

KINGDOM. LESSON 41

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God’s guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God’s kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) [QUIET TIMES] JEREMIAH 25, 29, 30 and 31
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Take turns and share (or read from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Jeremiah 25, 29, 30 and 31). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) [GOD’S RESOURCES] (5) 2 CHRONICLES 7:14
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Review two by two.

(5) God’s healing. 2 Chronicles 7:14. If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) [THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD
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**“The parable of the workers in the vineyard” in Matthew 20:1-16 is a parable about
REWARDS IN GOD’S KINGDOM.**

“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. We will study these parables by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 1, supplement 1).

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The landowner. He is literally a house-lord. He is probably an owner of an estate, which consists of a homestead and a large vineyard.

The hired workers. During the harvest season, workers were usually hired on a daily basis. They congregated on the market place, where employers came to hire them. A full working day consisted of twelve working hours from sunrise to sunset. At the end of each day, they were paid their wages (Leviticus 19:13).

The agreement. The first workers agreed with the landowner to work for one denarius. A denarius is the wages for one full day of work at that time. The later workers could not make such an agreement, because they only worked for part of the day. However, the owner promised them that he would give to them what is right.

The payment of wages. At the end of a twelve-hour working day, workers usually received one denarius. In this story the first workers received what they had agreed to work for. However, this landowner did much more than the workers expected. He began by paying the last workers first. And he paid the last workers the same amount as the first workers!

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of ‘the story’ of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the

time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is extended and contained in Matthew 19:16-30.

Two things show us what the setting of this parable is. The first word: “for” shows that it is connected with the foregoing. And the conclusion of the parable is the same as the conclusion of the foregoing passage, “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

The danger of not entering God’s kingdom. Matthew 19:16-26 describes a young man, who was very wealthy, but who also realised that he had not yet attained eternal life (salvation). He was searching to attain salvation, but he did it in the wrong way. He thought that he should attain salvation through doing the works of the law (Matthew 19:16,20). Jesus quoted the commandments of the second table of the Ten Commandments. He did not need to quote the commandments of the first table, because failure to keep the commandments of the second table implies failure to keep the commandments of the first table (1 John 4:20).

The rich young man’s reaction shows that his attitude towards the commandments was very superficial in relationship to Christ’s deeply spiritual interpretation of them (Matthew 5:21-48). Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

Jesus did not ask the rich young man to gain salvation by doing a good work! He was putting the rich young man to *the test of complete trust expressed in obedience to him*. Without complete trust in Jesus Christ, expressed in self-surrender and obedience, this rich young man could not be expected to go and sell everything he had. Jesus knew that his heart was bound to his wealth. If this rich young man wanted to be *a perfect believer*, or better: *a mature believer*, he should put his complete trust in Jesus Christ and do what Christ said. Then he would go and sell his possessions, which stood in his way to trust Jesus and to become a disciple of Jesus, and he would begin to follow Jesus as a disciple. By following Jesus, he would learn about denying himself, about taking up his cross every day and about witnessing for Christ. Without faith or trust in Jesus Christ, expressed in self-surrender and obedience, nobody can be saved!

Jesus does not put this test of selling everything one has to every person who wants to become a Christian! Jesus also does not put every one of his children to any particular test. Job, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph in the Old Testament, and Zacchaeus and Joseph of Arimathea in the New Testament, were people with many possessions and they were not asked to go and sell their possessions! Moreover, Abraham and all these other wealthy people were saved (justified), not by doing any good work, but only by faith (Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:28)! And they showed that their faith was genuine and alive by the kind of life they lived (Hebrews 11:1-40; James 2:21-23).

