



FOR PERSONAL OR SMALL GROUP USE



Fascinating  
Bible Studies  
on Every  
Parable



Dr. William H. Marty

Fascinating  
Bible Studies  
on Every  
Parable

Dr. William H. Marty



**BETHANYHOUSE**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by William H. Marty

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Marty, William Henry, author.

Title: Fascinating bible studies on every parable / Dr. William H. Marty.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020000567 | ISBN 9780764232442 (trade paperback) | ISBN  
9781493424894 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Parables—Textbooks. | Bible—Parables—Criticism,  
interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BS680.P3 M37 2020 | DDC 226.8/06—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020000567>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture indicated NASB is from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org)

Scripture indicated NET is from the NET Bible®, copyright © 1996–2016 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com>. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture indicated NLT is from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# Contents

Introduction 5

---

## Old Testament Parables

---

The Trees and the Thornbush King 17

The Rich Man and the Poor Man 22

---

## New Testament Parables

---

### **The Nature of the Kingdom**

*The Coming of the Kingdom* 31

The Sower and the Soils 31

The Wheat and Weeds 38

The Seed Growing Secretly 43

The Leaven 47

The Mustard Seed 51

The Children in the Marketplace 55

Jesus and Beelzebul, the Strong Man, and Good and Bad  
Trees 62

*The Value of the Kingdom* 66

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price 66

*The Consummation of the Kingdom* 71

The Fish Net 71

The Wise and Foolish Virgins 75

The Sheep and the Goats 81

## **The Ethics of the Kingdom**

### ***Discipleship* 89**

- The Tower Builder and the Warring King 89
- The Shrewd Manager 95
- The Talents 100
- The Unforgiving Servant 105
- The Watchful Servants and the Wise Manager 111
- The Thief 116

### ***Reversal* 119**

- The Narrow Door 119
- The Wedding Banquet 123
- The Great Banquet 128
- The Rich Man and Lazarus 134
- The Good Samaritan 139

### ***Prayer* 147**

- The Helpless Widow and the Unjust Judge 147
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector 154
- The Friend at Midnight 161

### ***Grace and Love* 166**

- The Workers in the Vineyard 166
- The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin 169
- The Prodigal Son/the Loving Father 176
- The Unworthy Servant 183
- The Sinful Woman and Two Debtors 187

### ***Judgment* 191**

- The Wise and Foolish Builders 191
- The Rich Fool 198
- The Wicked Tenants 203

### ***Fruitfulness* 208**

- The Barren Fig Tree 208
- The Vine and the Branches 215

What Does God Expect of Me? 219

Notes 221

# Introduction

One of the reasons Jesus is considered a Master Teacher was his extensive use of parables. He used them to teach large and small crowds like his disciples and to debate religious leaders.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? He used parables to draw his audience into the story. Once they identified with the characters, he would make a point, usually with an unexpected development. Though the stories were from everyday life, they were not always understood, even by his disciples. Jesus had to explain. “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything” (Mark 4:33–34).

While this book is mostly about Jesus’ parables, I have also included two parables from the Old Testament. The story of the trees and the Shechemites could be considered a fable because inanimate objects (trees) are assigned traits of the living, but it is a parable in that the story focuses on one main point. Also, Nathan used a parable of a rich man and a poor man to rebuke David for his sin with Bathsheba. In addition to parables in the Old Testament, the rabbis of Jesus’ time taught in parables, so Jesus was using a method that would have been familiar to his audience. But Jesus’

use of parables was somewhat unique because no one had used parables as extensively as he did in his teaching about the kingdom.

While writing these studies, I occasionally interacted with my brother-in-law about some of the parables. His response was often, “I never did understand what Jesus meant.” The purpose of this book is to help you understand Jesus’ parables—what he intended to teach and the response he expected—and then to suggest how we can apply his parables today.

Each study begins with an introduction followed by information on the historical and cultural setting of the parable. It is important to place each parable within the ministry of Jesus and to understand the cultural aspects of the story. Though it is difficult to categorize Jesus’ parables because of the different occasions and varieties of the stories, I have attempted to organize them into two broad categories: 1) the nature of the kingdom and 2) the ethics of the kingdom.

