

Core
Christianity



The Parables of King Jesus

LEADER'S EDITION
SUPPLEMENT

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Why *This* Supplement?

Leading a group discussion can be time-consuming and challenging. We've prepared this supplement to the leader's edition to provide additional notes and guidance as you prepare to take your group through each lesson. In addition to the notes found in your Leader's Edition, remember the following:

- You don't have to discuss every question from each lesson. As you work through the study, note the questions that you find to be the most thought-provoking, or that might prompt the best discussion.
- The "answers" presented here provide additional Scripture references and suggestions as you think through the answers. They are meant to help you, but you should not feel trapped by them. Make your own notes and additions, and leave plenty of room for group members to have different insights than what is written here.
- When you ask a question, give others in the group time to answer before you share. It's hard to sit in silence, but some people need more time. Resist the urge to do all the talking, especially with all the "answers" before you!
- Encourage group members to reflect specifically on the text, not just their opinions. At the same time, help them move towards appropriate practical application, reflecting on their own hearts and actions. The best way to accomplish this is through good follow up questions, and through modeling your own vulnerability as you share the ways you have been convicted and challenged throughout the lesson.
- The written prayers included in this study help give language to pray for your group as you open and close your time together. Once again, these are optional suggestions. Feel free to make them your own, and be sure to include time to pray for one another. (Opening prayers are found in your Leader's Edition; closing prayers are found in this supplement.)

We hope you enjoy this study!

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LESSON 1

The Purpose of the Parables

LEADER FOCUS

Jesus didn't tell parables as if it was a kind of TED talk containing ideas worth spreading. He told parables as the king speaking about his kingdom to soften or harden hearts and minds, to warn or summon, and to save or leave to judgment.

Opening Reflection Questions (Matt. 13:1–23)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 10)

1. What do you think of when you hear the word 'parable'?

Parables are stories or sayings that illustrate a truth using comparison or similes (i.e. "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant . . ." in Matt. 13:45; "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven . . ." in Matt. 13:33), hyperbole, or exaggerations not meant to be taken literally (i.e. "The trees went out to search for a king" in Judg. 9:8–15).

Parables are found in the Old and New Testaments and are used to clarify and/or amplify a truth or a condition, or explain theological truths.

2. Why did Jesus say he spoke in parables?

To fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah found in Isaiah 6:8–10, which foretold of a time when God's people, Israel, wouldn't hear because their minds were made up. They refuse to consider the new teaching Jesus brings. Their "hearts"—their thoughts, will, and feelings—become dull or sluggish. They shut their eyes on purpose so they can refuse to believe. Instead of turning to God, they turn away.

3. What are some of your favorite parables? Why?

Some OT examples are found in 2 Samuel 12:1–4, where Nathan calls out David; the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7; the eagle and the vine in Ezekiel 17: 2–10. Judges 9:7–15 contains a parable/fable combination.

In the NT, parables are found only in the synoptic Gospels (Matt., Mark, Luke). Good examples are the sower and soils from Matthew 13:1–9 or the two sons and the vineyard in Matthew 21:28–32. Matthew 13 is rich soil for choosing a favorite parable.

Questions for Reflection

(Matt. 13:10–17; 2 Sam. 12:1–15)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 11 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 12)

1. How do our words and speech bring about specific outcomes in the world?

Words are powerful, as James warns in James 3:6–8. Martin Luther's words sparked the Reformation. On December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt's words rallied a nation to war, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s words rallied thousands to the cause of racial equality. Words can stir people to action, either good or bad, which is why Jesus says by our words we are justified or condemned (Matt. 12:37).

2. Where are other places in Scripture in which we find God hardening some and softening others?

God hardens Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 7–10; Other good examples include Deuteronomy 2:30, Josuah 11:20, and Isaiah 63:17.

3. What difference does it make to recognize the parables as being by the eternal king and about his everlasting kingdom?

A parable like Nathan's to David in 2 Samuel 12, or Ezekiel's to the priests of Israel neglecting their duty in Ezekiel 34, spoke about sin or injustice in the horizontal direction—issues between people and failures in this world. What makes Jesus's parables different is the subject—the kingdom of God—and the speaker—Jesus—who will judge and save, soften or harden through his words. Jesus speaks of things that have eternal consequences, illustrating sin and grace in the vertical direction.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 13:4–8)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 12 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 13)

1. What other passages in Scripture highlight the gift-nature of salvation?

Many verses speak of salvation's gift-nature. Some of the clearest statements to this effect are John 4:10, Romans 3:24, Ephesians 2:8–9 and 2 Timothy 1:9. Some OT passages that allude to salvation as a gift are 2 Samuel 22:36 and Psalm 18:35.

2. How would you respond to a potential concern about Jesus's hardening hearts being unfair or unloving?

There will be some who see it this way based on an idea of "free will" understood as people's ability to make uncoerced choices. Understanding the idea of free will is influenced by our contemporary society's strong belief in individual freedom, but that has not always been the case throughout history. Leaders can help people look at the issue through a biblical lens in the way described below.

See next question for further discussion. (NOTE: This question will resurface in week 8; it's good to be prepared for questions about God's sovereign power in the doctrine of election.)

3. In addition to repeatedly hardening Pharaoh's heart, Deuteronomy 2:30 says God hardened the heart of Sihon, king of Hesbon, and later, all the occupants of the Promised Land except the Gibeonites (Josh. 11:20). God sends Isaiah to his fellow Israelites to tell them that God will not allow them to hear and understand so they can be saved. Jesus says this prophecy is fulfilled by his speaking in parables because the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" have not been given to them (Matt. 13:11). Do you think God is fair to do this?

This hardening or softening of hearts is seen throughout the Bible. It's called the doctrine of election and is tied to the idea of God's sovereignty over his creation. Election can be a difficult doctrine, but there are three things to consider:

1. God chose Seth, not Cain (Gen. 4:26); Noah, not the offspring of Cain (Gen. 5:28); Shem, not Ham or Japheth (Gen. 5:32, 9:26); Abram, not Nahor or Haran (Gen. 11:26); Isaac, not Ishmael (Gen. 21:12); Jacob, not Esau (Gen. 27:37); and on it goes through redemptive history.
 2. God has the right to choose to actively redeem some and passively pass over others. The parable Jesus told of the labors and the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16 expresses this truth when Jesus concludes, saying, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Paul explains this parable in real terms in Romans 9:11–13. See also John 1:13, 6:44, and 10:26.
 3. Psalm 14:1–3 and 53:1–3, and Romans 3:10–12 clearly state, "[A]ll have sinned, and no one [naturally] seeks God." This hardening is the tragedy of the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3. We must recognize God's infinite grace and mercy in choosing to save anyone.
4. What other parables or similes of the kingdom ("the kingdom of God is like . . .") overlap with themes in this parable, such as the gift of the kingdom, the growth of the kingdom, the hiddenness of the kingdom? (Hint: keep reading in Matthew 13.)

See Matthew 13 for the parable of the weeds (24–30), the mustard seed (31–32), leaven in flour (33), hidden treasure (44), fine pearls (45–46), and a fishing net (47). Consider also the king and unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23–35), the master and workers in the vineyard (20:1–16), a king and a wedding feast (22:2–14).

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 13:18–23)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 14 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 15)

1. Do you expect the gospel message to receive the same responses when you share the gospel with your neighbors or when the church preaches? Why or why not?

When we share the gospel with neighbors who are not believers, we may see any of the four possible responses illustrated in the parable. When the church preaches the gospel, believers will respond with a desire to produce more fruit. For those who are not yet believers, if the Holy Spirit has brought them to the place to hear the gospel, there is a good chance they will become “good soil,” but only time will tell.

2. What characters in the Gospels can you identify with various soils/responses? Consider Mary, Peter, Judas, Pilate, etc.

Mary and Peter were good soil. Judas was most likely a thorny patch because his worldly desires choked out the gospel. Some believe Judas, who was in charge of the money box (John 13:29), was stealing all along.

Pilate was afraid of Jesus (John 19:8); his wife suspected he was more than just another Rabbi (Matt. 27:19), so Pilate could be considered rocky ground. He wanted to release Jesus, but the threat of trouble caused him to give in to the crowd.

Overall, except for Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the religious leaders in Jerusalem were hardened pathway ground. The people who witnessed Jesus's ministry and miracles were rocky ground, and they fell away when the teaching became difficult (cf. John 6:60, 64).

