



Rejecting Legalism

JESUS OFFERS MERCY, NOT RELIGIOUS RULES.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 12:1-14 Memory Verse: Matthew 12:8

Legalism and license stand at opposite poles of the same problem: hypocrisy. In the biblical context, legalism requires strict adherence to the letter of the Mosaic law and rabbinical traditions with little or no regard for God's royal law of love (Jas. 2:8-9). At the other end of the spectrum, license uses opposition to legalism as an excuse for self-indulgence. Both reveal hypocrisy: the first because breaking one law means breaking them all (2:10) and the second because people simply want the freedom to sin without consequence. Hypocrisy involves both being something you're not and demanding of others what you excuse in yourself (Matt. 23:1-4). Not all Pharisees in Jesus's day were hypocrites, and they weren't the only hypocrites in Israel. But Jesus did condemn them for a hypocrisy that held others accountable to the law while ignoring their own responsibilities to God.

As you study Jesus's encounter with the religious leaders in Matthew 12, examine your own heart for hypocritical attitudes. Confess those to God and consider sharing what you have learned with the adults in your Bible study. Encourage them to confess and reject legalism in their hearts as well.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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We love freedom. Seldom do we like it when someone tells us what to do. And so we often chafe against rules that limit our freedom. Most people who live in an orderly society follow the rules willingly. Occasionally, though, we may hear of situations that demand a rule or regulation be set aside. When established rules become burdensome or unreasonable, we often become angry at the system. (PSG, p. 107)

What situation can you think of where laws and regulations were administered when mercy might have been a better approach?



Understand the Context (Matthew 12:1-50)

Conflict between opposing values is inevitable. Pharisees believed individuals were made right with God through strict adherence to the law of Moses and the traditions of the rabbis. In contrast to their legalism, Jesus revealed God's mercy.

Matthew 12 records several clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees. The first revealed the Pharisees' confusion about traditions. Following Jesus through a grainfield, they observed His disciples plucking and eating some grain. Jewish custom allowed this, but they were bothered because it was happening on a Sabbath. In their view, the disciples were "harvesting" grain, which violated the prohibition against working on the holy day. Jesus responded by calling out the Pharisees' preference for rituals over mercy.

Next, the leaders brought a man with a deformed hand to Jesus in the synagogue. Seizing a teachable moment, Christ used this opportunity as an object lesson for God's mercy. By healing the man on the Sabbath, He demonstrated His divine power and love. Ironically, the Pharisees who condemned His mercy on the Sabbath had no problem plotting His murder on the Sabbath.

Afterward, Jesus continued healing people in fulfillment of messianic prophecy (Isa. 42:1-4). He also cast out a demon who had caused a man to be blind and mute. Onlookers wondered if He was the Messiah. Rather than glorifying God for the miracle, the Pharisees cynically said Jesus cast out demons by satanic power.

Jesus again exposed their hypocrisy, noting that Satan would not act against his own evil spirits. In addition, followers of the Pharisees claimed to be able to exorcise demons, yet the Pharisees thought their power was genuine. The Pharisees were on dangerous ground. They were attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. They were so focused on Jesus's "sin" that they overlooked the unforgivable nature of their own blasphemy.

To justify themselves, the religious leaders demanded that Jesus offer a sign to support His authority. Of course, this ignored the amazing miracles Jesus had performed already.

The truth was that they would not accept any sign. Jesus prophesied the ultimate sign, referring to Himself as the Son of Man and predicting His own death and resurrection. However, when this prophecy came true, these leaders denied that as well. When people don't want to believe, nothing will satisfy them.

Later, hearing His family wanted to speak to Him, Jesus declared that every person who accepted the will of the Father was a member of His family. True believers in Christ don't seek excuses to do what they want. They trust and obey the Word and will of God.

Read Matthew 12:1-14 in your Bible. What key words or phrases describe the legalism promoted by the Pharisees? What words or phrases describe the mercy offered by Jesus? (PSG, p. 108)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Jesus's Mission) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel) and **Pack Item 14** (Handout: Legalism Worksheet).

INTRODUCE:

Call on a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 107 of the PSG.

