

Lesson One: Why Jesus Told Parables

Main idea: Parables are stories Jesus told to teach us important lessons about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Teacher preparation:

- Read Scripture references, Proverbs 28:13-14, Isaiah 6:9-10, Mark 4:10-12 and Luke 8:9-10
- Gather: Bible; dry erase markers or chart paper and markers; random box of stuff for storytelling, one item per child; Parable mini book, one per child; markers, crayons, or colored pencils; scissors
- Take time to meditate on this week's Scripture and think about your own life. Do you have an open mind and a humble heart when it comes to Scripture? Do you turn to God for understanding and wisdom? Do you live out what you read, or just let it sit in your heart?

Scripture references:

- Hebrews 4:12
- Matthew 13:10-17
- Ephesians 4:18
- James 1:5
- James 1:22-25

Game: Round Robin Story

Have all the kids sit in a circle, facing in. You will be telling a story as a group, with each person adding a sentence or two at a time. You or a student may start, then the person on the left adds to what you started. The rules are: you have to use the characters and places already introduced in the story. Don't go adding crazy characters and places without using the ones already in the story. Keep the story on track. You want an introduction, a problem, the problem gets solved, and the characters celebrate at the end. (A basic story arc.) Be respectful of the story parts others add! Nothing is "stupid." Laugh if it's funny, but don't judge what others add. If you have very shy students, they may pass their turn, but try to avoid this, as others will pass if they can't think of anything. The point is to stretch your creativity and get the group thinking

about stories. As a variation, you can bring in a box of random items, like a shoe, sea shell, and a rolling pin, etc. Have each student pick an object from the box. When it reaches their turn in the storytelling, they have to find a way to incorporate that item into the story. If you have younger children, you can sit in a circle and retell a familiar story, like the Three Little Pigs, with each student adding what happens next in the sequence of events.

Message:

Open in prayer, then say, Who likes stories? What are some of your favorite kinds of stories to read and listen to? (Allow children briefly to respond, and share some of your favorite children's stories.) Why do you think we like stories so much? (Allow children to respond.) Stories are fun! We get to use our imaginations and learn new things through stories. We also have an easier time remembering things we learn when we learn them through a story. Stories stick with us. Did you know that Jesus told stories, too? Why do you think he told stories? (Allow children to respond.) Jesus is a really great teacher. He taught important lessons in a lot of different ways. One of the ways he used a lot was through telling stories. Can anyone tell me what we call the stories Jesus told, which are written down in the Bible? That's right, the stories Jesus told in order to teach us important things are called parables. Today we are going to start learning about some of the parables Jesus told. We won't look at every parable Jesus told, because there are a LOT of them, but we will study many stories over the next several weeks. You may have heard some of these stories before, and that's okay. The word of God is alive and powerful. It says so in Hebrews 4:12. It says, "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." This means that even if we read the same Bible stories over and over, there is always something new to learn and apply to our lives. Even grownups learn new stuff when they read familiar stories from the Bible!

Sometimes the parables can be difficult to understand. We may hear a good story, but not be sure how that parable is supposed to change our lives. Jesus told us in the Bible why parables are so hard to understand sometimes. Let's read that together in Matthew 13:10-17. (Read, or have a student read, this passage. You could go around the room and have each student read one verse at a time.)

“¹⁰His disciples came and asked him, “Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?”

¹¹He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. ¹²To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. ¹³That is why I use these parables,

For they look, but they don’t really see. They hear, but they don’t really listen or understand.

¹⁴This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that says,

‘When you hear what I say,
you will not understand.
When you see what I do,
you will not comprehend.

¹⁵For the hearts of these people are hardened,
and their ears cannot hear,
and they have closed their eyes—
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.’

¹⁶“But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. ¹⁷I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but they didn’t see it. And they longed to hear what you hear, but they didn’t hear it.”

So can anyone explain why, based off the passage we just read, Jesus chose to teach in parables? (Allow a few responses.) Jesus was a well-known man. Lots and lots of people came to listen to what he had to say. But not all of these people were really interested in learning anything from Jesus. Some of the people came to listen to Jesus because they were hoping to see him do a miracle, or because they wanted to see this man who everyone was so excited about. Then there were the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, who didn’t want to learn from Jesus at all. They just wanted to try

and catch him saying something wrong so they could arrest him. So all sorts of people came out to hear Jesus, but only the people who were really interested in learning about the Kingdom of Heaven and salvation were able to understand the stories. No one else could understand what Jesus was teaching in his parables because their hearts were hardened towards God. Now, Jesus did not always teach in parables. He often said things directly, right out so everyone could understand. The parables are different. We are supposed to want to learn more, and we are supposed to work hard to understand what these stories have to say.

