

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 1: Choices

Notes for the leader: This is the first in a series of lessons about "Living in the Kingdom." This lesson explains that the **Kingdom of God** was at the center of Jesus's teaching throughout his ministry. It introduces the idea of a **parable**, which was a primary method Jesus used in his preaching and teaching.

 These key concepts will be repeated throughout this series of lessons.

This first lesson focuses on one of the few examples where Jesus explained in detail the "deeper meaning" of the parable. Later lessons in this series will refer back to these key concepts.

Introduction

Living in the Kingdom

Wherever he went, Jesus told people about the Kingdom of God. It was the subject of his first public preaching: "The time has come," Jesus said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." (*Mark 1:15*). It was the last thing he talked with his disciples about before he ascended into heaven (*Acts 1:3*).

The religious leaders of his time were suspicious of Jesus. They demanded that Jesus tell them **where** to find this Kingdom he kept talking about. Jesus told them that the Kingdom of God is not a **place**. For those who have invited God's spirit to live in them, he said, "**the Kingdom of God is within you.**" (*Luke 1:20-21*)

If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you are part of God's Kingdom. Being a member of the Kingdom of God means **a new relationship with God** – one that starts **here and now** and **lasts forever!**

What are Parables?

Jesus often used **parables** to teach people about the Kingdom (*Matthew 13:34*). The word "parable" literally means "a comparison." Usually, a parable is a short, simple story – but always with a deeper, spiritual meaning. The people and things in the parable represent things that are much more important than they seem to be on the surface, and the story teaches an important lesson. Many of the stories we learned as children are really parables intended to teach us something: for example, the story of the Three Pigs.

In this lesson, we'll look at two parables Jesus told. The first one is found in Luke 8, starting at verse 4. We're starting with this parable because it's the one of the very few parables where Jesus specifically explained the "deeper meaning" of the story. We can use the principles we learn in this lesson to look for the deeper meanings in other parables.

Luke 8:4-8

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.

Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.

Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

You need to remember that in those days, farmers didn't have tractors and plows. They would scratch up the dirt as best they could, and then throw handfuls of seeds into the air, to be carried by the breeze across the field. Jesus' disciples understood this, of course, but they weren't sure what he was trying to say in this parable, and they weren't even sure who he was aiming it at. So they went to Jesus to ask him to explain it. Jesus told them it was aimed at them –the disciples –if they were willing to understand it. He explained it to them this way:

Luke 8:11-15

"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Jesus had chosen these twelve men for an incredible mission. After his crucifixion and resurrection – which occurred less than two years after he told them this parable – he would return to heaven and leave them with the task of starting the Church, which would change the entire history of the world. He wanted them to understand that their job was to preach the gospel, and that the Holy Spirit would then begin speaking to the hearts of those who heard the gospel.

He wanted them to understand that different people were going to respond in different ways to what they heard. Some, whose "hearts were hard," would not be interested at all. There would be others who would seem at first to be believers, but who would drop out as soon as the going got tough. There would be still others who might believe what they heard, but they wouldn't be willing to let go of other things in their lives that were more important to them than their relationship with God, so they would never grow up to be good for very much. But there would be some, like the seed that fell on good ground, who would **hear**, and **believe**, and their **lives would be changed**, and they would tell others in their villages and towns, and **their lives** would be changed, and perhaps eventually a hundred people might become members of the Kingdom because of one person who **heard**, and **understood**, and **believed**, and was **willing to follow Jesus**.

Now let's look at another parable –one that Jesus didn't explain. Let's see if we can figure out the deeper meaning of this story. Turn back in your Bibles to Luke, Chapter 6, starting at verse 46. This is called the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders.

Here's some background on what had been going on just before Jesus told this parable. Jesus had been up in the hills with many of his followers, probably for two or three days, teaching them about God's truth in what we often call the "Sermon on the Mount." He had taught about spiritual priorities, and about what it means to love your neighbor, and what it means to follow the laws of God. Now everybody was coming back down out of the hills, feeling good about what they had heard and what they had learned, and were returning to their villages. As they walked back, Jesus turned to them and said:

Luke 6:46-49

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?

I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice.

He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.

But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."

Let's break into small groups and spend a few minutes talking about this parable. We'll see if we can figure out the "deeper meaning."

