

**ATHLETES
INTERVARSITY**
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

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PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Are you in?

(Written by Denny Brogan)

STUDY 1 THE SEED AND THE SOILS (MARK 4:1-9, 13-20)

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is very clear: People are either in the Kingdom of God or they aren't. It's also clear that only those who are in the Kingdom of God now will be in the final and eternal Kingdom of God when Jesus returns. Jesus, Himself, makes a shocking statement about the Kingdom of God in Matt 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the Kingdom of God". This statement raises some serious questions: "Who then are in the Kingdom of God?" and "How do we know if we are in?"

In this Bible study series we will be looking at several parables that Jesus told (i.e. stories based on common, everyday situations that illustrated eternal truths) about the Kingdom of God. Each will show us something about what the Kingdom of God is like and what characterizes those who are a part of it. And each will help us to evaluate whether or not these things are true of our lives or not. How we answer these questions, will help us to know if we are "in".

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Seed and the Soils

Mark 4:1-9; 13-20

INTRODUCTION: The overarching question that we are seeking to answer in this bible study series is “Are you in the Kingdom of God or not?” Starting with this study, we will be looking at several of the parables that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God to see what He had to say about what characterizes members of the Kingdom and what it means to be “in”.

WARM UP QUESTION:

- If your team doctor or trainer tells you that you need to do something over a long period of time in order to heal/get back to 100% after an injury, how do you typically respond? If you do what they say, do you typically continue doing it to the end? Why or why not?

READ MARK 4:1-9 (JESUS’ PARABLE)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In these verses, we see Jesus teaching a large crowd. Why would the story that Jesus told in vv.3-8 be one that His audience would have understood?

Jesus was teaching to people in an agrarian society. The scene was well known, and for many, was probably even a part of their own experience: a farmer, walking across a small patch of land, casting seed from a bag cinched about his waist, knowing full well that the seed would fall on many different types of soil and thus have a variety of chances of it growing and bearing fruit.

2. Describe the kinds of soils mentioned in the story, as well as the corresponding results that came when the seed fell on them.

“the path” = soil so packed-down by the farmer walking on it that it would be too hard to receive the seed.

“rocky places” = a thin layer of soil—that lay on top of stones or rock—that could receive the seed (and in fact, when warmed by the heat that the stones/rock retained, would cause the seed to take root quickly and grow rapidly), but because roots couldn’t grow deep and the mid-day sun was so hot, the plants would quickly die

“among thorns” = soil able to receive the seed, but—because it had in it the roots or seeds of competing plants that would rob the seed of the water and nutrients that it needed to grow —would not be able to sustain life for the plant.

“good soil” = soil that wasn’t packed-down, deceptively shallow with rock beneath or in-filtrated with the seeds and roots of competing plants; but rather soil that was worked up and ready to receive the seed and cause it to grow and multiply.

3. Why do you think Jesus says what He does in v.9?

This ordinary life story illustrated a very important spiritual truth that needed to be understood.

Let's walk through Jesus' explanation of the parable in vv 13-20 and seek to understand the spiritual truth He desired His hearers (and us!) to know through the telling of this story...

[Note: We are skipping over vv.10-12 for two reasons: 1) we want to stay focused on the parable that we are looking at, and 2) these verses are very difficult to understand, without taking a lot of time to understand the terminology and original meanings of the words used.]

READ MARK 4:13-20 (JESUS' TEACHING)

4. What is the seed that is sown?

"the seed" = the word = the Word of God (Luke 8:11)

5. How are the four soils like the conditions of peoples' hearts—especially as it relates to hearing and receiving the "seed" of God's Word, and allowing it to grow and produce fruit in their lives? Describe what might be characteristic of each of these types of people.

"Path soil" people are those who have hard and closed hearts to God's Word because of disinterest or unbelief, and who will not (and cannot) receive it when it comes to them.

"Rocky soil" people are those who may initially receive the Word, but who have no staying power when things get tough and who quickly "fall away" because they aren't willing to give what it costs to live in the Kingdom and under the reign of Jesus, the King.

"Among thorns" people are those who also may initially receive the Word, but who don't bear Kingdom fruit in their lives because they are distracted by and drawn to the things of this world, rather than to the things of the Kingdom.

