1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Luke, Part 2
Theme: Jesus the Storyteller

Overview: Jesus was the master storyteller. His parables began in everyday life—roads, barns, banquets, families, and courtrooms—and then turned to reveal surprising truths about God and his kingdom. In this second part of our study of Luke, students will learn from five of Jesus' stories to go and show mercy, to value the eternal things God values, to be ready for the Master's return, to turn back to the Father who longs to restore them, and to come humbly yet boldly to God in prayer.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

The Gospel was written by Luke, "the doctor" and traveling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" and wrote "an orderly account" based on what eyewitnesses handed down (Luke 1:1-4). He later wrote the book of Acts as a second volume (Acts 1:1).

Audience

Luke addressed his Gospel to "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3), possibly a Roman official or patron, so that he might "know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:4). Luke's attention to Gentiles, women, the poor, and outsiders made his account especially meaningful to a wide, largely Gentile audience.

Date

Luke's Gospel was written before Acts, which ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (about AD 62). The Gospel was likely completed around AD 60. The parables in this study were told during Jesus' final months of ministry, about AD 29–30.

Setting

Every lesson in this study comes from Luke's "travel narrative" (Luke 9:51–19:27), which begins when Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9:51). Along the way he taught large crowds, his disciples, and the religious leaders, often answering their questions and criticisms with stories. This section of Luke contains many parables found in no other Gospel.

Theme

Jesus' parables reveal the heart of God and the values of his kingdom. A Samaritan shows what it means to be a neighbor; a rich fool shows the danger of greed; faithful servants show how to wait for the Master; a running father shows God's love for lost sons; and a persistent widow and a humble tax collector show how to pray.

Why Study Jesus' Parables?

Jesus' stories still sneak up on us and challenge our assumptions. This study calls believers to show mercy to anyone in need, to be rich toward God rather than possessed by possessions, to live ready for Christ's return, to rejoice when the lost come home, and to pray with persistence and humility.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Luke 10:25-37

WEEK 2: Luke 12:13-34

WEEK 3: Luke 12:35-48

WEEK 4: Luke 15:11-32

WEEK 5: Luke 18:1-14

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Go and show mercy.**

STUDY: Luke, Part 2

THEME: Jesus the Storyteller

LESSON TEXT: Luke 10:25-37

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Leviticus 19:9-8; James 2:1-11; Romans 13:8-10

THE STORY OF THE NEIGHBORS

BY MARK SCOTT

TV's Fred Rogers made famous the refrain, "Won't you be my neighbor?" This warm and endearing ordained minister made us feel neighborly toward one another. But it was Jesus who blew the doors off any definition that would limit the scope and intensity of loving one's neighbor.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably Jesus' second or third most popular parable. But it is the first parable in the travel narrative of Luke 9–19, a section of Scripture that contains 18 such stories.

The Neighbor in Question

Luke 10:25-29

After Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), he multiplied his ministry by sending out the seventy-two on a short-term mission trip (Luke 10). Later, after the seventy-two had returned, Jesus had an encounter with an *expert in the law* (Jewish law, at least, and perhaps even Roman law).

The law expert wanted to *test* Jesus, and later he wanted to *justify* himself. When we want to test Jesus, we are doing what the devil did with Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). When we want to justify ourselves, we will remain stagnant in our faith and ultimately become idolatrous.

His question was not bad (i.e., it dealt with eternal life), but how he framed it up (*What must I do . . . ?*) might be indicative of his pride and legalism. The Master Teacher asked the lawyer a question. Jesus is interested in how we read his word. The lawyer knew the answer to the most important part of the law, love God and love neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:1-4 and Leviticus 19:18). For the moment, all sounded good. Jesus challenged him by saying, "Do this and you will live." But the lawyer had a question about who should be classified as his neighbor.

The Neighbor in the Ditch

Luke 10:30-32

Jesus answered the lawyer's question with a story rather than a dictionary definition. This parable began in reality, for there really was a road that went from Jerusalem to Jericho referred to as "The Bloody Way." But for a Samaritan to help a Jew on that road? That was the point at which the true-to-life parable veered into fictional analogy.

The people listening to Jesus might have been only slightly interested in a story of a man being *stripped*, *beaten*, and *left for dead* on that famous road that descends 3,700 feet in 17 miles. Was it nighttime? Was the man alone? Jesus said religious leaders (a priest and a Levite) came down that road, saw the needy man, and *passed by on the other side*. Since they were coming "down," helping the man would not endanger their ability to worship, unlike if they were going "up" to the temple. The title of the lesson is "The Story of the Neighbors." Notice that "neighbors" is plural. There are two neighbors in the text. This first one is in the ditch.

Q. Who is our neighbor? A. Anyone in need.

The Neighbor with a Strange Face

Luke 10:33-37

The whole parable turns on the phrase, "But a Samaritan. . . ." And, for effect, Jesus used the same verbs. He came, he saw, and . . . oops . . . he *took pity on him* (he had compassion in his gut for the injured man). This Samaritan was from the wrong race, the wrong place, and certainly had a strange face. We might wonder, *How did the neighbor in the ditch feel about this particular neighbor helping him?* The injured neighbor's thinking probably underwent a metamorphosis.