## **The Nature of the Kingdom**

When Jesus first began speaking in parables, he called them “mysteries.” This meant that Jesus was revealing new truths about the kingdom—truths that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. Jesus declared that with his coming, the kingdom had arrived (the inauguration of the kingdom), the kingdom would advance supernaturally, the kingdom was of incomparable value, and the kingdom would be consummated at the end of the age (“already” but “not yet”).

## **The Ethics of the Kingdom**

The parables in this category answer the question that the late Francis Schaeffer asked and answered in his book *How Should We Then Live?* In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduced “a higher calling” for subjects of the kingdom when he declared, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees,

you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20 NASB). Parables in this section clarify what it means to be a devoted follower of Christ (discipleship); they introduce the shocking theme of reversal; and they warn of the tragic and irreversible fate of those who reject Jesus. Others give truths about prayer, assuring us that God is a loving Father who will not disappoint. Some, like the workers in the vineyard and the prodigal son, emphasize God’s amazing grace and his unconditional love. The section concludes with a focus on fruitfulness, which includes the parable of the barren fig and Jesus’ teaching about the vine and the branches. In my opinion, the latter is an extended metaphor, not a parable, but I have included it because of its importance for becoming and remaining a fruitful follower of Christ.

## **Why Do You Speak to the People in Parables?**

When Jesus began teaching in parables, his disciples didn’t understand. After the parable of the sower, they asked, “Why?” His answer is somewhat puzzling. He said,

“The secret of the kingdom has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,  
‘They may be ever hearing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”

Mark 4:11–12

It seems as if Jesus taught in parables to deliberately conceal kingdom truths, at least from his detractors—those he refers to as “outsiders.” Matthew gives additional information on Jesus’ response with a longer quote from Isaiah. In Matthew, the failure to understand is due to the hardness of the hearts of the hearers rather than the intention of Jesus to prevent “outsiders” from understanding. Mark and Matthew give two different perspectives on the purpose of parables—Mark gives the divine and Matthew

the human. In Matthew, the parable of the sower and six other parables come after Jesus faced vicious opposition and the charge that his power over demons was from Satan. Jesus warned his opponents that their deliberate and stubborn unbelief was an unpardonable sin (Matthew 12:1–37). The reason outsiders could not understand Jesus’ parabolic teaching is because they didn’t want to understand; they had hardened their hearts. Mark, however, gives God’s perspective. Because Jesus’ opponents, primarily the religious leaders, had deliberately hardened their hearts, God had hardened their hearts. They couldn’t understand Jesus’ teaching in parables because they didn’t want to understand, thus God made it impossible for them to understand. They had committed “the unpardonable sin,” and put themselves under divine judgment.

## Only for Insiders

Since you are reading this book, I will assume you are what Jesus calls an “insider.” You want to understand the “secrets of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:11).

The NLT and other contemporary translations and paraphrases have translated the word *mysterias* as “secrets.” When we think of a mystery, we imagine something related to a crime or something that is strange and unknown. When we think of a secret, we think of information that is known only by a few people. Both of these terms are somewhat helpful for understanding what Jesus meant when he referred to “mysteries of the kingdom,” but the biblical usage of the term *mystery* and the nature of the kingdom will help us to better understand the stories Jesus told.

### ***Mystery***

*Mystery* refers to truths hidden in the counsel of God that could not be known unless God revealed them. The classic example in the Old Testament is the revelation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream to Daniel. The king had a dream that none of his counselors could

explain. He threatens to kill all his advisors, including Daniel and his friends, if they didn't interpret it. When Daniel and his friends prayed, the Lord revealed to Daniel the meaning (mystery) of the dream (Daniel 2:1–49).

Paul uses *mystery* nearly two dozen times in his epistles to refer to new revelations about Christ and various aspects of the Christian faith. John uses *mystery* to refer to the fulfillment of God's eschatological (future) plan as fulfilled in the book of Revelation. These are beyond the scope of this book, but all of the uses refer to the making known of divine truths that would have otherwise remained secret.

