

THE STORY
CHAPTER 24
STUDY 24

The Story so far ...

One day Jesus told a parable by the lake. It was the story of the farmer scattering seed. Some seed fell on the hard path, some seed fell in rocky places, some fell where the soil was shallow, some seed fell where there were thorns. And of course some seed fell on good soil. In each case the result was different. As usual the disciples did not get the point of the parable. Jesus explains the parable to them. It turns out that the seed represents the Word of God, and that the soil represents the hearts of the people listening to the word. The seed is the same in all instances – just like the Word is unchanging. What changes is the openness of our hearts to hearing and receiving the Word.

Jesus followed up with a parable of how important the placement of a lamp is – that is, if we want people to see it! He then taught them that we have a responsibility to put into practise what we have been taught, because there will be accountability.

Jesus then told some parables explaining what the kingdom of God is like – it is like a seed that grows automatically, all by itself. It is like a mustard seed – a tiny seed which grows into a big tree. Parables, stories taken from everyday life, were Jesus' prime method of teaching.

The Pharisees complained about the kind of company Jesus was keeping. In response to this, Jesus told his most famous series of parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coins and the parable of the lost son, better known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. The important, yet often overlooked part of this parable, concerns the older brother. The older brother mirrored the attitude of the Pharisees, who were complaining about the company Jesus was keeping. This older son, like the Pharisees, did not like the fact that others *they* deemed inadequate, were being brought into the Kingdom.

The parable of the good Samaritan is next. As always the context of it being told is vital. A teacher of the law was testing Jesus. During this exchange the teacher of the law wanted to justify himself by asking: who is my neighbour? Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan in response to this. It turns out that the teacher of the law asked the wrong question. The question is not: Who is my neighbour, rather: To whom will we BE neighbour. And the answer is: to who ever crosses our path.

Jesus did not only teach in parables. What has become known as the Sermon on the Mount is a good example of this.

- It starts with what we call the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes teach us about Kingdom life.
- Jesus then tells us that we are to be salt and light.
- Then He deals with prayer, with how not to pray and how to pray. This includes what has come to be known as The Lord's prayer.
- We are reminded that where our treasure is, that is where our hearts will be.
- He tells us that our eye is the lamp of the body.
- He shows us that we cannot serve two masters. We will either be devoted to one and hate the other, or vice versa.
- Jesus encourages us not to worry about what we eat or drink or what we should wear. Looking at the birds and the flowers we can see that God is able to care for us who are more valuable than they are. Rather, we should seek God's kingdom and his righteousness as our priority.

Jesus explains that those who hear and obey His words, will be building their lives on a firm foundation. Conversely, those who hear His words and don't put them into practise, will be building on a foundation of sand.

Then follows a series of miracles. The purpose of these miracles is to show that Jesus is the Son of God.

- Firstly Jesus shows that he has power over the **domain of nature**. This He proves by quieting the storm on the sea of Galilee.
- Then Jesus shows that he has power over **demons**. He does this by rescuing a man from demons, and putting the demons into the herd of pigs.
- Thirdly, Jesus shows that he has power over **disease**. He is on his way to heal Jairus' daughter when the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years touched him and was healed.
- And finally, He shows that he has power over **death**. Jairus' daughter dies before Jesus can get there. Jesus raises her from the dead.

The section closes with Jesus' healing of a blind man, and once again rescuing a demon possessed man.

Jesus commissioned His 12 disciples to go out in His name. He gave them the same authority that He had. In parenthesis, we are told that King Herod heard about the miracles the disciples were doing, and was curious about Jesus. It was speculated that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. Herod had a guilty conscience concerning John the Baptist because he had put John to death. Thus we learn how John the Baptist died.

When the disciples came back from the missions trip, Jesus took them away by Himself. It was nearly impossible for Jesus to do anything without attracting a crowd and soon a large crowd had gathered around Jesus. When Jesus saw that they were hungry He had compassion on them, and told His disciples to feed them. The disciples were intimidated by this request. Jesus then miraculously fed the crowd by multiplying just five loaves and two fish.

When the crowd had left, Jesus sent His disciples ahead of Him across the lake. He went up the mountainside to pray. A storm blew up and the disciples were terrified. Jesus then walked on the water and when the disciples saw Him they were even more terrified. Peter then asks if he can walk on the water to Jesus. He was able to do it ... until he took his eyes off Jesus. Then he saw the waves, saw the "impossibility" of what he was doing, and so he began to sink. When Jesus got into the boat the storm and died down.

The crowd once again gathered around Jesus. He rebukes them for seeking Him, not for His own sake, but for the miracles they have witnessed. He tells them that the work they should be doing is to believe on the One who had sent Him. They respond by asking for a sign. Jesus responds by declaring himself to be the Bread of Life. It is only by eating the bread of life that they will have eternal life. Jesus discussed this fact graphically in terms of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. After this discussion many of those following Jesus stopped following him. Jesus asked His disciples if they too would leave Him at this time. Peter answered: Lord to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life.

1. Why might Jesus have used parables as a way to teach people?

A parable is a remarkably powerful teaching tool. It engages people. It describes ordinary, every day events – sowing, reaping, travelling, shepherding. God is not mentioned. People engage with the story. They learn a lesson and embrace it. Then suddenly, they realise that God was the point of the story after all. They either stand condemned, or encouraged.