The difficulty of entering God’s kingdom. The rich young man chose to keep his wealth and possessions and turned away from Jesus Christ. He did not put his trust in Jesus and he did not begin to follow Jesus. Then Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom”. Jesus meant literally what he said and declared that it is absolutely impossible for a rich man to work, worm or buy his way into God’s kingdom! Wealth, possessions, money and the things that go with this, success, power and fame, have such a powerful hold on the heart, mind and life of natural people that they cannot save themselves out of it! These things bewitch the rich, powerful and famous people, and prevent them from entering into God’s kingdom (Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:9-10). Jesus spoke in absolute terms to impress on his disciples’ mind that salvation is from beginning to end not a human achievement, but a sovereign and gracious gift from God (John 6:44-45; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Christ’s disciples were profoundly shocked and asked, “Who then can be saved?” The disciples probably reasoned that because the poor also want to become rich, they too could not enter God’s kingdom. Jesus answered, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Every human being, both the rich and the poor, are completely dependent on God for salvation. Of himself, not a single person can do anything to save himself! A person is saved only because he is born-again *from above*, through the work of the Holy Spirit. “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:3-8). God even *gives* the faith that he must exercise. “All who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48; cf. Philippians 1:29). Thus, in short, Jesus Christ teaches that people are not saved by any of their own efforts, but saved only by God’s love and grace (2 Timothy 1:9-10).

The reward for sacrificial service in God’s kingdom. Peter said that he and the other disciples had left everything and had followed Christ. And he asked what they would receive. On the one hand, Peter and the other disciples had done exactly what Jesus Christ had asked the rich young man to do: they had left everything and had followed Jesus (Luke 5:11). On the other hand, Jesus said that there is nothing people could do to be saved (Mark 10:26-27). It is only God who gives eternal life (the salvation)!

Jesus gave his disciples a very reassuring answer. “No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them persecutions) and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). Whoever has made sacrifices for the sake of Jesus Christ, will receive many times more in this present age than they gave up. In spite of the persecutions and difficulties they have to face for Christ’s sake on this earth, they will

enjoy material possessions and relationships with people much more than the ungodly people. And after the second coming of Christ they will receive the kingdom of God in its final phase as the new heaven and the new earth.

The warning about being the first and the last. God does not look at people and their success, etc. in the same way as people do. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Corinthians 4:5). “The people who are the first” are the people, who because of their wealth, education and position, or success, accomplishments and prestige, are highly regarded by people in general, and sometimes even by Christians. But because God looks at the heart, many of these people will be assigned to a position behind the others in God’s kingdom, and some will even be excluded from God’s kingdom (Matthew 7:21-23).

“The people who are first” could also be the people who believed in Christ and attended church since they were young. But instead of seeing this as a great privilege, they have come to regard this as a merit, as something God would reward them for.

“The people who are last” may be people who are converted later in life, like Zacchaeus, the hard businessman and tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) or the hard-core criminal and murderer crucified together with Jesus (Luke 23:39-43). Many of those who are regarded as very important in the Church will be the last, and many who were totally unknown on earth will be the first. Such people may be the poor widow, who contributed everything she owned (Mark 12:41-44), or Mary of Bethany, whose act of kindness to Jesus was criticised by the disciples (Matthew 26:8), or the many children in the world, who put their trust in Jesus Christ, while the disciples quarrelled about their position of importance (Matthew 18:1-4; 20:20-28). Jesus therefore warns his disciples and all Christians to beware of a spirit that desires “to be the first”.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard illustrates the principle of the first will be the last and the last will be the first. When Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner, etc.”, then he intends to tell us what will happen when the kingship of God in its final phase on the final judgement day is unfolded.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 20:1-15.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 20:16.

Jesus concludes this parable in the same way he concluded Matthew 19:16-30, “So the last will be the first, and the first will be the last.” Jesus warns his disciples and all Christians not to be among the first who will become the last! Three things may be said about the people who regard themselves as the first:

The people who are regarded as the first think that they should be rewarded for their accomplished work!

Peter was eager to know what he and the other disciples would get, because they had left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus promised that they would be richly rewarded for their trust and obedience. But he warned them to avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to spiritual matters! They receive their salvation as a gracious gift from God, not as something they have earned! Therefore, even rewards from God are not the same as the rewards from people on earth. Not only salvation, but also the rewards from God for service in the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 3:11-15) are expressions of God’s unmerited grace and love for his people. Rewards from God are never a compensation for accomplished work!

