

Playing Through the Parables

The parables are stories used by Jesus that are included in the gospels. It is understood that Jesus used parables as a way to be helpful in explaining to people what God's Kingdom might be like or to help them to imagine how to live in God's kingdom. These stories are a key to understanding what God wants our lives to be like and what God's kingdom might be like if we live those lives. New meaning can be found in familiar parables when using different activities or when studying with new people. Parables are multi-layered, so each time we look at them we might find new meanings.

Choose one of the following parables as your focus, along with a few of these tools, to build a lesson plan with ways to engage youth in exploring the parables and other scriptures:

Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24–27)

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21–35)

Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22: 1–14)

Parable of the Bridesmaids (Matthew 25: 1–13)

Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–9)

Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32)

Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

Parable of the Friend at Night (Luke 11:5–13)

Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1–7)

Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10)

Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:1–32)

Opening Activity Options

1. **Forced Choices/Would You Rather:** Youth gather together in the middle of the room. Tell them you are going to give them two choices and they must choose one. One choice gathers people in one corner of the room while the other choice gathers people in the opposite corner. Once gathered, you can ask people to share something more about that question/topic or give them something to talk about in pairs. An example: Would you rather go to a movie (left corner of the room) or a sporting event (right corner). Once you choose, get a partner in your corner, and share the last movie you saw or sporting event you went to and who you went with.

You can also do this by offering all four corners of the room as choices. Example: If you were planning a vacation would you go to the mountains (corner 1), the beach (corner 2), a big city (corner 3), a national landmark (corner 4). Once in your corner, share with others in your corner what you would like to do on your vacation.

2. **Graffiti Sheets:** As youth walk into the meeting space have newsprint sheets hanging on walls, easels or on the floor with plenty of markers. On each sheet write a question or start a sentence for youth to write responses. These should be thematic to your program for the evening or should be some way to re-connect youth together for the evening. Examples: God is like ____, I think the kingdom of God will be ____, If I were to describe myself as a color I would be ____ or What is something you are excited about this week? Who did you reach out to this week? How do you want to make a difference in the world?

3. **Story Cards:** As youth come into the room hand them an index card with a word on the card that is in some way related to the parable. Words may be things like “servant”, “humble”, “guest”, “wise”, “foolish”, “confused”—or other words that are in the parable you chose or are related to the message. It is ok if there are duplicate cards but try not to have people with the same cards in the same group. Ask youth to get together in groups of 4–6 and share their words. How would they define their words? They should spend 5 minutes making up a story where they can use these words. Ask groups to share their stories. This could lead up to talking about the fact that Jesus used stories to give his followers glimpses into God’s kingdom.
4. **Word Association:** These are two slightly different games of “word association.” Choose a word that relates to the story or that is in the story (farmer, servant, host, guest, bridesmaid, groom, etc.). Go around the circle and ask everyone to say the first word that came into their head when they heard that word. You can do it this way a couple of times. Now choose a different word and just say the word. The person to the left of you has to say the first word that pops into their head from the word you said. But then the person to their left has to respond with the first word that pops into their head from the word the person before said, not what the person who started said. Use these words and associations to think about ways we think about terms and phrases as you then go into the Bible study.
5. **Re-Title the Painting:** Before youth arrive in the meeting area, hang up pictures or paintings. As youth enter, ask them to walk around the images and write a title for the picture or painting (you might mount pictures on newsprint sheets or have post it notes for them to stick onto the pictures). Share the creative titles that folks have come up with. You might then ask them to walk around and guess what Bible stories the pictures represent or could represent.

OR

You can use pictures and paintings to also ask youth to stand next to the one that expresses how they feel – or stand by the image that best expresses where they are with their faith right now. Then ask them to share with others who also chose that same picture, why that image expresses that for them.

(Hint: Many famous paintings have been created as reflections on parables. A quick web search can provide you with multiple options for a variety of parables. You can also recycle posters from Sunday school curriculum, like Seasons of the Spirit. These pictures and paintings do not have to be direct portrayals of the parables. You can use photos from newspapers or magazines, or even photos from your youth trips, service projects, or other events.)

Questions for Discussing Parables

Choose a parable or Bible story to focus on with your group. After reading the scripture aloud, use the questions listed below for reflection. Depending on the number of students participating, you may want to break into smaller groups for reflection. Encourage one person to ask the questions, while another records the answers before reporting back to the larger group.

1. What is Jesus telling us in this parable? What is your first reaction to the meaning of this parable?
2. With whom does this parable help us to be in relationship – God? Family? Friends? Others?
3. Why does Jesus tell this parable?
4. What was happening right before Jesus told this? How does that influence why Jesus might have been telling this? Does it shed light on what Jesus was trying to say or do?
5. What happens right after this parable is told?
6. Does the placement of this parable tell us anything about its meaning or Jesus’ intention?
7. What are words or phrases that stand out to you in this passage?

