

**ATHLETES
INTERVARSITY**
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

PARABLES
— OF THE —
KINGDOM

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Are you in?

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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

Entering the Kingdom

Matthew 7:13-27

INTRODUCTION: The verses we will be looking at contain important teachings of Jesus, but are not in the form of a parable or include any of His parables. They do, however, provide for us a good introduction to the topic of the Kingdom of God. They also raise an important question for all to consider: “Are you in the Kingdom of God or not?”

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- What does it mean for you to be a full-fledged member of a group of people or program (team, family, etc.) that you are a part of?
- How do you feel about those who have a less than full-hearted commitment and involvement in it?

READ MATTHEW 7:13-27

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As you look back over these verses, how does what Jesus says illustrate the “now, but not yet” reality of the Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven?

2. What do vv. 13-14 tell us about entering the Kingdom of God?

What is “the narrow gate”?

How do we “enter” through Jesus?

3. How do we know that we have entered the Kingdom of God through Jesus and are on the road that leads to eternal life and membership in God’s future and final Kingdom? What are the proofs or evidences that this has happened?

4. How do we see this illustrated by Jesus in vv. 15-20?

Read parallel verses in Luke 6:43-45

5. So, does this mean that people can't do any "good works" without faith in Jesus—or that everyone who does "good works" has entered and will enter the Kingdom of God? Look at vv. 21-23. What do these verses tell us about "good works" and the Kingdom of God?
6. What then are the distinguishing differences between those who do "good works" and are in the Kingdom of God and those who do "good works" and are not?
7. And how does one know what the will of the Father is in order to do it? Look at vv. 24-27...

SUMMARY: This passage raises the question "Are you in the Kingdom of God or not?" The fact that Jesus says that many will find out on the day of judgment that they are not in, and that "few" will enter into the Kingdom of God, makes it even more important for us to know what it means to be "in". Let's summarize what we've learned from this passage to help us begin to answer this question.

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

- Have entered through faith in Jesus
- Have experienced (and continue to experience) an internal (heart) change that produces (and continues to produce) external "good fruit"
- Hear and do what the Word of God teaches in order to know and do the will of God in their lives.

In the coming weeks, we will be looking at 9 parables that Jesus told that will help us to know even more about what members of the Kingdom of God are like and what it means to be "in".

APPLICATION QUESTION (for thought only): "Are you in?"

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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”. In our last study we learned that one of the proofs or evidences that someone is “in” is that they hear and do what Jesus says (i.e. what the Word of God teaches). In this study, we will be looking at a parable that Jesus told that will help make this truth even clearer.

OPENING QUESTION:

- What areas of life are you most interested in learning about, and what characterizes your interest and pursuit of learning more about them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

READ MARK 4:1-9

1. Describe the setting and what is going on in vv.1-2
2. Why would the story that Jesus told in vv.3-8 be one that His audience would have understood?
3. Describe the kinds of soils mentioned in the story, as well as the corresponding results that came when the seed fell on them.
4. Why do you think Jesus says what He does in v.9?

READ MARK 4:13-20

5. What is the seed that is sown?

6. 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.

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

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 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? Are there parts of your life that represent different kinds of “soil”?
- What are some practical ways in which we can become “good soil”? How can we help each other to do these things?

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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 will see provide for us more evidences of what it means to be “in” God’s Kingdom. Therefore, as Jesus says once again in this passage, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. (v.35)”

OPENING QUESTION:

- Have you ever made a commitment to something 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:

1. What prompted Jesus to tell the parable?
2. Why did the owner of the house (i.e. whose banquet it was) become “angry” (v.21)?
3. What was the response of the owner (vv.21-23)? What did he do?
4. What truth about the Kingdom of God does this parable illustrate?

How does this relate to what we’ve seen in the last two studies?

READ LUKE 14:25-35 (Jesus' teaching)

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

6. What additional truth do we learn from the two analogies that Jesus gives in vv.28-32?

7. And finally, what additional point—which connects to the parable in vv.15-24—do vv.34-35 drive home?

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 is 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?
[Note: This is in part what it means to “enter through the narrow gate” (Matt 7:13)]

- If you have, are you continuing to say “yes” to Him in what He teaches you and asks of you? [Note: This is in part what it means to “do the will of the Father” (Matt 7:21)]

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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 1) our need to enter through faith in Jesus and to give our whole lives to Him, 2) our need to count the cost before saying yes to Him so that we can continue to say yes to Him and His will, and 3) 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. 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.

OPENING QUESTION:

- 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?

READ LUKE 12:16-21 (Jesus' parable)

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

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?

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

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 themselves instead of trusting in and living for God.

