

A 40-Day Devotional Journey in Word and Image



PRAYING THE PARABLES OF JESUS



STEPHEN A. MACCHIA & S. K. SKINNER

FOREWORD BY ERIC E. PETERSON

Praying the Parables of Jesus isn't just a book you read. It's a guide to a deeper understanding and experience of the with-God life. Step through it slowly. Savor it. And let God do his work as you live in his unshakable Kingdom.

Ted Harro, president of Renovaré

In *Praying the Parables of Jesus*, Macchia and Skinner prayerfully, methodically, and artistically share Jesus' parables with twenty-first-century disciples. They encourage readers to embrace a more intentional life of slowing down, thus experiencing greater comprehension of Jesus' parables and more in-depth intimacy with Yahweh. Lectio divina and visio divina are integrative devotional practices. What a blessed contribution to the faith-forming community.

Barbara L. Peacock, founder of Peacock Soul Care and author of *Soul Care in African American Practice* and *Spiritual Practices for Soul Care*

The parables of Jesus have a way of drawing us into the reality of the Kingdom he came to announce. What a gift this book is to help us pray these stories and embrace the "unhurried intimacies" to which Jesus invites us.

Alan AND Gem Fadling, founders of Unhurried Living, Inc. and authors of *What Does Your Soul Love?*

Praying the Parables of Jesus demands that we listen, with fresh attentiveness and seriousness and playfulness, to Jesus' stories and that we open ourselves wide not just to what he's saying but also to what he's doing. With simple, penetrating commentary and arresting, soul-searching illustrations, Macchia and Skinner have dreamed up and pulled off a conspiracy of transformation. If you want to keep Jesus at a safe distance, this is not the book for you. But if you're ready to have Jesus turn your world upside down, start here.

Mark Buchanan, author of the David Trilogy

The paradox of this beautiful collection of words and images is that Macchia and Skinner guide the reader deftly into restorative relationship with Jesus not by exhausting exegesis but by winsome invitation. It is a rare experience to have yourself shepherded in clear, sensible steps not to right answers but to our Savior. This book is a gift to all who are hurried and harried by the world and who long to have gentle and kind guidance into the disruptive, delightful rest that only deep encounter with Christ brings.

Tara Owens, founder and executive director of Anam Cara Ministries, spiritual director, and author of *Embracing the Body* and *At Play in God's Creation*

This is a delightful, intriguing, and creative invitation to engage with the parables. It's fresh and deep—as deep as you'd like to go.

John Eldredge, author of *Wild at Heart*

This is more than a devotional book—it's an immersive encounter with Jesus and his teachings. We are invited to linger in each parable, not just as readers but as participants through holy reading and holy seeing. The stunning artwork helps us see truth beyond words. This is a treasure to return to again and again.

David AND Cindy Wu, cofounders of Mosaic Formation

What an excellent idea! A careful devotional guide for a journey through the parables of Jesus. I can hardly believe that this classic method for stepping into the most important stories Jesus told has so rarely been the subject of a book. I highly recommend this devotional reading that is so well conceived and delivered.

Gary W. Moon, founding executive director of the Martin Institute and Dallas Willard Center at Westmont College and author of *Apprenticeship with Jesus* and *Becoming Dallas Willard*

If you long for fresh insights from Scripture, “unhurried intimac[y]” with Jesus, and encouragement to apply the Spirit’s promptings to your daily life, then *Praying the Parables of Jesus* is for you. Be ready for surprise blessings! You’ll walk with Jesus through a field and stumble on treasure. You’ll knock on the door of his heart, receive fresh bread from his hands, cry with gratitude at his feet, and feast at his banquet. You’ll bow your head, look into a reflection pool, and see heaven opened to you. You’ll want to share this experience with your friends.

Bill AND Kristi Gaultiere, founders and leaders of Soul Shepherding (retreats and training in spiritual direction) and authors of *Journey of the Soul*

We all know we should spend time in the wisdom of the parables; what we don’t always know is how to engage with these monumental teachings. Paired with the earthy approach of *The Message*, this thoughtful, invitational guide leads us into imaginative spaces to linger, discovering new treasures in familiar places. What a wonderful gift!

Nathan Foster, host of *Life with God: A Renovaré Podcast* and author of *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*

What makes this book truly rare is its invitation: not merely to learn but also to listen. To respond. To encounter. Within these pages is a simple yet sacred rhythm that can move you from knowing about God to communing with him. These ancient stories, both timely and timeless, are meant not just to be understood but to be lived. Be warned: This is not a passive read. If you let it, this book will draw you into a deeper, more personal engagement with God. Open wide the doors of your soul—you’re being invited in.