ASK:

What situation can you think of where laws and regulations were administered when mercy might have been a better approach? (PSG, p. 107)

SAY:

We have laws to protect us and to keep our society secure. Parents make rules for the benefit of everyone living in the house. Teachers establish rules in classrooms so students can learn without distractions. But, in every setting, we need to leave room for mercy and grace—not just the letter of the law.

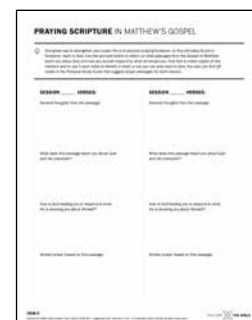
EXAMINE:

Explain that only focusing on the letter of the law without accounting for grace and mercy is called “legalism.” Note that legalism is not just a social challenge but a spiritual one. Summarize this information from page 127 of the Leader Guide to provide more insight into hypocrisy and legalism.

“Hypocrisy involves both being something you’re not and demanding of others what you excuse in yourself (Matt. 23:1-4). Not all Pharisees in Jesus’s day were hypocrites, and they weren’t the only hypocrites in Israel. But Jesus did condemn them for a hypocrisy that held others accountable to the law while ignoring their own responsibilities to God.”

TRANSITION:

In this session, we’ll examine how Jesus responded to hypocrisy in the form of legalism and discover why we must be aware of the dangers it presents in our lives.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play “I Am Free” by Newsboys and encourage the group to write down the phrase(s) that most resonate with them. Ask: **What do you most value about the freedom that Christ gives?** Point out that the power of the song is its message that Jesus sets us free from the bondage of sin. Ask: **How could the song remind us that we are freed from spiritual legalism?** Note that we are freed from the law in order to serve Christ with all our hearts.

Religious Rules (Matt. 12:1-2)

1 At that time Jesus passed through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick and eat some heads of grain. **2** When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “See, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

(v. 1) Confusing tradition for Scripture is not a new problem. The Pharisees of Jesus’s day made the same mistake. One example occurred as **Jesus passed through the grainfields**. Walking through fields was not unusual. Roads were not as well-defined as they are today. People often followed paths through local fields without harming the crops.

This incident occurred **at that time**, meaning after the preceding events. Some commentators reason that the time was in the spring, perhaps following the Passover. Regardless of the season, Jesus’s disciples **were hungry**. Following accepted custom, they started to **pick and eat some heads of grain**. Rather than a full meal, the handfuls of grain were more like a snack on a short journey.

This activity was not considered stealing. It was a common practice of compassion and hospitality (Deut. 23:25). While using a sickle to harvest another person’s field would be a crime, taking a few handfuls of grain was permitted. While trespassing or stealing weren’t issues, the fact that it was happening **on the Sabbath** would raise questions in the minds of some.

(v. 2) The **Pharisees** must have been following Jesus since they **saw this** and confronted Him. Later verses suggest the group was on the way to the synagogue. Instead of preparing their hearts for Sabbath services, though, the Pharisees were judgmental. Jesus knew what was happening, but the religious leaders felt the need to call special attention to the “problem.” To them, the disciples were participating in activity **not lawful to do on the Sabbath**.

Apparently, Jesus was not personally involved in taking or eating the grain. Still, the Pharisees attacked Him by condemning **your disciples**. They felt Jesus should have instructed them according to rabbinical traditions.

Instead of adhering to Scripture, the Pharisees tried to conform people’s activities to their own ideas of what was right and wrong. By “not lawful,” they did not mean it was breaking

civil laws, but religious traditions. The fourth commandment set apart the seventh day for rest, worship, and remembrance (Ex. 20:8-10; Lev. 23:1-3; Deut. 5:12-14). By not working on the Sabbath, people honored God who rested from His creative work on the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3). It also recalled how God brought His people out of bondage into a land of rest (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:15).

Mosaic law forbade harvesting or reaping on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21), but rabbinical traditions listed another thirty-nine prohibitions that served as a “hedge of protection.” These man-made religious rules were not part of God’s commands. Instead, they reflected human application of the law. Although the disciples only plucked a little grain by hand, the Pharisees viewed this as a kind of harvesting and, as such, was contrary to their understanding of the law.

The Pharisees’ real problem was a critical spirit. Their external adherence to traditions showed a lack of appreciation for God’s written Word and an ignorance regarding His walking Word (John 1:1). Their attitude revealed a harsh spirit that was contrary to the Scripture they supposedly were defending.