The Samaritan's compassion moved him to action. Sympathy was not sufficient. He went to the injured man and cared for him with the goods he had (*oil and wine*). He relieved suffering as best he could. The bloody man on the bloody way was . . . bloody. Mercy can be so messy at times. The Samaritan transported him to the nearest inn and took care of him. *The next day* means the Samaritan spent the night with the man—now that was extravagant care! It might have been terribly inconvenient to the Samaritan's schedule. Before leaving, the Samaritan put up the funds for the man's long-term rehab.

This is an interrogative parable. It ends with a question: "Which man was a neighbor to the man in the ditch?" Notice the turn. The first neighbor in the text was the man in the ditch—he had the needs. The second neighbor in the text was the Samaritan—he showed mercy. The lawyer could not bring himself to say, "The Samaritan," so he said, "The one who had mercy." As the conversation ended, the interrogative parable turned into an imperative parable—"Go and do likewise."

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THE BAD SAMARITAN

BY DAVID FAUST

There are good Samaritans and there are bad ones. Which kind are you?

On one occasion Jesus healed 10 men who had leprosy, but only one of them came back to thank him (Luke 17:11-17). That man was a Samaritan—a good one.

Sanballat, however, was a bad Samaritan. He ridiculed the Jews when they tried to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4:1-2). One day a Samaritan woman came to draw water from a well near the town of Sychar. Her neighbors probably considered her a bad Samaritan, for she had been married five times and was then living with a sixth man who wasn't her husband. After a life-changing conversation with Jesus, though, she became a good-news ambassador who introduced her neighbors to the Savior.

Bad Samaritans evidently can become good ones. That's why Jesus wanted the gospel to be preached in Samaria (Acts 1:8), and when it was, many Samaritans accepted Christ and were baptized (Acts 8:5-11).

Do the Opposite

My wife, Candy, received her clinical training to be a registered nurse at Cincinnati's Good Samaritan Hospital, which draws its name from Jesus' story in Luke 10 about a kindhearted traveler from Samaria who modeled good neighboring. No healthcare facility has ever been called Bad Samaritan Hospital. We know what good Samaritans do, but what about bad Samaritans? Their actions are the opposite of good neighboring.

If you want to be a bad Samaritan, skip the good deeds you know you ought to do.

Never take a risk. Don't get involved. After all, you might get hurt. Prioritize your personal safety above all other goals. Stay away from strangers, even those who obviously need your help.

If you want to be a bad Samaritan, see others as bothers rather than brothers and sisters.

Do what everybody else does. If others don't step in, why should you? If the other side of the road is good enough for the priest and the Levite, why not walk there yourself?

Look away. "When he saw him" (Luke 10:33)—when the good Samaritan noticed the wounded traveler lying there half-dead—he got involved. Loving deeds start with observant eyes. Bad Samaritans look away and stay away from needy neighbors in hospitals, nursing homes, jails, and homeless shelters.

Allow no cracks in your emotional armor. For the good Samaritan, seeing led to caring. He "took pity on him" (v. 33). Bad Samaritans, though, have lost their capacity to care. They don't have healthy boundaries; they build thick relational walls no one can penetrate.

Never get your hands dirty. Love was a hands-on experience for the good Samaritan. He bandaged the victim's wounds, poured on oil and wine, and transported the beaten man to safety—in the process soiling his own clothes and getting blood and grime on his own donkey. Bad Samaritans may drive cleaner cars, but are their hands really clean?

Be stingy with your financial resources. The good Samaritan used his own money to pay the innkeeper and promised to follow up later and spend more if further assistance was needed. Bad Samaritans keep all their money to themselves.

Jesus' story teaches us a lot about neighboring. Do you want to be a good Samaritan? "Go and do likewise" (v. 37). To be a bad one, just stay put and do nothing.

Personal Challenge:

Think of a neighbor in need—someone you know who needs encouragement, financial assistance, or some other kind of practical help. This week, what will you do to assist them?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In the course of obeying God over the past week, did anyone comment (favorably or negatively) on your Christlike behavior? Would you share what happened?

2. With whom did you share or show that "love is greater than laws" and/or "people are more important than procedures" over the past week? Tell us about that.

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 10:25-37** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to retell the passages in their own words in a minute or less.

3. What stands out in this famous "parable of the good Samaritan" passage, perhaps for the first time?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - The expert in the law tried to justify himself before Jesus. Why is that a bad idea?
   - What elements in this parable are real? What elements might be classified as fictional?
   - The priest and the Levite would both be considered "religious." How does this parable show us that being religious is not enough in God's eyes?
   - Based on this parable, who is your neighbor?
   - In what specific ways did the Samaritan show compassion to the man who was robbed?
   - In what ways can taking "pity" and taking "care" of someone in need be a form of loving God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and loving "your neighbor as yourself"?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. Jesus gave a simple command: "Go and do likewise." How will you obey that command?

8. With whom will you share the messages from this passage this week?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. How do you need mercy or care this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 12:13-34** as we continue studying some of Jesus' parables. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Serve God by valuing the eternal things he values.**

STUDY: Luke, Part 2

THEME: Jesus the Storyteller

LESSON TEXT: Luke 12:13-34

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 6:19-21, 24

THE STORY OF THE POOR RICH MAN

BY MARK SCOTT

The title of the lesson is an oxymoron. How can a rich man be poor? Of course, we know there is more than one way to be poor. One way is through what I call "affluenza" . . . for the "flu" of material possessions can afflict rich or poor.