"Good soil" people are those who are open and receptive to God's Word and who do what it says, thus allowing it to transform and shape their lives, which results in doing God's will and producing Kingdom fruit.

6. How is understanding this parable foundational to understanding other parables (and teachings) of Jesus?

If we are to understand what He says (whether through His parables or other teachings), we must be willing to not only hear, but obey—to not only let it enter our heads, but our hearts as well. We need to be "good soil".

SUMMARY: Jesus tells a simple story, but leaves His hearers (and us) with an important spiritual question: "What is our response to God's Word?" (or in other words, "What kind of soil are we?") Knowing this is crucial not only for our understanding of the parables and teachings of Jesus, but also for our understanding of whether or not we are "in" the kingdom of God. For Jesus makes it clear, that those who are in the Kingdom of God are those who receive God's Word and who do what it says. Therefore, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- "Are you in?"
- Which of the four kinds of "soil" do you most identify with? Why?
- If you are not characteristically "good soil" but want to be, what needs to happen in your life in order for you to become "good soil"?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Great Banquet

Luke 14:15-35

INTRODUCTION: In this study, we will be looking at another parable that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God—as well as a teaching of Jesus that drives home the main truth of the parable. The truths that we’ll see provide for us more evidences of what it means to be “in” God’s Kingdom.

WARM UP QUESTION:

- Have you ever made a commitment to something (e.g. a weight loss or strength building program) but then, after finding out what it was going to cost you (time, energy, etc.), you backed out of it (partially or entirely)?

READ LUKE 14:15-24 (JESUS’ PARABLE)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

[Context: Jesus was in the house of a Pharisee, and was being carefully watched (14:1). While there, He tells the host that when he invites others to dinner, he should invite those who can’t repay him instead of those who can. If he did, Jesus tells him, he will be blessed and repaid at the “resurrection of the righteous” (i.e. the beginning of the future and final Kingdom of God).]

1. What prompted Jesus to tell the parable?

The comment made by another guest about “the feast in the Kingdom of God” (v.15), which referred to the future and final Kingdom of God.

2. Why did the owner of the house (i.e. whose banquet it was) become “angry” (v.21)?

Although the initial invitation had been accepted (which would have been the case according to Jewish custom at that time) and the host was rightly planning that those invited would come, when the announcement that all was ready was given, those who were invited (and had initially said “yes”) made “excuses” and said “no”.

What was the nature of the “excuses” that were made, and why might they not have been genuine? (vv.18-20)?

These people let work, possessions and relationships keep them from honoring a commitment that they had already made. And their excuses don’t seem genuine. Why? Because people most likely would not have bought a field without first seeing it, nor would they have purchased oxen without first trying them out. Likewise, because getting married in this culture was never abrupt, the person who “just got married” would most likely have known about his upcoming marriage before saying “yes” to the initial invitation.

3. What was the response of the owner of the house (vv.21-23)? What did he do?

He invited others to his banquet—people who were just like those Jesus had told His own host to invite (14:13).

What happened to those who were initially invited, but who later said “no” to coming (v.24)?

They were not allowed to join in.

4. What truth about the Kingdom of God does this parable illustrate?

Not all who initially say “yes” will enter it

How does this relate to what we learned in our last study?

Seed that landed on “rocky soil” and “among thorns” initially took root and started growing. But when it stopped growing, it didn’t produce fruit (Mark 4:16-19)

READ LUKE 14:25-35 (JESUS’ TEACHING)

[Note: The phrase “cannot be my disciple” is used three times in this section (vv. 26, 27 and 33). Since Jesus’ true disciples are those who are not only “in” the kingdom of God now, but also those who will enter the future and final Kingdom of God, the phrase “cannot be my disciple” can be replaced with the phrase “cannot be in the Kingdom of God” without any change of meaning.]

5. From vv. 26, 27 and 33, what is necessary to be Jesus’ disciple (i.e. be in the Kingdom of God)?

We need to give everything to Jesus

- *Our relationships*
- *Everything that we have*
- *Our very lives*

6. What additional truth do we learn from the two analogies that Jesus gives in vv.28-32, and what does this practically mean?

We must count the cost before saying “yes” to Jesus; i.e. not make a commitment to follow Him knowing that you are unwilling to give Him everything

7. And finally, what additional point—that connects this teaching to the parable in vv.15-24—do vv.34-35 drive home? What needs to happen after we’ve initially said “yes” to Jesus?

