

Parables of Jesus

Leader's Note:

Within these resources the focus is on certain parables rather than others. To avoid repetition one of several parallel parables has been used. For example the Lost Sheep has been included, but not the Lost Coin; the Mustard seed and not the Parable of the Yeast. This is also partially because many of these parables are almost throw away one liners, used to underline other points, and as such would be difficult to do a whole session on. If you have time, once you have looked at the parables here and helped your young people develop their skills in interpreting them, you could give them those parables by themselves and let them have a go at interpreting them. It is also worth saying that parables are meant to pluck at our imagination and get us thinking. If your young people interpret them in a way you are unfamiliar with, don't shoot them down but explore what they are saying together. It may be that what they have said is completely wrong, or there may be some truth to it, but we want to encourage them to engage with the text rather than straight-jacket them into certain ways of thinking.

What are parables? Matthew 13:10-16

Leader's reflection

Parables can be somewhat frustrating to talk about in the Church. There is something about them, the images used, the narrative style, the imagination needed, which seems to relegate them much of the time to children's ministry. They are seen as childish, and as such are not given the same attention by adults as, say, the letters of Paul. When we treat parables in this way, it is no wonder that we miss the radical, surprising and sometimes painful teaching that they can allow us to experience.

An example of the way we treat Parables is the explanation for why Jesus taught them that was used a few years ago. Jesus told Parables because he was talking to an



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uneducated audience who needed tangible examples of what he was talking about to be able to understand. Let's pause for a moment and remember that Jesus was talking about, (amongst other things), the nature of God, the Kingdom of Heaven and the affects of faith. For one thing, if Jesus was around today and teaching about those things, then I imagine he would still be using imagery to talk about them. They are huge topics which it is difficult for anyone, from anytime, to get their heads around.

Secondly, we need to remember that Jesus' audience would have been much more religiously literate than many churchgoers today. The average man in Israel would have undergone at least 4 or 5 years of religious teaching and would have large chunks of the Torah memorised. If Jesus was going to speak to anyone directly about the nature of God, then these would be the people to do it to. But he doesn't. He uses these images to explore and explain, because what he is talking about is so abstract that people in any place at any time, will need a tangible, coherent image to grasp onto when trying to get their heads around this.

We must be careful in looking with too much depth at the elements of parables. They are, mostly, broad brush strokes rather than specific pictures. Does it matter what the seed in the parable of the mustard seed actually is? Is it important to have a deep understanding of ancient building techniques to dissect the wise and foolish builder narrative? There are times when it is helpful to look at the elements in more depth, but often we lose more than we gain.

Parables are a brilliant teaching tool for children, young people, and adults no matter how long they have been a Christian. They force us to look at ourselves and our faith with honest eyes and help us to grow in our faith. Jesus knew what he was doing when he taught in Parables. Let's use them to help our children and young people to gain deeper insights into who God is and what he wants us to do.



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Aim To think about what a parable is and why Jesus used them

Main points to cover

1. Parables are stories with extra meaning.
2. Jesus used them to show us lots of different things about God and what He wants for the world.

Focus On Why Jesus taught parables. The idea of risk to himself if he taught some of these things outright, the fact that people had to think for themselves to work out what he was teaching and the timelessness of the stories he told.

Activity ideas

Write a list of parables. Split the group into two and have a relay race between them. They will send up one person from each group to start and you show them the name of the first parable. They then have to go back to their group and together try and draw a very brief description of the story. Once their team has guessed the parable, they send the next person up. This will give you an idea of their starting knowledge of parables.

Have different explanations of the reason Jesus told parable written on pieces of paper, (to avoid arrest; so people understood what he was teaching; so people didn't understand what he was teaching), around the room. Read them out to the group and get them to stand at the one they think is most likely. Ask them to explain why they have gone to that one. Bring the group back together and go into more depth on each of the explanations and ask them if they want to change where they stood.

Why should we still read parables today? Ask the group to mind map reasons why the parables are still important to us today. Get them a chance to feedback their thoughts. Once you have done this, explain that parables are timeless, that the lessons they teach us still apply to us in the same way as to the people who heard them for the first time. Over the next few weeks we are going to explore some specific parables and see what they mean for us today.