Jesus delivered the Luke 12 discourse to perhaps his largest crowd ever. *Many thousands* (myriads) had gathered to hear Jesus. The crowd was so large they were literally *trampling one another* (Luke 12:1). Jesus wove several themes into this discourse, not the least of which were the twin themes of riches and trusting God. The discourse had two interruptions. The second one was from Simon Peter (v. 41). But the first one was from a man who was at odds with his brother over the family inheritance.

Possessed by Possessions

Luke 12:13-21

Teaching in the ancient world involved much more dialogue than today. So, the unnamed *someone* in the text felt comfortable interrupting Jesus. Since funerals can sometimes bring out the worst in people, this brother pleaded for Jesus to solve a family squabble about an inheritance. The boy sounded similar to the famous prodigal of Luke 15:11-32.

At first pass, Jesus' reply can be off-putting. He might not have wanted to jump into the middle of a family fight since he was in the middle of a sermon. Or maybe Jesus was teasing out the man's response in order to teach him a lesson (since Jesus' words will someday be the basis of all judgment—John 12:47-50).

Jesus read this man's heart and knew he was in deep water. He urged him to *guard against greed*. We must conclude from Jesus' answer that the man suffered from being greedy and was possessed by his possessions. Jesus went on to teach that life is not about who has the most toys—an upside-down teaching both then and now.

This teaching is referred to as the parable of the rich fool. The man was a farmer (as almost everyone was in Jesus' day). He had done well (sometimes God blesses rich unbelievers). His dilemma was he needed more storage space for his crops. This narcissist gave no regard for his community. He was wrapped up in a puny little universe called "me"; notice some form of that personal pronoun occurs 10 times in verses 17-19. He built larger barns to accommodate his crops, and then he sat back to watch the world go by.

This is one of the few parables where Jesus inserts "God" into a secular story. God called the man a *fool* (not an atheist but someone who has no moral compass). Death is a great wake-up call. If the man in the story had died that night, then who would own the barns full of grain? The parable has a tagline on it, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." The man was a fool (and so, possibly, was the man who interrupted Jesus).

Perspectives with Possessions

Luke 12:22-34

After the interruption, and after telling the rich fool parable, Jesus took a tangent for several verses and taught his disciples about material possessions. The text contains imperatives, two illustrations (object lessons of sorts), and a heartfelt appeal.

Returning to themes exposed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-34), Jesus shared some words about fretters. He said *not to worry*—about food and clothing. Those are real needs, and God promised to provide them for us. Two object lessons drove this home—i.e., ravens and lilies. The Middle Eastern raven was an ugly, small, and cheap bird. Arguing from the lesser to the greater, Jesus taught, "If God took care of the ravens, he will take care of you." Worrying about such things only subtracts; it never adds to your life. Worry does not increase stature or supply more rest to the worrier.

The second object lesson is about lilies. God takes care of them to the extent they exceed Solomon's glory. Lilies last only a short time in contrast to God's people, who last for eternity. God knows that unbelievers are consumed with acquiring everyday needs. God wants his people to trust in him for those needs.

The text ends with a heartfelt appeal from God. Shifting from birds and flowers to sheep, Jesus wants his followers to depend on him as sheep rely on a shepherd. We can afford to be wildly generous (*sell*, *give*, and *provide*) because God will take care of our needs, and our generosity on earth shows that we have treasure in heaven.

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APPLICATION

DON'T BET YOUR LIFE ON IT

BY DAVID FAUST

Greed is a weed in the garden of the soul. Have you noticed how gambling companies, sports leagues, and media outlets have joined forces to promote sports betting? Over the last four years, U.S. dollars spent on sports betting have increased dramatically. The amount wagered by sports gamblers now exceeds a staggering $7 billion per month.

Here's how Bloomberg.com described the trend in a December article called "The Sports Gambling Gold Rush Is Absolutely Off the Charts":

> *Legal sports betting in the U.S.—once confined to Nevada—has gone mainstream. Since the Supreme Court in 2018 ended federal bans on the industry's expansion, dozens of states have legalized it, and a multibillion-dollar betting boom is afoot. . . . As betting expands, the boundaries that once separated gambling from sports media and professional sports leagues are disappearing. Digital apps make sports betting possible on mobile devices, which gives it a foothold across America and threatens the business of brick-and-mortar casinos. And this is only the beginning; the industry is poised for explosive growth.*

The authors noted,

> *The Puritans believed gambling was sinful. And for much of U.S. history, that cultural disdain prevailed. . . . But the expansion of state lotteries and legalized casino gambling over the past several decades, along with greater cultural permissiveness toward many activities once seen as vices, has made gambling ubiquitous today.*

Big Barns, Small Faith

I'm a sports fan, but I'm alarmed by the swift expansion of sports betting. Gambling is addictive and it threatens the integrity of athletic competition. Small bets might seem like harmless fun, but can anyone seriously argue that the massive growth of the gambling industry is improving our society? Whenever we try to get something for nothing or rely on luck instead of the Lord, something is seriously wrong.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 cautions, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless." Jesus warned, "Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). To illustrate his point, Jesus told a parable about a rich farmer who made three big mistakes:

1. He overestimated his earning capacity. He assumed that a huge harvest one year guaranteed big harvests every year, so he built bigger barns to contain the expected yields. But things don't always turn out as planned.