When his disciples asked why he spoke in parables, Jesus replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets [literally, *myster-ies*] of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (Matthew 13:11). Jesus was referring to new truths about the kingdom of God—truths that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. For example, in the parable of the growing seed, Jesus reveals that the coming and advance of the kingdom is a secret process and not a sudden and spectacular event as envisioned in the Old Testament (cf. Mark 4:26–29 and Daniel 7:13–14, 26–27).

### ***The Jesus Revolution***

I don't particularly like rebels, but I must confess that I have been accused of being somewhat of a rebel. And some of my former students are rebels for Jesus. They have gone to places and started ministries that can only be described as revolutionary. One of my former students was asked to leave (expelled) from two countries for attempting to proclaim the gospel. He and his family are now missionaries in a third country that is not hostile to Christianity. Jesus was a rebel. His message about the kingdom was revolutionary. He wasn't expelled from Palestine; he was crucified for his revolutionary ideology.

In his insightful book *The Parables of Jesus*, David Wenham uses the concept of a "revolution" to describe Jesus' teaching about

the kingdom of God (see chapter 2, “Setting the Scene: Jesus’ Revolution”). I think the concept of “revolution” gives us a more accurate understanding of Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom. Wenham explains:

To paraphrase “kingdom of God” with the phrase “revolution of God” may help us appreciate something of the excitement of Jesus’ message. He was announcing a dramatic forceful change in society to people who—unlike many in our complacent modern world—really longed for such a change: God was at last intervening to put things right.<sup>1</sup>

Though the Old Testament, especially the prophets, looked forward to God intervening in history, Jesus’ revolution was different than expected. Most anticipated the overthrow of the Romans and the establishment of a renewed Davidic kingdom (see 2 Samuel 7:1–29), but instead of a political/military empire to overthrow Roman rule, Jesus came to overthrow the kingdom of Satan. Jesus’ kingdom was far greater than what Israel imagined. It was cosmic in scope, and spiritual: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13–14). Though primarily spiritual in the present, Jesus’ revolution anticipates the restoration of all creation that has been ruined by sin and Satan. We see a preview of Isaiah’s new heavens and earth in Jesus’ miracles (Isaiah 65:17–25).

### ***Three examples of the “Jesus Revolution”***

When his friends brought a paralyzed man to Jesus, Jesus initially forgave his sins. This infuriated the religious elite. They charged Jesus with blasphemy: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus responded with a question: “Which is easier, to forgive sins or to heal?” He then healed the man as evidence of his divine authority to do both. Those present were amazed. They had never seen anything like this. This twofold miracle was a preview

of both Jesus' present and future ministry when there would be no more sin and pain (Revelation 21:3–4). Jesus healed people of their diseases, but he did not heal everyone. His miracles were evidence that the revolution had come but was not complete.

Jesus also demonstrated his authority over nature. When the disciples were threatened by a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calmed the wild wind and waves with a single command: "Be still!" The disciples were bewildered and asked, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:39–41). Though the popular application of this miracle is to Jesus calming the storms of life, I both agree and disagree. I believe this is a preview of when Jesus will restore all creation that has been corrupted by sin and Satan. It is evidenced in the command of Jesus. He gave the same command to the wind and waves that he did to the demon-possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum (see Mark 1:25).

A third aspect of the Jesus revolution that was unexpected even by Jesus' closest followers was its inclusive nature. Instead of limiting his ministry to Israel and those considered worthy of God's favor, Jesus went out of his way to minister to those shunned by the religious leadership. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion, and commended him for his remarkable faith (Matthew 8:5–13). Luke, who gives more attention to Jesus' ministry to outcasts, records Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector. Because Zacchaeus repented and promised to repay those he had cheated and help the poor, Jesus commended him as a true son of Abraham. The Jesus revolution was for everyone, especially those who were considered ethnic, social, moral outsiders, but who Jesus considered insiders. This emphasis is particularly stressed in Jesus' parables.