The people who are regarded as the first think they should be rewarded in proportion to their accomplished work.

They fail to recognise that God is completely sovereign and that only he has the right to distribute his favours and give his rewards as he pleases! If God wants to give the same favour to a person, who has been a Christian only for the last day of his life, as to a person who has been a Christian for all his life, then God has all the right to do so. No human being may criticise God, because everybody is saved by God’s grace, and not because of his works of the law, his good works or his accomplishments, and also not because of his dedication, zeal or sacrifice! Therefore, this parable teaches that no one is entitled to receive anything from God, not even salvation, let alone a reward. It stresses the freedom and sovereignty of God to give his rewards purely out of his grace.

The people who are regarded as the first think that other people should not be rewarded for work they have not done.

They are often envious of the small and unknown people, whom God gives greater honour than to them who have worked hard for God all their lives! Therefore, this parable teaches Christians to refrain from priding themselves on their labour or accomplishments in God’s kingdom!

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

(1) Explaining the parable as an allegory (allegorising).

This parable has often been abused by allegorical interpretation. Although some interpreters have written other very valuable teachings, they have come up with an allegorical meaning for this parable, which cannot be deduced from the context and consequently must be rejected.

Irenaeus (130-200 A.D.) interpreted the parable as follows. “The householder” represents God. “The workers hired at different times” represent the people at creation, the people after creation and the people at the end time.

Origen (185-254 A.D.) interpreted the parable as follows. “The householder” represents God. “The first shift of workers” signifies the generations of people from creation to Noah. “The second shift of workers” signifies the generations of people from Noah to Abraham. “The third shift of workers” signifies the generations of people from Abraham to Moses. “The fourth shift of workers” signifies the generations of people from Moses to Joshua. “The fifth shift of workers” signifies the generations of people from Joshua to Jesus. “The denarius” represents salvation.

Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.) interpreted the parable as follows. “The vineyard” represents the Church from the time of creation to the second coming of Christ. “The householder” represents God. “The workers” are teachers who instruct the Christians in the Church in different periods of time: from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ. “The workers from the first, third, sixth and ninth hours” represent the Hebrew people, who honoured and revered God and persevered to cultivate the vineyard from the beginning of the world. “The eleventh hour” signifies the period from the first to the second coming of Christ. “The workers of the eleventh hour” represent the apostles, or in another interpretation, the Gentiles. Or “the various hours” signify the various stages of a person’s life: childhood, adolescence, youth, manhood, old age and senility.

Lenski interpreted the parable as follows. “The foreman” represents Christ. “The denarius” symbolises the temporal or earthly blessings. “The workers hired at the eleventh hour” signify inexcusable idlers.

Other interpretations that must also be rejected:

Jews and Gentiles: “Those called first” represent the Jews and “those called last” represent the Gentiles. There is nothing in the context that suggests this.

Employer-employee relationships: “Employers should pay their workers the same wages, no matter how much work they do!” There is nothing in the context that suggests this. It is not Jesus’ intention to teach that this principle should be applied to labour and industry in general. That would lead to idleness, chaos and corruption and is also unbiblical. “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

On the contrary, Jesus intended to teach that the principle “the last will be first and the first will be last” represents God’s dealings with people! Jesus condemns the attitude that seeks to deal with God on the basis of “so much pay for so much work”!¹

Dispensationalism of John N. Darby (1800-1882). “Jesus divided the history of the world into seven dispensations”:
(1) Paradise condition before the flood, (2) Noah, (3) Abraham, (4) Israel under the law, priests and kings, (5) Gentiles, (6) Holy Spirit, (7) Millennial Kingdom.² There is nothing in the Bible that suggests splitting the Bible into seven dispensations containing contradictory principles alongside one another (as for example, justification by keeping the law during the dispensation of Israel and two second comings at the end of the dispensation of the Church)! Jesus himself explains the parable as illustrating the principle of “the last will be first, and the first will be last”! He certainly does not illustrate the various stages of Church History!

(2) Interpretation of relative details.