2. He misaligned his priorities. His goal? "Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But there are more noble purposes to pursue.

3. He overestimated his lifespan. When he died that very night, his big plans would quickly fall apart. Someone quipped, "Americans seem to think death is optional."

Big barns don't matter if our faith is small.

Weed Out Greed

To avoid the mistakes made by the rich fool in Jesus' parable, here are three ways to counteract greed.

1. Recognize it. It's rare for anyone to confess the sin of greed. It's easier to see it in others than to see it in ourselves. We secretly judge what our neighbors own and buy, while rationalizing our own indulgences. As with other sins, victory over greed requires sincere repentance and confession.

2. Replace it with gratitude. Instead of being greedy, let's be thankful for what we have.

3. Redirect it toward generosity. Instead of accumulating an endless stash of things for ourselves, let's make it our goal to "excel in this grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7).

Personal Challenge:

Ask the Lord to shine the searchlight of his Spirit on any bit of greediness in your heart. Decide that you will fight against greed, replace it with gratitude, and be generous with what God has provided instead of always striving for more.

Source: bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-opinion-online-sports-betting-future-of-american-gambling/

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you receive mercy or care from others during the past week?

2. With whom did you share last week's lesson?

   Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 12:13-34** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase what happened in the passage, as if telling it to a 10-year-old.

3. What connection do you see between dividing an inheritance, building larger barns, ravens, and wildflowers?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - What do you learn from Jesus' initial response to the man who asked Jesus to intervene in an inheritance matter with his brother?
   - Recognizing that we all must "make a living," how do we strike a balance between earthly possessions and being rich toward God?
   - In the parable, what might the farmer have done with the bumper crop so as not to have been called "You fool!" by God?
   - Why are heavenly deposits a better investment than earthly deposits?
   - What happens when we "take control" of our lives vs. "releasing control" of our lives to God?
   - What special meaning do you read into Jesus referring to his disciples as "little flock" (v. 32)?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. Jesus gave several commands to obey in this passage:
   - "Do not worry about your life"
   - "Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink . . ."
   - "Seek his kingdom."
   - "Do not be afraid."
   - "Sell your possessions and give to the poor."
   - Choose one of these and share how you will seek to obey it this week.

8. With whom will you share this passage?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. If you were to worry about something this week, what would it be?
    - Let's follow Paul's good advice and "not be anxious about anything, but . . . by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present [our] requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 12:35-48** as we continue studying some of Jesus' parables. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Jesus is coming again, so be ready!**

STUDY: Luke, Part 2

THEME: Jesus the Storyteller

LESSON TEXT: Luke 12:35-48

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 24:42-51; Romans 13:11-14; 1 Peter 1:13-25

THE STORY OF THE MASTER'S RETURN

BY MARK SCOTT

Jesus, the master storyteller, continued his discourse in Luke 12 following the tangent about riches (vv. 13-34). He moved from riches to readiness. Disciples who trust God to provide for their needs will also be ready for God "to show up and show off" (as Marty Young, a minister in Utah, said).

This lesson text is highly metaphoric. The main metaphor concerns a master and servant. But under that big-picture metaphor are at least eight others that make this text quite visual (clothing, lamps, weddings, thieves, eating, etc.). Also worth noting in this highly figurative passage is that the metaphors are mostly eschatological (i.e., they especially relate to the future, specifically the return of Christ).

The Unusual and Coming Master

Luke 12:35-40

Servants (Christ followers) who have their treasures in the right place (v. 34) will be *dressed* (have their work clothes on). Their *lamps* will be constantly *burning* (not allowed to go out due to neglect). They will be ready to receive their master when he returns from a *wedding banquet*. The coming master will not catch the servants off guard. The servants will open the door for him as soon as the master *knocks* on the gate. And this will be true whether the master comes home during the middle of the night or toward daybreak.

Servants of this master will be vigilant. They will be waiting, watching, and ready for his arrival. Jesus used another metaphor to illustrate the servants' readiness—that of a *thief* breaking into a house. The owner of the house is the same person as the master. Thieves are usually discouraged from attempting a robbery when the owner (or his servants) is standing guard over the house.

But this master does not fit the norm. Jesus will, on another occasion, state the normal way that masters and servants work (Luke 17:7-10). Normally when the master returns home the servants serve him. After all, even if servants have done everything the master told them to do, they would still be unprofitable. But due to the love of God and the incarnation, in this text, the master is most unusual. This master comes home, dresses like a servant, and serves the servants (cf. John 13:1-17). And so that there is no mistaking, Jesus identifies the master in verse 40. He is the *Son of Man*. He will come at an unexpected hour, so his servants must always be ready.

The Faithful and Wise Servant

Luke 12:41-48

Peter interrupted the discourse (big surprise). The reason we know Jesus was speaking figuratively is that Peter framed his question in parabolic terms. "Are you telling this parable [of the master and servant] to us, or to everyone?" The unstated answer is probably "both." Jesus then extended the metaphor by calling the chief servant (maybe a reference to the apostles collectively) the *faithful and wise manager*. This special servant has a large stewardship. We know four things about him. He is in charge of the other servants. He is particularly over their food allowance. He, like the other servants, must be busy for the master. Finally, he is in charge of all of the master's possessions.