Notes for the leader: *Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.*

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: *The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.*

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

Understanding Parables

In this series of studies, we will usually start with the same first question each time: Who was Jesus telling this parable to? And what was the situation that led Jesus to tell this parable? If we start with this perspective, it makes it easier to figure out the "deeper meaning" of the parable.

1. Who was Jesus telling this parable to? What was the situation?

In this case, Jesus was challenging the people who had been with him on a spiritual retreat in the mountains. They had spent several days with Jesus, and were probably on a "spiritual high." Jesus stopped them on the way back to their homes and villages to make them think about putting the things they had been **talking** about into **practice** in their daily lives.

2. What kinds of choices did these two men need to make when deciding how and where to build their houses?

They needed to decide where to build. And how to build. And what to build with. And how much time and effort to put into preparing the building site.

Choosing a good building site isn't quite as easy as it might sound. In desert regions, you often find a nice, flat, hard-packed sandy area that looks good, but it's actually part of a dry river bed –an arroyo –which will flood badly whenever it rains hard. If you build your house in an arroyo, you're in trouble!

3. Why do you think the two men made such different choices?

Maybe the man who build his house without a solid foundation didn't know what he was doing. Maybe he didn't have enough money to build it right.

Maybe he was lazy.

Maybe he planned to sell it to someone who didn't know the difference, and get out of town before the first big rainstorm came!

4. What do you think is the "deeper meaning" of this parable? What was Jesus trying to get the people to see?

The **day-to-day choices** we make in our lives end up making us into the people that we are, for **better** or for **worse**. We need to make **good choices** so that our lives don't fall apart when troubles come.

a. What do you think the **houses** stand for in the parable?

Our **lives** –our **selves**.

b. What do the foundations of the houses stand for?

Our **basic values** –what we are building our lives on.

What we are putting our **faith** in.

c. What does the storm or flood stand for?

Troubles. Trials. Tribulations.

All of us will face serious troubles at some time in our lives.

d. What does the solid rock stand for?

Solid **values**. Solid **faith**. A personal relationship with **Jesus**.

e. What does the sandy ground stand for?

Trusting in **material things** –wealth, or fame, or popularity.

Trusting in things that can be washed away when things go wrong, or when times get bad, or when we lose our health.

Putting our faith in **anyone** or **anything other than Jesus**.

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Choices *(Luke 6:46-49)*

1. Who was Jesus telling this parable to? What was the situation?
2. In this parable, Jesus compares the way two men decided to build their houses. Look first at the story itself – **not** the deeper meaning. What kinds of choices did these two men need to make when deciding how and where to build their houses?
3. Why do you think the two men made such different choices?
4. What do you think is the "deeper meaning" of this parable? What was Jesus trying to get the people to see?
 - a. What do you think the houses stand for in the parable?
 - b. What do the foundations of the houses stand for?
 - c. What does the storm or flood stand for?
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Take-home Thoughts About ...

Choices *(Luke 6:46-49)*

Jesus taught people important truths about God using "parables." Usually, a parable is a short, simple story –but always with a deeper, spiritual meaning we need to know.

Jesus told his disciples a parable about a farmer sowing seed *(Luke 8:4-8)*. Some of the seed fell on hard ground, and never grew. Other seed sprouted quickly, but then died away. Other seed yielded a large crop. He told the disciples that their job was to spread the word of the gospel, just like the farmer spread the seed. Some people would reject the gospel. Others would seem to believe, but give up when things got tough. Others would believe, their lives would be changed, and many other people would become members of God's Kingdom because of them. Jesus didn't want the disciples to be surprised by this. They weren't responsible for the **results** –they were responsible for faithful **preaching**. Each of us needs to ask ourselves how we have responded to the **seed of the gospel** that God has planted in us.

Jesus told a larger group of followers a parable about two men building houses *(Luke 8:11-15)*. One did a quick and easy job, building his house on the sand. The other spent the time to dig deep and lay the foundation of his house on solid rock. When storms (troubles) came, the first man's house (life) fell apart. The second man's house stood firmly. In this parable, the **foundation** stands for where we are putting our faith and trust. If we put our trust in **Jesus**, we can be secure for eternity, no matter what happens. If we put our faith in **material things**, they can be wiped out in minutes, and we have nothing. Jesus asked his followers, "Why do you call me **Lord**, and do not **do** what I **say**?" That was a good question then, and it's a good question for each of us to ask ourselves today!

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