We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice. Believers should be kindhearted toward others as we follow God’s Word. While we must not violate our own consciences, we have to acknowledge that God is the ultimate Judge of what honors Him. Our ideas about righteousness only matter if they align with His Word.

Key Doctrine

The Lord’s Day

Activities on the Lord’s Day should be commensurate with the Christian’s conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. (See Mark 2:27-28; John 4:21-24.)



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice.

Call on a volunteer to read Matthew 12:1-2 as the group considers why the Pharisees saw a violation of the law.

CONTEXT:

Encourage one or two volunteers to share what they know about the Sabbath in Scripture. Summarize this content from page 109 of the PSG to offer more explanation:

“‘Sabbath’ comes from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, meaning ceasing, rest, or inactivity, and is based on God’s rest in Genesis 2:3. God commanded to the Israelite people to observe a day of Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:9-11). Sabbath rest was a centerpiece in Judaism. But over time, religious leaders moved away from God’s intention for the Sabbath. They took great effort to make up the definitions of what could and couldn’t be done on the Sabbath day. For example, these leaders established rules that regulated how far a person could travel on the Sabbath. According to their tradition, one could travel around 3,000 feet, slightly more than a half mile. Jesus and His disciples obviously ignored those man-made traditions as they passed through the grainfields.”

EXPLAIN:

Enlist a volunteer to read the “Did You Know?” feature on page 109 of the PSG. Highlight the lengths Jewish religious leaders went to “protect” the Mosaic law. Point out that, according to the law, the disciples were permitted to pick some grain in the fields and eat it. Emphasize that the Pharisees’ problem was rooted in their own interpretations and tradition, not anything God actually intended for the law.

ASK:

What role should religious tradition play in the practice of our faith? (PSG, p. 110)

DISCUSS:

Direct adults to suggest important traditions believers still observe today and record their ideas on the board. Lead a brief discussion on the origins of those traditions. Note that traditions that don’t come directly from Scripture aren’t necessarily bad.

SAY:

We just have to be careful about letting our human traditions take priority over what God has clearly revealed in His Word. And we have to make sure that we don’t use our own standards to judge the righteousness or sinfulness of others.

Something Greater (Matt. 12:3-8)

3 He said to them, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and those who were with him were hungry: **4** how he entered the house of God, and they ate the bread of the Presence—which is not lawful for him or for those with him to eat, but only for the priests? **5** Or haven’t you read in the law that on Sabbath days the priests in the temple violate the Sabbath and are innocent? **6** I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. **7** If you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent. **8** For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

(vv. 3-4) In answering the Pharisees’ attacks, Jesus relied on Scripture, reminding these Old Testament scholars about an incident from the life of **David** (1 Sam. 21:1-6). Before becoming king, David was hunted by a jealous Saul. On the run, David and his men had trouble finding food and, like Jesus’s disciples, **were hungry**. A short distance from Jerusalem, David came to Nob where the tabernacle was located.

At the **house of God**, David asked Ahimelech, the priest, for some bread. Only the **bread of the Presence** was available. This bread, set on a table in the Holy Place represented God’s presence among the twelve tribes of Israel. Only **priests** were allowed to eat it (Lev. 24:5-9), so it was **not lawful** for David and his followers to eat this bread. Yet they ate it without consequence.

(vv. 5-6) Jesus also reminded the Pharisees that the very **law** they were upholding allowed **priests** to **violate the Sabbath**. The wording includes the seventh day, as well as special **Sabbath days** observed during holy feasts. In their temple service, priests labored on these Sabbath days, but were not considered guilty.

Neither illustration specifically applied to the disciples’ situation, but Jesus was addressing a larger principle. The Pharisees had seen Jesus demonstrate His power. Now, He plainly told them **something greater than the temple is here**.

(v. 7) The Pharisees had **condemned** the disciples because, despite all their training, they did not comprehend the Scriptures. **I desire mercy and not sacrifice** comes from Hosea 6:6 and was not a repudiation of the sacrificial system. Jesus’s death on the cross was the culmination of sacrificial atonement for which the temple sacrifices were but a picture (Heb. 9). God considers mercy greater than sacrifices because mercy reflects His heart.