What do we need to do to understand the Word of God? Let's think about what we just read. Why won't some people understand the parables? This passage tells us that some people have hardened their hearts toward God. What does it mean to harden your heart to God? (Allow a student to answer.) It means that you have stopped listening to what God has to say and you do not do what he wants you to do. Ephesians 4:18 puts it this way: "Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him." We definitely don't want to close our minds and harden our hearts to God! So what's the opposite of closed minds and hard hearts? (Allow students to answer.) That's right, the opposite of having a closed mind is to have an open mind that is willing to learn from God. We are willing to change the way we think about things so we can think like Jesus does. The opposite of a hardened heart is a soft heart, one that is willing to let conviction come in and change the way we feel. We are willing to change the way we feel about people and the world so we can feel like Jesus does. Humble hearts are soft hearts. So in order to understand the parables, we have to keep an open mind, eager to learn new things about God and the Kingdom of Heaven, and we have to have soft, humble hearts, willing to change the way we feel and therefore the way we act around people and situations in our lives. (Write "open minds" and "humble hearts" on the board.) What else can we do to help us understand the parables?

Let's have a sword drill to find out. Take all fingers and bookmarks out of your Bible. When I say go, look up James 1:5. Go! (Read, or have a student read, James 1:5.) "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking." This verse tells us that if there is something we don't understand in the Bible, we can ask God, and he will help us understand it. James goes on to say more in James 1:22-25: ²² "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. ²³ For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like

glancing at your face in a mirror. ²⁴You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. ²⁵But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it."

So in order to understand the parables, we need to have open minds and humbles hearts. We also need to ask God to help us understand the Bible. We ask God for help by praying. (Write "pray" on the board.) We also need to live out what we learn! If you go to school and learn your multiplication tables, can you go home and never think about them again, and still remember your multiplication tables a year from now? Probably not. We need to practice the things we learn. That includes the things we learn from the Bible, too. We need to put the lessons we learn from the parables to practice, and do the things we learn in real life. God will bless us when we do what we learn. (On the board, write "do it!")

Now there is one more thing to learn about the parables before we close for today. The parables are all different kinds of stories, dealing with different kinds of people in different situations. But they all have one thing in common. All the parables are about the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 13:11, after the disciples ask Jesus why he uses parables, Jesus says, "You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven." If we have open minds, humble hearts, pray and live what we learn, then the parables teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven. We will learn what Heaven is like, who can go to Heaven, how citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven behave, and how the King of Heaven behaves. We have a lot to learn, and I am looking forward to sharing these stories with you all!

End in prayer.

Craft: Parables mini book

Every week, students will make a mini book that retells the parable in very basic terms. This first mini book in their library reminds them what parables are, how they can understand them, and what they are about. To begin, demonstrate how to fold the book. Fold along the solid lines. Start by folding the long side to the long side. Crease well. Keep it folded, then fold in half, crease well, and fold in half again, creasing well. Now unfold it all the way and fold it in half short side to short side, so the dotted line in the center is folded in half. Cut along this dotted line. Do not overcut! Now unfold the paper and

fold it in half again, this time long side to long side. Now for the tricky part. Pinch both short ends of the paper, with the crease facing up. Bring your hands together, causing the cut in the middle of the paper to open up. You should have a plus sign now. The last step is to press all the pages down so the cover is on top. Mush the pages down and crease all the folds. You may need to use a marker or pencil for these creases, as they are all now stacked up on each other. Now that you have a little book, have the kids write their name on the cover. Read each page and have the children illustrate it accordingly.

We can understand the parables when we pray to God to give us wisdom to learn from the Bible.

We can understand the parables when we have soft, humble hearts. We change the way we feel and the way we act around people and situations in our lives.

We can understand the parables when we keep an open mind and are eager to learn new things about God and the Kingdom of Heaven. We change the way we think so we think like Jesus.

Parables are stories Jesus told to teach us important lessons about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Story Time With Jesus

Lesson One

Why Jesus Told Parables

And How We Can

Understand Them

We can understand the parables when we live out the things God is teaching us about the Kingdom of Heaven through his Word.

Matthew 13:10-13, 16 NLT

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