



When Jesus came rather directly declaring and demonstrating that the long-awaited time of God’s salvation had arrived, he soon discovered that his directness proved to be a challenge to the ones he had come to save.

As Mark tells us in his gospel account, Jesus came as a messianic (God-anointed) King, announcing that he was bringing into vibrant view the kingdom of God. His actions, teachings—and eventually, his death and resurrection—accomplished once and for all the eternal purpose God had for the world. And yet, the very ones who were most prepared to receive him were so confounded by him that they confused his Spirit-filled, heavenly Father-directed efforts for those of the enemy he came to overcome.

By the fourth chapter of Mark, Jesus realizes that if he is going to get at the heart of his hearers, he is going to have to come at things in a not-so-direct manner. The manner Jesus chose to tell things slant<sup>1</sup> was the *parable*: “And he was teaching them many things in parables...” (4:2).

This disarming feature makes the parables the most useful tool in Jesus’ arsenal, as Robert Capon reminds us. “In resorting so often to parables, Jesus’ main point was that any understanding of the kingdom his hearers could come up with would be a misunderstanding.”

Now here is the thing about parables, they don’t define, diagram, or systematize; they describe something, usually something just as real but more challenging to see than the familiar elements of the short stories themselves: things like our souls, our hearts, our relation to the world, how God relates to us, and, of course, the kingdom of God. Parables, since they are (most of them) stories, disarm our assumptions about how God works by coming at such challenging topics sideways. Because they come at us on the slant, parables get to the heart of our relationship with God and one another before we know what to dismiss.

Eugene Peterson once said that “Parables trust our imaginations, which is to say, our faith. They don’t herd us paternalistically into a classroom where we get things explained and diagrammed. They don’t bully us into regiments where we find ourselves marching in [moral, unthinking conformity].” Parables are crafted to foster relationship with the communicator and in the stories. **Parables don’t do the work for us; they require us to put in work, imaginative or meditative work. Effort we could call *the work faith*.** They train us to hear the voice of the Lord and see with the eyes of the Spirit (see [Matthew 13:11-17](#)).

In other words, while we (like the men and women of [Mark 1-3](#)) can misunderstand Jesus’ straight-line efforts before he can get us to see what he sees, the parables get around our defenses by inviting us into a relationship with the teacher and the text. Parables invite us into a courtship of faith, requiring the use of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength as we grow into maturity in the kingdom.

So, here are the parables we will be entering into together this Epiphanytide. Our encouragement is to not just wait until the Gathering to jump in, but to walk with Jesus into these stories with intent at least twice a week during January. To help, we’ve put together a schedule along with some questions to ponder along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> One of my favorite poems is Emily Dickenson’s [Tell It Slant](#). A poem that seems to me to speak to the method and disposition of Jesus as he revealed to us the superb surprise of life with God now and forever.

## WEEK OF JANUARY 3<sup>rd</sup>

- **Day One:** Read “The Parable of the Two Sons” in [Luke 15:11-32](#). It is a familiar parable, second only to “The Good Samaritan” in notoriety. And while it is well known, the foundational revelation of the nature of God with us that it unveils is often overshadowed by our focus on the plight of the younger brother. So, [re-read the parable](#) asking the Spirit for fresh eyes to see and ears to hear, then write down any thoughts, observations, and questions that come to mind.
  
- **Day Two:** Re-Read [Luke 15:11-32](#), and then consider the following questions:
  - What do both sons’ initial interactions with their father (v. 12a & 28-30) reveal about their perception of the father and their own desires?
  - What does the father’s response to both sons (v. 12b & 31-32) reveal about the actual nature of the father and his desire for his children?
  - What do you want from God? What does he want for you?
  
- **Sunday:** Re-Read [Luke 15:11-32](#), asking for eyes to see the true nature of God with us, for us, and in us.

## WEEK OF JANUARY 10<sup>TH</sup>

- **Day One:** Read “The Parable of Laborers” in [Matthew 20:1-16](#). Now read the story preceding our parable in [Matthew 19:16-30](#), and consider how Jesus’ personal conversation connects with his parable. Why might Matthew have placed this parable after Jesus’ words to Peter?
  
- **Day Two:** Re-Read [Matthew 20:1-16](#), and consider the following questions:

- Be honest (and not judgmental); how do you think you would have reacted to the master’s actions if you were one of the first hired, the ones who labored all day?
  - The more literal translation of the master’s response in verse 15 reads, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? *Or is your eye bad (pain-ridden, diseased) because I am good?*” How does this question reveal the core issue of the parable?
  - How do the master’s final words in verse 16 make you feel?
- **Sunday:** Re-Read [Matthew 20:1-16](#) asking for eyes to see the true nature of God with us, for us, and in us.

## WEEK OF JANUARY 17<sup>TH</sup>

- **Day One:** Read “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager” in [Luke 16:1-8](#). This parable has proven to be one of the more difficult parables in Jesus’ collection. The difficulty lies in part because we connect the parable with 16:9-13, thinking that Jesus was commenting on the parable rather than taking the conversation in a different, if not somewhat similar, direction. Nevertheless, the parable feels a bit off at first reading, so [re-read the parable](#) and then write down any thoughts, observations, and questions that come to mind.
- **Day Two:** Re-Read [Luke 16:1-8](#), and consider the following questions:
  - What about this parable is unsettling or out of place to you? And, why?
  - What would you have done if you were the manager, caught in the squandering of what your master had given you? In what ways would your response have been different or similar to the manager's?
  - What would you have expected to be the master’s response to the manager’s actions? Why do you think that?

- **Sunday:** Re-Read [Luke 16:1-8](#), asking for eyes to see and courage to live in and share the true nature of God with us, for us, and in us.

## WEEK OF JANUARY 23<sup>rd</sup>

- **Day One:** Read the “Parable of the Talents” in [Matthew 25:14-30](#). Jesus tells this parable in the context of urging a preparation, “staying awake,” to be ready for the King and kingdom's arrival (see Matthew 24:1-25:13 or [listen to this](#)). With this in mind, [re-read the parable](#) and then write down any thoughts, observations, and questions that come to mind.
- **Day Two:** Re-read [Matthew 25:14-30](#), and consider the following questions:
  - Why does the master praise the first two servants? Their actions reveal what about Jesus’ expectation of “staying awake,” being ready for the kingdom come?
  - Read [verse 26](#) closely. Is the master affirming the third servant’s perceptions of him, or is he pointing out what the servant thinks about the master? Why does that matter?
  - What do you think God expects of you? How does what you think about the nature of the Father and his kingdom impact those expectations?
- **Sunday:** Re-Read [Matthew 25:14-30](#), asking for eyes to see and courage to live in and share the true nature of God with us, for us, and in us.