



*Entering In  
To What's There:  
Six Parables about God's Kingdom*

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All the prophets were poets. And if you don't know that, you try to literalize everything and make shambles out of it. A metaphor is really a remarkable kind of formation, because it both means what it says and what it doesn't say. And so those two things come together, and it creates an imagination which is active. You're not trying to figure things out; you're trying to enter into what's there.

Eugene Peterson



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# Introduction



*Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.*

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

*Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."*

*Matthew 13:34, Matthew 13:16 & Luke 17:20-21*

In the uncertainty of our world, both natural and political, we long for a different way. Is there a place or time when justice will finally win over abuse, and when power will be used to lift and heal, not to oppress and dominate? In the New Testament, this longing was said to finally be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke often about the time and place when God's heart of love, mercy and justice would be the ruling force "on earth as it is in heaven." This kingdom can not be pointed to on a map or described in a travel book; Jesus uses metaphors and stories—parables—to teach about this invisible reality to the crowds that follow him.

By teaching in stories, Jesus asks the listener to engage actively with the meaning; you won't understand by merely letting the words go in your ears, you must hear them. These stories invite us to enter into and understand this kingdom that is both here and not here, now and not now, real and invisible.

I'm not a theological expert, but I do have experience with metaphors. I love to turn them over and look at them from all angles, moving the parts around like furniture and dolls in a playhouse to see what meaning can be discovered. We are not looking for one-to-one correlations or concrete details that refer to historical events. We are after a sense or an experience. Our understanding will grow from engaging our emotions as we enter in using our imagination.

Reading the parables together, I hope we will discover new ways that this longed-for kingdom of God is already operating in our everyday lives.

Judy Hanawalt



# Study 1

## The Organic Kingdom

Jesus communicates the essence of the kingdom using organic examples. Maybe you have worked in a garden, planting seeds and hoping for growth, digging and mulching and doing battle with weeds. Even if you leave bread-making to the experts, you have probably mixed ingredients together and waited for edible results.

This is homey, down-to-earth stuff, but it suggests something more. How can a seed indistinguishable from a grain of sand grow large enough to provide shelter? Can a tiny glob of sourdough starter really produce enough bread to feed a community? The reality of the kingdom is not cut and dried, it is living and changing, growing and expanding.

Following the logic of Jesus' stories, the kingdom is both impossibly big and out of sight. It's as if the inside is larger than the outside, like a magic tent in Harry Potter's world, or Mary Poppins' satchel. It is hard to see God working in our lives and in our world; his work is buried in dirt or flour, yet he tells us it is the biggest reality there is.

This truth about the kingdom is promising and frustrating. Why is it so small and hidden? Why can't it be more obvious and powerful? What are we to do while we wait? The forces at work in our world are loud and overt: politics, commercialism and consumerism, privilege and greed, all trampling on the weak and poor. The present presses in hard while we wait for the kingdom to come. We need more sheltering trees and shared bread.

The little mustard has no special beauty or robustness, but in the end, it will be the biggest, most hospitable tree—existing not just for itself, but offering abundant nesting space. The tiny yeast expands 144 cups of flour into an abundance of bread. The kingdom is almost invisible, and it is the place for community to live and be safe and fed.

In the garden, when the season and conditions are right, there is growth. Luke assures us that *"nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known"* (Luke 2:22). We live in the in-between; the kingdom is here, and we wait.

### *Question for Reflection*

How do you imagine God's kingdom?



## *Scripture*

*The Mustard Seed and the Leaven*  
Matthew 13:31-33

*English Standard Version*

*He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

*He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*

*The Message*

*Another story. "God's kingdom is like a pine nut that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree, and eagles build nests in it."*

*Another story. "God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread—and waits while the dough rises."*

## *Questions for Reflection:*

How is the kingdom of God tiny? How is the kingdom of God huge?

How does the kingdom grow outwardly, like the mustard bush?

How does the kingdom grow inwardly, like the yeast?

How can you hold these two truths together?

What is the work being done? Who is doing it?

Do you have experience with waiting?





### *Personal Parable*

Do you see kingdom growth in your life? Is it outward or inward?

How might God be growing you inwardly for outward Kingdom purposes? Do you sense God making your life into a Kingdom-shaped "nesting place" like the mustard plant or Kingdom-filled "meal" for the people in your life?

## Study 2

### *Where Your Treasure Is*

The idea of finding buried treasure, or of a traveling salesman coming across a huge, perfect pearl is more fairy tale than real life. It makes me think of thrift store trips when something tucked in among the stained casserole dishes and the chipped platters catches my eye—a set of dishes I remember using at my beloved grandparents' house, or a pair of dusty-but-exquisite antique crystal cocktail glasses. I quickly tuck them into my basket to keep anyone else from grabbing them.