Jesus posed the prospect that the faithful and wise servant might become presumptuous (v. 45). He might get careless. This carelessness could show up in three ways. First, he could misjudge the master's return. (By the way, in the parables of Jesus, a subtle hint about the second coming is taught. That coming might not be imminent. There could be a significant delay in the master's coming. While Jesus could return at any moment, some people, especially those who are overzealous to teach about the imminent return of Christ, should take note.) Second, he could mistreat his fellow servants. Finally, he could become morally irresponsible by getting drunk. For that careless servant, the master could show up on a day and at an hour the servant does not expect. The servant has only himself to blame for his judgment by God—described in severe terms (i.e., *cut to pieces*).

The text closes with Jesus connecting the dots between knowledge and responsibility. Any servant (whether chief servant or not) who knows his master's will and refuses to do it will incur judgment (*many blows*). Does that mean those who do not know the master's will are off the hook? No! Those who did not know and therefore did not do will be punished with *few blows*. The principle is that with additional knowledge comes additional responsibility. This is true in every category of reality. The master evidently assumed that all servants knew something. Servants who are ready for the return of the king will be entrusted with much.

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WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

BY DAVID FAUST

I hate to wait. The problem is, I have to wait.

There are lines at the supermarket, the coffee shop, and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. When I was a boy, my parents made me wait until I was old enough to drive and date. When my wife and I were expecting our babies to be born or adopted, we had to wait several months to hold them in our arms.

On average, Americans spend 32 minutes waiting at a doctor's office (even when we have an appointment), 28 minutes waiting in an airport security line, and 21 minutes waiting for our significant others to get ready to go out. (Yes, someone really measured that!) Each of us average about 13 hours per year waiting on hold for customer service and 38 hours sitting in traffic. Over the course of our lifetimes, we spend about 6 months waiting in line.

Efficiency experts have developed something called queue theory, the mathematical study of waiting in lines or queues. McDonald's and other companies analyze staffing decisions, line placement, and customer demands at different times of day in an effort to decrease waiting times and improve customer morale.

Worth the Wait

The Bible has a lot to say about waiting. Here are some examples:

- "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).
- "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope" (Psalm 130:5).
- "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18).
- "But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7).
- "But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Romans 8:25).

At first glance, waiting implies little more than passive, quiet expectation. But the word also refers to being ready for action—prepared to serve or obey. That's why people who work in restaurants and catering halls are sometimes called "waiters" or "waitresses." They are standing by, ready for action—ready to serve. Both definitions of waiting appear in Jesus' parable about the master's return. The story reminds us to be "like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet" (Luke 12:36). But notice how the master treats his faithful, watchful servants: "he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and *wait on them*" (v. 37, emphasis mine). The master accepts the role of the waiter! What amazing grace—what humble, sacrificial love—Jesus demonstrated when he washed his disciples' feet! At the Last Supper, the Master became the waiter.

God sometimes asks us not to act, but to wait. We wait for justice to be done. We wait for prayers to be answered. We obey and serve while we wait for Christ to return. We strive to "live holy and godly lives" as we "look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:11-12). When patience is difficult, we recall how long-suffering and merciful God has been to us. And we trust that Heaven's blessings will be worth the wait.

Personal Challenge:

Rate your own level of patience on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = extremely impatient; 10 = gladly willing to wait). Confess your impatience to the Lord, and ask him to make you more patient and help you view time from an eternal perspective (as God does).

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you deal with worry and anxiety over the last week?

2. With whom did you share last week's lesson?

   Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 12:35-48** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to spend no more than 60 seconds paraphrasing the passage.

3. Let's dig deeper:
   - Jesus used numerous metaphors (figures of speech/implied comparisons) in this parable. Identify several metaphors. Do these metaphors have anything in common?
   - Read verse 37 aloud. Jesus lived out this principle of servant leadership when he washed the disciples' feet the night before he died (John 13:1-17). What does it say about a person's character when their actions (example to follow) are consistent with their words?
   - How does verse 40 help unlock the meaning of this parable?
   - What do you learn about how to be a faithful and wise servant from this passage?
   - What do you learn about how we should effectively and productively wait for Jesus' return?
   - Why will Jesus' return be worth the wait?
   - From the text, what are some dangers we may encounter while waiting?

4. What do you learn about God from this passage?

5. What do you learn about people?

6. As we study God's Word, we become more familiar with the Master's will and how to obey it. What do you learn about obedience to God in this passage?

7. As you await the Master's return, whom will you invite to join you in following Christ?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

9. As we await Jesus' return and the new life and new body we will receive—a body free of the pains and burdens of this life—we still are prone to the frailties and infirmities of this life. As you face this next week, what do you most need from God?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 15:11-32** as we continue studying some of Jesus' parables. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Turn back to the Father who's longing to restore you with joy.**

STUDY: Luke, Part 2

THEME: Jesus the Storyteller

LESSON TEXT: Luke 15:11-32

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 15:1-10; Ephesians 2:1-5; Psalm 32

THE STORY OF THE RUNNING FATHER

BY MARK SCOTT

The fourth parable of this lesson series is the third parable in this famous chapter. Scholars speak of "end stress" in narratives. They mean either that the essential point of a story comes at the end (as in a "punchy ending") or that when stories occur in a series, the accent of significance falls on the last one. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin clearly set up the parable of the lost son(s). And all three parables connect back to the criticism of the religious elite in Luke 15:1-2.

