

# KINGDOM.

# LESSON 15

<b>1</b>	<b>PRAYER</b>
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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.

<b>2</b>	<b>SHARING</b> (20 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[QUIET TIMES]</b> <b>2 CHRONICLES 16, 18, 20 and 26</b></span>
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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 (2 Chronicles chapters 16, 18, 20 and 26). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

<b>3</b>	<b>MEMORISATION</b> (5 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH]</b> <b>(3) EPHESIANS 4:12-13</b></span>
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*Review* two by two.

**(3) The ministries of the Church. Ephesians 4:12-13.** to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

<b>4</b>	<b>TEACHING</b> (85 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[THE PARABLES OF JESUS]</b> <b>THE TWO SONS and THE BARREN FIG TREE</b></span>
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**“The parable of the two sons” in Matthew 21:28-32  
and “the parable of the barren fig tree” in Luke 13:1-9 are parables about  
THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENTERING 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 this parable by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1).

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## A. THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

*Read* Matthew 21:28-32.

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

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### **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 closely linked to Matthew 21:23-27.**

The chief priests and the elders of the people of Israel question the authority of Jesus to cleanse the temple and especially to teach and heal within the temple courts. In his answer, Jesus asked them where John the Baptist got his

authority to baptise, from heaven or from men? Their unwillingness to expose themselves by saying what they really believed showed that they were hypocritical. They pretended not to know, while in reality they had rejected John the Baptist.

**(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 21:28-30.**

**(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 21:31-32.**

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### **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. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the main lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

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

**Notes.**

**The vineyard.** Because the parable does not say “my vineyard”, this detail should not be interpreted as being “the nation of Israel” (God’s vineyard). This detail should not be given any particular meaning.

**The first son.** He represents any person who repented and believed after initial unbelief and disobedience. This is a relevant detail in the parable.

**The second son.** He represents any person who pretends to be obedient, but in reality is an unbeliever and disobedient. This is also a relevant detail in the parable.

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### **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 two sons in Matthew 21:28-32 teaches about “the responsibility for entering God’s kingdom.”**

**The main message of this parable is the following. “No matter whether a person was formerly an unbeliever, tax collector or prostitute, every person is personally responsible to enter God’s kingdom. He is personally responsible to repent of his former life of disobedience and go and do the will of God.”**

Pretending to do the will of God, but not actually doing it, is hypocritical. Such people are like the seed that fell on the rocky place and quickly withered, or like a man without wedding clothes at the final wedding festival, who was thrown out into utter darkness.

Personal responsibility is one of the basic characteristics of the kingdom of God. No matter if they were initially unbelievers, disobedient, doubters, critical, or have committed great or small sins, *the genuine people of God’s kingdom have repented and are now doing the will of God!*

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### **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 do these passages teach the truth illustrated in the parable?

**Notes.**

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

**Matthew 7:21-27; 23:1-4.** Certain people profess with their lips that they believe in God and that they are doing things that, according to their own view, must please God. However, they do not do the expressed will of God (in the Bible)! They hear and know the will of God, but they do not practise the will of God. This is a grave warning to especially people who have much knowledge of the Bible, but do not live according to it.

**John 15:14; Acts 5:29.** All people, who do what Jesus says, are called his friends and receive the Holy Spirit. Above all the will of God is to convert and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (cf. John 3:16,36; 6:29).

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## **6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.**

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

*Notes.*

### **(1) Doing the will of God is the one thing needful.**

The tax collectors were despised by the Jewish people and especially by their religious and political leaders, because they were greedy, used extortion to get money and collaborated with the enemy, the Roman oppressors. The tax collectors and prostitutes represented the worst sinners in Israel. Their blatant sinful life, if continued, would without doubt disqualify them from entering God's kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8,27). Humanly speaking, such people had no hope of entering God's kingdom.

But when they saw and heard John the Baptist, they repented. They were impressed with John's "way of righteousness", that is, with the example of his own righteous conduct coupled with the righteous conduct he demanded of the people through his preaching (cf. Luke 3:8-14). He demanded that people repent of their sins and receive God's forgiveness. The tax collectors and prostitutes repented of their sins and believed in Jesus Christ in great numbers (1 Corinthians 6:11). The repentance and faith of tax collectors and prostitutes is very pleasing to the Lord (Luke 5:30-31; 19:10).