The sense of Jesus' parable is bigger than that, though. These discoveries are life-changing. The lucky finders are willing to spend every asset to secure the item worth far more than anyone knows. There's a hushed, hurried feel to the stories; the treasure must be acquired before others realize what is there. This is not a sacrifice, this is a score.

Treasure usually means material riches. Jesus isn't talking about a windfall that fattens up a retirement account, or elevates its finder to elite status. It is the opposite; this treasure comes at a high cost and cannot be liquidated into cash. Its riches are worth becoming poor. How odd it would seem to onlookers to see someone suddenly sell everything to buy a field, or put all their resources into one gem. That seems unwise.

Jesus' teachings on his community often up-end common sense. In these parables. The kingdom is hidden, so the seeker has to dig it up or pick it out of many shiny, lesser things. The person who is familiar with the kingdom can pull the kingdom treasure out of the jumble of other worthless trinkets; she recognizes what is of value and what is not.

Kingdom living is found beyond earthly riches--out in abandoned fields, covered with layers of dirt, decay and rust--far past what is comfortable and planned. Pursuing this kingdom leads to a place where taking a risk on the most beautiful thing you've ever seen is the only sane course of action. Out there in that field, Jesus' words make sense.

#### *Question for Reflection*

Does kingdom logic appeal to you, or does it feel foreign or scary?



## *Scripture*

*Matthew 13:44-45, 51-52*

*English Standard Version*

*The Parable of the Hidden Treasure*

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

*The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value*

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

*New and Old Treasures*

*“Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”*

*The Message*

*God’s kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidentally found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic—what a find!—and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field.*

*“Or, God’s kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it.*

*Jesus asked, “Are you starting to get a handle on all this?”*

*They answered, “Yes.”*

*He said, “Then you see how every student well-trained in God’s kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it.”*

## *Questions for Reflection*

Have you ever valued a “treasure” so much that you took extreme measures to possess it?

Do you remember when you “found” Jesus? What was that experience like?

What steps are there between finding the great treasure and making it your own, and becoming “trained for the kingdom?”

How does someone who is experienced in kingdom living go about life in this world?

What is the result of a life of giving up everything for the one best thing?



### *Personal Parable*

Can you think of a situation or a time in your life that kingdom wisdom turned earthy common sense upside down? What was the result?

What is your response to Jesus' words to Martha?

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:41-42*

## Study 3

### First or Last

There's no perfect economic system, but it's hard to imagine one that doesn't revolve around work and reward. We expect the first to arrive to be first served, the hardest worker to be the most honored, and those who don't measure up to "get their just deserts." We unconsciously adopt values that don't mesh with kingdom values.

We have this system ingrained in us: our worth is determined by our productivity. If we work hard, we deserve love and dignity—and financial reward. Those with nothing to show for themselves are justly denied esteem and compensation. There are two categories: deserving or not; productive or lazy.

We each look at the world from our unique perspective, whether we are in the category of the hard-working "firsts" or the under-performing "lasts." Firsts and lasts are both comparing their performance, assessing what they need and deserve, and finding fault with the other. The "firsts" believe they worked for what they have, deserving it more than the others; the "lasts" feel they weren't given a proper chance to step up and take their place. If the last become first, the lasts get it all and the firsts don't get anything. Is that justice?

The focus of this parable is not on a place, but on a person. He runs a vineyard, and employs workers from the village to care for his vines and harvest the fruit. The master employs as many as he can find, and gives anyone who works--for any amount of time--the same amount. With him, worth and access to resources are a result of his generous heart, not the workers' merit.

Grace is a common concept in the New Testament, but in parable form it gets past our brain and into our gut. Every time I read this story, I resonate with the crew that came early and worked all day: It's not fair! I can't argue with the logic of the master, though—he can do what he wants in his vineyard, and he wants to be gracious, so everyone receives exactly the same pay. *"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."* (John 1:16)

#### *Question for Reflection*

Where do you place yourself on the performance spectrum? Do you feel that your position is "fair"?



## *Scripture*

*Laborers in the Vineyard  
Matthew 20:1-16*

*English Standard Version*

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’*

*And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”*

### *The Message*

*“God’s kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work.*

*“Later, about nine o’clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went.*

*“He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o’clock. At five o’clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, ‘Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?’*

*“They said, ‘Because no one hired us.’*

*“He told them to go to work in his vineyard.*

*“When the day’s work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, ‘Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.’*

*“Those hired at five o’clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ‘These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.’*

*"He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?'"*

*"Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first."*

### *Questions for Reflection*

Who do you identify with more, the workers who got there early or the ones who came at the last minute?