(v. 8) Jesus asserted that **the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**. Jesus often referred to Himself by the messianic title “Son of Man.” As God the Son, He rules over all things, including the Sabbath. Mark’s Gospel helps by including Jesus’s saying, “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The disciples needed no excuse or forgiveness. Jesus declared them innocent (v. 7) because He best understood the Sabbath’s true purpose.

The Sabbath was a way for people to rest and worship God. But if our hearts are filled with His love, we will serve Him by serving others.

Praying Scripture

Matthew 12:7-8

Spend time praying Scripture using Matthew 12:7-8. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in these verses?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Ask God to teach you what it means to show mercy. Seek His forgiveness for the times you’ve cared more about being “right” than kind.

During the session, invite adults to pray this Scripture, as well. You and the adults in your group can also take advantage of the Explore the Bible Prayer Guide. This QR code also appears on page 65 of the *Personal Study Guide*.



Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter’s Bible passages.



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We should give greater attention to the condition of our heart than to adherence to man-made rules.

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 12:3-8 aloud while adults determine how Jesus countered the Pharisees' criticisms.

ASK:

What can we learn from Jesus's response?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that Jesus's opponents had spent their lives studying the Scriptures, but Jesus used the Scriptures they knew so well to prove they were wrong. Note the importance of a solid understanding of the Bible.

RECAP:

Use the commentary on page 132 of the Leader Guide to examine Jesus's illustrations. Share this content from pages 111-112 of the PSG to highlight Jesus's statement:

Jesus concluded His two illustrations with a startling claim: "something greater than the temple is here." Jesus's authority was greater than that of the temple. The implication was that His authority superseded the authority and the traditions of the Pharisees. Such a statement would have greatly angered the religious leaders. . . . Yet, by His very nature as the Son of God, Jesus is greater than man-made laws.

ASK:

What do these verses teach us about Jesus and His expectations of His followers? (PSG, p. 113)

PRAY:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*). Encourage adults to pray Matthew 12:7-8 using the prayer prompts on page 132 of the Leader Guide. Remind them that God calls His people to respond with mercy and love, not judgment and criticism.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Fruit

Show adults a piece of fruit and a slice of bread. Note that the fruit can remind us that God kept Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of life, while bread reminds us that Jesus defended His disciples when they picked grain on the Sabbath. Ask: ***In one story, eating was not okay, but in the other story it was. Why?*** Lead the group to discern the difference between God's rules and man-made traditions. Emphasize that Jesus brought the argument back to the truth of Scripture.

Compassionate Response (Matt. 12:9-14)

9 Moving on from there, he entered their synagogue. **10** There he saw a man who had a shriveled hand, and in order to accuse him they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” **11** He replied to them, “Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out? **12** A person is worth far more than a sheep; so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.” **13** Then he told the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out, and it was restored, as good as the other. **14** But the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him.

(v. 9) *Moving on*, Jesus concluded the discussion and headed to the **synagogue**. The pronoun **their** likely referred to the Pharisees. Jesus habitually attended Sabbath worship at whatever synagogue was nearby. He likely chose this place purposefully. He knew a need, an opportunity, and a challenge was ahead.



The Synagogue

The synagogue played a central role in the lives of first-century Jews. Scan here to view a reconstruction of a typical synagogue.

(v. 10) At the synagogue, Jesus **saw a man who had a shriveled hand**. The man’s condition was not an immediate emergency, but Jesus embraced this opportunity to show the mercy He had been teaching. Meanwhile, the Pharisees were seeking a reason to **accuse him**. The Greek wording can suggest civil matters, but here it was another reference to religious law. Some writers suspect the Pharisees made sure the man was present so they could trap Jesus.

The religious leaders asked Jesus a loaded question: **Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?** His earlier instructions about the Sabbath did not satisfy them. Like picking grain, they equated healing with work, which was prohibited on the Sabbath. If Jesus said, “Yes,” they could accuse Him of violating the law. If He said, “No,” they could question His teachings about mercy.

(v. 11) Jesus answered the question with a question. If one of their animals fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, would they **take hold of it and lift it out?** The implied answer was “yes,” so their silence was no surprise. He phrased the

proposition in a way that proved they would violate their own Sabbath rules for livestock. The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus into a theological corner but found themselves trapped instead.