### **(2) Pretending to do the will of God is hypocritical.**

The religious leaders of the Jews were deemed to be well acquainted with God's law and they outwardly behaved as if they were always willing to do God's will. But in reality they only pretended to obey God. They rejected God's messenger, John the Baptist, and now they rejected Jesus Christ and his message and were even plotting to kill him.

### **(3) Repentance after initial unbelief and disobedience is the main message of this parable.**

No matter if you have been a great sinner and have done terrible things. Repent (that is, change your thinking), turn to Jesus Christ and believe in him. You will receive forgiveness of all your sins and be saved (Isaiah 1:18; 55:7; Micah 7:18-19; Luke 23:40-43)!

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## **B. THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE**

*Read* Luke 13:1-9.

### **1. Understand the natural story of the parable.**

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

*Notes.* It generally takes a long time for a fig tree to bear fruit. This particular fig tree had been planted in the owner's vineyard. This was not unusual, because it meant that the tree would be given the best care. When finally the time arrived when it was reasonable to expect fruit on this tree, the owner went to look for fruit. It is not easy to see fruit on a fig tree, because the fruit is hidden beneath the foliage. One must come to the tree and use your hands to look for fruit on it.

For three years in a row, the owner did not find any fruit on this tree. So he ordered it to be cut down. The owner did not want the tree to take away any more moisture and minerals the other plants needed.

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

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

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

*Notes.*

#### **(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 13:1-5.**

While the main message in the setting is: "Repent!" the main message of this parable is: "Repent NOW!" In Luke 13:2-3 Jesus says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

#### **(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 13:5-9.**

#### **(3) The explanation or application of the parable is not given, but is implied in the context.**

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### **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.**

**Read** Matthew 21:18-22,42-44; Luke 20:15-16; 21:20-24.

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

**Notes.**

**Treating this parable as an allegory.** Sometimes, people want to give to every detail of the story of a parable a specific meaning. This is called to allegorise, or to treat a parable as an allegory. For example Gregory the Great (540-604) interpreted this parable as follows: “The owner” is God. He came three times to look for fruit. “The first time” God came was before the written law. Then he gave to man the capacity to judge how he should act towards his neighbour by the light of natural reason. “The second time” God came was at the time of the written law. Then he taught man his commandments. “The third time” God came was through grace. Then he showed his mercy to man. “The vinedresser” represents those who rule the church. “Digging” represents rebuking the souls that fail to bear fruit. “Dung” represents remembering (and confessing) sins. Those who refuse to do penance of their sins are in danger of being cut down.

This allegorical interpretation cannot be deduced from the context and therefore must be rejected.

**The fig tree.** One interpreter says that the “fig tree planted in the vineyard” represents “Jerusalem located in Israel”. However, in the light of Jesus cursing a fig tree in Matthew 21, the “fig tree” planted in the vineyard is probably a symbol of the highly privileged nation of Israel in the world. Jesus teaches that Israel as a nation had not repented and turned to him. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). The result was the end of Israel as a religious and political entity and the end of Israel’s significance in salvation history! The kingdom of God was taken away from them and given to another group of people who would bear the fruit of God’s kingdom (cf. Matthew 8:11-12; Matthew 21:41-43; cf. Romans 11:17-24). Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. so that Israel indeed stopped to exist as a nation. This however does not mean that God had rejected all Jews! “God’s people” now consists of all Christians from both the nation of Israel and from all the Gentile nations (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10).

**The period of three years.** This period is variously interpreted: According to different interpreters the three years represent:

- the whole course of Israel’s history
- the three years of Christ’s ministry
- the period beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist.

However, there is no evidence in the Bible that we should give these “three years” any symbolical meaning. This is therefore not a relevant detail in the parable.

However, the fact that the owner did not destroy the unfruitful tree immediately after the first year does point to the great love and patience that God has towards people, and in this context, especially towards the nation of Israel.