In this parable, what does it mean that "the last will be first, and the first last?" If you have encountered that phrase before, do you see it differently in this context?

Why do you think the master kept going back to get more workers instead of rounding them all up at once?

Why did he ask the last group what they had been doing all day?

Why do you think he paid the last workers before the ones who came first?



### *Personal Parable*

Does this story make you think of any situations or attitudes in your life?

Do you base your sense of worth on how much “work” you do—whatever that work is? Who’s assessment of your work matters most to you? How are your work and your worth connected?

Are you spending your time looking to the Master for direction, or looking around at your fellow workers? What do you hear the Master say? What do the other workers say?



## Study 4

# *Eat, Drink and Be Merry*

When I open my mailbox to find a elegantly addressed envelope on heavy paper, it's almost an event in itself. I love receiving an invitation to a wedding. To be included in an event like that is to be part of the family or the inner circle; it is not just a chance to go to a feast, it's participating in a celebration that brings joy because of your relationship with the host. It's a significant life event, worthy of special planning and consideration.

In these parables, Jesus compares the kingdom to a host and the guests who are invited to a wedding feast and a great banquet. The guests' response shows the value they place on him and his invitation: There are some who come and assume they deserve a better place than they do, there are some who make excuses and don't come, and there are some who are invited after the first people on the list make excuses and back out of their commitment to come to the feast.

There is upside-down kingdom logic at work here. Those who are invited first aren't the ones who come, and those who are on the margins of society—even out in the streets—are the ones who benefit. Ambition does not seem to have kingdom value. The ones with ambition, who are seeking to better themselves with their business deals and their marriage alliances, or by trading invitations with the the powerful, are not honored and recognized as they would expect. They are criticized. Their expectations of how they should be treated are up-ended. The marginalized and the ones at the back of the room are the ones that are brought forward, their hunger and their willingness to come at the master's invitation making them worthy of being included in the lavish feast.

### *Question for Reflection*

Has your pride ever been pricked by an invitation or a lack of an invitation? Or by someone not coming at your invitation?



## *Scripture*

### *The Parables of the Wedding Feast and the Great Banquet*

*Luke 14:7-24*

#### *English Standard Version*

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

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

*When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"*

*But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"*

#### *The Message*

*He went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.' Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.*

*"When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, 'Friend, come up to the front.' That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I'm saying is, If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."*

Then he turned to the host. *“The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.”*

*That triggered a response from one of the guests: “How fortunate the one who gets to eat dinner in God’s kingdom!”*

*Jesus followed up. “Yes. For there was once a man who threw a great dinner party and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests, saying, ‘Come on in; the food’s on the table.’*

*“Then they all began to beg off, one after another making excuses. The first said, ‘I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.’*

*“Another said, ‘I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.’*

*“And yet another said, ‘I just got married and need to get home to my wife.’*

*“The servant went back and told the master what had happened. He was outraged and told the servant, ‘Quickly, get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and wretched you can lay your hands on, and bring them here.’*

*“The servant reported back, ‘Master, I did what you commanded—and there’s still room.’*

*“The master said, ‘Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full! Let me tell you, not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party.’”*

### *Questions for Reflection*

What is the benefit of inviting those who can’t repay?

Compare the response of the rich and the marginalized to the invitation. What are each assuming about themselves? About the host? What role did choice play?

Do the guests’ excuses seem genuine? Is it a matter of a conflict, or a lack of desire?

What makes the host so angry? Does it seem justified?

Like the banquet, is the kingdom just one of many options? Is it the “sweet by and by,” a reality that can be postponed until life is over?

Does the second and third round-up of party guests seem like a lesser invitation? Are they lesser guests?

What evidence of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom logic is at work here?



### *Personal Parable*

Do these parables about invitations and parties remind you of a situation in your life? Is God trying to get your attention through this situation, or asking you to consider his invitation to you?

Are there ambitions that are causing you to pass up an invitation to a banquet with the King of the Universe?

How do Jesus' comments shed light on these parables?

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:29-30*

*Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. Luke 22:26-27*

## Study 5

# Lost and Found

Losing something valuable can cause heart-pounding, stomach-clenching anxiety. The panicky feeling that comes when suddenly you can't find your purse or you can't see your child on the playground is common to us all. That experience puts us in the middle of Jesus' parables about lost things, giving us a glimpse into the inner workings of the kingdom.

While the idea of searching tirelessly for the lost one makes sense, the searchers in these parables strike me as a little reckless. Common sense would say it is better to lose one than to risk the welfare of the many by leaving them unattended. It's only one little sheep in a huge herd, not worth very much in comparison. The woman looking for the coin seems to be missing the big picture as well; she has only lost a small percentage of her money, and she is wasting time searching when she certainly has more pressing tasks.