Even today, in several places in the Middle East, men do not run. It is considered undignified. But this compassionate father ran to the prodigal and "went out" to the elder brother. The reason? Because, as the title of a book by Helmut Thielicke implies, *The Waiting Father* loved both sons.

Lost From Home

Luke 15:11-24

One could argue that all the stories in Luke 15 constitute just one parable—singular (v. 3). So Jesus just "continued" as he told them. *A man had two sons*—both times Jesus started stories this way it did not end well for the Pharisees (Matthew 21:28-32). The younger (it's unusual for a Jewish story about two boys not to start with the firstborn) in essence told his dad to drop dead. Dad did not die, but he did grant the younger son's rebellious request. The inheritance was divided.

Soon the rebellious son *got together* his assets (meaning he traded his physical inheritance, such as cows and sheep, for cash) and headed to a *distant country* (Gentile territory?). There he *squandered* (this is the real meaning of "prodigal") his inheritance in *wild living*. After "prodigalizing," a *famine* hit the land (Jesus' way of hinting that someone is outside the will of God; cf. Ruth 1:1). The situation got so dire that the young man hired himself out to a pig farmer who sent the boy into the fields to feed pigs (Leviticus 11:7). A very sad line is, "But no one gave him anything."

The young son had an "Aha" moment when he *came to himself* (better than *came to his senses*). He remembered the home from which he was lost. In particular, he remembered the food that even his father's hired servants had. He mentally prepared his speech and headed home. He was hopeful his dad would make him a hired servant (so that he could earn the squandered money back?).

The description of the boy's father in the latter part of verse 20 is one of the most beautiful pictures of God's love in the Bible. The father *saw*, *ran*, *felt*, *hugged*, and *kissed* this boy who had left home. The boy managed to recite only the first part of his speech before he heard his father barking orders to prepare a party. Clothing, jewelry, and sandals were quickly brought out; meanwhile, the smell of steak got stronger and stronger. The running father's apologetic for the party was that his son had been *lost* and was *dead* but that he had been *found* and was *alive*.

Lost At Home

Luke 15:25-32

The elder brother who received (or would receive) the lion's share of the inheritance had been strangely absent from the party. (Tradition in Jesus' day would have had the elder brother serving as master of ceremonies for any family party.) He had been in the field. He heard the celebration and asked a servant what was going on. The servant brought the elder brother up to speed.

Instead of rejoicing, the older son pouted. He gave full vent to his anger and *refused to go in*. But the running father (again, because he loved both boys) went out to the son and pleaded with him to join the party. The grumpy son did three things. First, he complained that his father had not regarded his hard work through the years. (It is fascinating that he viewed himself as something like a slave even though he was a son.) Second, he accused his father of not noticing his hard work ethic and complained that he had not been rewarded with as much as a goat. Finally, he lied about his brother. Had his younger sibling squandered his inheritance? Yes. Had he spent the inheritance on prostitutes? Jesus never said that in the original story. The younger son might have done that, but the elder brother would have no way of knowing it.

The running father made his final appeal. He called him *son* (even though the boy viewed himself as a slave). He told the boy that everything he had was his. But his apologetic remained the same. The younger brother was dead and lost, but now he was alive and found. Did the elder brother finally go to the party? Would you?

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NEVER FORGET WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE LOST

BY DAVID FAUST

Sometimes the far country seemed like a bad dream. He was older and wiser now, but he still remembered the dark season. His stomach churned when he recalled the bitter taste and sickening texture of the pods he ate with the pigs. His senses recoiled when he thought about the hangover headaches and the smell of sour wine that lingered after long nights of partying in the far country. How empty his soul had felt back then! Separated by choice from his father's domain, he tried to live it up, but instead he sank to new lows.

He still remembered the moment when he came to his senses. "Hired workers in my father's house have it better than this," he reasoned. Arriving back home, ashamed and apprehensive, he was astonished when his father embraced him again as a full-fledged member of the family. Even his older brother's negative attitude didn't dampen the homecoming celebration. The table was spread and his father's joy was unrestrained. Relieved, the happy patriarch kept repeating, "My son was dead, but he's alive again!" Music filled the air and dancing filled the house, along with joyful hugs and tears. His redemption story could be summarized by the nickname "P. S."—Prodigal Son.

But now the memories were fading—and so was the amazement. As time passed, P. S. grew accustomed to the comforts he enjoyed every day in his father's house. He took for granted the hearty meals, the ring on his finger, and the robe on his back. The party ended a long time ago. Now what? Many years had passed since P. S. came back home. What would the postscript be?

Have We Forgotten?

The truth is, we all have been prodigal sons and daughters. Have you ever wandered from God and squandered your resources, wondering if the Father would welcome you back? In a sense, it's every Christian's story. We sing, "I once was lost, but now am found," because even if it's a distant memory, we treasure the story of redemption.