How might Jesus have told the parable addressing one of these areas of self-centered living?

READ LUKE 12: 22-34 (Jesus' teaching)

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

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

What reasons does Jesus give for not doing these things?

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?

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

What might it look like in the areas of life we have been considering?

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 our lives that we worry about or desire and seek after more than God and His desires and concerns?
- What do we “treasure” in our hearts more than God and what is important in His Kingdom?
- In God’s eyes, are we a “fool” (v. 20) setting our hearts on and running after our own wants and needs or someone committed to seek first God’s Kingdom, trusting in Him for the rest?

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The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

INTRODUCTION: In our last study, we learned that people who are in the Kingdom of God do not seek to live for themselves, but rather trust God and seek first and foremost to know His will (i.e. what's important to the King and His Kingdom) and to give themselves (their time, energy, money, etc.) to these things. In this study, we will see what is at the heart of self-less Kingdom living, identifying yet another aspect of what it means to be "in".

OPENING QUESTION:

- What is your typical response to needs that you "encounter" (e.g. homeless people begging for food or money on the sidewalk; starving children that you see on TV; news reports of people who have been devastated by natural disaster; etc.)?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

READ LUKE 14:15-37

1. What prompts Jesus' interaction with the "expert in the law"?

Who is this man? Why did he ask Jesus his initial question?

2. Jesus answered the man's question with a question. Why?

In what sense did the "expert" answer "correctly"?

What then did Jesus mean when He said "Do this and you will live" (v. 28b)?

3. How might the "expert" felt about Jesus' answer? Why does he ask Jesus his second question?

4. Review the parable that Jesus told (vv.30-35). Describe the setting.

How do the three people respond to the person (who most likely was a Jew) who falls into hardship?

In what ways did the Samaritan show love in his actions?

5. In v. 36, why does Jesus reverse the question that the “expert” asked in v.29? What was He communicating?

6. How do we see this same pattern lived out in Jesus’ life in the following examples?

7. How do we see the King’s example and this Kingdom principle summarized in I John 3:16-18?

SUMMARY: People in God’s Kingdom follow the example of “the Good Samaritan”—as well as the example of their King—by not only seeing those in need, but also feeling love for them and acting in love toward them by seeking to meet those needs (even if it means sacrifice to themselves) with whatever resources they have.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- In what ways do we put limits on who we will love and how much we will love them?
- Are our lives characterized by seeing needs, feeling compassion for those in need and acting to meet those needs—even at cost to ourselves?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The Unmerciful Servant

Matt 18:21-35

INTRODUCTION: In our last study, we learned that people who are in the Kingdom of God follow the example of the King (Jesus) of loving others by not only seeing those in need, but also feeling love for them and acting in love toward them by seeking to meet those needs (even if it means sacrifice to themselves) with whatever resources they have. This Kingdom value parallels another value that we will be looking at in this study, and this value will give us yet another evidence or proof of whether or not we are “in’ God’s Kingdom.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Why do we find it so hard to forgive others who wrong us, especially if they do it repeatedly?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

READ MATT 18:21-22 (the context)

1. What prompts Peter’s question to Jesus in v. 21?

Why does Peter suggest forgiving others who sin against him “up to seven times”?

What does Jesus’ answer in v.22 imply?

READ MATT 18:23-35 (Jesus’ parable and teaching)

2. What is significant about the debt owed by the servant in v.24 and his plea to his master in v.26?

How does the master respond (v.27)?

3. Given what just had happen to him, what is surprising about what the forgiven servant did in v.28?

What was the fellow servant’s plea in v.29?

How does the forgiven servant respond (v.30)?

4. When the master found out about what the forgiven servant had done (v.31), he calls the forgiven servant “wicked”. Why?

What is the master’s response to this wickedness?

5. What warning does Jesus give in v.35 to those who do not forgive others?

6. How is it that people who are “in” the Kingdom of God can (and should) forgive others?

SUMMARY: People in God’s Kingdom are characterized by their forgiveness of others who have sinned against them—with no limits as to the extent of sin or how many times they may have to forgive. They are able (and want) to do this because they have been forgiven by God for their sins (a debt that they could not repay) and have been spared the punishment that they deserved for their sins. People who are unwilling to forgive others who sin against them will not be forgiven by God and will be given the punishment that they deserve for their sin against Him.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- If so, who in our lives do we yet need to forgive?
- How can we—with God’s help—truly forgive these people “from the heart” and show forgiveness to them in word and action?