Mindy Caliguire, founder of Soul Care and author of *Ignite Your Soul*

A 40-Day Devotional Journey in Word and Image



PRAYING THE PARABLES OF JESUS



STEPHEN A. MACCHIA & S. K. SKINNER

FOREWORD BY ERIC E. PETERSON



Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



NavPress.com

Praying the Parables of Jesus: A 40-Day Devotional Journey in Word and Image

Copyright © 2025 by Stephen A. Macchia and Susan K. Skinner. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress is a registered trademark of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. The NavPress logo is a trademark of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. *Tyndale* is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Ministries. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Olivia Eldredge, Acquisitions Editor; Philip F. Newman, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Eva M. Winters, Cover Designer; Cathy Miller, Interior Designer; Sarah Ocenasek, Proofreading Coordinator

Cover and interior charcoal drawings copyright © by Suz Skinner and used with permission. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration of Scandinavian divider copyright © by Struvictory/Adobe Stock. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 979-8-89802-038-5

Printed in the United States of America

31 30 29 28 27 26 25
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Eugene Peterson

Translator of The Message and spiritual guide to many



Contents



Foreword *xi*

Welcome *xv*

Introduction: Praying It Slant **1**

Frequently Asked Questions about the Parables of Jesus **13**

- 1 The Lamp on a Stand 19**
Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-18; 11:33-36
- 2 The Wise Builder and the Foolish Builder 25**
Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49
- 3 New Cloth on an Old Garment 31**
Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:19-22; Luke 5:34-39
- 4 New Wine in Cracked Bottles 37**
Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39
- 5 The Weeds 43**
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
- 6 The Mustard Seed/Acorn 49**
Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19
- 7 The Yeast 55**
Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21
- 8 The Hidden Treasure 61**
Matthew 13:44
- 9 The Pearl 67**
Matthew 13:45-46
- 10 The Net 73**
Matthew 13:47-50
- 11 The Store Owner 79**
Matthew 13:52
- 12 The Unmerciful Servant 85**
Matthew 18:23-35
- 13 The Workers in the Vineyard 91**
Matthew 20:1-16

- 14 The Two Sons 97**
Matthew 21:28-32
- 15 The Tenants 103**
Matthew 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19
- 16 The Wedding Banquet 109**
Matthew 22:1-14
- 17 The Fig Tree 115**
Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33
- 18 The Ten Virgins 121**
Matthew 25:1-13
- 19 The Talents/Minas 127**
Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27
- 20 The Sheep and the Goats 133**
Matthew 25:31-46
- 21 The Growing Seed 139**
Mark 4:26-29
- 22 The Creditor and the Two Debtors 145**
Luke 7:41-47
- 23 The Sower 151**
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-15
- 24 The Good Samaritan 157**
Luke 10:30-37
- 25 The Friend in Need 163**
Luke 11:5-13
- 26 The Rich Fool 169**
Luke 12:13-21
- 27 The Watchful Servants 175**
Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-40
- 28 The Faithful and Wise Servant 181**
Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48
- 29 The Barren Tree 187**
Luke 13:6-9

30	The Place of Honor	193
	<i>Luke 14:7-14</i>	
31	The Great Banquet	199
	<i>Luke 14:15-24</i>	
32	The Cost of Being a Disciple	205
	<i>Luke 14:25-35</i>	
33	The Lost Sheep	211
	<i>Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7</i>	
34	The Lost Coin	217
	<i>Luke 15:8-10</i>	
35a	The Prodigal Son	223
	<i>Luke 15:11-24</i>	
35b	The Older Son	229
	<i>Luke 15:25-32</i>	
36	The Shrewd Manager	235
	<i>Luke 16:1-13</i>	
37	The Rich Man and Lazarus	241
	<i>Luke 16:19-31</i>	
38	The Obedient Servant	247
	<i>Luke 17:7-10</i>	
39	The Persistent Widow	253
	<i>Luke 18:1-8</i>	
40	The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	259
	<i>Luke 18:9-14</i>	
	Conclusion and Response	265
	Acknowledgments	267
	About the Authors	268
	About Leadership Transformations, Inc.	270
	Notes	272

Foreword



About five years before my parents died, I called a family meeting that included my sister, Karen, and my brother, Leif. Recognizing some of the telltale signs indicative of a descent into both physical and cognitive decline, I was interested in getting Eugene's and Jan's responses to a long list of questions and potential scenarios so that we could honor their wishes if and when they could no longer make decisions for themselves. Most of it was routine stuff: Stay in the house or move to a retirement center? Resuscitate or DNR? Cremation or burial? Things like that.

At one point I posed a particular question directly to Eugene: "How do you want us to think about your legacy?" After his typical thoughtful pause he said, "You know, until you asked the question, I had never given it any consideration." That sounding like the final word on the topic, I went on to the next item on my list.