We must continue to say “yes” to Him

SUMMARY: Jesus both illustrates and teaches in these passages that if we want to be His disciple (and therefore be “in” the Kingdom of God) we must give Him everything (i.e. our entire lives). Before we do this, however, He tells us that we must “count the cost” of what this means so that our initial “yes” will be followed by successive “yesses” throughout our lives. As one person has said: Giving our lives to Jesus and becoming His disciple starts with one big “Yes”, but needs to be followed by a whole lot of little (and sometimes not so little) “yups”.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- Have you counted the cost and said “Yes”—giving your life to Jesus?
- If you have, are you continuing to say “yes” to Him in what He teaches and asks of you?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Rich Fool
Luke 12:13-34

INTRODUCTION: In this Bible study series we've been learning important things about what it means to be "in" God's Kingdom; things like our need to hear and do what the Word of God teaches in order to know and do the will of God in their lives, and our need to count the cost before saying yes to Him so that we can continue to say yes to Him and His will. In this study we will be looking at another characteristic of what it means to be in the Kingdom of God; one that goes straight to the heart.

WARM UP QUESTIONS:

- What do you treasure most in your heart, and how does your life (i.e. how you spend your time, energy, money, etc.) reflect the importance of this/these things?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

READ LUKE 12:13-15

1. What is the setting for the parable that Jesus is about to tell? What was going on?

[Note: People often asked rabbis (teachers) for decisions about disputed points of the Law. In this matter, the Law stated that an elder son should receive double of what the younger son receives of their father's inheritance (Duet 21:17). It's most likely that the man asking Jesus this question is a younger son wanting more than what the Law provided for him. Jesus' refusal to give a decision is not a denial of His right do so. Rather, He uses the opportunity to speak about a "heart" issue, and another very important aspect of life in the Kingdom of God.]

READ LUKE 12:16-21 (JESUS' PARABLE)

2. The parable that Jesus tells here centers on the topic of "greed" (v. 15). Define greed.

Greed = "Selfish desire to acquire more than one needs or deserves" (Webster's Dictionary)

In the parable, how do we see greed lived out in the man's attitudes and actions? What is God's response toward the rich man's greed? Why?

[Note: The word "fool" is not lightly used; in the OT, it referred to those who reject the knowledge and ways of God as the basis for life and are punished for it (i.e. they receive the consequences of their foolishness.)]

In contrast to storing up things for oneself, what does it mean to be "rich toward God" (v.21)?

Using what we have and gain for His purposes and glory.

3. At the heart of greed is self-centered living. List other areas of life besides money and possessions that people strive after and end up living for instead of trusting in and living for God.

Relationships (friends, marriage, family), vocation, future plans, status, grades, etc.

READ LUKE 12: 22-34 (JESUS' TEACHING)

4. Why do people worry about the needs spoken of in vv. 22-28 (food, clothing, etc.)?

They don't think that God knows their needs, and/or they don't believe that He cares, and/or they don't think He is capable of meeting their needs—or maybe they just don't think about God at all in relationship to their daily needs.

What does it mean to “set your heart” on things and to “run after” them (v.29-30)?

Set heart on = focus on or to be consumed with its importance

Run after = strive [The word used is a strengthened form of the word “seek” in v.31.]

What reasons does Jesus give for not doing these things?

God knows the needs of the people who are in His Kingdom (v.30), He deeply loves them (they are more valuable to Him than the ravens and the grass of the fields, vv.24, 28) and He promises to meet their needs (v.31)

5. People also often have wants or things of this world that they “treasure” (v.34), which become things that they set their hearts on and run after as well.

What does Jesus tell us that we should do instead of setting our hearts and running after these needs and wants?

Seek God's Kingdom and trust in His provision [Note: In a similar passage (Matt 6:33), Jesus commands His followers to seek first God's Kingdom. In doing so, He does not negate that they may have a part in meeting their own needs (i.e. through work). Rather, He is pointing out the difference of priority and importance that the one should have over the other.]

6. What does it mean to “seek first God's Kingdom” (v.31)?

to seek first and foremost to know His will (i.e. what's important to the King and in His Kingdom) and to give themselves (time, energy, money, etc.) to these things.