As time passes, though, it's tempting to forget the prodigals and become like the grumpy older brother. Despite occasional conflicts with our brothers and sisters, it's pretty pleasant here in the Father's house. The table is spread. Familiar friends greet us. It's easy to become so comfortable and complacent that we forget what it was like in the far country. Worse, we forget that many of our neighbors are living there right now.

Welcome Home

Maybe you became a Christian after your own rebellious season in the far country. Or perhaps you never strayed very far away. Either way, we should never take for granted the blessings found in the Father's house. And we should keep praying and searching for those who have wandered away, and we should do whatever we can to bring them home.

God's welcome party isn't over. Will we joyfully join the festivities, or will we become resentful and demanding like the pouting older brother? Will we come to our senses and rediscover God's abounding love for lost people? When we do, our worship services will become homecoming celebrations again. Every baptism, every prayer, every song of praise will remind us of the Father who runs with open arms to welcome his beloved children back home.

Personal Challenge:

How is your life different today because the heavenly Father welcomed you back to his family? What can you do to make your church a welcoming home for prodigal sons and daughters?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you see God provide for you over the past week?
2. In what specific way did you actively await Christ's return last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 15:11-32** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to spend about a minute retelling this famous parable.

3. What are the most surprising elements in this parable . . . and why?
4. Let's dig deeper:
   - Verse 11 says "Jesus continued." The passage we're studying is the last of three parables all dealing with things or people who are "lost." What does this indicate about how Jesus cares about people who are far from God?
   - Why would the father in the parable grant his younger son's inheritance request and allow him to leave?
   - If the father in this parable represents God the Father, and the younger son represents repentant sinners, who might the older son represent?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
   - What do you learn about his grace?
   - His respect for our life decisions?
   - His desire for relationship with us?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. What do you learn about the appropriate motive for obeying God from this passage (especially vv. 29-32)?
8. With whom will you share this parable and God's desire for a renewed relationship with us?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. Who in your life is still "a long way off" from God and/or you? How can we pray for this person and for you?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 18:1-14** as we continue studying some of Jesus' parables. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FIVE

LESSON AIM: **Come humbly and yet boldly to the Father in prayer to receive the good things he wants to give you.**

STUDY: Luke, Part 2

THEME: Jesus the Storyteller

LESSON TEXT: Luke 18:1-14

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 11:1-14

TWO STORIES ABOUT PRAYER

BY MARK SCOTT

All of the parables of Jesus had a context, of course. But not all of them had strong opening and closing lines. Jesus sometimes left his parables open-ended (Luke 15:11-32). But both stories in this lesson text had clear opening and closing lines. That makes their interpretation easier. But that does not mean the applications will be less hard-hitting.

As the travel narrative (Luke 9–19) in the Gospel drew to a close, Jesus was nearing Jerusalem. People wondered if the kingdom of God would appear soon (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus answered that the ultimate kingdom will not come when people are expecting it. It will be similar to the days of Noah when the flood caught people off guard. The chapter division could be confusing. The subject matter of the parables was prayer, but the context concerned the faith and humility necessary for always being ready for the return of the king.

Prayers of Persistence

Luke 18:1-8

The opening line of the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge is clear enough (v. 1). Not persisting in prayer indicates that one is not ready for the king to return at any moment. The judge in the parable had three strikes against him. He did not fear God, he did not care about people, and he thought of people as an interruption. In short, he was not a good guy. The widow ("silent one" in the Old Testament) would not take no for an answer. She persisted in her pleas to the point of making a pest of herself.

Her persistence paid off. The judge was less than noble, but he finally took care of her need. The widow was bothering him to no end, and it seemed he was even afraid of her (*she might come and attack me*). So, he granted her justice. An Old Testament story might provide the backdrop here. Elisha encountered a widow who needed similar justice against an adversary (2 Kings 4:1-7). Elisha performed a miracle so that the widow could pay her debt. Jesus might have had something similar in mind.

The widow represented God's people (*chosen ones*). The judge represented God—not in character but in decisiveness. Jesus' statement, "Listen to what the unjust judge says," drew attention to the difference between God and the judge in the story. Unlike the judge in the story, God will not put his people off. He will act quickly to get them justice. However, he wants his chosen ones to pray with persistence. The parable ended with an interrogative closing line, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" What kind of faith? The kind that persists in prayer.

Prayers of Humility

Luke 18:9-14

The second parable also contained opening and closing lines. Jesus discerned that people in his audience were *confident of their own righteousness* and *looked down on everyone else*. In the words of Mark Twain, "They were so proud they could strut while they were sitting down." The closing line concerned humility, and this was all in the context of praying properly before Jesus' return.

Jesus' parables were almost entirely secular. That is why they could sneak up on people. They normally dealt with fishing, farming, cooking, etc., so they did not sound as if they would threaten anyone's sovereignty. Then, Bam! The person would suddenly realize the spiritual point. But this parable is different. It is the only parable of Jesus that had a "church context." Its setting is the temple and therefore it is sacred—not secular.

Two men went up to the temple to pray. They could not be more different (about as different as a widow and a judge). One hated Rome (Pharisee), and one sold out to Rome (tax collector). The Pharisee distinguished himself as a "separatist" and distanced himself from robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and certainly the tax collector. He reminded God and boasted about his spiritual discipline of fasting and his tithing.