The following morning, as we were shuffling around the kitchen getting breakfast ready, Eugene turned to me and said, "You know, I was thinking about that legacy question, and I have an answer for you." Immediately I reached for my legal pad, preparing to capture whatever he would speak next. Looking me directly in the eyes, he said, "Eric, *you're* my legacy!"

My recollection of the moment is that we didn't discuss it any further because we didn't need to. Without saying another word, we both knew that having a share in Eugene Peterson's legacy did not mean imitating the man. Which is to say, it didn't mean running the Boston Marathon, or pastoring one church for twenty-nine years,

or writing a bunch of books, or translating the Bible. Rather, it meant being *me*: the person God created me to be. That's how the son honors the father, through a legacy of faithfulness.

It's equally true in our relationships with the triune God: While we are each created in the image of God, the best way we can honor the Father is by being the unique individuals he made us to be. The ongoing legacy of Christ is manifested in the great cloud of people-witnesses who have been animated by his Spirit. This life of discipleship, however, is anything but intuitive. Much of the time it feels unnatural. Therefore, we need guidance. As usual, Jesus leads the way. As usual, it's a circuitous way.

Jesus was and is a master in the art of intrigue. The indirect ways he often spoke left his listeners alternately offended or delighted, but never disinterested. He was impossible to ignore or dismiss. Such is the power of human curiosity.

Recent studies in neuroscience have revealed the human brain's affinity for stories. In addition to hooking our attention, the best ones invite participation; they make room for us to find *ourselves* in the story. This is how Jesus created us: hardwired for stories. Storytelling, as a result, was his favored pedagogy. His parables, in particular, reflect (actually, they *anticipate*) Emily Dickinson's poetic wisdom to "tell all the truth but tell it slant."¹

When it comes to our spiritual formation, twenty-first century North American culture makes for a poor educational classroom, permeated as it is with the capitalistic values of acquisition, consumption, and production. But the parables turn those values on their head as they champion the almost laughable values of being least, last, little, and lost. For those who have ears that hear and eyes that see, the parables lead modern-day disciples to the trailhead of liberation: pointing us down the path that releases us from slavery into the freedom of God's capacious Kingdom.

As we read the parables of Jesus on their own terms, our worldview is reshaped from one that is oriented around the value systems of the empire to the unique and sometimes-offensive ways of the Kingdom. Accordingly, if we're not squirming a little, we're probably not reading them properly. They are designed, I am persuaded, to be compelling, perplexing, even corrective. That's why we keep coming back to them; they are an endless source of invitations to take yet another step closer to God.

As a pastor, my great hope, for myself and for others—to become fit for citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven—is accompanied by my great trust in the Scriptures to reveal the distinct ways of God. The parables of Jesus are among the most effective of biblical genres for doing exactly that. But like with anything that is old and familiar, their potency can become diminished over time. New translations, accompanied by various art forms and other creative interpretations, are needed in each generation to convey fresh invitations to the Way and the Truth of abundant Life to a world full of hungry hearts that often have misplaced affections and misdirected appetites.

Consequently, I'm always on the lookout for un gimmicky, trustworthy resources to lead people into a deepening intimacy with the Lover of our souls. In *Praying the Parables of Jesus*, S. K. Skinner and Steve Macchia have given us just such a gift, resulting in a beautiful example of Eugene's legacy.

Allow me to come in through the back door to share an idea I've been working on: The pastoral vocation, charging me with the care and the cure of souls, has deepened my appreciation for the sacraments. Over the years, I have come to see that baptism and communion (you could add up to another five, depending on your tradition) serve as a way to sanctify our sensibilities so that we grow to experience the divine presence everywhere. That Jesus chose such common elements as water, bread, and wine to be the tangible signs of our new life in him alerts us to the sacred presence that is all around us in the ordinariness of our days.

In other words, we don't have to be confined to a church or be located around a table or font to experience all life sacramentally. The Kingdom is pervasive in our world (consider the yeast) and there is, therefore, much to taste and see, to smell and hear and touch, to know that God is with us.

Similarly, I am persuaded that Jesus didn't exhaust all the possible images to describe the uniqueness of our new life as citizens of his Kingdom. He reached for the ones at hand to stimulate and to sanctify our imaginations, but that was just to prime the sensory pump. There are endless objects and experiences in this moment in church history that can be used as signs to awaken a sleepy world to the reality of God. And because everything about the gospel is livable, we ourselves ultimately become incarnate parables that enact the Good News and point people to the way of Jesus. Perhaps the genius of the parables is in their imprecision ("God's kingdom is

like”): They leave lots of room for us to enter them as participants and to give others a glimpse of what the Kingdom’s like.

