

BRIERCREST

BLST 849 NT Specialty: Parables and the Journey of Faith

Fall Semester, Online November 23-27, 2026

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Course Dates: November 23rd to 27th, 2026

3 Credit Hours

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Many of the best-known words of Jesus in the New Testament are drawn from the parables, an intriguing array of short stories scattered throughout the gospel narratives. Even titles of parables such as “the prodigal son” or “the good Samaritan” are used in general culture, although awareness of the content and context might be a bit sketchy. A staple of sermons and Sunday school lessons, most of the parables are very familiar to the church community, but poorly interpreted, with a lazy drift into cliché or easy moralism. This course will survey the rich catalogue of parables with fresh eyes—ranging from the humble mustard seed and the tenacious friend and midnight, all the way to the toxic weeds in the garden and the nasty tenants of the vineyard—and aim to rediscover their powerful theological nuances and breathtaking Christology for a new generation of readers inside and outside the household faith.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the place of the parabolic imagination when studying the Bible, and to acknowledge the value of such an awareness for an integrated theology.
2. To appreciate the prophetic intensity and artistic complexity of the parabolic genre in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and to discern how the various literary elements contribute to the theological landscape of the canon.
3. To undertake a careful analysis of selected parables and become acquainted with the skills and signals involved in a close reading of these texts.
4. To take preliminary steps toward disseminating our research on the world of the parables to various audiences in the church and the larger academy.

COURSE TEXTS

Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).

Keith Bodner, *Exploring the Financial Parables of Jesus: The Economy of Grace and the Generosity of God* (Baker Academic, 2025).

Any other course materials will be posted electronically on Canvas.
We should also have a copy of the Bible at hand for each online session.

Students are expected to refer Briercrest Seminary's Format and Style Guides and Guide for Writing Research Papers, available as PDF documents here: <https://www.briercrestseminary.ca/currentstudents/documents#fs-panel-21948>

These texts are available in store and online at the Briercrest Bookstore: <http://briercrest.ca/bookstore>.

Students are responsible for course materials and communication on Canvas (<https://briercrest.instructure.com>) and their myBriercrest.ca email account.

OUTLINE OF TOPICS

Each day of our course will contain audio lectures ("Bodcasts"), along with scheduled Zoom meetings throughout the week. There will be questions for discussion each day, and occasionally some supplemental readings that will be posted on our Canvas page.

Part 1: Entering the World of the Parables

Our initial discussion orients us to the background of the *parable* in the Hebrew Bible, and examples can be found in the wisdom and prophetic materials of the Old Testament. We will briefly review the famous case of Nathan's parable of *the Ewe Lamb* in 2 Samuel 12, but also discuss *the Lion, the Bear, and the Snake* in Amos 5:18-20 ("A man was attacked by a lion. By sheer accident he was able to save himself, but then a bear ran at him. Again he escaped. With the last of his strength he made it to his house and just barely slammed the heavy door in the bear's face. Gasping for breath, he leaned his hands against the wall—and a snake bit him. The bite was fatal") and the *Ruined Man* in Proverbs 5:11-14. With that background in mind, we'll move to the New Testament and the greatest exponent of the genre, the Lord Jesus in the three synoptic Gospels. In broad strokes, there are a few categories, which for our purposes we can refer to as financial parables, parables of the daily grind, and apocalyptic parables. Our discussion will include a financial example (*Treasure in the Field*), a parable of the daily grind (*Leaven*), and a parable of the end times (the *Net* in Matthew 13) to bring our first lecture to a conclusion.

Part 2: Abiding in the Field

Our second lecture begins with some further reflections on wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, along with a definition of the term parable and what it means across the biblical canon. We will follow up this discussion with some concrete examples, beginning with the famous parable of the *Sower* in Mark 4. On the surface, the parable is quite straightforward: a farmer sows his seed, but only seed that falls into the good soil bears fruit, and the rest are essentially useless. While it is often interpreted as an allegory of conversion—that is, we should expect lots of rejection of the word—in our discussion we will also ask if it is a parable of sanctification, that is, about living an abundant and vibrant life of discipleship. We continue with a look at the parable of *Salt* in Mark 9:50 ("Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other"), and the variations that occur in Matthew and Luke. Speaking of variations, the lengthy parable of the *Prodigal Sons* in Luke has an interesting parallel in the *Two Sons* of Matthew 21:28-32, and we will discuss the similarities and differences between these stories of contrasting offspring. Our discussion also includes attention to the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* as we consider the values of the Kingdom of God.