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Parable of the Lost Sheep: Luke 15:1-7

Leader's reflection

This is one of the best known of all Jesus' Parables. As such, often we hear its title and think, "yep, know it." But there is a greater depth to it than we often see, particularly if we are from a more urban or suburban environment, or, to be honest, if we aren't sheep farmers.

Sheep and shepherds are a recurring theme in the Bible to refer to those who lead and are led. In Genesis 48, Jacob states on his deathbed that God had been the "shepherd of his life"; the prophet Nathan used the image of sheep to challenge David about his behaviour towards Uriah the Hittite; Jesus used sheep in this parable and others. There are many other examples throughout both the OT and NT.

In fact, the shepherd was used as an image of what a leader should be, and was used throughout the middle east to describe the legitimacy of rulers, which makes sense of lines like, "who is the shepherd who can stand against me?" (Jeremiah 49:19). The image of the shepherd who lives on the hillside, cares for, defends, feeds and waters his flock is a powerful one.

What is going on at the start of this story? What triggers the telling of the Parable? It's the grumbling of the Pharisees. It's interesting to note that they seem to be annoyed with Jesus for spending time with tax collectors and outcasts. Why are they annoyed? Surely they don't want to spend time with Jesus? Maybe they do. Maybe they see someone who they believe *could* be one of them, if only he would lay aside this need to spend time with the lowly and the poor. If only he would spend time with the respectable people. So in an attempt to educate the educated, Jesus begins to tell a story.

What does Jesus mean by using the image of the good shepherd? The good shepherd who leaves his sheep to go and find one? He doesn't seem like a great shepherd to be honest. A question I often get when leading sessions on this is, what about the other



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sheep? What happens to the 99? Maybe that is partially the point. A normal shepherd may leave the 1 in the wilderness and stay with the 99. But the good shepherd? The good shepherd will go and search for that one, because that one is just as important as the others, and deserves the care and attention the others have. Maybe that is one of the points Jesus is trying to make, that each and every sheep is valuable, and while a competent shepherd would ensure the safety of the 99, for Jesus those who are outcast those who have wandered, are just as valuable as those who stay.

And why sheep? Because of the way sheep wander. Jesus didn't just pluck an animal out of thin air to use. Many animals will run for freedom whenever they get the chance, and will often return of their own will. Sheep are not so free willed, but they keep their heads down. A sheep wanders away by keeping its eyes on the ground looking for fresh food and good grass, and it will move away a little at a time, until it is a long way away. Then it looks up, and panics. It can't see anything familiar, it can't see other sheep, so it panics and runs around in circles incapable of doing anything for itself.

In choosing sheep, Jesus is saying something about the way people get lost, and what they need. They (mostly) don't go running off and then return by themselves, although there is a parable for that as well, but mostly we end up wandering away without realising it and then have no idea how to get back.

And then the good shepherd comes for us, and carries us safely back. The good shepherd doesn't abandon us in our panic and loss, but comes and finds us, because he is not just a shepherd, he is THE Good Shepherd.



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Aim	To Explore why Jesus used shepherd and sheep imagery and how they relate to us
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep.2. Jesus came looking for us and will always come for us when we walk away from him, out of love for us.3. Jesus loves us enough to come and find us.
Focus On	Jesus comes to find us because he loves us. Focus on walking away from faith rather than from church activities.

Activity ideas

Hide and seek. This game would work well as an introduction and, if possible, could be played outside. Whether the shepherd (seeker) does or doesn't manage to find all the sheep, make the comparison with Jesus the good shepherd, who will continue to search for us and who knows where we will be.

Ask the young people to suggest things that could lead us away from Jesus. Try to focus on things that may steal our whole focus. Some of these things may be good in themselves, such as school work or friends, but the result of them being our focus is that we lose sight of Jesus in our lives. Use the example from the reflection of the way sheep wander, and how it can be a long time before we realise that we have walked away from Jesus at all.

What does it look like for us when Jesus finds us again? How do we think it would make us feel to see what we had been focusing on instead of Him? Explore the idea that we may need to change our priorities to make sure we keep our eyes on Jesus.

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Parable of the Mustard Seed: Matthew 13:31-32

Leader's reflection

This is an incredibly short parable, more of a micro-parable than a full story. In three sentences Jesus gives us an image of the kingdom of God that we can all grasp and understand. This parable comes towards the end of a section where plants are a strong theme. The image of plants, sowers and farmers was one Jesus used a lot; the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the sower, Jesus as the vine. Preceding this parable are the stories of the sower and of the weeds. This story seems to act as a punctuation to these stories. In the sower we see the different types of ground that the seed falls into, in the weeds we see God's reaction to the different types of plants growing. This is like the zoom shot to the wide shots of those parables.