SUMMARY: All of us have needs and wants. Jesus instructs us through this parable and teaching that people in God's Kingdom shouldn't set their hearts on these things or strive after them—especially in greed and self-service. Instead, they should trust God and seek first and foremost to know His will (i.e. what's important to the King and in His Kingdom) and to give themselves (time, energy, money, etc.) to these things. People, who are in God's Kingdom, set their hearts on the desires and concerns of the King, and run after these things.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- What are the things in your life that you worry about or desire and seek after more than God and His desires and concerns?
- What do you “treasure” in our heart more than God and what is important in His Kingdom
- In God's eyes, are you a “fool” (setting our hearts on and running after our own wants and needs) or someone committed to seeking first God's Kingdom (trusting in Him for His provision)?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Talents Matt 25:14-30

INTRODUCTION: In this study, we will discover yet another characteristic of those who are in the Kingdom of God now and who will enter into the final Kingdom of God when Jesus returns. This study builds on the parable that Jesus told in Matt 24:45-51 (which emphasizes being responsible in carrying out the Master's will while He is away), by highlighting a certain important aspect of that responsibility.

WARM UP QUESTIONS:

- Think about a time when someone (e.g. a parent, an employer, a coach) handed over a responsibility of theirs to you for a period of time. How did you feel about having this responsibility? How did you do in carrying it out?

READ MATT 25:14-30

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does the "it" in v. 14 refer to?

It refers to the time of Jesus' return and of the coming of the final Kingdom of God (25:1)

2. The parable starts out with a certain man (a master) about to go away on a journey.

What does he do before he leaves?

"entrusted his property"= gave responsibility to others for what belonged to him (v.25)

"each according to his ability"= no one was given more than he could do something with

What is his expectation of what ought to happen with what he has entrusted/given to others?

Although not stated in the opening lines of the parable, we see later that he expected that they would use what he had entrusted/given to them for him and his purposes.

What kinds of things ("talents") has Jesus entrusted/given to us that He expects us to use for Him and His purposes while we wait for His return?

Abilities, finances, material possessions, opportunities (e.g. college education), etc.

3. In the parable, what happens while the master is away?

Two servants used what had been given to them to double it for their master; the third servant hid what he was given and didn't use it for his master.

Why did the third servant hide what the master had given to him?

He says that it was because the master was "a hard man" (v.24) and therefore he was "afraid"(v.25). The master, however, calls him "wicked" and "lazy"(v.26). In any case—whether it was fear, willful disobedience or laziness (or possibly even selfishness because he believed he wouldn't receive anything in return for his work) —he was unwilling to work and/or to use what had been entrusted/given him for his master.

How do these examples parallel what people today do with the “talents” that Jesus has given to them?

It seems that—because in most cases, people believe that what is theirs belongs to them (instead of acknowledging that they belong to God and have been entrusted to them)—they end up using their “talents” for themselves and not for God.

4. “After a long time” (v.19) the master returns.

How does he respond to what the first two servants did? What did they receive from him? Why?

Because these servants were “good and faithful” with what had been entrusted/given to them, the master commended them and invited them to share in his presence and blessings.

How does he respond to what the third servant did? What did that servant receive from him? Why?

Because the servant didn’t do anything with what he had been entrusted with (not even acting on what he “knew” to at least put it into the bank to earn some interest), the master calls him “worthless”, puts him out of his presence and has him punished.

5. How does this “settling of accounts” (v.19) parallel what will happen when we die and/or when Jesus returns?

Hebrews 9:27 → “...man is destined to die once, and after that, to face judgment”

2 Corinthians 5:10 → “For we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (which includes how we used or didn’t use for Him and His purposes the various resources and opportunities that were given to us by Him.)

[Note: It might be helpful here to mention that there is an appropriate and needed “fear of the Lord” that we must have. According to the Bible, the “fear of the Lord” means to acknowledge and respond appropriately to the Lord (in worship, obedience, holy living, service and—in the case of this parable —using what He has entrusted/given to us for Him and His purposes) because of who He is and because of what He will do if we don’t.]