It is also a powerful teaching tool to use when some are not ready for the truths Jesus is teaching. Jesus speaks about "casting pearls before swine". Using parables, Jesus can teach profound truths, but those not really interested – the "swine" – will miss the point. It won't be "wasted" on them. In the words used in The Story, only those "with ears to hear" will hear. So parables are part of God's judgement. Those who "don't have ears to hear" are therefore condemned to not hearing. Those who are determined, reject the truth, will not be able to hear the truth.

The parable about the sower shows this. The same seed – the Word – is sown to all. It is the condition of the heart of the listener that determines whether the seed will take root or not. The opportunity is freely available to all alike. It depends on their hearts as to whether they will hear.

Parable is from 2 Greek words: “para” – meaning “alongside”; “bolé” – meaning “I throw.” A parable is a story thrown alongside. It can easily be engaged and understood. Or it can be left to lie there.

Parables can be seen as a “levelling of the playing field.” Profound truths are taught using easily accessible concepts. For those who are willing to engage – who “have ears to hear” – they can learn and understand the profound truths.

2. What can you learn from Jesus’ parables that you can use in your own life?

Sower: We learn that our hearts are critical in the process of receiving and understanding the Word of God. We learn that we must be open to what God is saying, and be willing to be obedient to it. A hard heart means that it will be gone before I can even have a chance to respond. A shallow heart means that the Word will never take root and when trials come, the truth will wilt. A heart taken up by external concerns, means that we will struggle to see the relevance of the Word and it will soon be choked out. But a heart ready to hear and obey, means that there will be a rich harvest. For example, we will experience the promises of the Word, we will experience the abundant life Jesus promised.

Kingdom parables: The Kingdom of God is growing as inevitably as a seed planted in the ground. Whether I do anything or not, the kingdom will grow. That gives an enormous sense of peace to know that God’s Kingdom is God’s business.

It also gives enormous peace to know that it will be big. “Do not despise the day of small beginnings” is what Zerubbabel was told. We might not see too much evidence of the kingdom right now, but it will, one day, be big.

Parables of the lost sheep, coins and son: God came to seek and to save what was lost. That included me. I am a product of the truth of that parable. That gives me a responsibility to be part of God’s seeking and saving those who do not yet know that Jesus loves them. The Prodigal Son story lets me know that no matter how far I have wandered, the Father is always waiting, longing for me to return. The story of the older brother reminds me that I should celebrate when others come to know Jesus.

Good Samaritan: Really challenging. My neighbour is not defined geographically. Neighbour is defined by my choice – to whom will I be neighbour?

3. If you would have heard Jesus’ sermon, what do you think you would have done? Would you have followed?

CS Lewis was once asked if he “liked” the Sermon on the Mount. Liked? He answered? How can I like something that knocks me down whenever I read it! In other words, the Sermon remains a most challenging piece of scripture. This is attested by the fact that many interpretations of it try and spiritualise much of the teaching so that there isn’t an onus on us to try and live it.

So, would I have followed? I would have been drawn to Jesus, would have loved the teaching, the amazing standards of the Sermon. Could I have honestly said that I would have followed? I would have wanted to. But as I feel today, if it depends on my following well the teachings, then I have little chance.

4. Why did Jesus teaching bother some of the religious leaders?

Jesus was challenging their traditions. The parable of the lost sheep etc. A Rabbi worth his salt would not be seen dead with some of the people Jesus was mixing with. They may even have made one ceremonially unclean. Jesus tells the parables, including the Prodigal Son and the story of the older brother. That suggested the Father welcomes “sinners” to the same extent that he welcomes “older brother” i.e. the establishment Jews. It meant that the establishment Jews needed to choose whether they wanted to be part of what the Lord was doing - that they could exclude themselves from the heavenly celebrations. That would not have gone down too well!

Then they challenge Jesus on the issue of eternal life. Jesus does not throw the law out. “Do this and you will live” Jesus says. But this answer is not satisfactory, and so the man seeks to justify himself -tries to narrow down the field of who his neighbour is, maybe to make it easier. Instead Jesus widens the field – neighbours are all to whom you chose to be neighbour. Neighbour isn’t about geography. It is about needs we can meet which cross our path.

Jesus taught them about prayer – the Pharisees loved to pray on street corners where their piety could be seen. Jesus condemns that – the acclaim they get from people for their pseudo piety is all the reward they will get.

5. Jesus explained that he is “the Bread of Life” – the source of substance and satisfaction. What can you do to gain a deeper satisfaction in your relationship with Jesus?

Ultimately we are talking about relationship with God through Jesus. The more we know Jesus, the more we will enjoy him and enjoy relationship with the Father. That is why the “eating his body and drinking his blood” – incorrect politically as those phrases may sound – is the good way of describing what needs to happen. Jesus must become more and more part of who we are. What we do, must be informed by who Jesus is and ultimately what Jesus would do in that situation.

How do we “eat his body and drink his blood”? We have what other denominational structures call “Means of Grace” to do this. This is NOT saying that there are other ways to salvation. This is talking about means to enjoying the grace we have already received in Jesus.

What are means of grace?

- Well, prayer is one. Spending time talking to the Lord is a way of enjoying the grace which is already ours through Jesus.
- Bible study is another means of grace. We get to know Jesus better through studying His Word to us. Not academically, but emotionally too. What does this mean to me? How can I enjoy what I am reading about?
- Church attendance is a means of grace. Being together with others, singing songs to the Lord with others, hearing together the Bible being explained and together being challenged.
- Fellowship is a means of grace. We meet together, encourage one another, hold each other accountable.

We have many “means of grace” and we are to use these to enjoy Jesus – “the Bread of Life.”