3. How have you responded to the summons of King Jesus to “Come!”?

Hopefully, your group has responded with “yes” to Jesus's call. Allow for time for people to share their stories and/or hesitations.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 16)

1. What's the difference between a profession of faith and possession of faith? Where else in Scripture do we hear this distinction?

A profession of faith doesn't always indicate a "born again" heart and the possession of faith. Understanding that faith is God's gift, not a human decision (John 1:12, 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:23), true possession of faith is, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, like the wind, which "blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8, ESV).

Jesus speaks of those with only a profession of faith in Matthew 7:23. When the kingdom of heaven comes on the last day, Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you."

2. How does the evil one seek to snatch away the word today?

Satan is the father of lies, so one strategy is to discredit the word of God. This was his strategy with Eve in the garden, and it hasn't changed. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul says Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, so false religion and false doctrine can snatch gospel truth away. Satan can do "signs and wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9) through people who claim healing miracles or prophetic utterances. The manipulative and deceptive use of technology, persecution, false accusations, and information are also his means.

3. What are some ways in which we get distracted from the truth about Jesus?

Technology, peer pressure, signs and wonders, emotional worship, scientific claims, rampant individualism and an overly subjective focus in life. Michael Horton says our inclination is to be "navel gazers."

4. On what basis can we have confidence that we belong to Jesus?

We have assurances from God's word (Rom. 8:29–31; Eph. 1:4–5) and the assurance given by God's Spirit to our spirit that undergirds our conviction that God is faithful to his promise (Eph. 1:13; 1 John 5:10a).

LESSON 1: CLOSING PRAYER

At the conclusion of each study, ask for prayer needs from the group. Try to limit this part of the closing prayer to five or so needs if possible. One helpful tool is to keep a “running” prayer list that each group member can update for themselves to use between sessions. The closing prayer can then focus on new or updated needs. Begin the closing prayer with these items.

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that without the illuminating power of your Holy Spirit, we would have remained people who, although seeing do not see, and, despite hearing, remain deaf to the promise of being included in the kingdom of your Son. With your gracious gift of new hearts, our seeing, hearing, and understanding enable us to pursue lives obedient to your commands, not to earn or add to the righteousness you have given to us, but from gratitude for being redeemed.

Yet, we’re still a stiff-necked people. Though our hearts have been made alive through your Spirit, we sometimes harden them to pursue the shiny things of the world we think will satisfy but always fall short. We naturally try to self-justify our actions, so we need to hear “you are the man,” or “you are the woman” from your word that confronts us with the unvarnished truth of our fallen nature, yet holds forth the promise of your redeeming and cleansing power.

Father, thank you for the time we’ve had together. I pray for each one here that, as we travel together through the parables, you would bring us to a deeper understanding of the gospel of grace that freely offers your mercy to sinners through the finished work of Jesus. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

LESSON 2

The King's Enemies

LEADER FOCUS

The parables must be considered in light of the historical-redemptive story of the Bible. Encourage your group to read the previous paragraphs or chapter to understand the context in which Jesus spoke. Asking who was there, what was happening, and where it fits in the redemptive timeline of Jesus's earthly ministry helps in understanding Jesus's purpose for the parable.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 19:11–27)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 22)

1. Do you hear much talk about enemies nowadays? Why or why not? In what context or sphere do you hear about them?

Yes, the media is filled with "us-them" talk. Tribalism and divisiveness are common today.

2. If you had such a thing, what would it take for someone to be on your "enemies list"? What would it take for someone to get off the list?

Expect an interesting discussion.

3. What do you think of the concept of God having enemies?

Many people think that "God is love" most of all, and his other attributes are secondary or subsumed under his love. But the Bible reveals all of God's attributes; his love, holiness, justice, mercy, etc., are all equally and continually displayed. God's love doesn't override his justice towards sin and sinners. (Ps. 5:5, 11:5).

Questions for Reflection (Luke 19:11–27)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 21 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 24)

1. What are some comical or tragic situations from life, film, or literature caused by failing to understand the context of a message?

There are many answers, but a timeless one is a spouse who says, "Oh, I don't want much for my birthday," and the other doesn't give a present. Another context is when the unanswerable question, "Does this outfit make me look fat?" is asked. "Yes" or "no" is never appropriate. In that context, only a reassuring hug seems to work.

2. Why were people so confused about the coming and the nature of the kingdom? Why are people still so confused about the coming and the nature of the kingdom?

First-century Israel anticipated the Messiah would be a human king, like David, who would immediately restore Israel to world power. Today, people have a poor concept of "heaven," believing that God wants people to be good, he's there to help if needed, and good people go to heaven. This is the most common understanding people have today about the kingdom. Sociologist Christian Smith called this moralistic, therapeutic Deism.

3. What are some future blessings Christians anticipate when the kingdom is fully come?

We should anticipate a reversal of the curse on creation that came with the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3 (Rom. 8:22). We should anticipate the end of sin, suffering, and death (1 Cor. 15:51–57; Rev. 21:1–4).

Questions for Reflection (Luke 19:11–27)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 23 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 26)

1. Why is it important to note that this is not a lesson on management principles but about the kingdom of God?

Jesus is revealing the dual nature of the coming kingdom: its advent with his incarnation, and its consummation with his return in glory at the end of the present age.

2. What do you think of the nobleman's responses to the various servants?

It seems just and fair. Those who honor their master are rewarded; those who don't are punished.

3. Compare and contrast the proportionality of rewards in your school or workplace with the proportionality of rewards in the kingdom of God.

Diligence at school or work results in agreed-upon wages, either grades or pay, from an authority. Our diligence in obedience to God is imperfect. Out of God's abundant grace in Christ, we're the recipients of unspeakable riches (adoption, peace, reconciliation, eternal life).

Questions for Reflection (Luke 19:11–27)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 25 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 28)

1. How does Jesus move us from being enemies to being heirs? Why does he do this?

By dying for us as sinners, his blood justifies us by God's grace (Rom. 5:1–11). Jesus does this out of love for the Father and to redeem a world of fallen people as a kingdom for his glory. (See John 3:16; Eph. 2:4–5; 1 John 4:9–10.)

2. Why do you think it's important to talk about the consequence of rejecting Jesus?

As the poster for *Gladiator* says, "What we believe and do now echoes in eternity." The parable's point is that those who refuse the king and will not live under his gracious reign will be punished.

3. What other parables or similes of the kingdom (the kingdom of God is like . . .) overlap with themes in this parable, such as the delay of the king, the enemies of the king, the rewards of the king, and the grace upon grace of the kingdom?

The parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24), the parables of the hidden treasure and the fine pearls (Matt. 13:45, 47), the wedding feast (Matt. 22:2), and the parable of the man going on a journey (Mark 13:34).

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 28)

1. Do you know Jesus to be an overbearing taskmaster or a gracious and merciful Savior? Why?

He must be viewed as a gracious and merciful Savior who promises rest for souls (Matt. 11:30; 1 John 5:3). If there are people in your group for whom this is a struggle, take time as a group to listen and encourage them, and include them in your closing prayer.

2. How has a fear of punishment or desire for reward been used in your life? How have they been used in your Christian life? In what ways has this been helpful, and in what ways has it been unhelpful?

Encourage people to share a "risk/reward" example from everyday life, from their Christian walk, and if it proved beneficial.

3. What gifts has the king given you to use before he returns?

First and foremost, the gift of faith. As a group leader, perhaps the ability to teach, or compassion for others, or hospitality. Encourage your group members to share ways they are able to contribute using their gifts.

LESSON 2: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, it seems hard at times to wait for Christ's return to end injustice and establish your kingdom of righteousness, but we wait because we know your timing is perfect. You're calling people from every tribe, and language, and people, and nation, and you have not yet brought the full number of the elect to faith and life. How gracious of you to be drawing an uncountable number of people to faith in Jesus so they can enjoy eternal life in your unending kingdom. How gracious of you to save us, and to work in our present circumstances of joy and sorrow, blessings and challenges to make us fit for eternity.

As we wait, help us recall the words of David, who prayed, *"Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me"* (Ps. 5:8). I pray for those who are opposed to the truth of the gospel. When they seem to threaten, assure us that you are there. When they tempt us, help us stand firm as you lead us in righteousness. As you work in our hearts, work in theirs too. Soften their resistance and show them the hope of the gospel. Father, make us your witnesses for salvation by our joy and gratitude for all things. Help us bear with others in patience, kindness, and gentleness in the week ahead. May the joy of our salvation shine forth from us in all we think, say, and do. In Jesus's name, Amen.