### ***The "Already but Not Yet" Kingdom***

Because of Jesus' announcement—"the kingdom of God has come near"—most believe that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. Some believe it was fully inaugurated. The theological terminology

is *realized eschatology*. An older dispensational view is that Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom, but because the Jewish leaders officially rejected Jesus, he did not inaugurate the kingdom. This is the “postponed kingdom” view. My view, and the one that I think is most consistent with the scriptural evidence, is that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom, but the complete fulfillment is future. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus instructed us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). It seems as if Jesus is encouraging us to pray for the future completion of the kingdom of heaven that has already invaded earth. In his final Passover meal, Jesus assured the Twelve that he would not celebrate the meal “until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). Again, Jesus anticipates a future aspect of the kingdom.

Theologians refer to this phenomenon as the “already but not yet” kingdom—a prominent feature in many of Jesus’ parables.

## New Treasures

After Jesus began teaching in parables, he asked his disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” . . . ‘Yes,’ they replied” (Matthew 13:51). Jesus informed them that those who understand parables are like scribes. They can teach old truths about the law but also new truths about the kingdom of God. Jesus compares these new truths (mysteries) to a valuable treasure (Matthew 13:52). Though at times difficult, I think we would agree that the kingdom truths Jesus revealed in his parables are like an incomparable treasure.

To enable you (the reader) to unlock the truths hidden in Jesus’ parables, I suggest the following guidelines:

1. Context. Relate the parable to the cultural context of first-century Palestine and the historical context of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus told stories related to everyday life in Israel. Israel was a Jewish nation but had been significantly influenced by

Greek and Roman culture. In reading a parable, we should first consider what the story meant to Jesus' audience, not to those of us who live in twentieth-century America.

From a historical perspective, we need to remember that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament promises. A kingdom perspective is essential to understanding Jesus' parables. We should ask, "What is the new kingdom truth or truths in the story?" The mysteries of the kingdom are new truths about the nature of the kingdom of God that are different or clarification of what was envisioned in the Old Testament.

2. Purpose. Not always, but often, Jesus stated the purpose either before or after the parable. Jesus was a Master Teacher and had the uncanny ability to seize teachable moments. For example, when he was invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee, Jesus noticed how the other guests were scrambling to get the most prestigious seats. Jesus told a story about a wedding banquet to teach about humility (Luke 14:7–11). There is no preceding context for the parable of the shrewd manager, but Jesus gives the purpose at the end of the story. He says to use your earthly possessions to help others and you will be welcomed into your eternal home (Luke 16:1–9).

We must also remember that Jesus' purpose was not to entertain. Though he told stories with surprising twists and turns to capture and hold people's attention, Jesus' purpose was to challenge and impress on his followers the need to change their mindset about how they related to God and others. In the parable of the wedding banquet, mentioned above, the other guests must have been shocked when Jesus told them to take the least desirable seats, then they would be honored when the host invited them to take the seats of honor (Luke 14:7–11). Sinners probably smiled and the Pharisees undoubtedly grimaced when, in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus said that heaven celebrates when one sinner repents (Luke 15:1–10).

3. Main point/points. In the early history of the church, parables were often interpreted as allegories, giving meaning to every detail of the parable. The classic example is Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan. His interpretation is as follows: The man who went down from Jerusalem represents Adam and Jerusalem, the heavenly city of peace from which the man fell. The thieves are the devil and his angels. The priest and the Levite are ministers in the Old Testament. The Good Samaritan is God, and the beast is the flesh and refers to Jesus' incarnation. The inn is the church. And so forth. This kind of approach was obviously the imposing of Christian doctrine on the story.

