the stories Jesus told

"All Jesus did that day was tell stories—a long storytelling afternoon.."

Matthew 13:34 {msg}

navigators™

{ the power of story }

One thing that made Jesus' teaching so powerful and resonant was his use of story.

"All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable." (Mat. 13:34)

We call them "parables" because they are symbolic, but they were essentially stories.

People came to him with questions and criticisms. They demanded answers, but Jesus' responses most often began, "One time there was this guy..."

His answers weren't always tidy. Sometimes they seemed out of the blue. But they always cut right to the heart of the matter.

As you read these stories, pay attention to how they make you feel. Are you confused? The original listeners probably were too. Do they startle you, amuse you, convict you? Try to think about why.

One time Jesus disciples asked, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Jesus answered, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

He essentially said, "I want to teach in a way that only gets through to those who want to understand."

Bear that in mind as you study these Stories Jesus Told. They may take some thinking, soul searching and good discussion, but they'll get through if you want them to.

Our prayer is that they will be stories that change the course of your story, which is what they were always intended to be.

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{listen}

Start by reading the story (the first block of words) before moving on to Jesus' explanation (the second block).

In your own words, describe the three main threats to the growth of a seed that Jesus' mentions.

What is a seed/crop ultimately supposed to do?

{reflect}

What is "the seed" and where is it sown? (See second block of words.)

Write down the three things in life that correspond to the threats to the seed Jesus mentions in your own words.
1)

2)

3)

Get specific: Can you think of areas in your life that fall into these three categories?

Look at v. 23 and it's sister verse, Luke 8:15. What would it mean for you to be "good soil"?

What kind of "yields" should your life have?

{live}

How can you plough, fertilize, water or weed the soil of your heart this week?

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched.

And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23 [ESV]

{2}lost stuff

{listen}

Have you ever looked frantically for something you've lost the way the characters in these stories do? What was that like?

Who were the people listening to Jesus' story here?

How might this story affected each type of listener differently?

{reflect}

What "lost stuff" is Jesus alluding to?

What does this teach you about what God is like?

How is Jesus using these stories to quiet his critics?

Do you think there really are "righteous persons who need no repentance"?

How has God sought you out?

{live}

Do you feel treasured by God this way?

What is a practical way to live as one sought and found by God this week--to make the most of being back with your rightful owner?

Can you think of anyone you can "receive" and spend time with the way Jesus did? (You might read 2 Cor. 5:16-21.)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:1-10 [ESV]

{3}two sons

{listen}

This story is a continuation of Jesus' response to his critics from the last study. (Luke 15:1, 2)

How might his critics have reacted to this story? What about the "tax collectors and sinners"?

{reflect}

What part of this story affected you the most?

How did both sons misunderstand their father?

What words would you use to describe the father in this story?

Which son do you relate the most with?

Looking at the flack Jesus' was getting in vv. 1 & 2, how does this story explain Jesus' actions?

Put Jesus in the story he told. What do you think he would have done?

{live}

Some people insulted Jesus by calling him a "friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19), but Jesus never seemed to mind this title! Jesus explains himself this way:

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." (Matt. 9:12)

How is this good news for you?

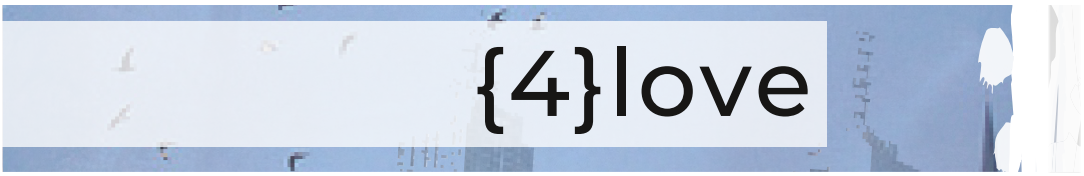
If God wants nothing more than to love you and spend time with you, how might you respond to that tomorrow morning?

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put
a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15:11-32 [ESV]



{listen}

What affect does true forgiveness have on you?

Have you ever had to forgive someone for something big? Was that easy or hard?

Where does love come from? (What are it's origins?)

{reflect}

Why do you think Simon was such a bad host to Jesus?

What do you think motivated this woman? (What did she understand about Jesus and his teachings?)

Does your love for Jesus reflect the amount you've been forgiven? (How do you know he has forgiven you?)

In other accounts, Jesus said,

"Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me … And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Mark 14:6 & 9)

What do you think he meant? What is the gospel, and why does he want this act to be footnote to it?

{live}

Three things characterized this woman's act of love. It was:
1) Costly (One year's wage, see Mark 14:3-5)
2) Confusing (both Simon and Jesus' disciples were perplexed)
3) Conspicuous (she made quite a scene)

How might your love for Jesus have these same traits?

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luke 7:36-49 [ESV]

{listen}

How do you determine the worth of something?

What is the biggest purchase you made? Was it worth the cost?

Have you ever come to realize the worth of something you initially didn't recognize?

{reflect}

In what ways are these stories similar/dissimilar?

Do you relate to one of these characters? (Which one? Why?)

What do you think Jesus is trying to say?

Jesus said some pretty radical stuff about following him like,

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:23-25)

How does this story shed light on Jesus' demands?

{live}

What can you joyfully give or give up in order to know Jesus more deeply this week?

When you buy something, you get to use it. How might you make the most of your place in the kingdom this week?