But when we think about the times we have lost something of great emotional value, something irreplaceable—when your toddler disappears around a corner, or your dog takes off through an open gate—the response is not measured and practical. We drop everything and take off running.

These parables are directed at the religious leaders who were irritated that Jesus had time and compassion for the people in society that they considered worthless. Jesus directly challenges the idea that those with privilege and power are more important and worthy of God's attention and care. In his stories, the unimportant ones are worth dropping everything and running after.

While simple at face value, these parables draw us deeper into the impractical, reckless nature of the kingdom and of Jesus' love for his people. In the kingdom's economy, the one is somehow more important than the many, and no effort is too much to find even the least one.

### *Question for Reflection*

What experience comes to mind when you think of losing and finding things?



## *Scripture*

*The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin*  
Luke 15:1-10

*English Standard Version*

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

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

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

*The Message*

*By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story.*

*"Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!' Count on it—there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.*

*"Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it—that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God."*

## *Questions for Reflection*

Who do you resonate with: the lost sheep or the ones who stayed in the pen?

What would it be like to be sought the way the shepherd sought the lost sheep, or the woman searched for the coin?

How is being found related to repenting?

Does it seem unfair that the "irresponsible" ones are given so much time, attention and celebration?

In what ways do you feel lost and least? How are we sought and found?



### *Personal Parable*

*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:14-16*

Jesus and his kingdom are aligned with the marginalized--the least and the lost. How do these parables invite you to participate in that kingdom value?

## Study 6

# Prayer Power

Women, especially widows, tax collectors and children had something in common in Jesus' day: they were weak and powerless, at the bottom of the social order. Judges and religious leaders, though, were at the top; they were powerful decision makers. Jesus tells stories of them side by side, but he tips the power balance toward the weak, away from the strong. The widow's persistence is power, turning the unjust judge to justice in her case. The tax collector's humility is power in his prayer, turning God's face to him to justify him and away from the proud, boastful teacher. The children's desire to come to Jesus makes them recipients of the kingdom of God, with power as the King's heirs.



It's a beautiful idea. When we pray persistently, humbly and even childishly, though, we often wait, straining to hear in the silence, and not seeing justice or the kingdom. We are still waiting for the ultimate answer, watching for the kingdom to be real in our experience "on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus acknowledges that it's a hard task, and is unsure how many people will be able to sustain this kind of faith and persistence.

The children that come and climb up on his lap add a twist to the parables. Children are very persistent when they want something, but there is a purity to their pleading—they are simply expressing a need in the humility that comes with their small size and lack of experience. They aren't trying to push the boundaries and tip the scales of justice, they are just being themselves, honestly seeking to be with Jesus. It isn't work for them to keep coming to Jesus; it isn't a show for them to be humble. They take Jesus and the kingdom at face value and go toward it.

The parables play with the dynamic between the powerless and the powerful, but we can't make one-to-one kingdom correlations. For instance, the judge is not like God—he is the opposite. Jesus highlights the actions of the powerless when they come up against power: the widow coming again and again and the penitent tax collector. Jesus illustrates the way God receives these offerings of faith, by silencing the critics and opening his arms to the seeker.

### *Question for Reflection*

Where or when do you feel powerless?



## *Scripture*

Luke 18:1-17

English Standard Version

### *The Parable of the Persistent Widow*

*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

### *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

### *Let the Children Come to Me*

*Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."*

## *The Message*

### *The Story of the Persistent Widow*

*Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!'*

*"He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"*

*Then the Master said, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"*

### *The Story of the Tax Man and the Pharisee*

*He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.'*

*"Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'"*

*Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."*

*People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. "Let these children alone. Don't get between them and me. These children are the kingdom's pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."*

### *Questions for Reflection*

Have you ever felt like the widow in this story—helpless to get what she needs?

How does God compare to the judge in the story?

Have you ever felt like the tax collector—beyond forgiveness?

Do you ever relate to the pharisee, who dedicated his life to God and worked hard to be righteous?



### *Personal Parable*

Do these parables remind you of an issue that you have brought to God again and again?

How can you cultivate child-like faith?

Would your prayer life change if you approached Jesus like the children did--just as yourself, with nothing to offer?

# Resources

Interview with Eugene Peterson, On Being Podcast,  
<https://onbeing.org/programs/eugene-peterson-entering-into-what-is-there/>

The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told  
by Simon J Kistemaker

The Bread Monk: Parable of the Leaven  
<http://breadmonk.com/my-bread-blog/three-measures-of-flour>

Hidden Treasure and Pearl  
<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/hidden-treasure-and-pearl-great-price/>