Later in the history of the church, to avoid allegory, interpreters insisted that parables contain only one main point, a view that prevailed until recently. Now interpreters realize that limiting a parable to one main point eliminates the creative richness of Jesus as a storyteller, and it is almost impossible to state the purpose of some parables in a single statement; thus, they recognize that more than one of the details of the story can have meaning. This is the view of New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg and others. Blomberg suggests limiting the main points of the parable to the number of main characters in the story, and categorizes parables as three, two, or one parable.<sup>2</sup> Blomberg's approach is helpful for avoiding turning parables into allegories, and the main principle is that we should give symbolic meaning only to features of the story that are consistent with the progressive advance of God's unfolding plan of redemption and Jewish culture in the time of Jesus. The question to ask: "What would Jesus' audience have understood from the story?" It is unlikely that the Jews, even Jesus' closest followers, would have connected the inn with the church in Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan.

However, by their very nature, parables introduce new and unexpected truths about the inauguration and growth of the

kingdom; thus, Jesus' audience would have been surprised by what Jesus intended. And it's obvious that some parables anticipate the future, especially those about the advance of the kingdom and final judgment.

4. Application. Since Jesus intended parables to bring about life change, we must ultimately ask, "So what?" How do I respond? What new truth have I learned about God, myself, and others? How will this change how I think and act? Though application is subjective in that it will be somewhat different for each of us, we need to prayerfully reflect on the story and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us through the parabolic voice of Jesus. I have found Ezra 7:10 helpful for the study and application of all of Scripture: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."

I hope these studies will help you to become a scribe like Ezra, who can understand, apply, and teach the old and new mysteries of the kingdom from the treasure of Jesus' parables.

# The Trees and the Thornbush King

Judges 9:7–21

---

AUTHOR'S TAKEAWAY: *Be careful of what you ask for—you might get it.*

---

Some might describe the current moral and spiritual environment in America as “everyone doing what is right in his or her own eyes.” This is not the first time in history that people have abandoned any kind of higher moral standard to do whatever they wanted. The era of the judges was similarly characterized, and it was one of the worst eras in Israel’s history. Without a godly and charismatic national leader, God’s people spiraled downward into a cesspool of spiritual apostasy and tribal warfare. They were repeatedly oppressed by surrounding nations and seduced to adopt their pagan practices. To rescue his people from their enemies, God raised up judges. Unlike judges today, these judges were military and spiritual leaders, not judiciary officials. The judges were flawed, but they were able to slow the descent into chaos. As the plot unfolds in the book of Judges, it becomes increasingly apparent that Israel desperately needed a king.

The parable of the trees is a story told by Jotham to rebuke the people of Shechem for choosing an evil king. It is one of many illustrations in the book of Judges that exposes the disastrous consequences when people abandon God and do whatever seems right to them. Gideon was the fourth of six major judges. God empowered him to rout a superior force of Midianites in a surprise attack in the middle of the night. But unfortunately, after he died, the Israelites rejected Gideon's family, abandoned the Lord, and worshiped the detestable Baals (Judges 8:33–35). Jotham and Abimelech were two of Gideon's seventy-one sons. Abimelech was his son by a concubine from Shechem, so Jotham and Abimelech were only half brothers. Abimelech conspired with the citizens of Shechem to become their king. Perhaps because his half brothers shunned him, he hired hit men to murder all of Gideon's sons. But Jotham escaped. And when the people of Shechem gathered to make the murderous Abimelech their king, Jotham climbed Mount Gerizim across the valley from Shechem, and shouted out the parable of the trees.

## The Trees

*The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien is a wonderful fantasy about the struggle between good and evil. As the plot unfolds, trees join the fight to save Middle Earth from the evil Sauron. Like the courageous trees in Tolkien's fantasy, the trees in Jotham's fable also have human characteristics.

We don't know if Jotham preplanned his speech or if it was spontaneous, but it was certainly clever and effective. In the story, trees are seeking a king, but the most important and productive trees in Israel refuse to become their king. First, the olive tree declines because it is busy producing olive oil in the service of both the gods and man, and is not interested in ruling over trees that simply wave their branches in the wind—an action (or nonaction) that brings up images of uselessness. Next, the fig tree says the

same. It would rather produce sweet fruit than rule as king over useless trees. The trees pleaded with the grapevine to be their king, but the grapevine also refused. “Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?” asked the grapevine.