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

”Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Matthew 13:44-46 [ESV]

{6}branches

{listen}

What do you know about how a tree makes fruit?

Why do you think branches go bad? What good does pruning do?

{reflect}

Just for the sake of clarity, write down all the pieces of this analogy and what they each represent.

What does it mean to “abide”? How do branches abide in trees?

What are we being told to do here? (And what does that mean?)

What are we ensured will happen?

Who gets the glory? Why?

{live}

If you had to guess what the “sap” was, what might it be? (Hint: Jesus specifies to remain in it.)

What kind of fruit does it produce in us? (What are we “full” of?)

When you think of obedience to Jesus, are you usually thinking about experiencing his love and having fullness of joy?

Experiment with this this week. Obey Jesus in a new, uncomfortable way and see how you experience his love and joy in those times. Write down a specific area of life below.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

John 15:1-11 [ESV]

{7}storms

{listen}

Have you ever seen a big, tall building being built? What's the very first thing they do?

Why do you think these people were calling Jesus "Lord"?

Why is it weird to call someone lord, but ignore their counsel?

{reflect}

Jesus is being pretty direct here. What do you think is motivating him?

Let's just say Jesus let these folks keep giving lip-service to his lordship. What would have happened to them?

Go to YouTube and search "What an incoming tsunami looks like". How does this shed light on Jesus' words in this story?

What "storm" do you think Jesus had in mind?

What might the two results Jesus mentions look like in your life?

{live}

If you had to be specific about what Jesus is telling you to do, how would you describe it?

What is the rock you are supposed to build on?

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?

Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

Luke 6:46-49 [ESV]

{8}tenacity

{listen}

Why did Jesus tell them this story?

Is prayer hard or easy? (How is your prayer life?)

What keeps us from praying, or makes us “lose heart” in prayer?

How are prayer and faith related?

{reflect}

Do you think Jesus is saying that God is like this judge?

Why do you think Jesus uses the example of a corrupt judge to teach about prayer?

How does the way you think about God affect your prayer life?

Jesus talks about prayer elsewhere this way:

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11)

Do you think God’s definition of what is best for you is sometimes different than yours?

{live}

If you knew God was all powerful, all wise and all good, how might that affect your prayer-life?

What are some key, IMPORTANT things you might start talking to God about in prayer?

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Luke 18:1-8 [ESV]

{9}risk

{listen}

What's it like to be made responsible for something important?

Are you more careful with your own stuff, or with other people's stuff. Why?

Is risk a good or bad thing?

talent: a greek/roman coin worth about 20 years wages!

{reflect}

How did the master determine how much to give each servant?

How do you think the "good, faithful" servants decided how to use the money that had been "entrusted to them"?

What things did the master do for the industrious servants?

What governed the "wicked, slothful" servant's decision-making?

How would you contrast the master's two responses (the two results)?

What does Jesus wants us to learn from this story?

{live}

What do you think these "talents" represent in your life?

How do you view your time, resources, giftings, opportunities? Are they yours, or have they been entrusted to your care?

Does this paint a picture of God as being risk-averse or intrepid; cautious or bold? What does this mean for your life if it is supposed to reflect the wishes of the Master?

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money.

Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Matthew 25:14-30 [ESV]

{listen}

Why did this lawyer pose his question?

For what reason did he ask for clarification from Jesus?

How would you define love?

Is love easy or hard?

{reflect}

What do you think this traveler was experiencing during the course of this story?

Why do you think the priest and Levite “passed by on the other side”? What would you have done?

Why do you think the Samaritan helped him?

In what ways was this act costly and uncomfortable?

How did this story affect you? Which part impacted you the most?

{live}

What needs do you encounter during the course of your days?

What makes you want to “pass by on the other side”?

What resolutions can you make in order to live a “good Samaritan” lifestyle?

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Luke 10:25-37 [ESV]

{listen}

What is it that makes a party a party?

How does it feel to be invited to a party?

How is a party a reflection on its host?

{reflect}

Which of these stories stood out most? Why?

Why do you think Jesus used parties as the backdrop for these three stories?

If you had to give a one-word title for what each story is about, what would they be?

#1 _____ #2 _____ #3 _____

Chose one of the three stories here, and write a 3 sentence description of what it's teaching you

{live}

Let's say that this weekend you are throwing a party that God would want to come to. What would it be like?

How does your response to the last question teach you about what might please God in your life in general?

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'

So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

Luke 14-7-24 [ESV]

lessons

Take a few minutes to record your key lesson from each study.

{dirt}

{lost stuff}

{two sons}

{love}

{treasure}

{branches}

{storms}

{tenacity}

{risk}

{neighbors}

{parties}

more stories

Did you enjoy exploring Jesus' stories? You should consider continuing to do so over the break! Here is a list of a few more.

As you read these, seek to understand the following:
(1) hearers and heart of the parable, (2) the symbolic significance of the various elements and (3) the application to your life and perspective.

salt & light	Mat. 5:14-16
sheep & goats	Mat. 25:31-46
day laborers	Mat. 20:1-16
growth	Luke 13:18-19
weeds	Mat. 13:24-30 & 36-43
asking	Luke 11:1-13
mercy	Mat. 18:23-34
pride	Luke 18:10-14
serving	Luke 17:7-10
bad tenants	Mark 12:1-12
alertness	Mark 13:32-37
oil	Mat. 25:1-13
security	Luke 12:13-21