So what do we reflect on in this parable? Is our own faith like a seed? Yes. All our faiths take root and, hopefully, grow and grow. Its roots reach out to other areas of our lives and start to have an impact on them. Our actions, emotions and worldview all become shaped by this one thing which is at the centre of all the others. That is our hope for our young people and children. That they will become people whose faith grows and becomes so central to who they are that it has an impact on everything they do.



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Aim

To think about how our faith can grow, when nurtured, into something that makes a difference to our whole lives

Main points to cover

1. Our faith, no matter how long we have been Christian, is always growing.
2. Like a seed, our faith can start small, but as it grows it will influence more and more of our lives.
3. As it grows, we focus on God more and more.

Focus On

The difference that faith makes to our lives as it grows

Activity ideas

Quiz: Have a set of pictures of seeds and trees/plants. In teams see if the young people can match the correct seed to the plant. Go through the answers. Ask the young people what led them to the answers they chose. Explain that seeds can be difficult to identify, but that we can see the difference between the plants easily. The seed of faith is one that can be difficult to spot, but we can see how it grows and how it changes us in our actions and words.

Explore the idea of the Kingdom of God. Ask the young people to think about what a kingdom is and either put the ideas together as a group, or get them to mind map in different groups. Explain that a kingdom is a place where a king rules, and this means that what the king believes is important, is what matters. Split the young people into three groups. Ask one group to imagine a kingdom where the king is selfish and what that looks like; one group to think about a kingdom where the king doesn't care about anything and what that looks like; and the last group to think about a kingdom where the king cares more for his subjects than himself and what that looks like. Which of these reflects the Kingdom of God and why?

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The young people should by now have a partial image of what the Kingdom of God looks like. Ask them to think about their own lives and whether they reflect that Kingdom. This is quite a challenging question, so give them some time and space to think about this. Ask the young people to draw a tree which represents their lives, what is at the centre (trunk), and what are the branches which grow from this? Ask the young people to pray about this and ask God to help them put His Kingdom first if they want to



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Parable of the wise and foolish builder: Matthew 7:24-27

Leader's reflection

This is another surprisingly short and yet very well-known parable. Taking up a mere four verses, it still has a great depth of meaning, with implications for our lives and faith.

Within the narrative of the Gospel, this story comes at the end of the sermon at the mount. It is therefore used as punctuation of a wider point which Jesus is making; yes, you can agree with what I am saying but if you don't then act on it, what use is it? This serves as a reminder to many who would say that Jesus was a wise teacher with much to say about life, but do not recognise the authority behind those words. It also reminds those of us who do recognise his authority that his words require work on our part.

That work is not easy. The image used is of carving out rock by hand. Current building specifications state that for a house, foundations need to be a metre deep and 60cm wide. While this is for modern buildings, there would not have been much difference for houses at the time of Jesus. Carving out a trench of this size by hand into solid rock, even if that rock is the sandstone which is prevalent in the Jordan valley, would have been a long and arduous process.

Flooding was a common occurrence around the Jordan. With the hilly landscape around the Jordan and the rocky and sandy make-up of the terrain, flash flooding could occur suddenly. While Palestine is a relatively dry area, it wouldn't need to happen often for the effects to be felt by the people of the area. All the imagery which Jesus uses would be familiar to the people he was speaking to. House building would be something many would be involved in, as people would often build their own houses.



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The challenge to act on what we have heard is still there for us. What do we base our lives on? Do we look to the teaching of Jesus to shape our lives and actions, or are we ruled by our own hearts and the world around us? Jesus is permanent, unchanging, and stable, like the rock. If we build on him, our foundations are strong. Often this parable is limited to the work we put into building our lives on, but the real emphasis is *what* we build on. If we build on our own achievements, our reputations, the thoughts of those around us, then we are building on sand. Those things can shift and change without warning, but if we build on Jesus's teachings, if we use him as an example and shaper of our lives, then our foundations are strong no matter what else happens to us.