## **The Thornbush**

In desperation, the trees plead with the thornbush to become their king. The thornbush conditionally agrees. “If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade” (Judges 9:15). This is extreme irony because thornbushes are so small they can’t provide much shade. The thornbush adds a warning. “But if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!” (Judges 9:15). Because thornbushes are extremely dry, they are susceptible to fire that can quickly spread and burn an entire forest.

## **The Shechemites**

Jotham applies the parable directly to the Shechemites. They are dumber than trees, and have made a terrible mistake in anointing Abimelech as their king. He is a thornbush. Jotham reminds them of how his father, Gideon, had risked his life to rescue them from the Midianites, and says that they repaid him with treachery by murdering his seventy other sons and choosing Abimelech as their king. He warns them of reciprocal justice. He wishes them happiness if they acted in good faith; but if their intentions were evil, he predicts severe judgment in the form of a curse. “But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!” (Judges 9:20).

Knowing that his half brother is violent and dangerous, Jotham flees to Beer, an unknown location.

||||| **REFLECT** |||||

1. Read Genesis 6:9. What are some of the ways that Noah’s lifestyle is a contrast to the lifestyle of people during the time of the judges, when everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes? How do you nurture and maintain a lifestyle that is pleasing to God?
2. Read Judges 9:9–13. Why do you think the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine refused to become king of the Shechemites? What are some of the reasons you would not become the leader of an organization?
3. What three principles would you use for selecting leaders in a church, civic organization, or political office?
4. Read Judges 9:16–20. Jotham stated that the actions of the Shechemites would merit either divine blessings or judgment.
  - a. What does Jotham’s statement imply about the justice of God?
  - b. What does it imply about the consequences of our choices?
5. We all make mistakes. What is one mistake that you have made, and what were the consequences? What could you have done differently to avoid the mistake? What life lesson or lessons did you learn from the experience?
6. How could you use this story to explain to high-schoolers that choices in life have consequences?

||||| **OPTIONAL** |||||

1. Read Judges 9:22–57 for the consequences of the Shechemites’ choice of Abimelech and the fulfillment of Jotham’s curse.

- a. See Judges 9:22–25. How did God act to fulfill Jotham’s curse? In the NLT, verse 23 reads, “God sent a spirit that stirred up trouble between Abimelech and the leading citizens of Shechem, and they revolted.” What does this verse suggest about God’s sovereign control over spirits, both good and evil?
  - b. What happened to the citizens of Shechem?
  - c. What happened to Abimelech?
  - d. How is Judges 9 a vivid illustration of the descriptive phrase, “Everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes”?
2. See Judges 21:25. How is the current era in America like the era of the Judges?

||||| **Memory Verse** |||||

This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.

Genesis 6:9

# The Rich Man and the Poor Man

2 Samuel 12:1–12

---

AUTHOR'S TAKEAWAY: *If I had only known . . .*

---

All of us have had “If I had only known” moments. One of mine was when I was seven. My friends and I were playing outside when we noticed an elderly lady sitting in her backyard enjoying the sun. We conspired to frighten her, and hid behind an old trailer. My friends crawled under it and gave me the general direction to throw a rock, which was supposed to land near her but not hit her. Yep, you guessed it. It hit her. My friends shot out from under the trailer and said, “You hit her in the head!” We all ran home. I thought I was safe because no one was home, but after what seemed like an eternity, I heard a knock on the door. I kept stone-quiet, hoping they would think no one was home. But they knocked again and again, and then I heard a loud voice: “This is the police. Open the door.” My heart sank. I was only seven years old, and I was going to prison for murder. That obviously didn’t happen; the rock, fortunately, hit her in the shoulder, not the head. But I have never forgotten that experience. “If I had only known . . .”

