

## A study of Jesus' Parables

### TRUTH ILLUSTRATED

What was the last exciting thing you shared with someone? From medals to movies, when we have something excited to tell, we share stories with an emphasis on emotion. Nobody describes the game-winning catch with only black and white detail. They share how it *felt* to catch the game-winner. Stories sprint past our brain and land firmly in our hearts.

This semester, as we study Jesus' parables, that's what it's all about. A parable, in simplest terms, is a story, specifically designed to teach a heavenly truth. Most importantly, parables demand a response. Being told a fact isn't nearly as powerful as being told a story and letting us discover that fact for ourselves. And, when it comes to some of our most firmly held ideas, stories have a way helping us realize, "Maybe, just maybe, I'm wrong." It's not just truth, it's Truth Illustrated.

When Jesus told parables, he expected life-change. The gospel writers recorded these parables so the lessons of the Kingdom of God might be passed down to future generations. However, these lessons weren't for everyone. As we will see, parables were often hard to understand. There were times when listeners clearly understood their place in the story and were either encouraged or infuriated. Other times, like in our parable today, some listeners left scratching their heads.

### MARK 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Again he began to teach by the lake. Such a large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there while the whole crowd was on the shore by the lake. <sup>2</sup> He taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching said to them: <sup>3</sup> "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground where it did not have much soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. <sup>6</sup> When the sun came up it was scorched, and because it did not have sufficient root, it withered. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among the thorns, and they grew up and choked it, and it did not produce grain. <sup>8</sup> But other seed fell on good soil and produced grain, sprouting and growing; some yielded thirty times as much, some sixty, and some a hundred times." <sup>9</sup> And he said, "Whoever has ears to hear had better listen!"

<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> He said to them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those outside, everything is in parables.

### SCOUTING REPORT

- SETTING** Where was Jesus & to whom was he speaking?
- NEED** What need prompted the parable? Each parable relates to one truth to be understood or followed.
- STORY** Characters, plot, conflict, dialogue—sometimes people from the setting show up as characters.
- TRUTH** This is the main point of the parable, interpreted through understanding the setting, need, and story.

### DISCUSSION

What's your favorite fictional story or character? Why?

1. Where was Jesus and to whom was he speaking? (1)

2. Who in the story asked Jesus the meaning of the parable? (10)

3. What reason did Jesus give for speaking in parables? (11)

4. What does it mean that even Jesus' own disciples were confused by his parables?

5. What's the difference between hearing and listening? (9)

6. What are some specific questions you have coming into this study? (About Jesus, the Bible, etc.)

ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

INTERPRETATION

APPLICATION

Why is this little box down here? Sometimes it's to share some insight in the passage, challenge your heart more deeply, or to point you to something cool. Mostly, however, we want to point you to your greatest resource in this study—your coach.

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### STUDY NOTES

#### AMERICA'S PASTIME

Once on a mission trip, I went with several teenagers to a baseball game. Most of the teenagers were born outside the US, few of them spoke English, and none of them had ever seen a baseball game.

I started playing T-ball around age 4. My guess is that many of you started playing sports as young children as well—maybe even baseball. If you grow up with it, like I did, baseball is a very simple game. At least, that's what I thought. It turns out baseball is really difficult to explain to someone who has never seen it.

Where do you start? Maybe begin with the guy holding the stick, we call it a bat. He's trying to hit the ball. If the ball is thrown somewhere in this region (elaborately point to your mid-section), and you don't swing, or if you swing and miss, you get a strike. Three strikes and you're out. If the pitcher, that's the guy throwing the ball, throws it anywhere but here (return to elaborate mid-section pointing), it's a ball. Yes, the baseball is a ball, but it's called a "ball." Yes, it's like a foul, but there is a thing called a "foul ball." Yes, a foul ball is a hit, but it's hit in the wrong place... Can you understand the difficulty? Eventually, we just concluded with the real reason we all love baseball, "Here, eat your hot dog and nachos. I give up."

As difficult as it might be to explain the game of baseball to a group who has never heard of it, imagine how much more difficult it might be for Jesus, God in the flesh, to explain what the Kingdom of God is like and how a person should live in response to it. Jesus didn't just tell us what to do in bullet-list form. He knows us too well for that. We cleverly justify our own sin. Instead, he told us those same truths in a way that connects with our heart just as much as our head.

### TRUTH ILLUSTRATED

Our passage today teaches us a lot about how Jesus used parables in his ministry. For us, it also helps explain how we are approaching this study.

Today's passage opens, "**Again he began to teach by the lake.**" If you had no other context, several questions are immediately obvious—Who is teaching? To whom is he speaking? And what lake?

The first audiences to Jesus' parables understood the context into which Jesus spoke. We are 2,000 years and several thousand miles removed from these moments.

Each week, above the study questions, there will be a gray box titled "Scouting Report." The Scouting Report will help us get into the sandals

of the first audiences, covering four specific categories that we need to understand.

Today, instead of reading the Scouting Report for this passage, you'll read a description of what each item is intended to share. Scouting Reports are important because they're a snapshot to help us understand the context and background of each parable.

Although you'll get a full Scouting Report for our passage next Week, our passage shows Jesus teaching by the Sea of Galilee early in his ministry. He is teaching **a large crowd gathered around him**. It was so large that he had to get **into a boat on the lake** while **the whole crowd was on the shore by the lake**. This is our "Setting" in the Scouting Report.

Jesus tells a parable to this huge group, the details of which we will discuss next Week. However, many of the people in Jesus' audience would have been farmers. All of them understood the value of planting seeds in the proper place. They might even cringe at the idea of wasted seeds. So, Jesus must be sharing something very important if the sower in his story is so careless with his seeds. (Come back next Week to find out what.)

### WHAT'S THE GAME PLAN?

Although parables are easily understood stories, their meaning was often hidden. They were like riddles that the audience had to think about and wrestle through. Even Jesus' disciples didn't always understand. **When Jesus was alone, those around him with the twelve disciples asked him about the parables.** Jesus' response was that **"The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those outside, everything is in parables."**

Although Jesus' parables are powerful, they are also mysterious. They weren't intended for everyone. Jesus himself interprets our passage today, which is what we'll study next Week. And thankfully, we have a much broader context than Jesus' original audience for understanding the parables. However, as we dive into this study, our game plan is to teach you as much about *how* to study parables, as it is *a study* of parables.

All four gospel writers recorded Jesus' parables—Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John. As such, we will be hopping around in different Gospels. Although each parable fits into the narrative in which it is contained, they also stand independently as Kingdom-minded lessons.

The goal of parables is life-change. Repeatedly in this study, you will be challenged to change. It's not enough to hear the truth, we must respond. As Jesus said, **"Whoever has ears to hear had better listen!"**