

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will first study **the parable of the two sons** in Matthew 21:28-32 and then study **the parable of the barren fig tree** in Luke 13:1-9. These are parables concerning THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENTERING GODS' KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. Please read Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-20 and Luke 8:4-15 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S)      **THE FIRST PARABLE: THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS.**

Let me read Matthew 21:28-32. "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not, he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

(T)      **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

What are the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable?

The sad experience of most families with growing children is that at some stage, the children express their unwillingness to obey their parent's wishes. However, the joyful experience of parents is that often the children repent of their behaviour and do what their parents ask of them.

(S)      **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

What is the context of this parable?

*The setting.* The parable is closely linked to Matthew 21:23-27, where the chief priests and the elders of the people question the authority of Jesus to cleanse the temple and especially to teach and heal within the temple courts. In his answer, Jesus asked them where John the Baptist got his authority to baptise, from heaven or from men. Their unwillingness to expose themselves by saying what they really believed showed that they were hypocritical. They pretended not to know, while in reality they had rejected John the Baptist.

*The story* is contained in Matthew 21:28-30.

*The explanation or application* is contained in Matthew 21:31-32.

(T)      **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Because this parable speaks of *the vineyard* instead of *my vineyard*, this detail should not be interpreted as being God's vineyard, Israel. This detail should not be given any particular meaning. *The first son* represents any person who repented and believed after initial unbelief and disobedience. *The second son* represents any person who pretends to be obedient, but in reality is an unbeliever and disobedient. They are relevant details in the parable.

(S)      **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable of the two sons teaches about *the responsibility for entering God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is the following. "No matter whether a person was formerly an unbeliever, tax collector or prostitute, every person is personally responsible to enter God's kingdom. He is personally responsible to repent of his former life of disobedience and go and do the will of God". Pretending to do the will of God, but not actually doing it, is hypocritical. Such people are like the seed which fell on the rocky place and quickly withered, or like a man without wedding clothes at the final wedding festival, who was thrown out into utter darkness.

*Personal responsibility* is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. No matter if they were initially unbelievers, disobedient, doubters, critical, or have committed great or small sins, the genuine people of God's kingdom are *now* doing the will of God!

**(T) POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct and clear teaching of the Bible.

I want to compare the parable with 1 Samuel 15:22-23. King Saul obeyed only half of God's commandment: He executed the enemies, but did not destroy their possessions. Instead, he pounced on the plunder and spared the evil king of Amalek. The prophet Samuel said to him that obedience to God is better than bringing sacrifices to God; that rebellion against God's command is as evil as the sin of occult practices; and that arrogance against God is as evil as the sin of idolatry. Because king Saul had rejected God's word, God had rejected king Saul. *This is a grave warning to especially people in leadership positions.*

**(S)** I want to compare the parable with Matthew 7:21-27 and 23:1-4. Certain people profess with their lips that they believe in God and that they do things that must please God, but they do not do the expressed will of God in the Bible! They hear and know the will of God, but they do not practise the will of God. *This is a grave warning to especially people who have much knowledge of the Bible.*

**(T)** I want to compare the parable with John 15:14 and Acts 5:29. All people, who do what Jesus says, are called his friends and receive the Holy Spirit. The will of God is above all, to be converted and to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (John 6:29)

**(S) POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

First. Doing the will of God is the one thing needful. The tax collectors were despised by the Jewish people and especially by the Jewish religious leaders, because they were greedy, used extortion to get money and collaborated with the foreign enemy, the Roman oppressors. The tax collectors and prostitutes represented the worst sinners in Israel. Their blatant sinful life, if continued, would without doubt disqualify them from entering God's kingdom. Humanly speaking, such people had no hope of entering God's kingdom. But when they saw and heard John the Baptist, they repented. They were impressed with John's *way of righteousness*, that is, with the example of his own righteous conduct coupled with the righteous conduct he demanded of the people through his preaching. He demanded that people repent of their sins. The tax collectors and prostitutes repented of their sins and believed in Jesus Christ in great numbers. The repentance and faith of tax collectors and prostitutes is very pleasing to the Lord.

**(T)** Second. Pretending to do the will of God is hypocritical. The religious leaders of the Jews were deemed to be well acquainted with God's law and they *outwardly* behaved as if they were always willing to do God's will. But in reality they only *pretended* to obey God. They rejected God's messenger, John the Baptist, and now they rejected Jesus Christ and his message and were even plotting to kill him.

**(S)** Third. Repenting after initial unbelief and disobedience is the main message of this parable. No matter whether you have been a great sinner and have done things that are awful, repent, turn to Jesus Christ and believe in him, and you will be saved!

**(T) THE SECOND PARABLE: THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE.**

Let me read Luke 13:1-9. "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down'."