Aim

To consider what difference a strong foundation makes and how we choose the foundation we build our lives on

Main points to cover

1. Our lives change depending what we build them on.
2. If we build our lives on our own achievements then they can be swept away, but if we build on Jesus then, while things may be difficult for us, the foundation will remain firm.

Focus On

What the imagery in this story means for us today.



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Activity ideas

Building activity: Before you tell the story give the young people a limited amount of resources such as paper, sellotape, blue tac etc. Tell them they have a certain amount of time to build a house or tower using those materials which needs to hold a small cup of water without being supported. Once their time is up see if they meet the criteria set at the start. Ask them which towers/houses have stood firm and why. Explain the idea of foundations in house building and why they matter so much to the strength of the house.

Telling the story: Get the young people to read through the story together. Ask them to pick out what they think the most important parts are and why. Discuss these together as a group and decide on the three most important things in the story.

Ask the young people what the point of Jesus' story was. Explain where it came in the Bible and what had come before it. Ask them to list what they think Jesus wants us to do to make sure we have a firm foundation. Explore what happens if we build on things such as our own reputation, coolness, or cleverness, and by contrast what it means if we build our lives on Jesus.

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Parable of the Good Samaritan: Matthew 10:25-37

Leader's reflection

The radical meaning of this parable can get lost sometimes when we try to shift it into our contemporary culture. To grasp the depth of feeling and resentment between the Israelites and the Samaritans we really need to look at the history between the two peoples.

In short, about 900 years before the birth of Christ, the Kingdom of Israel split in two, the northern kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah in the south. These were ruled by separate Kings and to all intents and purposes were two separate countries.

Two hundred years later Assyria invaded Israel and took many of its people captive, before resettling the land with its own citizens. The effect of this was that those Israelites who had stayed mixed with the settlers and, as a result, diluted their Jewish heritage and faith by worshipping pagan gods.

About 100 years after this, the Babylonians invaded Judah and took almost all of its people into exile. After 70 years, 43,000 Jews were allowed to return to rebuild Jerusalem. What they found when they returned was that the inhabitants of the northern kingdom had moved into the land and taken over much of it. The Samaritans who were now living in Judah were not happy with the return of the remnant, and there were many battles between the two groups.

This deep seated hatred continued for centuries to the time of Jesus. Often when we talk about this parable, we talk about the Jews and Samaritans in a way which implies petty falling out or casual racism. But when looking at the history of these two peoples, it is clear that this was more akin to the segregation of blacks and whites in the US, or apartheid in South Africa.



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In teaching about a Good Samaritan, Jesus was not taking a caricature of a people and twisting it, he was taking the attitude of an entire population and turning it on its head. The idea of a Samaritan helping anyone would have been as radical to a Jewish audience as speaking to a woman in public, or healing on the sabbath.

So what is the meaning Jesus was trying to get across? This parable was in answer to a question of “who is my neighbour?”. This question was asked more to find out who a neighbour wasn't. Who were the people who don't need our help, who can we ignore. Jesus' answer turns the question completely around and tells us that we are all to be neighbours to each other. Wherever we see someone in need, someone who is in pain, hurt or struggling, there we find out neighbour. Our neighbour is not limited therefore by geography or social class, not by race or religion, but rather whenever we see someone in need of help, we see a neighbour. That is a message which is as radical and challenging today and it was then, and which should challenge all of us in the way we act to those around us.

Aim	Thinking about who our neighbour is and how we can help them
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Jesus told this story in response to a question, “Who is my neighbour?”2. Who is our neighbour?3. What do we need to do to help them?
Focus On	Our actions as a response to Jesus



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Activity ideas

Ask the young people to think about what they already know about his story, and write their suggestions on a flip-chart. Ask them what they think the key message of the parable is. Once you have done this, explain in as interactive a way as possible, the reasons that Samaritans and Jews hated each other. Once you have done that, ask if it changes the way they see the story and if so, how.

Explore the idea that the Samaritan didn't do a small trivial act to help, he went out of his way and paid significant money to help the man. Does this also affect how the young people see the story? Does it change the challenge from this story to us?

Game: Split the young people into groups of three. Explain that this game is about helping each other. Have a list of combinations, such as 3 feet, 1 hand 2 feet 1 elbow etc. Explain that you are going to call out a combination of things and they can only use a combination of those to reach the other side of the room as a team, helping each other not to use the bits of their bodies that are not on the list