8. What might this parable mean to your family as you gather together for a meal or for a holiday or just in the course of your daily living together?
9. What does this parable mean as you gather to eat lunch in your school cafeteria? As you hang out with friends at a coffee shop or a mall?
10. How do you see this parable and its message as being relevant to your life?

Ways to Respond to Scripture

1. **Mirror, Mirror:** Have long mirrors propped against walls or have lots of individual/handheld mirrors around the room with dry erase markers. Ask youth to look at their reflection in the mirror. Ask youth to take one color dry erase marker and write on the mirror something that has been revealed to them about God from this scripture passage. Then take another color dry erase marker and write on the mirror something that this scripture has revealed about yourself.
OR
Have youth choose a character in the story with whom they identify. Look in the mirror and write words that describe the ways in which they identified with that character in the story.
2. **Artistic Expressions:** Chalk it UP—give youth sidewalk chalk and have them go outside and express the parable in their own chalk images. Cite the scriptures as others walk by, they will see the story and be reminded of the message. If it is raining, use chalk on black construction paper.
 - Write a Letter—Choose a character in the story and write a letter to that person from you explaining what that story means to you today OR write a letter from one character in the story to another character.
 - Cartoon Squares—make a table with 8 cartoon squares and ask youth to illustrate the story as though it were a comic strip.
 - 7 Word Expression—Ask youth to boil down the parables message into 7 words. Painting, pottery, Play Doh, collages – let youth express the message of the scripture using one of these mediums.
3. **Service:** Doing a service project for a group in the community may be a way to respond to the message of the scripture.
 - Breakfast Bags—If you have a local shelter for people struggling with homelessness your youth could decorate brown paper bags and then fill them with some non-perishable items (raisins, pb & j sandwich, granola bar, juice box, etc.) Take to the shelter for them to distribute in the morning.
 - CWS Hygiene or School Kits—The Church World Service website can give you details about what to put in each kit. Youth might collect items from the congregation prior to this study and then assemble and package the kits.
 - Church Spruce Up—Sometimes our own buildings need some service! Weed or plant a garden bed, dust/polish the pews, clean out a supply closet, talk to your property committee about things the church needs. Really clean, not just tidy, the youth church school room or youth meeting space.
 - Meals for a church member—The group might make a simple casserole or soup for a family in the church in crisis or someone who has been sick.
 - Cards to those far from home—Have youth make cards with newsy notes about the community and the church family to send to missionaries or those serving in the military. Let them know your group is praying for them and then Do!

4. **Prayer:** Give youth various ways to be in prayer or reflection after discussing the passage.
 - Sand Garden—On a tray, put sand (colored sand or just sand). To the side of the tray have a variety of items: feathers, shells, rocks, small mirrors, possible small figures, different crosses, pinecones, glass florist stones, etc. Also, have small sand toy rakes and shovels so that youth can reflect on the passage and move the sand around, adding elements to make a mini meditation garden. You could also use a shoebox.
 - Labyrinth—A great way to focus on a parable or scripture is to utilize a labyrinth. There are several types: a walking labyrinth, a hand-held labyrinth, or a printable labyrinth. Whatever one is available to you, utilize it as a way for youth to focus their mind on the message in the scripture passage. The youth can mediate in silence while they walk the labyrinth path or trace it with their fingers or an eraser side of a pencil.
 - Poetry—Have available poems and writings on scripture or the life of Jesus and then have paper, pencils, and pens for youth to write their own words or poems to express how the scripture passage spoke to them. (Imaging the Word has excellent books with classic paintings, photos, poems, and other artistic expressions).
5. **Movie Clips:** Use a movie clip to help youth see ways in which the message of the scripture might be seen in a different context. Possible movies include Finding Nemo (Prodigal Son, Lost Sheep/Coin), The Lion King (Prodigal Son), The Empire Strikes Back (Mustard Seed), Pay it Forward (Mustard Seed), The Incredibles (Good Samaritan), A Bug's Life (Mustard Seed), and Antwone Fisher (Prodigal Son).

Ways to Re-tell the Scripture

1. “Once Upon A Time”—is how this begins and each person in the circle adds a sentence to re-tell the story.
2. Using an accent (Southern, British, Bostonian . . .)—retell the story in an agreed upon accent or dialect using that lingo.
3. As an advertisement tagline or motto (Just Do It)—what would be the tagline for this scripture’s message, or the way God is portrayed in this scripture.
4. As a text conversation between two people in the story.
5. As a tweet (140 characters or less).
6. In 4–6 Instagram photos.
7. In a modern location (mall, school hallway or cafeteria, coffee shop, movie theater, chat room online, fast food restaurant, soccer field).
8. As a knock-knock joke.
9. From a different person’s perspective in the story.
10. As a Facebook status.
11. In a video (or in a music video).
12. Paper Bag skit—random items in a paper bag that must be used as you retell the story.

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