**(S) POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

It generally takes a long time for a fig tree to bear fruit. This particular fig tree had been planted in the owner's vineyard. This was not unusual, because it meant that the tree would be given the best care. When finally the time arrived when it was reasonable to expect fruit on this tree, the owner went to look for fruit. It is not easy to see fruit on a fig tree, because the fruit is hidden beneath the foliage. One must come to the tree to look for fruit on it. For three years in a row, the owner did not find any fruit on this tree. So he ordered it to be cut down. The owner did not want the tree to take away any more moisture and minerals that the other plants needed. The keeper of the vineyard suggested that the

owner give him one more chance to care for the tree. He would loosen the soil around the tree and spread manure around the tree. On purpose, Jesus does not tell whether this particular fig tree ever bore fruit. The answer is left to the hearers and readers. Jesus wants each of them to apply the lesson of the story to himself.

(T) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

What is the context of this parable?

*The setting* is found in Luke 13:1-5. While the main message in the setting is “Be converted!” the main message of this parable is “Be converted *now!*” In Luke 13:2-3 Jesus says, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

*The story* is found in Luke 13:5-9.

*The explanation or application* is not given, but is implied in the context.

(S) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Sometimes, people want to give to every detail of a parable a specific meaning. This is called *allegorising*, or treating a parable as an allegory. For example one person interpreted this parable as follows: “God is the Owner, who came looking for fruit three times: God’s first coming was before the written law of Moses. Then he gave to man the capacity to judge how he should act towards his neighbour by the light of natural reason. God’s second coming was at the time of the written law. Then he taught man his commandments. God’s third coming was through grace. Then he showed his mercy to man. The *vinedresser* represents those who rule the church. *Digging* represents rebuking the souls that fail to bear fruit. *Dung* represents the remembrance or confession of sins. Those who refuse to do penance of their sins are in danger of being cut down.” This allegorical interpretation cannot be deduced from the context and therefore must be rejected.

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

(T) The fig tree is a relevant detail. One interpreter says that the fig tree planted in the vineyard represents Jerusalem located in Israel. However, in the light of Jesus cursing a fig tree in Matthew 21, the fig tree planted in the vineyard is probably a symbol of *the highly privileged nation of Israel in the world*. Jesus teaches that Israel as a nation did not repent, did not turn to him and did not bear fruit. The result was the end of their religious and political entity and significance! The kingdom of God was taken away from them and given to another who would bear the fruit of God’s kingdom (Matthew 21:41-43). And Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed so that Israel stopped to exist as a nation. This however does not mean that God has rejected all Jews. 1 Peter 2:9-10 teaches that *God’s people* now consists of all believers from both the Jews and the Gentiles.

(S) The period of three years is not a relevant detail. This period is variously interpreted. One interpreter says that it represents the whole course of Israel’s history. Another interpreter says that it represents the three years of Christ’s ministry on earth. Still another interpreter says that it represents the period beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist. However, there is no evidence in the Bible that we should give these *three years* any symbolical meaning. The period of three years is therefore not a relevant detail in the parable. However, the fact that the owner did not destroy the unfruitful tree immediately after the first year does point to the great patience that God has towards his people!

(T) The magnanimous keeper of the vineyard is a relevant detail. He obviously represents God who dealt very patiently with his Old Testament people, Israel. God’s great patience towards Jews and Gentiles is still applicable today.

(S) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the barren fig tree teaches about *the responsibility for entering God’s kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is the following. “Every person must repent immediately and turn to Jesus Christ without delay or else risk to be lost for ever!”

*Personal responsibility* is a foundational characteristic of God's kingdom. The genuine people of God's kingdom do not procrastinate or delay important decisions. They repent and turn to Jesus Christ immediately, because they do not want to risk being lost for ever.

(T) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

Isaiah 55:6-7 says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ... Let him turn to the Lord. And he will have mercy on him." A person is therefore responsible for his response to Jesus Christ. He is responsible to seek God, while God may still be found! He is responsible to act *now*, today. He must not delay the most important decision in his life until it will be too late to change! 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, "*Now* is the time of God's favour, *now* is the day of salvation." A person is responsible to respond to Jesus Christ immediately, because *now* is the time of God's favour, *now* is the day of salvation! *Tomorrow* may be too late!

(S) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let me summarise the main teaching or lesson of this parable. The responsibility of every person is to turn to Jesus Christ without delay. Although God is very patient in his dealings with his people, his patience will not last forever. One day - and God alone knows when that day will arrive - the opportunity to be saved will be withdrawn. The procrastinator will die in his sins and be lost forever. Therefore, do not delay! Accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord *today*!

(T) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the lost son. As preparation, please read Luke 15:11-32.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net)

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".