Nathan, a prophet during the united kingdom era, used a parable about a rich man and a poor man to rebuke David for his sin with Bathsheba. Instead of leading his army in the spring campaign against the Ammonites, David stayed behind in Jerusalem. He was not necessarily negligent because he was confident Joab could effectively command the army. In the early afternoon, David saw a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of her house. Bathsheba apparently did not think anyone would see her from the roof of the palace, but David did. He summoned her to the palace, and she complied. We don't know if she was compelled to go to the palace or went voluntarily, but regardless, she shouldn't have gone. David slept with her and thought no one would know he had violated another man's wife. But he was wrong.

When Bathsheba told David she was pregnant, he immediately tried to hide his sin. David summoned Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to Jerusalem, and encouraged him to go home. But Uriah was a devoted soldier and refused to enjoy the comfort of his home and wife while his fellow soldiers were enduring the hardships of a military campaign. David then sent Uriah back to the army with secret instructions for Joab to put Uriah dangerously close to the wall, where he would probably be killed. Joab did as David commanded, and informed the king that Uriah had been killed.

In historical narrative, writers almost never make comments about whether the action of the characters is right or wrong, but David's sin was so offensive that this writer steps out of his role as historian and gives the divine perspective on what had happened: "But the thing David had done displeased the LORD" (2 Samuel 11:27).

## **A Rich Man and a Poor Man**

The Lord sent Nathan to David; but instead of directly rebuking David, Nathan told him a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had a huge flock of sheep and a large herd of cattle.

The poor man had only one lamb that he cherished and treated like one of his family. When a guest arrived at the home of the rich man, instead of killing one of his own sheep to feed his guest, he forcibly took the lamb of the poor man and killed it for his guest.

David was incensed and demanded that the rich man repay the poor man four times what he had stolen from him.

## **Nathan and David**

Though the identity of the two men in the story should have been rather obvious, Nathan pointed at David and said, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). As God’s prophetic spokesman, Nathan then announced judgment on David. He reminded David of how greatly the Lord had blessed him. He had protected David from Saul’s murderous attempts to kill him, gave him Saul’s possessions including his wives, made him king over Israel and Judah, and would have done even more for him.

In return, David had despised the Lord by doing evil. He had Uriah murdered and stole his wife. God is kind and forgiving, but there are inevitable consequences for sin. Nathan said that because of his high crimes, his kingdom would never enjoy peace. David had sinned secretly, but his retribution would be public: One of David’s own family would violate his wives in the sight of all Israel.

David’s response is remarkable. He confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13). David had sinned against Bathsheba. He had sinned against Uriah, Joab and the army, and all Israel. Yet he correctly recognized that his greatest offense was against the Lord. David’s humility in owning his sin is one of the primary reasons that he became the ideal model for the kings of Judah and Israel. For example, in the divine critique of Abijah’s rule, the writer says, “He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been” (1 Kings 15:3). David was obviously not perfect, but unlike most of the kings after



- 4:30.) The Lord sent Nathan, the prophet, to rebuke David. How does God convict (rebuke) us of sin today?
4. Why do you think Nathan used a parable to confront David rather than directly rebuking him? Do you think this is an effective way to deal with someone who has sinned? Why or why not?
  5. Read 2 Samuel 12:22–23. What do these verses imply about the living and the dead? What do they suggest about life after death (the afterlife)?
  6. What new truths have you learned from this study about sin and its consequences?

||||| **OPTIONAL** |||||

1. Read Psalm 51. After approximately one year of refusing to acknowledge his sin, David pleads for forgiveness.
  - a. Vv. 1–2: What two aspects of God’s character are the basis for David’s appeal?
  - b. Vv. 3–6: What different words (terms) does David use to describe his sin?
  - c. Vv. 7–12: What are four of David’s requests?
  - d. Vv. 13–17: What does God desire more than sacrifice?
2. Read Psalm 32. This is a companion to Psalm 51. David expresses his gratefulness for God’s mercy and forgiveness, what he learned from his experience, and his encouragement to others.
  - a. Why does David praise the Lord?
  - b. What was David’s physical and emotional state before he confessed his sin? What does this reveal about the consequences of sin?
  - c. What does David want others to learn from his experience?
  - d. What new truth have you learned?

||||| **Memory Verse** |||||

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15–17