LESSON 3

The King's Mercy

LEADER FOCUS

Once again, encourage your group to remember the three rules of Bible understanding; context, context, context. The lesson shows this by pointing to the importance of Luke 10:25 as the opening of the parable.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 10:1–37)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 10)

1. How do you decide when/if you are going to help someone in need?

Consider the aspect of personal safety when helping a needy stranger. Consider how you might need to overcome selfish desires or inconvenience when helping others.

2. What is one of the most merciful acts you have ever received or witnessed? What impact did this have on you?

In addition to personal, practical examples, consider reflecting on how receiving the gift of saving faith is a merciful act you can reflect on over and over again.

3. Mercy is a significant theme in literature, theater, film, and television. What are some examples of mercy in these mediums? Why do you think it's such a recurring theme?

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is a good literary example. A more recent and good read about contemporary technology is *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro.

The Elephant Man, the true story of David Lynch and *Blade Runner*, are examples from films. "Friends," and the classic BBC series recently released, "All Creatures Great and Small," are TV shows with themes of mercy.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 10:1–37)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 31 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 36)

1. What are some ways that we still seek to “test” God? Is it always wrong to test God?

Your group may have various answers, most of them examples of doubting God. The most common way people test God is by *quid pro quo*—the idea that, *if I do this for you, you must do that for me*. Example: “If I stop lying, then you’ll heal my mother.” The only positive example of testing God is found in Malachi 3:10: “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”

God warns us not to test him (Deut. 6:16; 1 Cor. 10:9), but to test all things against his revealed standards by a mind renewed in faith by the Spirit (Rom. 12:2).

2. What other characters or people groups in Scripture sought to “test” God? How did that end?

There are many examples. Adam and Eve tested God with tragic results. Cain tested God with his careless offering resulting in murder (Gen. 4:3). Sarai tested God’s promise of a family resulting in strife for generations (Gen. 21:9, 13). The Israelites tested God in the wilderness resulting in forty years of wandering. Moses and Aaron tested God at Meribah, losing their privilege to lead and enter the Promised Land. All ended badly.

But consider Peter. He tested Jesus by doubting the trial Jesus said he would soon face, and God graciously restored the deeply repentant Peter (Matt. 16:23; Luke 22:32; John 21:15–17).

3. How would you answer this lawyer’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

4. Why do you think that some struggle with the difference between just deserts and grace?

We all look for justice based on a human understanding of reaping what one sows. We wonder why God would extend grace to people who do terrible things, but we fail to understand the nature of sin as disrespecting our eternal creator and rebelling against God.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 10:25–37)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 33 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 38)

1. What other characters in Scripture failed to show compassion, and which ones did show compassion?

Examples of those who failed were Sarai to Hagar (Gen. 21:10), the Levite to his concubine (Judg. 19:25), Jonah to the Ninevites (Jon. 4:9–11),

Examples of compassion are Abram in Gen. 18:22 and Gen. 21:11. Pharaoh's daughter (Exod. 2:6), Ruth to Naomi (Ruth 1:17), Boaz to Ruth (Ruth 2:14), Joseph to Mary (Matt. 1:24), and Jesus, over and over again.

2. Why do you sometimes show mercy and other times refuse to show mercy?

We tend to show mercy to those like us or in situations we may have faced. We hesitate to show mercy to those we fear or are unknown, or when we assume they deserve the trouble they have. For example, we're merciful to a sick neighbor and unmerciful to the homeless person on the corner.

3. What is the difference between patiently enduring someone's sin against you and resisting them? When do we turn the other proverbial cheek to insult and injury, and when do we refuse to do so? Why?

To glorify God and show ourselves to be his true children, we need a pure heart that's as accommodating as possible for the sake of a lost world. To "turn the other cheek" doesn't mean we place ourselves or others in danger or that we ignore injustice. But when we're the objects of personal slights, our first response shouldn't be to retaliate in kind. Instead, our first response should be forgiveness, which demonstrates strength (Prov. 19:11).

Questions for Reflection (Luke 10:25–37)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 35 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 40)

1. What other parables or similes of the kingdom (*the kingdom of God is like . . .*) overlap with themes in this parable, such as mercy and compassion?

The parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24), the mustard seed (13:31), the net (13:47), the king who wished to settle accounts (18:23), and the laborers in the vineyard (20:1).

2. What does it mean for us to think of Jesus as The Good Samaritan? How has he manifested that goodness to us?

When we were helpless and hopeless, he came to us, bound our wounds, carried us to safety, and ensured we would remain in safety as we healed. He did this by giving us new birth, forgiving our sins, binding up our guilt before God, and sealing us with the Holy Spirit as he conforms us to his image, and he will ultimately bring us to his kingdom.

3. What are some ways in which you can seek to grow in demonstrating mercy? Are there some people with whom you should seek to reconcile?

We grow in mercy by understanding the mercy God has extended to us in Jesus and pay that forward to those we see in need, regardless of our view of their circumstances. If group members share specific areas for growth and/or circumstances where reconciliation is needed, take time to pray for these needs.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 41)

1. Are mercy and justice opposed to each other? Why or why not?

At first glance, they seem opposed because justice involves dispensing deserved punishment for wrongdoing, and mercy is all about pardon and compassion for an offender. However, these two attributes of God form a unity within his character. Christianity is unique in that God's mercy is shown through his justice. There's no setting aside of justice to make room for mercy.

2. Psalm 85:10 reads, "Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other." How and where do steadfast love (mercy) and righteousness (justice) meet and kiss? What are the consequences of this kiss?

They meet at the cross. (see Rom. 3:21–22, 24, 26). Mercy and justice kiss at the cross when God the Son satisfied (propitiated) God the Father's wrath for sin. The Son gave his life for sin as the justifier for sinners, paying the price they owed for sin. The Father was just (legally able) to forgive sin because the Son paid the price. God's justice was satisfied. God is just, and sinners were forgiven by the mercy the Son had for sinners. The cross brought justice and mercy together for the glory of God. The consequences are the defeat of sin and death and eternal life for all who believe and accept God's gift.

3. Why do we find it hard to receive mercy? Why do we find it challenging to give mercy?

It seems, to our fallen consciences, too good to be true. We find the giving of mercy a challenge for the same reason, because of our fallen view of justice and mercy.

4. How does the love of Christ and the mercy of God in Christ influence your life?

It stirs the deepest feelings of gratitude that fuel my desire to love God, obey his commandments, and love and serve my neighbors (John 14:15; 1 John 2:3).

LESSON 3: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Gracious Father of all mercies, how can we ever plumb the depths of your mercy toward your rebellious creatures? Your justice requires satisfaction for every wrong, or your righteous wrath cannot be checked. And justice was satisfied when Jesus took on flesh, lived in perfect obedience to your Law, then willingly died to pay for our sin. Justice was satisfied on the cross as Jesus died—the righteous for the unrighteous, the perfect for the corrupt, your Son in the place of your enemies. Mercy can have no greater witness.

Then, by your grace, not only was the penalty for our sins paid, but even more surprising is the credit of Jesus's perfect righteousness given to all who believe. Not only did justice and mercy kiss at the cross, they did so under the loving eye of infinite grace as you freely granted us the required perfect righteousness we could never earn.

In Christ, we have been given the righteousness that fulfills your command to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). We are saved by works, the perfect works of God the Son, and we are given the perfection to stand before your throne of mercy by grace alone. May these truths encourage us to show mercy wherever we go in the days ahead. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Warnings

LEADER FOCUS

When you travel to another city and stay in a motel, you don't go out and buy pictures for the wall and a new rug for the bathroom because you know it's not your home. Instead, you appreciate being warm and dry as you wait to finish your trip and return to your real home and all its comforts.

Randy Alcorn said it well: Each day we're one step closer to our heavenly home and its unperishable treasure and one step further away from the passing treasure of our earthly home.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 12:32–48)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 46)

1. Have you ever been surprised by a guest whom you did not know was coming, or shown up somewhere thinking you were expected but found out they were not ready for your arrival? Share the story—ups and downs.

Prepare a personal example to share, but give room for group members to tell their stories and get the conversation going.

2. What are some situations in which you have been distracted or may have even fallen asleep when you ought to have been awake, with either problematic or funny results?