(v. 12) Jesus further revealed their hypocrisy by emphasizing that **a person is worth far more than a sheep**. So, if it was acceptable to rescue their animal, God would not be offended by helping another human being. When all is said and done, **it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath**. In his Gospel, Mark added that Jesus was angered by the Pharisees’ cold and manipulative hearts (Mark 3:5).

(v. 13) Having answered the question, Jesus commanded the man to **stretch out your hand**. The man may have felt uncomfortable being the center of attention, and obeying Jesus could have turned the Pharisees against Him. So, he had a choice to make.

He chose to be healed by Jesus. When the man **stretched it out**, his hand **was restored**. When Jesus heals, He does so absolutely.

(v. 14) The **Pharisees** responded with murderous intent after they **went out** of the synagogue. Instead of praising God, they **plotted against** Jesus. Some commentators interpret this to say they wanted to arrest Jesus. However, the term **kill** literally means “to destroy or ruin.” Their goal was no longer to embarrass Him or simply prove that He was wrong. He had threatened their authority and their way of life. As a result, they were convinced that He deserved to die.

We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most. The Lord’s love and mercy isn’t limited to days on a calendar. Every moment is the right moment to be His hands and feet in the world. And if we truly love Him, we will desire to live accordingly.



READ:

APPLICATION POINT: We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 12:9-14 aloud while the group listens for indications that the Pharisees had shifted from being spectating critics to active opponents.

EXAMINE:

Encourage adults to work in teams of two or three to review and discuss the content for verses 9-10 on pages 113-114 of the PSG. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share things that stuck out to them from the verses.

EXPLAIN:

Point out that the Pharisees who confronted Jesus in the fields were probably leaders in this synagogue. Note that some scholars believe they used the man as a “set up” in order to accuse Jesus of breaking the Mosaic law.

ASK:

How might the authority of Jesus be perceived as a threat? (PSG, p. 115)

RECAP:

Note that Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders. Use this content from page 114 of the PSG to show how Jesus revealed the Pharisees’ legalistic and hypocritical hearts:

Through this illustration, Jesus contrasted the man-made rules of the Pharisees that permitted rescuing an animal on the Sabbath with the prohibition to heal a person on the Sabbath. In so doing, He exposed the inconsistency of the Pharisees. . . . In theory, every Pharisee would agree with that statement. In the reality of this situation, though, the Pharisees were so filled with hatred for Jesus that they would be more inclined to help the sheep and ignore the man who needed healing.

EXPLAIN:

Point out that instead of accepting the truth, the Pharisees rejected Jesus’s message. Note the irony of condemning Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath, yet plotting evil against Him on the same day. Affirm that legalism and hypocrisy can lead to devastating and dehumanizing attitudes and actions.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Compare Mark 3:1-5 and Luke 6:6-10 to Matthew’s account of the man with the shriveled hand in 12:9-14. Record any additional details you find in the parallel passages. ***How do the parallel passages help you get a broader picture of this scene?***

CHALLENGE

REVIEW:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 116 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice.
- We should give greater attention to the condition of our heart than to adherence to man-made rules.
- We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

REFLECT:

Encourage a few volunteers to paraphrase these statements and to identify ways they can put them into practice each day.

REFLECT:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Legalism Worksheet*). Allow adults to work in teams of three or four to reflect on how legalism shows up in our world and how the Bible responds to those efforts. Allow each team to report on their work. Remind adults that legalism is rooted in hypocrisy and inevitably erodes our compassion for others.

DISCUSS:

Direct attention to the first set of questions on page 116 of the PSG. Encourage adults to be sensitive to the needs of others and to seek opportunities to show mercy instead of criticism.

PRAY:

Remind the group of Matthew 12:7-8 and **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*). Urge them to continue praying these verses back to God during the week. Close the session in prayer.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or an email encouraging them to continue thinking through the content on **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Legalism Worksheet*). Suggest they read and reflect on the second set of questions from page 116 of the PSG as they seek God's help in rooting out their own legalistic and hypocritical tendencies. Assure them that you are praying for them as they work through these issues in their lives.

ADULT COMMENTARY



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EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.

