



03 SEP - 01 OCT 2025
WEDNESDAY / 5 WEEKS



BEXHILL URC



TIME
10.00 AM - 12.00 PM



Autumn Bible Study 2025

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 1 - Introduction & *The Mustard Seed and the Leaven*

OVERVIEW - Matt 13:31-33, Luke 13:18-21

Jesus' parables are not simple moral stories but revolutionary proclamations of the coming Kingdom of God. A German New Testament Scholar, Joachim Jeremias, in one of his masterpieces - *The Parables of Jesus*, argues that these parables are best understood as weapons of confrontation—spoken into real moments of tension, designed to provoke and reveal. They are not abstract teachings but situated utterances: brief, striking images that disarm the listener and demand a response.

In this first week, we explore what a parable is, why Jesus used them, and how the world in which He taught shapes their meaning. We begin with two deceptively simple illustrations—the mustard seed and the leaven. Both images suggest something small, hidden, and seemingly insignificant. Yet they speak of a Kingdom that grows in obscurity, works invisibly, and ultimately transforms everything it touches.

These parables overturn the expectations of a triumphant, political Messiah and instead speak of a God who works through subtle, unexpected means. The mustard seed, often associated with nuisance weeds, suggests a Kingdom that refuses to remain controllable or confined. The leaven, which in Jewish thought could signify corruption, becomes a symbol of God's subversive and unstoppable work.

We'll reflect not only on what these images meant to Jesus' first hearers, but also how they challenge our contemporary expectations of success, influence, and visibility in God's mission.

KEY THEMES

- **Parables are not fables:** They do not simply teach ethics, but rather reveal the inbreaking of God's reign in unexpected ways.
- **Jeremias' insight:** Many parables preserve the original Aramaic idioms and context of Jesus, offering direct access to his proclamation.

- **The mustard seed:** Symbolises the surprising growth of the Kingdom—from obscurity to overwhelming presence.
- **The leaven:** Emphasises the hidden but transformative power of the Kingdom. It works silently yet pervasively.
- **These parables redefine power:** The Kingdom of God comes not with might, but through hidden, life-giving transformation.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What surprised you about the way Jesus used everyday images (like mustard seeds or yeast) to describe the Kingdom of God?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose to speak in parables rather than more direct teaching?
3. In what ways have you seen “small beginnings” grow into something impactful in your own spiritual journey or community?

WEEK 2 -

The Good Samaritan

OVERVIEW: Luke 10:25-37

This parable begins not with a story, but with a loaded legal question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds in a way that both affirms the law and disrupts its common interpretation. Instead of a straightforward answer, He tells a story that reframes the concept of neighbour and challenges assumptions about love and righteousness.

At its core, the Good Samaritan is not a sentimental tale about being nice. Joachim Jeremias stresses that this parable is a confrontation—a critique of hardened religiosity, social exclusion, and deep-seated racial prejudice. The shock lies not merely in the kindness shown, but in the identity of the one who shows it. To a Jewish audience, the Samaritan was not simply an outsider but an enemy. Yet it is he who embodies true compassion, while the priest and Levite—symbols of religious authority—fail to act.

This reversal exposes the dangers of religious orthodoxy divorced from mercy. It also redefines the nature of love: not

limited by tribe, boundary, or rule, but expressed through costly, practical action across lines of suspicion and fear.

This week, we ask what it means to become a neighbour, rather than merely to identify one. The parable invites us to examine our assumptions about who deserves compassion—and whether we, like the lawyer in the story, are still looking for ways to limit our responsibility.

KEY THEMES

- **Not a sentimental tale**, but a radical critique of religious self-righteousness and social boundaries.
- The **priest** and **Levite**, expected to embody God's compassion, fail to act.
- The **Samaritan**, despised by Jews, becomes the model of mercy.
- Jeremias highlights the **shock value** for Jesus' original audience: this was an offensive story.
- Jesus does not just answer the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?"—He flips it: "**Who acted as a neighbour?**"
- True discipleship demands **costly compassion** beyond cultural and religious boundaries.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What barriers—cultural, social, or religious—might prevent us from loving certain "neighbours"?
2. How does this parable challenge common assumptions about who can show or receive God's mercy?
3. What does it mean to "go and do likewise" in your community or church context?

WEEK 3 -

The Prodigal Son

OVERVIEW- Luke 15:11-32

This is perhaps the most beloved of Jesus' parables—but also one of the most misunderstood. Often read as a simple story

of repentance and forgiveness, it actually contains a layered confrontation with the heart of religious pride and the scandal of grace.

Jesus tells this story in response to the Pharisees and scribes, who criticised Him for welcoming sinners. Joachim Jeremias reminds us that this context is essential: the parable is not a moral fable, but a theological bombshell. The younger son represents open rebellion, yes—but the older son embodies something more subtle and dangerous: self-righteous resentment.

At the heart of the story is the father, who runs—undignified and exposed—to welcome a disgraced child. This image, Jeremias argues, would have deeply shocked ancient listeners, especially in a culture where honour and control mattered more than affection. The father's actions are not just generous—they are scandalous.