Prepare a personal example to share, but give room for group members to tell their stories and get the conversation going.

3. Why do you think Scripture continually encourages God's people *to be awake, to remember, and to stand firm*?

Consider our human limitations and weaknesses, temptations to sin, and the obstacles of persecution, rejection, or otherwise.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 12:32–48)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 41 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 48)

1. Have you ever been surprised by the kindness or service of someone? How, when, and why?

There will be some encouraging stories in our day of automated customer service.

2. In what ways do we sometimes act as if Jesus will not return at all? In what ways do we sometimes live as if Jesus's return will not be soon? Why do we do this? What might it look like if we were consistently expectant?

By accumulating earthly "treasures" or trying to find ultimate comfort in worldly possessions. It is good to plan for the future and work to have a comfortable home for our family but, we must remember this world is not our home. The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13ff serves as a guide.

3. Why is it important that Jesus continually tells us what the world will be like between his first and second comings?

So we see the futility of this world and, believing his promise, eagerly long for our true and final home.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 12:32–48)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 42 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 49)

1. What are some examples in Scripture of characters being faithful in a little and were then put in charge over much more?

Joseph was a faithful servant to Potiphar. Later he was second to Pharaoh in Israel. Moses faithfully tended Jethro's sheep. Later, he led Israel. Samuel was faithful to duties in the temple and to Eli, the priest, and he became a great judge in Israel. Ruth was faithful to care for Naomi; she would be an ancestor of Jesus.

2. The image of a thief coming in the night is used frequently in Scripture. What are some other passages where this image appears, and what is the importance of those passages?

Some examples include Matthew 24:36, 42–44; Luke 17:26–29; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–28; 2 Peter 3:1–18; and Revelation 3:3, 16:15. These passages speak to preparedness: “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Luke 12:40).

3. How does the Lord use commands and warnings to guide and shape his disciples? How does the Lord use commands and warnings in the lives of those who reject him?

His commands and warnings call his disciples to action and encourage them by showing how faithfulness yields rewards. For those who reject him, he warns of their judgment and punishment.

Questions for Reflection (John 13:1–20; Phil. 2:1–18)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 45 | LEADER’S EDITION P. 52)

1. What is the difference between working for our salvation and serving from our salvation?

Working for salvation shows an incomplete understanding of the gospel that says faith alone gives Christ’s righteousness. Understanding this good news results in works of service from a heart of gratitude.

2. The Bible sometimes speaks of differences in rewards and punishments. How should we think about these matters?

We are carrot and stick people, naturally motivated by reward and punishment, and God has made this a part of his kingdom. Ephesians 2:10 says we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the good works he has prepared beforehand that we might walk in them. So, whatever rewards we may receive are joyfully given back to the king because he enables us to do them.

D.A. Carson once described heavenly rewards this way: “Some of us are 64 oz. Big Gulps, some of us are 24 oz. tumblers, other 8 oz. juice glasses, and some are shot glasses. Whatever size glass we are revealed to be, we’ll be filled to the brim and eternally happy with our rewards.”

3. Does Jesus seem like a police officer trying to break up a good party or a beloved Savior and Lord calling us to fruitfulness? Why?

Hopefully, your group will see Jesus as beloved Savior. It's not that Jesus wants to rob people of fun; it's that, as our Creator, he knows our true and lasting joy is found in serving others from a renewed heart that seeks to glorify God.

Questions for Discussion

(BIBLE STUDY P. 10 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 10)

1. What difference would it make in your work or school habits if you knew your boss or teacher was about to walk into the room?

It shouldn't make a difference to you if your goal is to honor Christ by being diligent in the task at hand, making the best use of time (Eph. 5:16). However, we all slip into neutral, and as Christians, we should be aware of when we do and refocus our effort.

2. What difference would it make in your life to live and serve as if the Lord were coming soon, as he said?

Again, there shouldn't be a difference, but "where the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:38). And, as in the previous question, we need to be aware of our distractions and refocus our commitment holding fast to enduring to the end (Matt. 24:13).

3. How can we best prepare and be ready for the king's return?

By understanding the truth in these parables, be ready, for his coming will be a surprise. Matthew 24:42 records Jesus teaching on how we should stay ready.

4. How can we emulate our king in our service? What is the nature and purpose of your service?

The answers will vary, but central to our service is a humble heart, a contrite spirit, and a joy in honoring our Savior.

LESSON 4: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Father God, we can have no greater privilege than to be in your service as we wait for the return of our Savior. What greater motivation can we have than to know that we are your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which you have prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). Loving our neighbors, cheerfully giving our time and resources, and showing compassion are not the usual reactions we see today, so people wonder why we act in these ways, and that may give us an opening to share Christ.

I pray that for each of us, our actions would cause people to wonder why we seem different and lead them to ask the reason for the hope that is within us. Father, help us to be able to give a clear, simple, and humble answer for our hope; that it resides in the forgiveness we have that comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ. And I pray that we would be careful to observe and see your Spirit at work, and through our halting yet confident words, we would have the privilege of seeing you bring someone to new life. You have prepared the way and the works, so help us to be bold and walk in them. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Heart

LEADER FOCUS

As creatures made in God's image, we share his attributes of compassion, mercy, and morality which contribute to our sense of justice. However, our finite existence leads to a limited view, and our fallen nature colors our conclusions.

On the other hand, God is infinite in all his attributes. He's infinitely loving, merciful, good, and just. He knows all things at all times and acts with mercy toward his fallen creatures because his grace and compassion have no end. This isn't to say that God will save everyone, but it's helpful to remember that the person we think is beyond saving may be one God has chosen in eternity for salvation.

So we must look past our biases and prejudices as we seek to proclaim God's grace and mercy to everyone we meet. The King's Heart is our lesson on God's infinite grace.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 15)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 58)

1. What's the most precious possession you have ever lost? Describe your search and rescue operation to reclaim the lost good.

If we as finite people search for lost material things, how much greater is our infinite Creator's search for his precious image-bearers he sees lost in sin?

2. How do you evaluate an "acceptable loss?" At what point would the search be unworthy of your time or effort, and at what point would there be no limit to your time or efforts?

Talk about the depth of God's love to "search" unfailingly for lost sinners.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 15; Exod. 16:1–12)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 50 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 59)

1. Why do we sometimes grumble and complain against the Lord?

Encourage people towards personal reflection rather than using examples of “others,” by having your own personal example ready.

2. How would you seek to help someone who is a chronic complainer? What would your counsel to them address?

A wise man said, “It’s not what you want that does you good; it’s what you get.” Good counsel would convey the idea of being satisfied in perhaps less direct terms.

3. What is the difference between being able to talk about a situation honestly (the good, bad, and ugly of the situation) without being a grumbler?

The absence of blame and the recognition of God’s purposes. James 1:2–4 is a good text to note.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 15)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 52 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 61)

1. Why do we want some people to get caught and punished and others to be shown mercy?

We know evil should be punished and often want those caught in evil’s web to receive mercy. At the same time, our motives may be more sinister. We want people we like to receive mercy; we want people we dislike to get caught and punished. Discuss these heart motives with your group.

2. What kind of sins do you find easy to overlook or forgive? What kind of sins do you find nearly impossible to overlook or forgive? Why do you think that is the case?

The answers from your group may reveal how we view the people involved and how we view ourselves (as sinners or righteous?).

3. When have you been overwhelmed by mercy received?

Someone should mention the mercy we receive in God's gift of saving faith.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 15:20–32; Ezek. 34:11–16)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 55 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 64)

1. What other passages of Scripture describe sin as being *lost* and salvation as being *found*?

Lost: Ps. 119:176; Isa. 6:5; Rom. 1:21; Eph. 2:1, 4:18, for example.

Found: Luke 1:79, 2:32; John 9:25; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 2:25, for example.

2. What comfort is it to know God is a seeking, searching, and rescuing God?

The “natural” human condition of lostness is described in Psalm 14:1–3, repeated in Psalm 53:1–3, and quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10–12. Because of sin, everyone is blind; no one seeks God, and therefore there are no true “seekers.” The ultimate comfort comes when Jesus says he has come to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

3. As those saved and found, how should we respond to others who are lost?

With the good news of the gospel, the warning of unbelief, and the urgency of believing. The message cannot be watered down to make it palatable to “seekers” or so finely accurate and eloquent to convince people to believe. The gospel must be presented frankly, lovingly, and patiently. 1 Peter 3:15 is the classic verse.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 64)

1. Do you sometimes find yourself believing your relationship with the Lord is based on your performance rather than his love and mercy? How does this play out in your life? What does God say in his word about these matters?