The landowner has the right to hire whom he wants and to do with his money what he wants. The fact that Jesus compares the kingdom of God with this landowner shows that he calls attention immediately to the fact that God is the owner of everything and everyone, and that God determines the destinies of people in a complete sovereign way. The right to rule belongs to God and not to us. Salvation is his free gift and not the product of human effort (Ephesians 2:8-9). This detail is relevant.

The agreement with the first workers was fair. The standard daily wage for both soldiers as workers in Jesus’ time was one denarius. The fact that the landowner made an agreement, a wage-contract, with these workers of the first hour shows that these workers were definitely working for wages. Both employer as well as employees considered this as fair, because they agreed on it. This is relevant.

The third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hour.

In ordinary labour circumstances, it would be extremely strange to hire workers just one hour before the end of the day! Jesus definitely does not give these details any particular meaning and therefore they are not relevant. What does become clear is that the landowner is not only interested in his vineyard and the work done in it, but especially in *the unemployed workers*! What is important is not how long they worked, but that they received work!

¹ Salvation through works of the law (thora, sharia) with some Christians, Jews and Muslims. Karma-samsara with Hindu’s and Buddhists.

² See supplement 4 in “Revelation - The Last Bible book” under www.deltacourse.org.

The promise to the last workers. With those workers who started their work after the beginning of the day, the landowner made no agreement. He just promised them that he would pay them whatever is right. This detail is also relevant, because the landowner later says that he has the right to do what he wants with his own money. This also points to the central point or main message of the parable, namely, that God has the sovereign right with respect to whom he employs and how he rewards them.

The words “when evening came” (Matthew 20:8). These words are relevant. The context (Matthew 19:28) points to the end of the world’s history, when Christ will judge all people. This has reference to the central point or main message of the parable, namely, what will happen when that day arrives.

The foreman of the vineyard (Matthew 20:8). Some interpreters see in the landowner’s command to the foreman, a symbolical indication of the fact that “the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgement to the Son” (John 5:22). But because the foreman does not have any function from verse 11-15, the interpretation that “the landowner” represents the Father and “the foreman” the Son is questionable. It is better to regard the foreman as a figure belonging to the story and not to the lesson to be learned from it. He only makes the story more interesting and vivid.

The payment of wages beginning with the last workers. This detail is relevant, because Christ said, “The last will be first”. This order gives the first workers a chance to see what the landowner would do to the last workers at the end of the day.

Each one receives exactly the same reward. When the last workers were paid one denarius, the first workers expected to receive more than had been agreed upon between themselves and the landowner. However, the first workers received the same amount as the last workers. They began to grumble against the landowner. They were not only dissatisfied with what they themselves had received, but also envious of what had been given to the others. The main reason of their dissatisfaction was that others, though last, were made to be first, and that they, though first, had been made the last! However, they had only themselves to blame for their bad attitude, because they had received what they had agreed with the landowner before they began. It showed that they harboured a work-for-wages spirit, that they failed to recognise the owner’s rights, and that they were envious.

There is only one reward given as a gracious gift to all true Christians, namely, they will all have a part in the inheritance of the kingdom of God in its final phase!

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) 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, 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 one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16 teaches about “rewards in God’s kingdom.”

The main message of the parable is the following. “God has the sovereign right with respect to whom he employs in his kingdom and how he rewards them on the final judgement day. Therefore people must avoid being among the first who become last. They must avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to spiritual matters.” They receive their salvation as a gracious gift from God, not as something they have earned!

Unselfish service is one of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom serve without expecting or demanding rewards. They avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to spiritual matters (Matthew 19:16,22,27; 20:2,13). They do not fail to recognise the sovereignty of God, that is, his right to distribute his favours as he pleases (Matthew 20:14-15,23). They acknowledge that God calls people in a sovereign way, and that he gives to those he calls whatever rewards he deems suitable, also in a sovereign way! And finally, the people of God’s kingdom avoid being envious of anybody who receives more from God than they expect or deem just (Matthew 20:15,20-28). They realise that it is a very great privilege to know Christ’s love and to work in God’s vineyard or kingdom!