I welcomed a new visitor to worship recently. She described an on-again, (mostly) off-again spiritual life that was as eclectic as the tattoos that adorned her arms. But with the birth of her daughter (“a little child shall lead them”), she was motivated to figure out what she believed. When she asked me for a recommendation of what to read in order to understand the uniqueness of the Christian faith, and to determine if it was right for her and her children, I’m embarrassed to admit that I didn’t have a ready answer for her; I could not come up with a title or a resource that would simultaneously inform her head and delight her heart in a way that introduced her to the Lover of her soul.

I hope she comes back soon, because now I do. As sure as it is in your hands, you can be assured that I will put it into hers.

*Eric Eugene Peterson
Colbert Presbyterian Church*

Introduction

Praying It Slant



A mustard seed. A lampstand. Weeds. Yeast. A pearl. Two sons. A fruit tree. Talents. Sheep and goats. A good Samaritan. A rich fool. A lost coin. A lost son. A persistent widow.

These are just some of the stories Jesus loved to tell—stories we love to hear. His rationale for the parables is pretty straightforward: “I tell stories,” he says in Matthew 13:13, “to create readiness, to nudge the people toward a welcome awakening.”

Jesus recognizes, of course, that a nudge is no guarantee that someone will wake up:

“You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. . . . In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it. I don’t want Isaiah’s forecast repeated all over again:

Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing.
Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a thing.
The people are stupid!
They stick their fingers in their ears
so they won’t have to listen;

They screw their eyes shut
so they won't have to look,
so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face
and let me heal them.

“But you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that see! And God-blessed ears—ears that hear!”

MATTHEW 13:11-16

How about you? Do you have eyes that see and ears that hear? We live in a time that is thick with information; we are weighed down by its heaviness. We have every definition, explanation, and perception on any subject, large or small, promptly available to us. We are patterned to encounter life through efficient, instantly gratifying means. We are impatient in our approach to life.

In an instant age, have we lost the capacity to wait? Even our prayer lives are vulnerable to the allure of instantaneous clarity. We come to God with lists, expectations, and requests, leaving little room for deep relationship, attentive listening, enhanced trust.

In such an environment, what are we missing? What significant insights might only be revealed slowly, gradually? What important decisions are being made haphazardly? Might our conversations, our relationships, be irreducibly complex?

Our age may be built around efficiency, but we were created to, as Eugene Peterson puts it, savor subtleties and relish ambiguities.² We were designed to be attentive, to be patient, to ponder. Like poems, or paintings, or beautiful sunsets, Jesus' parables honor this design. His stories are a way to “tell all the truth,” as Emily Dickinson writes, “but tell it slant.”³

Jesus' parables suggest that God desires to reveal himself, impart wisdom, and bestow gifts on his children in a way that cultivates with and within us “unhurried intimacies.”⁴ The Scriptures assure us that one day we will “see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us” (1 Corinthians 13:12). But maybe for now, our encounters with God in prayer are meant to take place in what seems like a fog or a mist as we let our affections for him and our trust in him increase.

Tilted Heads, Spinning Hearts

The parables of Jesus make our heads tilt with wonder and our hearts spin with curiosity.

We listen to each story and are arrested by the profundity of its message. One after another, each simple parable offers life change to the hearer. It points us toward the priorities of the Kingdom of Heaven and persistently invites us to embrace the way of Jesus.

It's really that straightforward, and yet the parables are consistently delivered by Jesus with titillating and unnerving obliqueness. We listen and are left tongue-tied for a moment. If we have eyes that see and ears that hear, then slowly and reflectively, with curiosity and awe, we begin to prayerfully wonder how best to respond.

In his book *Tell It Slant*, Eugene Peterson suggests that the parables are Jesus' primary means for teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven:

The parable . . . is a way of saying something that requires the imaginative participation of the listener. Inconspicuously, even surreptitiously, a parable *involves* the hearer. This brief, commonplace, unpretentious story is thrown into a conversation and lands at our feet, compelling notice. A parable is literally "something thrown alongside of" (*para*, alongside, plus *bolē*, thrown) to which our first response is, "What is *this* doing here?" We ask questions, we think, we imagine. . . . And then we begin seeing connections, relations. A parable is not ordinarily used to tell us something new but to get us to notice something that we have overlooked. . . . Or it is used to get us to take seriously something we have dismissed as unimportant because we have never seen the point of it. Before we know it, we are involved. . . .

A parable comes up on the listener obliquely, on the "slant."⁵

Jesus' message of the Kingdom of Heaven is consistent; conveyed with poignancy and grace; employing imagination, creativity, and invitation. His parables are captivating and powerful, winsome and life altering. Never too complex, always simple, direct, meaningful, relevant, and powerful. Never in a hurry, and with an uncanny

economy of words, Jesus expresses God's heart for the lost, the least, the lonely, the little, and the left behind. And he welcomes them home with wide-open arms.