In contrast, the tax collector *stood at a distance* (cf. Luke 15:20; 16:23) and not in the prominent places where people could see him (Matthew 6:5). His contrition caused him to not even look up to heaven. He also *beat his breast* as a sign of repentance. He cried out for God's *mercy*.

The closing line had to shock the people of Jesus' day. A justified tax collector—could there be such a thing? Heaven puts a high value on humility and reverses earth's view of who gets exalted. The return of Jesus makes our prayers burn white hot with persistence, but they also must be voiced in a humble posture.

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ON THE RECEIVING END OF PRAYER

BY DAVID FAUST

Have you seen the movie *Bruce Almighty* starring Jim Carrey, Jennifer Aniston, and Morgan Freeman? The film received mixed reviews upon its release in 2003, but it was popular at the box office. Carrey plays Bruce Nolan, a TV news reporter in Buffalo, New York, who complains about God's actions and then gets a chance to try doing God's job himself. Bruce hears thousands of prayers, but even after setting up an e-mail system to handle the influx, he can't keep up with all the requests. Exasperated, he answers every prayer with an automatic "Yes"—and chaos results.

Despite its flaws, the movie raises interesting questions. What is it like to be on the receiving end of prayer? How does the Lord keep track of it all? How does he deal with requests that contradict one another? What if 10 different workers pray to get one job? What if three different men want to marry the same woman? How does God sort out millions of prayers, respond wisely to each request, and weave it all together for good?

Brilliant and Incomprehensible—Yet Accessible

God's thoughts are infinitely higher than ours, but he has revealed his will in Scripture and made himself accessible through Jesus Christ, who insisted that prayer is more than repeating religious words. Prayer is relational, not transactional. It's not like programming a computer or putting money in a vending machine to get what you want. Talking with the heavenly Father is about building a relationship, not just getting a certain result.

My 1-year-old grandson is learning to talk. I don't criticize him for mispronouncing words. I am delighted he wants to communicate with me. I wonder if the heavenly Father feels that way about my feeble attempts to pray.

A friend showed me a handwritten letter she received from her son, who is in prison. In the letter, he expresses love for his parents and apologizes for the pain he has caused them. My friend treasures that letter. I wonder if that's how the Father feels when we approach him like the repentant tax collector who prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

A football coach doesn't mind if his players consult with him during timeouts; he wants to help them win. A teacher doesn't mind when students raise their hands to seek clarification about the lesson; she wants to help them learn. A doctor wants his patients to explain their symptoms so he can outline a plan for healing. A tour guide doesn't mind when travelers come to her with questions.

We should approach the Almighty with humility and reverence, as servants deferring to our Master—deserving nothing, demanding nothing. But because of God's grace, prayer is also like talking with a trusted friend over coffee. It's like confiding in an empathetic counselor who listens well and offers a fresh perspective. It's like sitting across the desk from a wise lawyer or judge who can help us untangle perplexing problems and find solutions. It's like phoning Dad and Mom to stay connected and seek their advice.

I can't comprehend the brilliant mind of God, fathom the depth of his love, or explain exactly how prayer works. But I know God treasures our communication with him, because heaven contains "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people" (Revelation 5:8). I know that the Lord is for us, not against us. I know that Christ is the "one mediator between God and mankind" (1 Timothy 2:5). And because of Christ, I know that God is our Father, teacher, counselor, friend, and guide. So, even when I struggle to articulate my thoughts—even when I feel unworthy and inadequate—I am determined to keep praying.

Personal Challenge:

In a private place, read Jesus' two stories about prayer recorded in Luke 18:1-14. Notice: Jesus told these stories to remind his disciples that we "should always pray and not give up" (v. 1). After reading these stories, pray out loud to the Lord. Talk with him as you would to a loving parent, a wise judge, a trusted friend. Tell him what is on your mind. Then be quiet in his presence. What is the Lord saying to you through his Word?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How have you seen someone close to you being drawn back into a relationship with God and/or with you? (How can we continue to pray?)

2. With whom over the past week did you share God's desire for a renewed relationship?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 18:1-14** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to spend a total of about one minute summarizing these parables.

3. What general principles about prayer do you learn from these two parables?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - Why did Jesus tell each of these two parables? Who was his intended audience for each?
   - What do you learn from this passage about praying for justice?
   - What example can you give for how you recently prayed persistently for justice?
   - How would you answer the question at the conclusion of the first parable, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Why or why not?
   - What differences do you see between the tax collector's prayer and the Pharisee's prayer?
   - Most of us would say we identify with the tax collector rather than the Pharisee in the second parable. But perhaps if we would humble ourselves and honestly assess our attitudes, we may identify some commonalities with the Pharisee. If so, what attitudes do you see in yourself?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people, especially in how we approach God in prayer?

7. In what ways is humble-hearted and persistent prayer a vital part of living in obedience to God as we follow him?

8. What part does humble-hearted and persistent prayer play in sharing your faith?
   - Who will you be praying for this week, that God may draw them to himself?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. The apostle Paul wrote, "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (Ephesians 6:19-20). How can we pray for you as you declare the gospel this week?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.