



Life Group Studies

Introduction

This series is on what are sometimes called the ‘parables of the kingdom’, a series of stories that Jesus told to help his disciples understand the nature of the kingdom of God that he was preaching. His public ministry was increasingly marked by division between those who believed in him and those who rejected him, and these parables contain strong elements of this theme of division as it relates to the kingdom. They provide us as Christians with a deeper understanding of what God is doing in the world, and how to respond to some of the struggles we have with seeing the kingdom of God as a reality now.

Parables can be difficult to study because they are purposefully designed to have a variety of meanings and to be difficult to understand for those who are not attuned to the ‘spirit’ of the kingdom (see the discussion between Jesus and his disciples on how to understand parables in the *Parable of the Sower*). So these studies focus on being clear about the images that are used, and finding our response to what Jesus is saying. There may be no ‘right’ answer to some questions!

Given the gardening metaphors used in some of the parables, as an exercise your group might want to plant a seed in a small pot together at the start of the study series, and see how it grows (or not!) throughout the time.

DIFFERENT SOILS - THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-23

1. Are there any keen gardeners in your group? Ask them to explain what kind of garden they are cultivating, and any particular difficulties they have with making it grow well.
2. What is the 'seed' in the parable (see v19)?
3. What is meant by the term the 'Kingdom of Heaven'/'Kingdom of God'? (*n.b. Matthew uses 'heaven' instead of 'God' because he is following the tradition of not using God's name, out of reverence for its holiness*)

[a possible definition is 'the reality of God's rule in the world'].

4. In verses 10-17 Jesus and the disciples discuss why he teaches in parables, and Jesus refers to Isaiah 6:9-10. Choose which of the three following options you think is the most correct answer to the question 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' (v10), and explain why:
 - a. To make it easy for simple people to understand his teaching by using clear illustrations.
 - b. To make it hard for people to understand so that they would not repent and be healed.

c. To reveal the division between those who are willing to understand and accept the kingdom of God and those who aren't.

5. What might it mean to 'understand' the message of the kingdom?

6. Have four different people in the group each explain the nature of one of the 'soils' and what it means according to verses 18-23. Have you seen these different responses at work in your own life or those of people you know?

7. Why did Jesus tell this parable to his disciples?

8. What should our response be to this parable?

THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

1. Can anyone in the group describe what is called the 'problem of evil', which can make it hard to believe in God's existence and power?
2. In the Parable of the Sower, the 'seed' represented the message of Jesus. What does it represent in this parable (see vv37-39)? What are the 'weeds?'
3. The type of weed discussed is probably *darnel*, a poisonous plant that is very similar in appearance to wheat. It was sometimes used by those who wished to sabotage other people's crops by planting it among their wheat seeds. Why does the owner of the field not want to pull up the weeds before they grow (vv29-30)?
4. People have read this parable as referring to the fact that the church will contain both true and false disciples of Jesus. Others see it as being more clearly about the 'mixed' world we live in that will contain God's people and those who reject him. Are both interpretations possible?
5. What happens to the wheat and the weeds at the 'end of the age' (vv40-43)? What realities might this be referring to?

6. We often find it hard to listen to Jesus speak about judgement. Are there areas of injustice and evil in our world today that would make us desire for God to 'pull up' the weeds and throw them into the fire?
7. Are you more likely to argue with God that he is too harsh or that he is too patient with evil?
8. What encouragement could Christians draw from this parable?

A MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 13:31-34

1. In the first parable in this series, the 'seed' was the message about the kingdom. In the second parable it represented the members of the kingdom. What does the seed represent in this parable (v31-22)?
2. Based on the amount of discussion about it, you could be forgiven for thinking that the issue of whether the mustard seed is really 'the smallest of all seeds' is most important part of this passage! Given that the smallest known seed is actually that of a rainforest orchid, is it important that Jesus was 'wrong' here? What is the point of the metaphor of the mustard seed and bush?
3. In verse 32 Jesus makes an allusion to Daniel 4, and Daniel's interpretation of a dream by King Nebuchadnezzar. Read Daniel 4:1-27. What does this passage tell us about the relationship between earthly kingdoms like Babylon and the kingdom of God?
4. Here are two possible one-line summaries for these two parables:
 - a. The mustard seed = 'From little things big things grow'
 - b. The yeast & the dough = 'Big impact from small input'Do these capture the meaning? Create your own summaries.

5. How could this parable be an encouragement to you as you follow Jesus and take part in his kingdom? In what circumstances might Christians particularly draw comfort from it?

A HIDDEN TREASURE

Matthew 13:44-46

1. Why do so many people love stories about the search for hidden treasure?
2. What are some of your greatest 'treasures'? These could be objects, people, memories, achievements, etc.
3. If you could only keep one of those things, what would it be, and why?
4. Is there a time when you have made great sacrifices to get something or to achieve a personal goal?
5. What do the images of the hidden treasure and the pearl tell us about what Jesus thinks of the kingdom of God? Do the two images give us different ideas or are they saying exactly the same thing?
6. What attitudes, actions and feelings flow from the discovery of the treasure and the pearl for the men in the parables?
7. What might God be calling you to give up in order to pursue the kingdom of God with wholehearted commitment and joy?

A DRIFT NET

Matthew 13:47-53

1. Are there any anglers in your group?
 - a. What is the difference between pole fishing and fishing with a net?

2. What is the kingdom of God compared to in this parable?
 - a. What does this image tell us about the nature of the kingdom?

3. Jesus told his first disciples to follow him and that he would send them out to 'fish for people' (Matt 4:18-19). What does that mean? Does the parable imply anything about what the 'catch' might be like or what our attitudes as fishermen should be?

4. Can you find any significant differences between this parable and the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (n.b. there might not be!)?

5. To what extent is it possible and desirable for Christians to be separate and distinct from the rest of the world?

- a. Eg. Is it a good idea for Christians to try to create their own 'subcultures' with separate schools, universities, social activities, entertainment industries, etc? What are the benefits and dangers of this approach?

6. Have you learnt anything new in particular during these studies, which perhaps you haven't seen before (v52)? What is the benefit of continually returning to the same parts of the Bible to study them again?

7. What is the kingdom of God?