While only some of the parables end with a cliff-hanger, we consistently find ourselves on the edge of the cliff, with a necessary, consequential next step in front of us. Each parable elicits a response. Choose today the Kingdom of Heaven, and all other things will be added unto you.

The parables are both the ends and the means of Jesus' truth telling. Their invitations to reorder our lives according to Kingdom priorities are gentle and piercing, filled with grace, truth, justice, and mercy. Guided by and toward God's loving truth, the parables (with the head-scratching manner of communication found in them) lead us into depth of insight and radical application.

A Liberated Lifestyle of Delightful Obedience

The cost of discipleship is steep, but it is designed to set us free. Jesus was sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit to live among us, invite us into his Kingdom, suffer on our behalf, and ultimately overcome death (on the cross) and be raised gloriously, miraculously, and triumphantly as our long-awaited Messiah. His teachings—challenging to the religious elite, comforting to everyday people with ears that hear—liberate his followers toward a lifestyle of delightful obedience to a better way of living: not arbitrary rules and regulations shaped by the patterns of the world but the cruciform way of humility, servanthood, love, and compassion.

The parables are a beautiful window into the dailiness of Jesus' life, lived among his generation and emulated, embodied, and empowered through his stories.

As we read the Gospels, we see Jesus embody prayerfulness in all his interactions. He invites his disciples to listen and pray, to watch and pray. He teaches them to pray:

“The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.”

MATTHEW 6:7-9

In this book we invite you to pray the parables of Jesus. These stories have been preserved for us to reflect upon and to inform our way of being in our generation. As we hold Jesus' stories in quiet stillness, listening for his Spirit to illuminate them and weave them into our own stories, their truths shape our thinking, transform our living, and inform our engagement with others. We become Christlike, Kingdom-ready, Good-News people.

Starting in the Scriptures

Today there is a clarion call toward a necessary adjustment in our spiritual lives: to return to the biblical text as the primary informer of our hearts and souls, our minds and our lives. Each time the Scriptures are heard, read, and received, the Word of God comes alive. The Scriptures inform our prayers as we seek to emulate the truth of God's Word in our daily lives.

We can easily forget, in the face of many distractions, that the Scriptures were given to us as a gift to treasure, an unparalleled source of strength, the delivery system for our training in Christlike prayerfulness. When we sit with the Word, we allow it to master us rather than seeking to master it. The Bible is no dead text; it is alive with meaning and purpose and life-changing value. For you and us. Today and every day.

Making Your Way Through

We begin in the Gospel of Matthew (with parallel passages provided). One parable that appears only in the Gospel of Mark will follow, and then we will conclude with parables from the Gospel of Luke. As we do so, we are convinced that we will become ever more prayer-full in our daily lives. You will notice that the Gospel of John is not included here. Very simply, John was more concerned about presenting Jesus in expanded and explained metaphor. The parables are therefore found only in the synoptic Gospels.

We will initially consider each parable with some contextual noticings:

- The opening paragraph will offer a summary of the parable and relevant context: Where is Jesus when he's teaching the parable, and how is Jesus sensitive to the person(s) he's teaching?

- A *simile* to the Kingdom (“like”/“as”) will consider how Jesus is sowing seed into the soil of our souls via a readily understandable comparison.
- *Contrast(s)* will be presented between Kingdom mindedness and worldliness: How is Jesus safeguarding the secrets of God?

As you reflect on the parable via *lectio divina* and *visio divina*, you will also notice Jesus highlighting conclusively the sovereignty and superiority of God. And you will see Jesus consistently and continuously teaching about the salvation and eternal life made possible exclusively by God. These are the big ideas of Jesus’ parables, and they are unearthed as we reflect on his teachings and pray into our best response.

As we move into the passage at hand, our chosen translation of the Bible is *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Scriptures into contemporary English. Eugene is one of our spiritual heroes. We greatly appreciate his desire to make the ancient Word of God widely accessible to the modern ear and his firm commitment to accurately represent the original text. A gifted linguist with the enthusiastic support of twenty biblical scholars who reviewed his work, Peterson sought to bring the language of the Bible into the language of today. We celebrate his work.

We encourage you to read the parables with another translation of your choice, alongside *The Message*, as you pray your way through the parables. Invite the Spirit of God into the deepest recesses of your soul as your teacher and trailblazer, comforter and guide.

Our invitation as you read each parable is as follows:

- Engage with the parables prayerfully, expectantly, and joyfully.
- Tilt your head with eager curiosity. Enter the scene of each parable and absorb the storyline and eternal meaning of the passage. Then stay alert to what God has for you on this day.
- Instead of reading with your mind alone, exercise your creativity and let your heart feel the deeper meaning of the texts at hand. Pray that the seeds of each parable will be planted deeply in your heart and soul.

