



ONCE UPON A PARABLE
Student Handbook



Do you like stories?

What is your favorite role — as the storyteller or the listener?

Our lives are made up of stories. Every day in conversation we narrate our adventures, filling in the plot and characters from our personal experiences. Some people take a formal approach to storytelling: writing books, sharing oral histories, keeping a diary, or blogging. Through stories, we learn truths about the world and our place in it as our own story unfolds.

But the real story began long ago in a garden, as a loving God created us in His own image. Then the true Storyteller came down to us. He taught about God and His Kingdom as He recalled ancient Scriptures. He delivered powerful one-liners that turned accepted wisdom on its head. And He told parables.

Parables are short stories that use situations and objects from everyday life to make a single point. To some people in Jesus' audience, the words were vivid illustrations, helping them understand difficult concepts through familiar images. To others, the stories were confusing, or simply entertaining. They missed the deeper meaning.

Jesus called us to learn from His words, to apply them to our lives, and to share His truth with the world.

Now for the rest of the story...

"He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9).

WEEK ONE

Stories: RSVP

"He taught by using stories, many stories..."
— Mark 4:2 (The Message)

Day 1

1. On a pop quiz, which would you be more likely to remember: the dates and events you studied in history class, or the plot of the movie you watched last weekend? Why?

2. Stories have a way of staying with us. They often touch our hearts more than ordinary information. Jesus knew that. He used short stories called “parables” to teach us about abstract things like love, forgiveness, and Heaven by using everyday objects. These word-pictures translated mysterious truths with vivid illustration. Which of the following do you think Jesus included in His parables?

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bread | <input type="checkbox"/> Treasure | <input type="checkbox"/> Storms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Farmers | <input type="checkbox"/> Weeds | <input type="checkbox"/> Weddings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soil | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheep | <input type="checkbox"/> Landowners |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bridesmaids | <input type="checkbox"/> Servants | <input type="checkbox"/> Fathers and sons |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lamps | <input type="checkbox"/> Vineyards | <input type="checkbox"/> All of the above |

3. Jesus compares His Heavenly Kingdom to an elaborate banquet in **Luke 14:15-23**. Take a minute and picture the scene: the clean, pressed tablecloths; the fancy silverware; the dishes overflowing with food. How did the host’s friends respond to his generous invitation?

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

4. How did the master respond when he heard their excuses?

- He rescheduled the party so that they could attend.
- He accepted their apologies.
- He canceled the party altogether.
- He found others who were thrilled to accept his invitation.

5. Like the no-shows at the feast, when Jesus showed up to teach that His Kingdom had arrived, many religious leaders refused to follow Him. What are some of the excuses you give that keep you from accepting Jesus’ invitation each day?

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

“Please excuse me, I _____.”

6. The people who show up for God are the ones who realize they are needy — the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame (**Luke 14:21**). What are some of the needs in your life that you can bring before God?

7. Just like the servant's message to his master, "There is still room" (Luke 14:22), Jesus told His disciples that there are many rooms in the house of God (John 14:2). As Jesus' followers, we are given the awesome opportunity to invite others to join us in God's Kingdom. Who in your life needs you to help show them the way?

Day 2

1. Have you ever gone fishing? What did you catch? To Jesus' audience, fishing was something that would have been very familiar, but not as a hobby. Fishing was an important way of life in that region. The story of the net in **Matthew 13:47-50** describes fishing with a dragnet. According to these verses, what did the net collect?
2. Once the net was full and the fishermen had pulled it to shore, what did they do with their catch?
- Cleaned and gutted the fish
 - Put all the fish in baskets
 - Separated the good fish from the bad fish
 - Cooked dinner
3. How does this resemble what will happen at the end of the world?
- God will collect all of His people into Heaven, like a giant net.
 - God's angels will separate the wicked from the righteous.
 - God will flood the earth with water.
 - God will give us the task of sorting between the good and bad people.
4. In Jesus' story, the net, as it was dragged along, could not distinguish between good and bad fish, but picked up everything in its path. The time for separation came later. What lesson(s) do you think Jesus was teaching us through this parable?
- We should share Jesus' love with everyone.
 - We should only share Jesus with the people who really belong in God's Kingdom.
 - We should judge people and separate the good from the bad.
 - We should leave the sorting up to God.
5. Churches, like dragnets, are full of many different people — believers, unbelievers, hard workers, sluggards, encouragers, and critical spirits. Sometimes we find ourselves wanting to pick and choose who we'll let in. After seeing Jesus' example, what should our attitude be instead?