We all feel this way at times. Our natural bent towards expecting rewards and punishment causes these feelings. God's love is never performance-based. Instead, it's promise-based, covenantal love. Jeremiah 31:31, 33; Hosea 2:23; Hebrews 10:14–17 are excellent examples.

The OT uses the Hebrew word *chesed*, translated as “long-suffering,” and the NT uses the Greek word *agape* to make it clear that God's love is something completely different than and superior to human love.

2. Is there a point at which someone can be irretrievably lost? What does Scripture mean when it talks about the unpardonable sin (Mark 3:28–30)?

Jesus speaks of the one sin that will not be forgiven, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). There is forgiveness with God for every sin and blasphemy except one, the sin of the willfully blind who persistently refuse the illumination of the Spirit and oppose his work. This is the sin John speaks cautiously about in 1 John 5:16.

3. What do these parables teach us about the king and his kingdom? What do they teach us about the nature of the king? His heart and his mission?

They teach us about the amazing, unfailing love of God for those he has chosen in eternity past and has redeemed in history. Jesus is gentle and lowly—gentle with sinners and lowly in heart as he stoops to meet us, redeem us, and promises to bring us home (Matt. 11:28–30, 12:20).

LESSON 5: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Gracious heavenly Father, what a great privilege we have to come into your presence and bow before your throne. Angels stand aside as we're ushered into your presence with Jesus as our Savior, intercessor, and advocate. We love you because you first loved us, and while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. How complete is our joy when we embrace these truths from your word.

One in 100 lost, yet you're not satisfied with 99; you value each one. One in ten is lost; you will not stop until all ten are secure. One in two is lost, and all heaven rejoices as you bring the lost one home. You did not wait for us to draw near to you but clothed yourself in frail humanity and let us hear your voice calling, even when we were far away. But God! You are rich in mercy and have made us alive in Christ Jesus. By grace, we have been saved. With Paul, we marvel that you have raised us with Jesus and seated us with him in the heavenly places to display your immeasurable riches of grace forever in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Father, may our gratitude overflow in love, praise, and obedience to sing your praises constantly each day. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Comfort

LEADER FOCUS

As the Pharisee demonstrated 'bad' prayer and the tax collector 'good' prayer, we learn from them that the mark of good prayer is how it expresses the glory and greatness of God, his great gift of salvation, our trust in his promises, his limits on our trials, and our gratitude. A great prayer that speaks to each of these issues and more is Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 17:20–18:1)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 70)

1. How do you feel when you see justice delayed, denied, or perverted?

It tends to anger us. Help your group members think through why that is.

2. Justice is a significant theme in literature, theater, film, and television. What are some examples of justice in these mediums? Why do you think it's such a recurring theme?

In literature, every Christian should read Marilynne Robison's, *Gilead*. The one some call the greatest novel ever, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Ernest Hemmingway's short story "Big Two Hearted River" is another classic.

In theater, Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* stands out. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a classic study on justice.

In film, *The Accused* (1988), *And Justice for All* (1979), and the vigilante theme in *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009) are highly rated.

(The suggestions offered here come from internet searches on these themes and present a gold standard among the genre. Not many people will have read or seen these.)

3. Where do we find a good definition or standard of justice?

The Bible provides the best definitions and standards of justice because they come from the one who is infinitely just and, as creator, can define justice. All human-defined standards of justice fall short but can reflect God's law written on human hearts.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 17:20–18:1)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 61 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 72)

1. Why is it difficult to pray at times?

Probably the greatest obstacle is distraction. It may also be that we're trying to avoid God, perhaps out of anger, doubt, fear, or disappointment.

2. Why should we pray?

First, we're commanded to pray (Matt. 6:6; Luke 11:2). We pray out of gratitude, to know God more, to know our hearts more, and to acknowledge our dependence on God. We pray because it's the means God uses to bring about justice in this present age. We pray because our great privilege is to go before God with our requests.

3. In some sense, all our prayers are answered in one of three ways: yes, no, or wait. How have these various answers played out in your life and growth in grace?

Encourage your group to share.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 18:1–8)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 62 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 73)

1. Why is it important to recognize God as being just? Would you want to serve or worship a God who is unjust?

If God is not just, then his laws that define justice would be suspect. If he is not just, his promises are empty, and the human condition hopeless. No one would want to worship or serve an unjust God.

2. How has God manifested himself as just? What would it mean for us if his only attribute was justice? How do attributes like love and mercy, coupled with justice, shape our understanding of God?

God demonstrates his justice by punishing sin and responding to the cries of those who are mistreated. He displays his justice in setting the standards of civil law that remain the basis for just human law. God must be just and have a standard for justice to display mercy. His display of mercy is the means by which he conveys his love.

3. How are we to address the perversions or delays of justice in our society? How are we to address the injustices in our hearts and thoughts?

This is a difficult question, and human solutions can result in another form of injustice. Christians must begin with the truth that every person is created in God's image and deserves the dignity and respect that human life demands.

We address the injustices we have in our hearts by honestly recognizing our prejudices and suspicion of culturally different people. How we address this begins with prayer, is furthered by a humble heart, and grows with a contrite spirit (Ps. 34:18; Isa. 57:15).

We also ought to thank God for his patience in delaying judgment so that he can gather all his people to himself, trusting that all sin will be paid for either at the cross of Christ or in the final judgment.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 18:6–17; Eph. 1:3–14)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 65 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 76)

1. What are some of your favorite prayers in Scripture? Why are they some of your favorites? What do you learn from them?

Many people think first of The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, one of the greatest prayers. The Psalms are filled with prayers, and Psalm 23 is especially treasured by many.

2. What other passages of Scripture use a how-much-more type of comparison teaching us something about God? What do they teach? How do those realities comfort you?

Matthew 7:11 shows the difference between human gifts and gifts God gives. Hebrews 9:14 contrasts the animal sacrificial system of Israel with the sacrifice of Jesus.

These contrasts teach the infinite goodness and bounty of God's gifts and comfort us in knowing he desires to give us those things that truly lead to lasting joy.

3. Why does the Lord find pride so offensive? How do you feel around prideful people?

Because pride is the root of the first and all subsequent sin. Prideful people are boring.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 77)

1. How would you respond to the critique that God doesn't hear or answer prayers? How would you address the criticism that he doesn't respond in a timely manner?

A good first step with any criticism about God is to ask questions. A good first question is, "What do you mean by that?" Before responding to critics, it's best to know the terms. What is the critic's view of God, prayer, and what constitutes an answer?

2. There's a country song by Garth Brooks which thanks God for unanswered prayers. Reflect on what that might mean. Can you share a prayer you prayed and are grateful it wasn't answered in the way you'd hoped? What do these situations teach us about our prayers and God?

Our desires change, and we can't see into the future what may happen should God answer our prayer. Encourage your group to share prayers they are glad weren't answered. We all have them. What we learn from this is the sovereign power and infinite knowledge of God to always work for good for his people. He knows what we need before we ask (Matt. 6:8). He is patient and compassionate with our childish prayers.

3. How are you comforted by God's mercy?

The more I recognize my sin, and the more I understand and believe in God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the more I am comforted by his mercy toward me in his saving work.

4. 1 Peter 1:5–6 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all of your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." Reflect on this passage together in light of some of the themes in this lesson: prayer, timing, expectations, and humility. Note in particular the reason the Lord calls his people to cast their anxieties on him. How does that reason comfort and reorient you?

Direct the conversation toward the joy that comes by the total abandonment of ourselves to God's infinite mercy, grace, and love. The God of the universe cares for us!

LESSON 6: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, we know you hear our prayers because you're the perfect Father. Even in their best intentions, our earthly fathers fall short, but you don't sleep, and you don't grow weary of hearing your children come to you with their concerns, petitions, and words of thanksgiving and praise. We come to you now, in the Spirit, through Jesus our righteousness, to ask for comfort in this world of injustice.

All around us, we see the effects of sin—ours and others'—because we're tarnished, painted with the brush of original sin that makes us sinners by nature and by deed. But we have also been made new in Christ Jesus, forgiven for sins past, present, and future, and empowered by your Spirit to put off our old ways and put on the way of Christ.