INTRODUCTION

- Take it slow. Don't turn the page until you've had a relationally engaging experience with Jesus. Use this as an opportunity to cultivate unhurried intimacy with your Messiah, King, Savior, and Lord.

You'll be helped in this process by the two ancient practices of *lectio divina* and *visio divina*.

Lectio divina (which means "sacred reading") was the primary way the Scriptures were historically prayed within religious monastic communities. It was a practice that Benedict of Nursia established in the sixth century to help people imaginatively enter into and meet God in a Bible passage. It was the belief of the early church fathers and mothers that the biblical text was central to one's life of faith. To absorb the Word of God into the mind, heart, and soul of the listener was the primary means of building up and strengthening the church. As Eugene Peterson describes it,

Lectio divina is the deliberate and intentional practice of . . . listening to, accompanying, and following Jesus alive. . . . It is not just a skill that we exercise when we have a Bible open before us but a life congruent with the Word made flesh to which the Scriptures give witness.⁶

The spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* has been a principal means for generations of Christians to experience a divine encounter with God through the pages of the Bible. As Eugene Peterson writes in his introduction to *The Message*, "The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us."⁷ Slowly and prayerfully engaging with the Scriptures, we will follow the ancient intervals of reading and praying:

- stopping and resting for a moment and preparing to encounter God in the Bible (*silencio* is the Latin term; *pause* is the modern word we will use);
- doing a first reading and then making observations about the scriptural text (*lectio* or *read*);

- reflecting on what we observe in our reading of the text a second time and in ourselves as we read and notice (*meditatio* or *ponder*);
- engaging in conversation with God inspired by the text (*oratio* or *pray*) after reading the text another time and noting the prayer that's evoked;
- taking note of what this time with God has brought to the surface (*contemplatio* or *reflect*), even as we prayerfully reflect on the text one more time; and, finally,
- considering how this time with God translates into our lives with God (*incarnatio* or *live*) and choosing responsively how best to live out the text we've prayed. God may also be simply inviting us to rest in his grace and receive the parable as a gift for our souls.⁸

Another way to consider *lectio divina* is simply to acknowledge the powerful impact of a repetitive read of the same passage of Scripture—slowly, perhaps audibly, repeating the words over and over again, letting them wash over and deeply embed themselves into the fibers of our minds, hearts, and souls.

There is a resurgence of interest in and fascination with the use of *lectio divina* today—an excellent sign of spiritual renewal and one that we affirm and encourage, particularly in this text.

Visio divina is a complementary practice to *lectio divina*. Although *visio divina* is a relatively recent term, Christians have been contemplating God through art and nature for millennia. Early Christians painted Bible scenes in catacombs. In the Middle Ages, stained-glass cathedral windows and illuminated Bible manuscripts helped worshipers experience God in nonverbal ways. As we see in Greek and Russian Orthodox churches around the globe, venerating icons has been and is today an important way Orthodox Christians pray.

Visio divina uses images instead of words to heighten one's attentiveness to the meaning of the passage. To see in this context will include gazing, looking, observing, noticing—all the ways we see with our internal heart and mind's eye. Just as *lectio divina* invites people to meditate on Scripture, *visio divina* helps people pray

with art. *Visio divina* translates as “divine seeing,” and the practice uses silence and images to help worshipers reflect and respond to God in ways other than listening to sermons or singing praise songs.

Since there’s no single correct way to practice *visio divina*, there’s room to improvise. Whether alone or in a group, people tend to focus on a single work of art, often with a biblical or religious theme. You can also pray with your eyes while admiring a garden, walking along the ocean, hiking a mountain, or even spending time in an urban neighborhood. Some *visio divina* experiences include guided prompts and time to share insights.⁹

As you ponder and pray with the graphite drawings for each parable, and with their corresponding prompts for reflection, we hope that the artwork’s “tell it slant” nature will be yet another invitation to pray it slant with the parables. We follow the same sixfold process noted above, but instead of reading the text, we engage with a visual representation of Jesus’ imagery-rich storytelling (a uniquely designed image created by coauthor and artist S. K. Skinner) through questions for reflection and prayer.

It’s important to note that even though we are presenting the sixfold nature of *lectio* and *visio divina* in their traditional linear progression, we invite freedom and joy in their use. The more you become familiar with *lectio* and *visio divina*, the more you will encounter the Spirit’s often mysterious, creative, and surprising leading. We believe that to hold the process openhandedly is to remain openhearted. Let’s not become rigid like the Pharisees of old; instead, let’s remain agile and fluid and flexible, open to the continual move of the Spirit in, through, among, and all around us as eager disciples of Jesus.