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The Workers in the Vineyard

Matt 20:1-16

INTRODUCTION: We've been looking at parables that have been showing us what people in the Kingdom of God are like. And although the emphasis of this study's parable is actually more on what the King is like (a common feature of many of the Kingdom parables), it isn't void of giving us understanding of Kingdom people characteristics. So again, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- As a kid, you probably said more than once, "It's not fair!" comparing what you got (or didn't get) to what someone else got. How important is "fairness" to you now? Why?

READ MATT 20:1-16

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Review back through verses 1-7. What might each of the men who were hired by the landowner to work in his vineyard felt as they were hired—or not hired—as the day went on?
2. How would each of them felt about what was promised them for their work, and what might they have expected for their pay?
3. What surprising thing happens, however, in v. 9? What might those who had only worked for one hour felt about this demonstration of generosity by the landowner?

Why did the landowner do this for them?

4. How did those who had worked all day think and feel about this in comparison to what they received (vv.10-12)?

Were their thoughts and feelings right and justified?

5. How does the landowner address their complaint of “It’s not fair!” (vv.13)?

6. What does he reveal about them? About himself?

7. Jesus follows up His parable with the statement, “So the last will be first and the first will be last.” What was He communicating to His disciples (and to us)?

8. What do we learn from this parable about the characteristics of people who are in the Kingdom of God?

SUMMARY: People in God’s Kingdom understand that it is only by the invitation of the King—and His grace—that they are “in”. They serve the King with joy, believing in His promises and rejoicing in His fairness and goodness to them. They also serve without comparison and envy towards others, rejoicing in the King’s compassion, generosity and grace to whoever He chooses.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- Do you live as if God owes you more (or will give you more) because of your merits, or do you serve Him with joy and with a willingness to accept whatever He gives you because you know Him to be fair and good?
- Are you more apt to be envious of others who seem more blessed by God than you (especially those who you feel don’t deserve it), or to rejoice with/for them?

5. What are the outcomes for those who do “keep watch” and who are “ready”?

SUMMARY: People in God’s Kingdom believe that Jesus will return to bring them into His final Kingdom. They are “watchful” as they wait for His return with spiritual alertness, expectancy and excitement. They also are “ready” as they wait by faithfully serving Him; i.e. doing the things that He has told them to do.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- “Are you in?”
- Do you live as if Jesus could return at any time?
- Are you ready for His return and judgment?

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The Talents Matt 25:14-30

INTRODUCTION: In this study—as in our last—we will again be reminded of our need to be ready for Jesus’ return and will discover characteristics of those who will enter into the final Kingdom of God (and those who won’t). This study builds on the parable that Jesus told in Matt 24:45-51 about the servant in charge (which emphasized being responsible in carrying out the Master’s will while He is away), by highlighting a certain important aspect of that responsibility.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Think about a time when someone (e.g. a parent or an employer, captain or 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?
2. The parable starts out with a certain man about to go away on a journey. _What does he do before he leaves?

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

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?

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

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

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

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?

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

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

5. In your own words state the main spiritual truth that comes from the parable of the talents, and what is necessary now for those who want to enter the Kingdom of God when Jesus returns.

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 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?

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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

- have entered "through the narrow gate" by placing their faith and trust in Jesus, the King
- have experienced (and continue to experience) an internal heart change that produces (and continues to produce) external "good fruit" for the Kingdom
- hear and do what the Word of God teaches in order to know and do the will of God in their lives
- receive Jesus' teachings (and all of God's Word) and do what it says
- have counted the cost of giving their entire lives to the King and have done so
- 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
- see those in need, feel love for them and act in love toward them by seeking to meet those needs with whatever resources they have (even if it means sacrifice to themselves)
- forgive others who have sinned against them—with no limits as to the extent of sin or how many times they may have to forgive
- serve the King with joy; believing in His promises and rejoicing in His fairness and goodness to them, serving without comparison and envy towards others and rejoicing in the King's compassion, generosity and grace to whoever He chooses
- are "watchful" as they wait for His return, waiting with spiritual alertness, expectancy and excitement; and are "ready" as they wait, faithfully doing the things that He has told them to do
- know the goodness of the Master and "fear" Him, using the various resources and opportunities that He has given them (and continues to give them) for Him and His purposes while He is away

We've considered all of these characteristics 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 for us will be revealed and there will be 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 even convinced yourself wasn't even there; e.g. sorrow, bitterness, anger, etc.) 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?

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

2. In verses 34-45, note the similarities and the contrasts between what is happening with the two groups of people. What does the King say to those on His right (the sheep) and to those on His left (the goats)?

How do each of these groups of people respond?

What is the King's reply to each one?

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?
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 what we saw in our first study in Matt 7 where Jesus said 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?

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 the final Kingdom of God 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" (or you know you're not), and you want to be "in", what do you need do now to be sure?