You have promised to make us like Christ because in love you predestined us for adoption and signed our adoption papers with the blood of our Savior. Now we're your children and fellow heirs of all your riches with Christ. Because of this promise, we suffer and pray, knowing you hear our prayers and will uphold us in our trials until we're glorified with Christ.

Father, thank you for revealing these things to us. May we hold these things close in our hearts to find strength in the week ahead. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Judgment

LEADER FOCUS

In Isaiah 55, God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isa. 55:8–9).

Our King is infinite in all his ways. We’re often surprised by who God is saving, and we’re often impatient for him to judge the injustice in this world. George Herbert, the 17th-century Christian minister and poet, paraphrased an ancient Greek proverb in his collection of 1,200 hundred proverbs called *Jacula Prudentum* (Darts of the Wise), writing, “God’s mill grinds slow, but it grinds exceedingly fine.”

The King’s judgment often comes in surprising and unexpected ways.

Opening Reflection Questions (Mark 11:15–33)

(LEADER’S EDITION P. 82)

1. What are some of your favorite plot twists in novels or movies? Why?

Surprise endings are fun. Encourage short discussion.

2. What are some of the most unexpected storylines in the Bible?

There are many subplots with surprises, and the parable in this lesson is a good example. As your group shares some other examples, you should look to make two points as the leader. First, the one storyline is the promise of redemption. Second, the most surprising and unexpected ending is the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the “beloved Son.” Greek philosophy and the Jewish Pharisees believed in a spiritual—not bodily—resurrection, but as “embodied souls,” humans are a unique expression of God’s image that he intends to preserve in glory forever.

3. If you could witness any one day/event recorded in Scripture, which one would you want to witness? Why?

The resurrected Christ. So I could be one of the 500 witnesses Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:6.

Questions for Reflection (Mark 11:1–12:12)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 71 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 84)

1. The titles of the parables in our Bible are not part of the inspired text of Scripture. What other titles could be given to this particular parable? How would that title inform and shape our understanding and expectations of the parable?

Perhaps, "The Evil Tenants" to emphasize the shamefulness of the tenants' actions. Or "The Father's Vineyard." Discuss other ideas that arise in your group, noting the different perspectives and emphases.

2. Why do you think there was such opposition to Jesus from the leader's of the day? Why is there so much opposition to Jesus today?

Jesus threatened the theological and economic power of the established authority. The opposition of today is often for the same reason. Further, in a democratic society, people fear that religion encroaches upon their freedoms.

Questions for Reflection (Mark 12:1–12; Isa. 5:1–7)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 72 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 85)

1. What surprises you most about the actions of the owner in this parable? Why?

His patient treatment of the disobedient tenants. It seems crazy on the part of the owner.

2. How are Jesus's parables different from Aesop's Fables, Grimm Fairy Tales, or moral allegories? Why is this distinction important?

Fables are short stories using animals or inanimate objects in imaginary situations to illustrate moral values. Fairy tales are similar and meant more for entertainment. Neither speaks of religious concepts. Parables use people and realistic settings to compare and contrast to teach religious truths.

Questions for Reflection (Ps. 118; 1 Pet. 1:22–2:10)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 74 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 87)

1. What does this parable tell us about the king and his kingdom?

His sovereignty, mercy, patience (Hebrew word *chesed* meaning *long-suffering*), and single-minded focus on his redemption promise throughout history.

2. What are some ways in which the Gospel stories surprise us?

We might be surprised by Jesus's patience, the hardness of some hearts, the insight of others to get closer to the truth. It's a surprise that only Peter is willing to say Jesus is the Messiah yet still doesn't fully understand.

3. How does the Bible disorient and reorient us? How does this particular parable disorient and reorient you?

The Bible is often viewed as a moral system, a "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth" kind of book. Others see God loving all people, winking at their folly while being a benevolent deity who waits for people to come to him. But this parable shows that all humanity longs for independence from our creator. Adam's original sin of rebellion remains in every human heart. Only by the gracious gift of faith can people think differently.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 88)

1. Do you find yourself more offended by God's judgment or awestruck at his mercy? Why?

Encourage your group to see God's mercy in the Son's incarnation, sacrifice, and our being credited with his earned righteousness by God's grace alone.

2. What three questions would you like to ask God? How do those questions manifest themselves in your life—in your prayers? What, if anything, would change if you knew the answer to these questions?

This question should spark some lively conversations.

3. Jesus says that we love because we're loved, not in order to be loved (1 John 4:19). What does that mean? What implications does it have for our relationship to God and to others?

God loved us while we were his enemies (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). Implication: complete gratitude and open honesty before God about our failures. For interpersonal relationships, patience, gentleness, empathy, and prayer for others.

LESSON 7: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, your long-suffering patience with us is our constant source of amazement. The conviction for sin and the guilt we feel is good as long as we remember that our sins are removed from your sight as far as the east is from the west. I pray that we'll remind ourselves of the gospel that declares us righteous in your sight and press on by not looking back but by looking forward to the prize of the upward call you continually make in Christ.

Thank you for your word that tells us of your plan to redeem a fallen creation that will be far greater than we can imagine. Thank you for new hearts that believe your promises to do so. Father, this is your vineyard. Jesus is the rightful heir, and we're joyous workers in the vineyard in one sense and the fruit-bearing vines in another. May we always be open to your loving work of pruning us to bear more fruit, even when the cuts seem deep, because you always act out of love for us as our perfect Father.

Father, help us remember that our righteousness is the free gift from your infinite grace. We can't possibly add to the righteousness we have from you in Christ, but we can demonstrate our gratitude by obeying all you have commanded. We feel the weight of the burdens we carry in this world, but help us tightly grasp the promise of rest you offer to our weary souls. Your yoke is easy, and your burden is light because it's living as you have designed us to live. Father, help us live these truths in the days ahead. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Rewards

LEADER FOCUS

Christianity is unique because it isn't a "moral system" but a relationship-based desire for goodness and obedience in thankfulness to God. The world's religions all attempt to reach up to God, to find him through special knowledge or spiritual practices, but the apostle Paul says, "Yet he is actually not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27. cf. Deut. 4:7; Ps 145:18).

The stunning beauty of Christianity is that God has reached across the unbridgable divide between the infinite and the finite through the God-man Jesus Christ to redeem sinners and bring them into the unimaginable riches of the Creator of all that exists and freely share his goodness.

Opening Reflection Questions (Matt. 19:16–20:16)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 94)

1. What is a *tit-for-tat* or *quid pro quo* relationship?

You do this for me, and I'll do that for you.

2. What are some books or movies in which the theme of redemption is portrayed as a wage earned for a service rendered? What are some books or films in which the theme of redemption is portrayed as an undeserved gracious gift?

The Kite Runner, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Return of the Jedi* are books and movies of earned redemption. *The Matrix*, *Les Misérables*, and *A Christmas Carol* are stories and films about unearned redemption.

3. Would you want to know what your co-workers or bosses earn? Why or why not?

Yes and no. On the one hand, we're curious; on the other, it colors our view and relationships.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 19:16–20)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 81 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 96)

1. What do you think most people would say is the goal of religion?

To live a good life and go to "heaven."

2. Why do you think people consider God to be unfair? What would happen if God were fair and not also merciful?

See questions 2–3 on page 6. In summary, people consider God's electing choice in redemption unfair because not everyone has a chance, i.e., the one who never heard the gospel, heard about Jesus, etc. But, if God were fair and not merciful, humanity would have ended with Adam and Eve.

3. Would you begrudge the Lord for saving a notorious and cantankerous atheist on their deathbed? Why / Why Not?

We shouldn't, but the group will have a lively discussion on the topic.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 20:1–16)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 82 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 97)

1. Why do you think it is sometimes difficult for us to rejoice in the good fortune of others?

Because we're selfish and jealous by (fallen) nature.

2. Where do you think the idea that God is a stingy God who withholds good things from his people arose? How would you respond to the claim that God is not a good and generous Father but a stingy God?

Many people think of the Puritans and their piety (a misplaced idea), or the Victorian age. However, it's a timeless idea going back to the beginning, seen in Cain's actions in Genesis 4, by the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus), the people in Jesus's day (Matt. 6:28), down to our current time.

3. If our good works don't earn or contribute to our salvation, why should we do good works?

Out of gratitude for our redemption. Ephesians 2:10 and Romans 12:1–2 explain why.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 20:1–16; Jon. 3:1–4:4)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 85 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 100)

1. What does this parable teach us about the king and his kingdom? How is this kingdom different from the kingdoms of the world?