Lectio and *visio divina* are all about praying the Word and, as the Word comes alive, participating in the Spirit’s prompting to live the Word. As we are led by the Spirit, our belief will lead to our action. We hope that these practices, creatively accompanied by word and beauty, will be instilled into your ongoing life of prayer. Slow down. Listen. Receive. Reflect. Obey. Remain open to the Spirit as you read, notice, and pray. This posture will lead you to the heart of God and to Kingdom-focused righteousness and faithfulness.

A Note on the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Older Son

This parable, told in Luke 15:11-32, is long and multifaceted. To give due consideration to the complexity of the parable, we've divided it into two parts ("35a: The Prodigal Son" and "35b: The Older Son"). You are free to go through both these sections in one sitting or spread them out over two. (Doing the latter would make this a forty-one-day journey through forty parables.)

Guidance for Group Use

In hopes of our readers using this material in their own personal prayer closets as well as with small groups, we offer the following guidance for group use. However, simply gathering with a group of peers who desire to go deep into the parables and share from their personal prayer experiences is terrific. A suggested basic overview for such a gathering looks like this:

1. Choose a time that works for everyone, perhaps weekly or biweekly. Commit to coming prepared to each gathering, working through a previously designated number of parables prior to arrival.
2. Begin your time together with casual fellowship and a simple form of welcome. Practice tangible hospitality before sitting together in a circle, then offer a time to be silent together in community before leading in prayer.
3. Invite everyone to offer personal reflections about their encounter with the designated parable(s). How did their *lectio* and/or *visio divina* experience deepen their understanding and application of the biblical text? Most importantly, how did the parable(s) deepen their intimacy with Jesus?
4. Try not to interrupt as each person shares from the heart. Listen as best as possible from the soul level. Only comment about what you heard if invited to do so, and then simply provide a verbatim of what you heard. Don't attempt to fix theology you disagree with, compare or contrast someone's story with yours, or compete with one another's insights. Simply be present with one another and practice pure listening.

INTRODUCTION

5. Take your time between sharing. Perhaps invite a minute or two of silence after each person's reflections. Slow down and be loving, supportive, empathetic, compassionate, and present. Treat one another's sharing as a sacred trust offered and received in love.
6. After everyone has had the opportunity to share about their experience, invite prayers for one another as you continue to pray it slant in the coming days. Determine the next time to meet, and continue onward with this shared experience.
7. To reiterate the second item above, practice hospitality—both tangibly and intangibly—for all who come and offer themselves in this prayer experience. Don't be rushed even as the time comes to an end. Leisurely release and bless one another as you depart.

Notice how praying the parables transforms your personal time with the Lord in your prayer closet. Talk with your spiritual companions about your experience. Combine your individual experiences with community, and watch how your friendships in Christ are enhanced. We trust that by practicing the traditional phases of lectio divina as you pray the parables of Jesus you will incorporate this way of praying the Scriptures hereafter. Although the visio divina questions will be unique for each parable (while following the ancient order), the lectio divina queries will remain consistent for the sake of learning this form of prayer repetitively: silencio/pause, lectio/read, meditatio/ponder, oratio/pray, contemplatio/reflect, and incarnatio/live. We pray that the Word of God will come alive in your heart and soul with each and every prayerful consideration of the parables of Jesus.

A story-rich prayer life awaits you.

THE LAMP ON A STAND

Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-18; 11:33-36



In the Sermon on the Mount, speaking to a great crowd, Jesus describes how his followers are to make the way of God known. It's never to be hidden or withheld. For the eager hearer, especially one inclined toward the voice of Jesus, this message offers comfort and courage, conviction and hope. Go public. No secrets. Let your light shine.

SIMILE. Lamps are created to be lit, dispelling the darkness that engulfs daily life. They are to be not only ignited but also free of distraction or obstruction. Anyone who considers hiding a light, keeping it under a bucket or hidden under a table, isn't using it correctly. Our lives, fashioned around Jesus' life, are to brightly illuminate the path so that all may see.

CONTRAST. The light of a well-lit lamp consumes the darkness that surrounds it. Light and life go hand in glove, as do darkness and death. The contrast between light and darkness is palpable, and a covered-over lamp withholds the light from shining forth as it's meant to. The truth of the Kingdom life of God is to be shining brightly for all to see.

LECTIO DIVINA



PAUSE. Sit silently and reverently with the Lord and invite him to make his presence known to you during this prayerfully reflective experience.

READ. Read the parable of Jesus a few times, either silently or aloud. Begin to notice what words and/or phrases pop off the page and land in your heart.

PONDER. Meditate on the parable, lingering with each word on the page. Note what's being formed in your heart and mind around the meaning of the parable.

PRAY. Formulate a prayer based on what you're noticing in the parable. Pay particular attention to the prompting of the Spirit toward one aspect of the parable.