Making It Personal

Just as you catch more fish with a dragnet than with a single fishing pole, our love should be spread out among all the people we meet, not just our favorite few. Ask God to keep your mind and heart open to the most unlikely catch so that you can point them to Jesus.

Stories: Small Beginnings

"But the Master said, 'You don't need more faith. There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it would do it."

— Luke 17:6 (The Message)

Day 1

1. Have you ever tried to grow something? Maybe it was a seed you planted in elementary school, or vegetables in your grandparents' garden. Maybe you forgot your sandwich in your locker and grew mold by accident! What would you say is the key to making something grow?
2. In the story of the mustard seed (**Matthew 13:31-32**), Jesus spoke of a plant that may be unfamiliar to us, but was very familiar to His original audience. The mustard plant was a common sight in the region of Galilee. Probably everyone in the crowd had passed at least one on their way to hear Jesus. The plants grow to 12 feet in height and produce little black seeds that birds love to eat. Read the story now. How does Jesus describe the mustard seed in verse 32?
 - The most plentiful seed
 - The costliest seed
 - The largest seed
 - The smallest seed
3. When a mustard seed is planted in the ground, what is the result?
 - French's original mustard
 - The largest of all garden plants
 - An attractive flower bush
 - A field of mustard
4. How does this resemble the Kingdom of Heaven?
 - The Kingdom of Heaven is not expensive to plant.
 - To accomplish something big for God, you have to get your hands dirty.
 - God can use what seems small and insignificant to accomplish great things for His Kingdom.
 - Other: _____
5. Read **Luke 17:5-6**. What lesson do you find in this verse?
6. What are some practical ways that we can feed and water our faith?

Day 2

1. Imagine how insignificant and helpless Jesus' audience must have felt at this time, being just a tiny part of the powerful Roman Empire. Even Jesus' disciples were just 12 ordinary fishermen. But God wasn't limited by their circumstances. Using their faith, God enabled them to change the world. In your life, do you ever feel small and insignificant? What causes those feelings of powerlessness?



Stories: Hidden Treasure

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden
in a field..."*

— Matthew 13:44

Day 1

1. Have you ever discovered a hidden treasure? What was it? Where did you find it?
2. Read all of **Matthew 13:44**. What three things did the man do after he made his discovery?
3. This story may sound strange to us, but it made perfect sense to Jesus' audience. There was an ancient saying that the only safe place for money was in the earth, and it was common for cherished items to be buried for safekeeping. This was not a case of finders keepers, however. According to the law of that time, in order to own the treasure, the man had to own the field. What did the purchase of the field cost him?
4. Based his actions, how precious do you think the treasure was to him?
5. What is the key truth in this story?
 - God has hidden His Kingdom from us.
 - We should hide our knowledge of the Kingdom from others.
 - Jesus' Kingdom is to be treasured when it is discovered.
 - It is wrong to have many possessions.
6. What makes the Kingdom of Heaven so precious, like costly treasure?
7. You may have heard the expression, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Is everyone able to recognize heavenly treasure when they find it? Why or why not?

Ask God to open your eyes to the treasures around you today.

Day 2

1. In the last story, a man discovered hidden treasure by accident. In the story of the valuable pearl (**Matthew 13:45-46**), a merchant is actively searching for his treasure. Was the merchant's response similar to or different from the man's in **Matthew 13:44**? What did he do when he found his treasure?

2. How well do you relate to the merchant in this story?
 - Easily – my relationship with God is my greatest treasure.
 - So-So – I love God, but I don't always show it in my actions.
 - Not at all – I am not ready to become a part of God's Kingdom.
 - Other:
3. God's Kingdom comes to us in different ways. Some of us go searching for it; others discover it unexpectedly. What matters is our response when God reveals it to us. If you are a believer, think about when you became a Christian. How did God reveal His Kingdom to you?
4. What do these stories teach you about the value of what you hold in your heart?
5. In each of these stories, the men made a costly choice in order to obtain their treasure. Similarly, the Christian life is not without sacrifice. What are some of the things that you, as a middle school student, have had to give up so that you can follow Him with your whole heart?
6. Likewise, the Christian life is not without reward. What are some of the rewards you've encountered as a follower of Jesus? What treasures are you looking forward to receiving?
7. What lesson is God teaching you today through His stories?