SUMMARY: People who are in God’s Kingdom now, and who will enter the final Kingdom of God when Jesus returns, know the Master, expect His return and are ready for it. They also acknowledge that He has given them (and continues to give them) various resources and opportunities to use for Him and His purposes while He is away, and they use these things out of love for the Master and a right understanding of who He is and what He is like—as well as out of a right “fear” of what He will do if they don’t.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- What are some of the “talents” that Jesus has given to you, and how are you using them (or not) for Him and His purposes.
- How does the thought of “giving an account” to Jesus affect the seriousness of how you live your life now and your being ready for His return?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Sheep and the Goats

Matt 25:31-46

INTRODUCTION: Throughout this entire Bible study series we have been discovering what people who are in the Kingdom of God and who will enter into God's future and final Kingdom are like. Since this is the last study in our series, let's review what we've learned so far:

People who are in the Kingdom of God and who will enter into God's future and final Kingdom

- receive Jesus' teachings (and all of God's Word), obey it, and bear "fruit" as a result
- have counted the cost of giving their entire lives to the King and have done so with a commitment to follow through by continuing to say "yes" to Him and His will
- trust God and seek first and foremost to know His will (i.e. what's important to the King and in His Kingdom) and to give themselves (time, energy, money, etc.) to these things
- expect Jesus' return and are ready for it because they use what He has entrusted/given to them for Him and His purposes

There are, of course, many other characteristics that we could have looked at in other parables and teachings of Jesus. However, with each one we've looked at, we've done so with a desire to know for certain whether or not we are "in" the Kingdom of God or not. Why? Because one day the answer to that question will be revealed about us—and it will have significant and eternal consequences. This is the focus of our final study.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Think about a time when something that was going on inside of you—something that you had maybe worked hard not to show, or maybe had convinced yourself wasn't even there (e.g. anger towards a coach or resentment towards a fellow teammate)—was suddenly made known to others. How did you feel?

READ MATT 25:31-46

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In verses 31-33, who is this "Son of Man"? Where is He? What's going on around Him? What is He doing?

*"Son of Man" = Jesus ("What will be the sign of your coming?" Matt 24:3)
= the King (Matt 25:34, 40)*

King Jesus is sitting on His throne separating all the peoples of the earth who are being gathered before Him into two different groups. [Note: Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats. For although sheep and goats often grazed together during the day, they were normally separated by the shepherd at night because goats needed to be inside and warm while sheep could stay outside in the cooler air.]

What is the significance of being put at the King's right and His left?

The right side was the side on honor

2. In verses 34-45, what does the King say to those on His right (the sheep) and to those on His left (the goats)?

The “sheep”

“Come” (to be with Him)
“blessed by my Father”
“your inheritance, the kingdom”
“prepared for you”

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The “goats”

“depart from me” (to be separated from Him)
“cursed (by my Father)”
“eternal fire”
“prepared for the devil and his angels”

What reasoning/criteria does the King use in making these decisions?

His decisions were based on what they did or did not do for others in need. However, their actions were actually the fruit of what had been/was in their hearts (i.e. their actions showed whether they were already in the Kingdom of God or not).

Look at Luke 6:43-45. “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks (and our actions show) what the heart is full of.”

[Note: The phrase “brothers of mine” in v.40, has led some to believe that Jesus is referring to His disciples or His people. However, most believe that he is referring to all people who are poor and needy.]

3. In v.46, what more do we see about the outcomes of the King’s decisions for each of these two groups of people?

The judgment is final and eternal. There are only two alternatives: either eternal separation and punishment or eternal life and blessing.

4. Looking back over the entire passage, we see in this picture of judgment that both groups of people refer to the King as “Lord” (v.37 and v.44). We are reminded of the introduction to our series, and Jesus’ shocking words in Matt 7 that not all who call Him ‘Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of God (Matt 7:21).

What does this passage tell us about who will and who won’t enter the future and final Kingdom of God—and why?

People who will enter the future and final Kingdom of God are those who are already in it, and who are already living as people in the Kingdom. This passage uses the example of how Kingdom people treat the poor and needy. However, any of the things that we have learned in this Bible study series about what is characteristic of those “in” the Kingdom could have been used as well.

SUMMARY: Although we’ve seen it in other passages we’ve studied, this passage especially shows us the seriousness of being “in” God’s Kingdom now because of what it will mean for us at the coming of God’s future and final Kingdom when Jesus returns. We must be sure. The stakes are too high.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- If you don’t know for sure whether or not you are “in” the Kingdom of God (or you know for sure you’re not), do you want to be “in”?