REFLECT. Hold the parable like a diamond or a prism, looking at it from as many angles as possible. Notice any nuance or texture to the parable that feels invitational.

LIVE. Incarnate the truth you've discovered for your life today. Ask the Lord if there is one aspect of today's parable that you need to emulate in your sphere of influence. Or simply receive the parable as a gift for your soul.



THE LAMP ON A STAND

Matthew 5:14-16

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

See also Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-18; 11:33-36

VISIO DIVINA



PAUSE. Take a moment to ask the Lord to help you focus on what he has for you as you pray with this drawing, *Shine*.

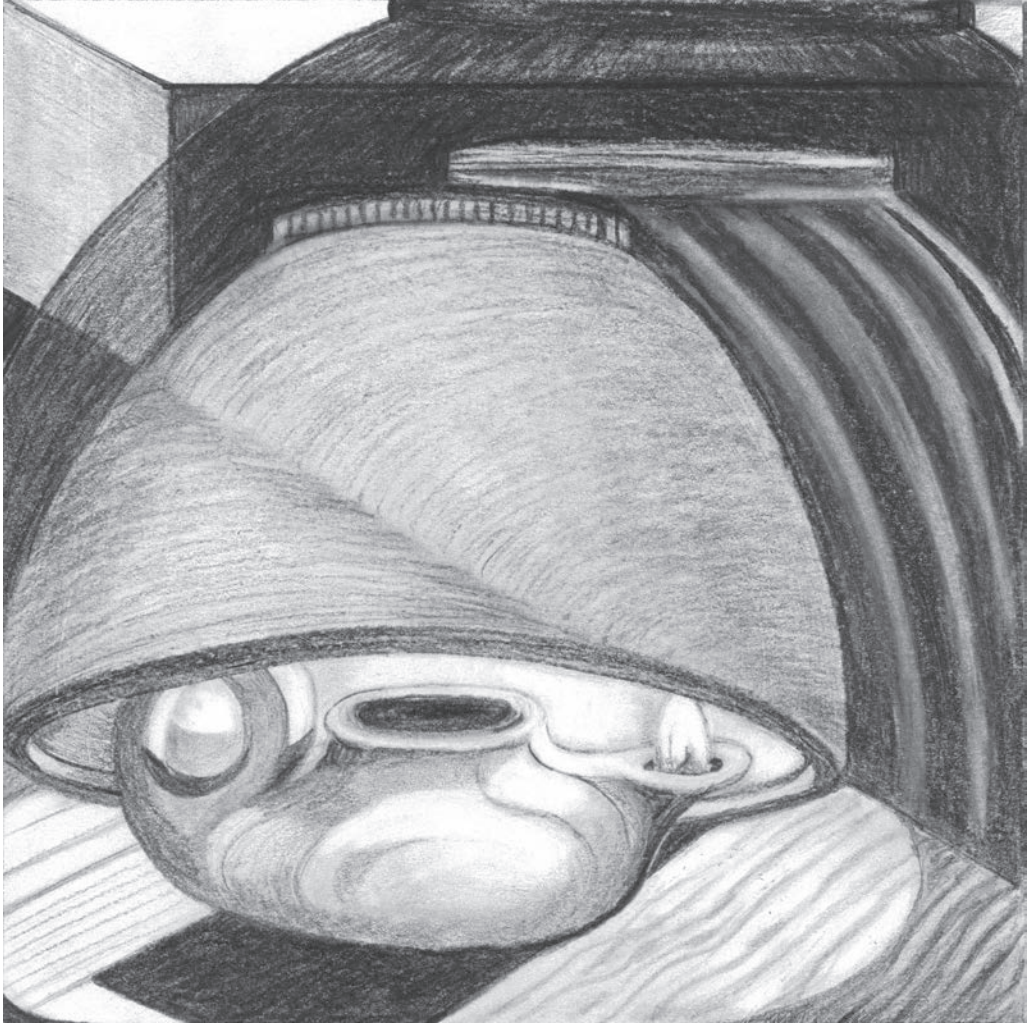
SEE. Let your eyes travel from the foreground into the background of the drawing and back again, from light to shadows, from clarity to darkness. How do contrast and repetition in the drawing play with the themes of the parable?

PONDER. How do you imagine the movement of the bowl or the bucket? Is it being lowered or lifted? Consider what each movement reveals as light is either hidden or allowed to spill out into the open. What emotions, memories, or curiosities arise in you?

PRAY. Be still with the Lord. Talk to him about what you are noticing.

REFLECT. What self-awareness (personal thought or reaction) or God-awareness (sense of God with you) occurs in your prayer? Look at the drawing once more. Is there anything new this time?

LIVE. Consider how this parable translates into your present-day life. Do you sense an invitation from the Lord to live differently?



SHINE