The Parables of Jesus



Perhaps the most distinctive style of Jesus's teaching was His use of parables. Aside from His miracles, Jesus may be best known for the stories He told. For example, even individuals who are not familiar with church or the Bible might understand what it means to be a "Good Samaritan" or a "Prodigal Child." Jesus's parables have left an indelible mark on the church and the larger culture.

A parable has been defined as a comparison from nature or daily life designed to teach a spiritual truth. From the outset of His public ministry until the last days in Jerusalem, one comes across His timeless parables. Matthew's word is appropriate at every juncture: "He told them many things in parables" (Matt. 13:3).

PARABLES AND TEACHING

Everyone loves a good story. Jesus developed stories from familiar images and ideas that reveal truth about the nature of God, prayer, spiritual values, stewardship, judgment, and the kingdom of God. He used parables as a teaching device with His disciples, antagonistic religious leaders, and ordinary people.

The Synoptic Gospels contain between fifty and sixty such stories. Add to that number ten brief stories found in John's Gospel. Some of them are very brief, such as the parables of the pearl of great price, the leaven, and the hidden treasure. Some are full-length stories like the parables of the good Samaritan, the talents, the sower and the soils, the rich fool, and the prodigal son.

PARABLES AND DAILY LIFE

Jesus was the keenest of observers about daily life. He drew lessons from farmers sowing in the field, from village customs about weddings, from shepherds and sheep, from banquets, and so much more. Recall that His audiences often were simple, uneducated people such as fishermen, farmers, and villagers. They could grasp His

“Jesus used good storytelling to project divine truths about redemption, the kingdom of God, and ethical values.”

lessons easily about an unjust judge or a friend who knocked on a neighbor’s door at midnight. Jesus used good storytelling to project divine truths about redemption, the kingdom of God, and ethical values.

There is a timelessness about these stories, as well as a haunting beauty. They always present some powerful lesson about God and His will for today. And they have the potential to open the doors for evangelism, especially with those who are not familiar with the Bible otherwise.

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Many of Jesus’s parables deal with the arrival of the kingdom of God, a major message He sought to bring to Israel in His day. Matthew 13 is the great chapter on this theme. There, Jesus used a series of parables to proclaim the actions of God in His own ministry.

PARABLES ON GOD’S NATURE

Some parables illustrate unforgettably the nature of God as Jesus came to reveal this essential truth. Speaking of the love of God to the Pharisees who were grumbling about tax gatherers and sinners around them, Jesus produced some memorable parables in Luke 15 that reflect God’s love and compassion toward those who have lost their way or stand estranged from Him.

These parables of Jesus on the nature of God are excellent examples of His understanding of simple truths for daily living. For example, he related the shepherd’s concern about a lost sheep, the peasant woman’s loss of a coin, and the prodigal’s lapse so terrible that he was feeding swine when “he came to his senses” (Luke 15:17). Again, these were topics and illustrations the common people could grasp and embrace. And, when necessary, the religious leaders of the day also realized that Jesus was condemning them and their brand of “faith” (Matt. 21:45-46).

THEMES OF THE PARABLES

Though Jesus did not follow a consistent theme in His teachings through parables, He did address some of the major subjects of His ministry through these stories. He dealt with the relation of the old covenant with the new covenant in parables of the barren fig tree and the great feast. His lessons on prayer were highlighted by the parables of the friend who knocked at midnight and the unjust judge. Stewardship was another important theme as portrayed by the stories of the unjust steward and the rich fool.

Jesus’s solemn teachings on judgment come through His parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the talents. The parables of Jesus touch movingly on death and resurrection in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as the parable of the wicked husbandman.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PARABLES

Contemporary Bible students strongly insist that Bible students who seek the message of Jesus through His parables must understand the setting of the story. It is also important to realize that the parable usually has one major lesson to teach. Using an allegorical approach to the study of parables is both inappropriate and inaccurate. Students of Scripture should seek one primary lesson from each parable.

Jesus’s timeless reputation as a Teacher certainly comes from the substance and content of His inspired and authentic lessons. When we add the unique form of these lessons through the parables, we quickly affirm the conclusion of the centuries regarding Jesus’s teaching: they “were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority” (Matt. 7:28-29).

This article was adapted from *The Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 406-407. Used with permission.