The king, perfect in all things, will always do what is right. He owns all things and his judgment and actions are perfect. So, his kingdom is focused on equality (Gal. 3:28), where all citizens are placed in the position that gives them the most joy in service and love for the king. The kingdoms of this world are unjust and unequal because of fallen people's selfish use of gifts and wealth.

2. What other characters in Scripture were offended by the Lord's mercy to others or overwhelmed by his mercy to them?

Jonah is the prime example of being offended by God's mercy (Jon. 4). The Israelites were to be a "light to the nations" but considered God's gifts to be theirs alone. They were offended by God's mercy, and God was offended by their selfishness. Examples of those who are overwhelmed are Job (Job 38–41) and David (Ps. 31:22).

3. Why can't people demand or expect mercy from God? What is the problem with such thinking?

Because God does have the right to do what he chooses with what is his. Creation and all it contains are God's. Such thinking says, "I know better than God," resulting from pride and our fallen nature.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 101)

1. Why is it important to recognize that good works (fruit) are the results of our salvation in Christ and not the prerequisite for that salvation?

So we understand the depth of God's grace, Christ's mercy and love, and the Spirit's work in us now. Salvation is God's monergistic (one power) work, not a synergistic or two-way cooperative effort. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling."

2. How might a robust understanding of the grace-based nature of the kingdom manifest itself in our churches, our speech, our hearts, and our actions? In other words, what difference does this grace make in our worship and lives?

By enthusiastic evangelism, gratitude-based service, generosity, and worship that celebrates the infinite power, wonder, and awe of God's grace and revelation.

3. Discuss the difference between working in Jesus's kingdom and working for Jesus's kingdom? Why is this distinction important? Where do we find this distinction highlighted in Scripture?

Those who work for Jesus's kingdom are trying to earn their way in. Those who work in Jesus's kingdom know they belong and serve out of humble gratitude. Consider how Romans 12 follows chapters 1–11.

4. How does the generosity of God comfort you?

By knowing that all I need, he is able and willing to give.

LESSON 8: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, none of us deserve your merciful favor, yet we receive it with gladness. We pray for our family, friends, and neighbors that you would give them saving faith because we know the joy of our salvation. But Father, remind us that you loved us and called us when we were enslaved in our sins so that we would pray for our enemies, too.

Our sense of justice is colored by our pride, tribalism, and our fallen nature, so we often think that the worst people don't deserve your mercy. But that only reveals the sin that remains in our hearts. You are building a kingdom of righteousness with people from every tribe, language, people, and nation, and that means there are many people we view as different and strange in their ways. But we all bear your image. We are all precious in your sight. We are all hideous sinners who will one day display the unimaginable beauty as we reflect the glory of Jesus Christ.

Father remind us of this truth as we go through our daily lives and encounter all kinds of people, those like us, those unlike us, and those we are tempted to imagine are beyond your mercy. Help us remember we were once the same. Change our hearts, Father, so we can develop the eyes of compassion that you display toward sinners, including us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The King's Banquet

LEADER FOCUS

Understanding that the gospel is pure grace is necessary to bring about true humility. Our natural attitude is pride. If the Son of God willingly put aside the glories of heaven to be abased throughout his lifetime and killed for our salvation, what room is there for our pride? The unbeliever sees no reason to accept the invitation to come to God's offered means of salvation. Those with faith in Jesus realize that they were the chief of sinners and, with humble hearts, consider others more important than themselves, knowing that the last will be first in God's kingdom.

Opening Reflection Questions (Luke 14:1–24)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 106)

1. If you were hosting a banquet, who would you invite and why?

People invite friends or others who, perhaps, could help them in some way.

2. Would you ever attend a state dinner and sit at the head table? Why or why not?

Most people would not presume to do so.

3. How would you feel if someone could read your mind and understand your heart, responding to your inner thoughts and feelings rather than your spoken words?

It's a terrifying prospect.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 14:1–6)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 91 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 108)

1. What are some other stories in the Bible where one character is using another character to try and make themselves look or feel better, rather than loving or serving them? What do we learn from these stories?

The Pharisees constantly tried to make themselves appear more righteous than Jesus. For example, Luke 5:33, 11:53; Matt. 22:16. In Paul's letters, he mentions false teachers and "Judaizers" who were denying people the freedom offered in the gospel. Even Peter fell into this error by abandoning his gentile friends when important Jews visited Antioch (Gal. 2:11).

2. Discuss the difference between using people and loving people. Why is this distinction so important?

In any context, using people is unloving. Some may appear to act out of love, perhaps helping those in need, but do so to gain recognition or rewards for themselves. Helping the needy with truly loving motives, perhaps anonymously, or without hope of reward or other motive is loving people.

3. We're familiar with the proverb, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). A classic example of this type of human hubris is someone claiming that the Titanic was unsinkable. What are some other examples in Scripture, politics, sports, science, or art where pride led to disaster?

Satan to Eve, "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5), and Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:12–16), are examples of pride leading to tremendous disaster. Politics are full of examples: Nixon, Clinton, Palin, Cuomo, and many more. In sports, Jerry Jones, owner of the Cowboys, is a good example. No matter how much he spends, he's disappointed.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 14:7–24)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 93 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 110)

1. Have you ever crashed a wedding reception, party, or banquet? What would you expect to happen if you were discovered?

Obvious results.

2. What are some examples from Scripture, film, and literature where we find the proud being humbled and the lowly being exalted? Why does this theme seem to resonate so well with us?

One example is Jesus humbling his questioners as in Matthew 22:23–33. The proud are humbled and the lowly exalted when the man born blind who is given sight by Jesus is later questioned by the religious leader's, and he asks them, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" (John 9:27).

Humbling the proud and exalting the lowly is a common theme in books and movies. A classic example is *Citizen Kane*, and *The Lord of the Rings* portrays that theme in literature and film.

3. How would our lives be different if we recognized ourselves as our sisters'/brothers' keepers?

We may be ostracized if we stand up for the moral and economic rights of others. Within the church, we would see a more communal and less individualistic approach to life.

Questions for Reflection (Luke 14:12–24; Phil. 2:1–11)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 95 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 112)

1. What's the lamest excuse you've received for someone bailing on a celebration? What's the lamest excuse you've offered for bailing on a celebration?

Feigning sick is common.

2. Why is it so difficult to believe that God's kingdom is all of grace? Why do we so desperately want to think of it in terms of reciprocity?

Historically, western society has celebrated those who “lift themselves by their own bootstraps.” To claim we have earned all we have is a point of pride and a celebrated success story.

3. Jesus doesn't let a relatively benign and factually accurate statement about the resurrection stand (Luke 14:15). Why stir the proverbial pot? How, when, and why should we enter the fray, and when should we stay out?

The man who spoke did so from pride. It's not easy to determine which battles to enter, but those where we can offer an answer with gentleness and respect are good candidates (1 Pet. 3:15).

4. How may we apply the King's Guest List to our lives and the life of our church?

By welcoming all, serving, and honoring all without regard to status, wealth, or what they may contribute.

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 113)

1. In the passage we read from Philippians, how and why was Jesus humbled and exalted? What is the relationship between his humbling and exaltation and our own?

He humbled himself. It was his choice as part of the plan from eternity past between Father, Son, and Spirit to redeem fallen humanity. This agreement is called the covenant of redemption and is inferred from the titles given to Jesus (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2) and the work he said he came to do (John 5:36–37, 6:38, 17:4).

2. His humbling was from eternal relationship and glory to lowly born, rejected, scorned, and crucified humanity. Our humbling is putting aside our sinful pride and false honor as God works to conform us to the image of Christ.

John the Baptist, while imprisoned, was perplexed by the nature of the kingdom. Had it come with Jesus or not? Why is he in prison? What's Jesus doing? Jesus sends words to John while in prison, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Luke 7:22–23). What relationship does this have to our parable? What's the good news about which Jesus speaks?

John was in prison for telling Herod it wasn't legal to have his brother's wife. Jesus was being rejected in his hometown as he embarked on his earthly ministry. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:18 and 35:5–6 to let John know the promised Messiah has arrived.

Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet to make the point that he has come to his own, and his own rejected him (John 1:11, 5:43). So the invitation now goes out to those who were not "his people," the gentiles (Hos. 1:9–10; Rom. 9:25–26).