Making It Personal

Matthew 6:21 says that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What is your greatest treasure? If it's something besides God, what are you seeking to gain from that treasure? Take time to pray, asking God to take first place in your heart.

WEEK FOUR

Stories: Ready or Not

"So stay alert. You have no idea when he might arrive."

— *Matthew 25:13 (The Message)*

Day 1

1. Which of the following best describes you?

- I plan ahead and am prepared for most situations.
- I prefer to go with the flow and figure things out as I go along.
- I am usually caught unprepared.

2. Read the story of the ten bridesmaids in **Matthew 25:1-13**. Here Jesus teaches about the importance of being prepared for His return. In this story, what does the wedding banquet represent? Who is the bridegroom?

3. Of the ten bridesmaids, how many knew that the bridegroom would be coming?

4. How many prepared for his arrival?

5. What preparations did some make as they waited for him?

- They got their beauty sleep.
- They took extra oil for their lamps.
- They prepared food for the wedding banquet.
- They purchased gifts for the bride and groom.

6. Why did some bridesmaids bring extra oil?

- They wanted to make the other bridesmaids look foolish.
- It was a wedding gift.
- They wanted to be ready in case the bridegroom arrived late.
- They needed their lamps to shine brighter than the rest.

7. What made some of the bridesmaids' laziness so foolish? (Check all that apply)

- They relied on other people rather than preparing themselves.
- They should have tried harder to get the other bridesmaids to share.
- They could have easily bought extra oil ahead of time.
- Their foolishness cost them their seats at the banquet.
- Other:

8. Why did the bridesmaids refuse to share their oil?

- They only had enough oil to keep their own lamps burning.
- Oil was very expensive.
- They were being selfish.
- They wanted to impress the bridegroom.

Ready or not, here he... came? Even though they knew the bridegroom would be coming, some of the bridesmaids failed to take the necessary steps to prepare for his arrival. Extra oil, like faith, cannot be borrowed at the last minute. Each of us must have our own.

Day 2

1. If you knew that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, what would you do today? Would you live your life any differently than you do every other day?

2. Jesus told us to keep watch, because no one knows the day or the hour of His return (**Matthew 25:13**). How should this affect how we live?

3. Judging from the behavior of the foolish bridesmaids, how seriously did they take the bridegroom?
 - Very seriously—they wanted to be prepared for his arrival.
 - Kind of seriously—they looked forward to his coming but were more concerned with their own plans.
 - Not seriously at all—they didn't want to have anything to do with him.

4. Read the following statements and mark whether they are wise ("W") or foolish ("F"):
 - _____ My parents are both Christians, so I know I'll go to Heaven.
 - _____ I've got plenty of time to become a Christian. For now, I'll live my way.
 - _____ I need to live like Jesus will come back at any minute.
 - _____ God won't really send people to Hell.
 - _____ Real faith doesn't flare up and burn out quickly. It lasts a lifetime.

5. Faith in Jesus is the lamp that lights our path as we follow Him. Is it possible to live off of someone else's faith (such as your parents' or friends'), or does it have to be your own? Explain.

6. When you look at your own faith right now, how would you describe the light it gives you?
 - Burning brightly — I am living for Jesus.
 - Flickering — I believe in Jesus, but I am struggling with doubt and disobedience.
 - Dim — I believe in Jesus, but I have chosen not to follow Him right now.
 - Dark — I don't know Jesus (or don't want to).

7. If Jesus were to come back today, would you be ready? Why or why not?

Making It Personal

Real faith doesn't flare up for an instant and disappear. Real faith keeps burning even in the darkest times. When we trust God and live for Him, He is our light. **Psalm 18:28** reads: "You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light." If you are struggling in your faith, ask God to refresh you by His Spirit so that you can live each day for Him.

NOTES

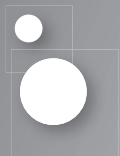




NOTES







this book belongs to:

Jesus used stories — *parables* — to get a point across. He asked us to learn from His words, to apply them to our lives, and to share His truth with the world. He called us to let *His* stories influence the story of *our* lives.

And that's what this book is about — a chance to not only discover the point behind the parables, but to also get to know the Storyteller and the role *you* play in the tale He's telling.

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