But the greater shock may be the unresolved ending: the elder brother remains outside the celebration. The parable confronts those who cannot stomach a grace that doesn't operate on merit. It forces us to ask: where are we in the story? Are we willing to receive God's mercy? And are we willing to rejoice when others receive it too?

KEY THEMES

- **More than a moral lesson:** This parable is a portrait of the **heart of the Father**—compassionate, watching, and ready to run.
- The **younger son** represents sinners who return in desperation.
- The **father** acts with shocking generosity—running, embracing, restoring.
- The **older son** reflects those who keep the rules but **lack love and mercy**.
- Jeremias suggests the real “punchline” of the parable lies in the father's appeal to the elder son: “All that is mine is yours... but we had to celebrate.”
- This is a **story of scandalous grace**, of divine hospitality offered not to the worthy, but to the repentant.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Which character in the story do you relate to most at this moment in your life—and why?
2. How does this parable reshape our view of God's grace, especially in contrast to human expectations of justice?
3. In what ways can churches become more like the father in this parable—radically welcoming, patient, and generous?

WEEK 4 -

The Labourers in the Vineyard

OVERVIEW - Matt 20:1-16

This Parable Is as Unsettling Today as It Was in the First Century—Especially for Those of Us Who Value Fairness. Jesus Tells of a Landowner Who Hires Workers Throughout the Day—Some at Dawn, Some at Midday, Others in the Final Hour. Yet at Day's End, all Receive the Same Wage. Those Who Worked Longest Complain, and We Sympathise. But the Landowner Insists on his Freedom: "Am I Not Allowed To Do What I Choose With What Belongs to Me?"

Joachim Jeremias Urges Readers To Move Beyond Economic Logic and Recognise the Theological Point: God's Grace Is Not Merit-Based. The Parable Is Not About Wages—It's About Generosity. It Challenges Deeply Embedded Assumptions About What Is "Deserved" and Reminds Us That in God's Economy, Grace Is Freely Given, Not Earned.

The Early Workers' Resentment Exposes a Deeper Issue: a Transactional Mindset That Expects God's Favour To Be Proportionate to Effort. But the Kingdom Operates by a Different Logic. It Values Participation, Not Comparison; Reception, Not Entitlement.

This Week, We Are Invited To Reflect on our Attitudes Toward Grace—Especially When It Is Extended to Those We Think Haven't "Earned It." The Parable Exposes How Subtly We Can Turn Discipleship Into Competition, and How Hard It Can Be To Rejoice in God's Generosity When It Doesn't Favour Us.

KEY THEMES

• **Not about economics,** but about the **Kingdom of God,**

where grace, not merit, is the measure.

- The **early workers** reflect those who assume they deserve more based on effort or status.
- The **landowner's question**—"Are you envious because I am generous?"—exposes the human heart's resistance to divine grace.
- Jeremias suggests this parable is **directed at those within the faith community**, who struggle with the idea that newcomers or outsiders might receive equal standing.
- God's generosity **reverses expectations**: the last are welcomed as first; the undeserving are embraced.
- The Kingdom is not a reward system—it is a **gift**.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever felt like one of the early workers—expecting more because of your effort or faithfulness? How did you respond?
2. What challenges you most about the idea that God gives equally to those who "come late"?
3. How might this parable shape the way we welcome newcomers into our church or faith community?

WEEK 5 -

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

OVERVIEW - Luke 18:9-14

This brief but piercing parable brings us face-to-face with the heart of Christian faith: justification before God. Two men go to the Temple to pray—one a Pharisee, outwardly righteous and respectable; the other a tax collector, despised and corrupt. The twist is immediate and shocking: it is not the seemingly devout Pharisee who goes home justified, but the broken, penitent tax collector.

Joachim Jeremias emphasises the context of this story: Jesus told it "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." The parable is a mirror to religious pride, exposing how easily spiritual practices can become sources of superiority rather than humility.

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The Pharisee's prayer is filled with comparisons—he defines his righteousness by what he is not. The tax collector, on the other hand, offers no defence, no excuses—only a cry for mercy. In that raw honesty lies the seed of salvation.

This final session challenges us to examine our own spiritual posture. Are we trying to justify ourselves—through good works, moral standing, or theological correctness? Or are we willing to be justified by God alone? The scandal of this parable is not just who gets forgiven, but who doesn't—and why.

KEY THEMES

- The **Pharisee** does everything “right” on the outside—fasting, tithing, living morally—but trusts in his own righteousness.
- The **tax collector**, deeply aware of his sin, throws himself on God's mercy: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”
- Jeremias notes that this is a **paradigm shift**: righteousness is no longer earned but received in humility.
- The parable criticises **religious self-confidence** and elevates **genuine repentance**.
- The one who **dares not lift his eyes** is the one whose prayer is heard.
- God's justice is **restorative, not reward-based**—and grounded in grace.

GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1.Why do you think the Pharisee's prayer, though full of good deeds, is rejected by God?
- 2.How does this parable challenge the way we think about sin, confession, and righteousness in our own spiritual lives?
- 3.In what ways can our churches foster an environment of humility and honest repentance rather than comparison and pride?



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