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. 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 clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach compare to what the parable of the workers in the vineyard teaches?

(1) God has a sovereign right to employ whom he wants in his service (Mark 13:34).

The Lord Jesus Christ has put his servants in charge of his household or vineyard (the worldwide Christian Church or kingdom in its present phase) and has given to each servant his assigned task in it. Thus, every Christian should find out what the Lord wants him to do in the Church and in this present world. His life is meaningful for the Lord and no one may disregard his contribution.

(2) Only God gives the real growth and the servants should regard themselves as God's fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:5-11).

His servant Paul was assigned the task to plant the seed of the gospel in Corinth and his servant Apollos was assigned to water the growing plants in Corinth.

(3) God has the sovereign right to reward his servants as he wants (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

Some of his servants or fellow workers were very careful how they fulfilled their assigned task. They built with materials that could not be destroyed. Their work will be tested by fire on the final judgement day and that will reveal the quality of their work. When their work survives the test of fire, God will reward them. How he will reward them is not stated in this passage.

(4) The victory wreath for the righteousness through faith (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:6-8).

The victor in a contest receives such a wreath. But here all the runners receive a victory wreath that will last forever, the crown for the righteousness through faith (Greek: *ho té̄s dikaiosunés stefanos*). God will publicly announce that his servant has been perfectly justified by faith through the perfect work of salvation of Jesus Christ. It symbolises God's perfect righteousness which Christ earned and God imputes (ascribes) to the believer!

(5) The parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27) (see supplement 15).

God's specific rewards beyond the crown of righteousness are based on different degrees of faithfulness and diligence. There are different degrees of rewards for different degrees of faithfulness and diligence! The servant who has greater faithfulness and diligence, will also be given a greater responsibility in the kingdom of God in its final phase on the new earth (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

(6) The parable of the unworthy servant (Luke 17:7-10) (see lesson 39).

Christians should avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit. The main message of the parable may be the following. "Christians should strive to be worthy servants, who do more than just their duty". Christians should not serve with the spirit of a slave, doing grudgingly only what they are told to do. They should serve with a free spirit, doing willingly, wholeheartedly and gladly more than what they are told to do. They serve in a spirit of love and gratitude. A slavish spirit receives no recommendation in God's kingdom!

Or the main message of the parable may be the following. "*Christians should regard themselves as unworthy servants, who do their duty.*" Christians should not serve with a spirit of pride, thinking that they are worthy of commendation, credit or reward for doing what they are told to do. They should regard service as a privilege, without expecting credit for their obedience. They serve in a spirit of humility. A *proud spirit* receives in God's kingdom no recommendation (cf. 1 Peter 5:5-6).

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

Discuss. What are the main teachings or lessons of the parable of the workers in the vineyard? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) All people must know what God is like.

God will graciously reward each Christian at the final judgement. However, all these rewards are given, not because Christians deserve them or have earned them, but because everything is based on God's love and grace. According to Ephesians 2:10 even the works that Christians do is based on God's grace!

(2) Christians must know what they should be like.

What is important is to serve God with the right attitude or spirit and to serve God faithfully and diligently: The genuine people of God's kingdom avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to spiritual matters, and instead recognise God's sovereign right to reward the people he called with whatever reward he deems suitable.

5	PRAYER (8 minutes) [REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD
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Take turns in the group to *pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two's or three's and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

(*Group leader.* Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. **Commitment.** Be committed to make disciples, build the Church and preach the kingdom.
2. **Preach, teach or study** “the workers in the vineyard” together with another person or group of people.
3. **Personal time with God.** Have a quiet time from half a chapter of **Jeremiah 32, 33, 36 and 37** each day.
Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. **Memorisation. Review series L: “God’s resources** (1) God’s presence. Hebrews 13:5-6, (2) God’s Word. Psalm 119:105, (3) God’s strength. Isaiah 41:10, (4) God’s wisdom. James 1:5; (5) God’s healing. 2 Chronicles 7:14.
5. **Bible study.** Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 13:1-14.**
Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. **Prayer.** Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. **Update your notebook** on preaching God’s kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.