3. What are some of the most common excuses for failing to come to Jesus? How would you respond to those excuses?

"I'm too sinful." Another, "I'll do it later." In general, people don't see their need.

4. How does this parable shape our understanding of Christ and his kingdom? How does it inform our understanding of the mission of the church?

The kingdom welcomes all, from every tribe, and language, and people, and nation (Rev. 5:9–10). Therefore the mission of the church is to obey the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

LESSON 9: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, what an incredible privilege to be given a seat at your table. Your word tells us that you have raised us with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places because of your great love and the richness of your mercy. Eternal life began when you gave us faith, and regardless of our present circumstances, you remind us that we are already seated at your banquet—what a precious truth.

Help us to put aside all our self-righteousness. We have no basis in our lives or deeds to be seated here. We're seated in your kingdom only because of the life and work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. He has secured our place in your presence. Without your gift of faith, the cares of this world, and the empty promises it offers would cause us to turn away from your invitation. But you cannot be denied. All you have chosen will come because of your irresistible call that changes our will to one that desires you above all else. Thank you, Father, for your merciful grace.

We joyfully echo the words of Paul, who offered this prayer:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33–36)

The King's Return

LEADER FOCUS

Our last lesson completes the puzzle, pointing to the believer's hope in the promised return of Jesus Christ to this earth. At that moment, the refining trials for God's people will cease, and the opportunity to accept the King's invitation will end. Then, Jesus says, "Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left" (Matt. 25:32–33).

We have learned that regardless of our success or failures in this world, we're promised an eternity of complete fulfillment in the presence of God through his Son, Jesus. We have learned that God is the one who saves, and he's saving people from every tribe, language, people, and nation, and the most unlikely candidates for salvation in our eyes may be the very people God has chosen to save—people like us. Finally, we can be sure that God has promised to right all wrongs, punish all evil, and remove sin and death from his kingdom. The Spirit encourages and equips us to wait in eager expectation, working for Christ and his kingdom as we do, out of gratitude for his abundant grace and mercy.

Opening Reflection Questions (Matt. 24:29–25:13)

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 118)

1. Would you want to know the future? Why / why not?

Most people will say "no."

2. How have you been troubled by the failure to be prepared for an event, meeting, or visit?
How have you been relieved by being prepared for an event, meeting, or visit?

We all have both experiences. Encourage people to share, but watch the time.

3. Scripture talks about the way of wisdom leading to life and the path of folly leading to death. What are some examples of these two paths and their destinies in Scripture, film, or literature?

Proverbs 8 is a good description of wisdom. In Scripture, some examples are the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), Lot's wife at Sodom (Gen. 19), Eli the priest (1 Sam. 4:18), and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:28ff. In film and literature, those accounts of war battles, or the rise and fall of nations are good examples.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 24:29–25:13)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 103 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 120)

1. How would you prepare your home if you were going to entertain a dignitary? How would you prepare to meet a king or queen at their palace?

We would do our best to look and act our best.

2. Why do airlines call for us to put on our own air masks before seeking to help others put on theirs? What lessons might we draw from this practice?

You can't help someone else if you're passed out.

3. What are some other passages of Scripture that provide coming attractions of Jesus's return? What do they reveal about those who trust Jesus? What do they reveal about those who reject Jesus? What do they reveal about heaven and hell?

The flood of Noah's era was a precursor to the final judgment. The holy war for the Promised Land, beginning with the fall of Jericho and continuing with the defeat of the various 'ites' was not genocide, as some believe, but a preview of God's judgment at the end of the age. Matthew 24 is the longest and most descriptive.

Those who trust Jesus will not face the final judgment because their sin was judged in Jesus. Those who reject Jesus will be punished. What is revealed about heaven is a restored creation where redeemed people and God will live together in the kingdom (Gen. 2:5–15; Rev. 22:1–4). What is revealed about hell is called the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment. Because those who reject Jesus will continue to reject him into eternity, they are punished forever. It is a sobering thought and should drive our prayers and evangelism.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 25:1–13)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 105 | LEADER'S EDITION P. 122)

1. What do you think about the wise bridesmaids failing to offer their oil to foolish ones?

They recognize the reality that there isn't enough oil for all of them. The bridegroom had to be welcomed, the five stayed ready, and the story shows that readiness is an individual responsibility.

2. Do you think God should offer people endless chances to come to him? Is it reasonable or right for the Lord to say salvation is a limited-time offer? Why / why not?

The problem with “endless chances” to believe is that without God the Spirit’s intervention to change a person’s heart, they will never believe. Psalm 14:1–3, 53:1–3, and Romans 3:11–12 make this clear.

3. Are you more surprised by God’s amazing grace to sinners or annoyed at his punishment of sinners? Why?

More by his grace because human sin had caused irreversible damage to God’s good creation. Only God could repair the damage, and he did so in Jesus.

Questions for Reflection (Matt. 25:1–13; 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11)

(BIBLE STUDY P. 107 | LEADER’S EDITION P. 124)

1. Why can there be salvation in no other name, or person, than Jesus?

Because Jesus is the only human who a) was sinless, and b) could bear the wrath of God. He had to be God born in flesh to be sinless. That’s why the virgin birth is an essential Christian doctrine. He also had to be human to die. That’s why Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection are essential Christian doctrines (1 Cor. 15:3–5 is actually an early creed of the nascent church). The proof of his sufficient work was the resurrection. Jesus is unique as the God-man, having two natures, unmixed in one person. He accomplished what the first Adam failed to do. Jesus fulfilled all the law, and all who believe in him for salvation are credited with his righteousness.

2. Would you want to worship a God who didn’t punish sin? Would it be worth serving a God who tolerated abuse, murder, hatred, and the like?

If God didn’t punish sin, he would be unjust, his holiness would be tarnished, and he wouldn’t be God.

3. Why is it good and necessary that Jesus provides us with coming attractions?

How else can we know what is to come? How else can we prepare?

Questions for Discussion

(LEADER'S EDITION P. 125)

1. What does the Bible mean when it asks, "What profit would it be to gain the whole world and lose your soul?"

Everything we accumulate in this present age will be destroyed (2 Pet. 3:10). The end of the age will usher in the never-ending kingdom of God. The contrast is between the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite, between the perfect gifts and treasures of heaven and the temporary things of this world (Matt. 6:19–20).

2. Why do you think it's difficult for people to believe that Jesus will return? Why do you think it's difficult to believe that Jesus will return "soon"?

Because it's been a long time since he left for heaven. Soon is also relative—Christians have been waiting since the first century. Peter expresses the hope we have in 2 Peter 3:9.

3. What comfort do you take in the realization that the king's return is on the horizon?

The comfort that the troubles of this life will one day be over. That all that is broken and unjust will be made right.

4. What have you learned about Jesus and his kingdom through his parables? What difference does this make in your life?

Encourage your group to each share their thoughts, including both theological reflections *and* personal application. Encourage them to keep ready, knowing their king is preparing a glorious, eternal home for them (John 14:2).

LESSON 10: CLOSING PRAYER

Begin with group prayer needs.

Heavenly Father, we're often distracted in so many ways with things that won't matter at all in 25 years, much less into eternity. It's both funny and sad how these things can spoil the joy we should have as we anticipate the return of Jesus. On that great and glorious day, he will bring the full measure of his kingdom to earth along with all those who have gone before us.

No one knows the hour or the day, but we know it's sure to happen. As we wait, help us wait with expectation and purpose. Expecting in every waking hour the return of your Son and purposefully going about the business of working in your kingdom as we live in this world. As Jesus reigns over all things from heaven, we live on earth to serve your purposes until Christ returns. As we do, you have promised to keep us in your name by sanctifying us in the truth of your Word.

Christ has secured our salvation, and our reward awaits us in heaven. We know this because you promised that all you have given to him would be redeemed. We're secure in his hand and doubly secure in your hand. Not one of us chosen for eternal life will be lost. What a great promise and sure hope. Father, may we live each minute of our lives in eager expectation of the beatific vision—that supremely blessed state of seeing you directly in the face of Jesus Christ. Whether we see it in our lifetime or not, we'll surely see it and bask in it forever. For we know our redeemer lives, and at the last, he will stand upon the earth. Our eyes will behold Christ, and our hearts, along with your servant Job, will faint within us out of pure joy.

Thank you, Father, for this study. May these wonderful truths return to our minds in the coming days to keep us focused on our promised eternal destiny.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)