**The magnanimous keeper of the vineyard.** This is a relevant detail. He obviously represents God who had dealt very patiently with the people of Israel. God’s great patience towards Jews and Gentiles is still applicable today (cf. Luke 4:18-21; 2 Peter 3:9).

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### **4. Identify the main message of the parable.**

**Discuss.** What is the main message of this parable?

**Notes.**

**The parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13:1-9 teaches about “the responsibility for entering God’s kingdom.”**

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

Personal responsibility is a basic characteristic of the kingdom of God. The genuine people of God’s kingdom do not procrastinate or delay important decisions. They immediately repent and turn to Jesus Christ, because they do not want to risk being lost forever.

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

**Read** Isaiah 55:6-7; Proverbs 27:1; 2 Corinthians 6:2.

**Discuss.** How does what each of these Bible passages teach compare to what the parable teaches?

**Notes.**

**(1) Isaiah 55:6-7.**

It says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." Every person is responsible for his response to Jesus Christ. He is responsible to seek God, while God may still be found! He is responsible to act NOW, TODAY, and not delay the most important decision in his life until it will be too late to change!

**(2) 2 Corinthians 6:2.**

It says, "NOW is the time of God's favour, NOW is the day of salvation." A person is responsible to respond to Jesus Christ immediately, because NOW is the time of God's favour, NOW is the day of salvation!

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**6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.**

*Discuss.* What is the main teaching or lesson of this parable? What does Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what does he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

*Notes.* The main lesson of this parable is to turn to Jesus Christ without delay. Although God is very patient in his dealings with his people, his patience will not last forever. One day - and God alone knows when that day will arrive - the opportunity to repent and be saved will be withdrawn. The man who continually procrastinated "will die in his sins" (John 8:24) and be lost forever (cf. the cowardly and the unbelieving in Revelation 21:8). Therefore, do not delay! Accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord TODAY!

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**C. A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN TEACHINGS OR LESSONS OF THE PARABLES ABOUT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM**

*Teach.* The responsibility for entering God's kingdom is the personal responsibility of every person on earth. No person can bear this responsibility on behalf of others. No one can make the decision to be converted and believe in Jesus Christ for another person. No one can blame others for the consequences of his own decision. God will hold every person personally responsible for his decisions and the consequences of his decisions. Therefore these parables teach the great responsibility of every person with respect to entering God's kingdom:

**(1) The parable of the children sitting in the market places (Matthew 11:16-19).**

Everyone is responsible for his unresponsive reactions to God. Irresponsibly and inconsistent behaviour is childish! People (and certainly also Christians) must stop their childish behaviour and take responsibility for their words and actions.

**(2) The parable of the weather signs (Matthew 16:1-4).**

Every person is responsible for his unresponsive reactions to God's signs of the time. Instead of looking at the signs of the weather, people (and certainly also Christians) must look at the special signs that mark the beginning of the new era in God's history of salvation. The great events around Jesus, especially his death and resurrection, are such great and important signs that people ought to respond.

**(3) The parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32).**

Every person is responsible for his unresponsive reaction to God's revealed (spoken) will. In spite of initial unbelief and disobedience, people (and certainly also Christians) must repent and do the will of God.

**(4) The parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:1-9).**

Every person is responsible for his unresponsive reaction to God's patient work in his life. In view of the time that has flown by, people (and certainly also Christians) must repent and start to bear fruit in their lives, because God's patience has a limit and will not last forever. A time will come when it will be too late to repent, to be saved or to bear fruit (Revelation 6:12-17).

**(5) The parable of the dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50).**

Every person is responsible to know that God's final judgement is absolute certain and irrevocable. This fact should be an incentive for every person to repent and enter the kingdom of God!

<b>5</b>	<b>PRAYER</b> (8 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[REACTIONS]</b></span> <b>PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD</b>
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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 parable of the two sons” and “the parable of the barren fig tree” together with another person or group of people.
3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time with God from half a chapter of **2 Chronicles 32, 33, 34 and 36** each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. (4) The tasks of church leaders: **Acts 20:28**. Daily review the last 5 memorised Bible verses.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 4:17-25**.  
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.