Part 3: House Building

A cluster of parables are centered around a household or related construction sites, and in Part 3 of our course, attention turns to this particular grouping of stories. We start with the familiar *Tower Builder* parable, and then turn to the end of the Sermon on the Mount and examine the background and imagery of the *House on the Rock* that brings the longest discourse of Jesus to a crescendo. We then consider a pair of stories where home ownership looms large, and a nocturnal temporal setting is prominent: the audacious *Friend at Midnight* in Luke 11:5-8 refuses to take “no” for an answer, while the *Thief at Night* in Luke 12:39-40 and Matthew 24:43-44 warns of a clear and present danger that has relevance for every reader, because this thief wants to steal something more valuable than jewelry or electronics. Also in this unit of our course we respond to the *Banquet Invitation* in Luke 14:15-24, as an evidently wealthy patron sponsors a lavish feast, but the excuses for rejecting this offer are really weak. There is a similar parable of the *Royal Wedding* in Matthew 22:1-14, but also enough differences to consider these as separate parables where the guests do not make the wisest choices.

Part 4: Return of the King, Part 1

In many Christian circles there has been a fascination with the “end times,” as writings such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series readily testify. Despite these and other sensational publications, a robust doctrine of eschatology has long been the hallmark of a balanced and sound biblical theology, with careful thinking about the end of our lives, the return of the Lord Jesus, and a final phase of global turbulence and the judgment of humanity. Numerous parables have an apocalyptic (“unveiling”) angle and provide insight into the end times, and in this section of our course we begin with the *Wheat and the Weed* in Matthew 13:24-30, with its subsequent interpretation in vv. 36-43. Next, we turn to the much shorter parable of the *Mustard Seed* in Luke 13:18-19 (Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches”) with parallels in Matthew 13:31-32 and Mark 4:30-32. Also, we undertake an extensive reading of the parable of the *Oil Lamps* in Matthew 25:1-13 in order to provide an overview of parables where some facet of the end times is unveiled.

Part 5: Return of the King, Continued

Our conversation on eschatology and challenging issues of the apocalyptic genre continues with two lengthy parables as the focus of this lecture. We begin with a review of the parable of the *Talents* in Matthew 25:14-30, where, as we recall, a master gathers his servants and entrusts his wealth to them before leaving on a journey, and a notable feature is that three servants receive unequal amounts based on their individual abilities—five talents, two talents, and one talent—and we should stress that a talent is a monetary term, and a single talent is a massive sum equal to about twenty years of labor. But we also analyze the variations on this parable in Luke 19:11-27 where ten servants each receive the exact same amount (one mina, a much smaller amount, roughly equal to about three months of wages), and we will explore the implications of such differences. We then turn to the *Vineyard Tenants* in Mark 12:1-11, which could be understood as a summary of the Bible in “2 minutes or less.” Along with other versions in Matthew 21:33-44 and Luke 20:9-18, we examine the particular contexts and extraordinary Christology that emerges from this parable that encapsulates the Passion Narrative in unique ways.

Part 6: Servants and Masters

Having surveyed a number of stories with masters and employees, we now turn to another group and start with one of the least known of the parables, the *Dissected Servant* in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46 that provide a vivid and cautionary warning about reckless stewardship. We then move to the *Fig Tree Without Fruit* in Luke 13:6-9 and the combination *Patch* and *Wineskins* in Mark 2:21-22 (“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins”) with its variations in Matthew 9:16-17 and Luke 5:36-38. Moreover, we also return to the *Rich Man and Lazarus* in Luke 16:19-31 in order to discuss a controversial issue: does this parable provide any geospatial insight on the afterlife, or is there a rather different purpose (e.g., N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 255, “The parable is not, as often supposed, a description of the afterlife, warning people to be sure of their ultimate destination”) within the plot of Luke’s Gospel?

Part 7: Matters Near and Far

This lecture begins with consideration of a short and well known parable in Luke 18:25—“it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God”—and we will assay whether there was an ancient gate in Jerusalem that is referred to, or whether some other aim is in view. After that, we turn to the lengthy account of the *Sheep and Goats* found in Matthew 25:31-46, and although some interpreters refer to it as a prophetic description of the final judgment, most of the hallmarks of the parabolic genre are present even though it starts in a unique way: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” In this lecture we will also evaluate what has been considered the most politically incorrect parable of all time in Mark 7:24-30 (cf. Matt 15:21-28): “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.” Based on the geographical context in the vicinity of Tyre and involving an outsider, what is the best way to interpret this passage?

Part 8: The End in Mind

Our eighth lecture begins with the last of seven parables in Matthew 13, in verse 52, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” What are the options for interpreting this parable of the *Storeroom*, and why is there a reference to scribes or teachers of the law as disciples? We also explore the genre of the embodied parable—and there are some Old Testament antecedents—in Matthew 17:24-27 where Jesus asks, *From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes, from their own children or from others?* We will then conclude with a parable written, of all people, by the Sadducees, as they ask a trick question in Mark 12:18-27 about an unfortunate widow who had seven husbands: “At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” Matthew, Mark and Luke all include this parable, and we will explore the best interpretive options for this fascinating dialogue.

ASSIGNMENTS

Pre-Course Assignment:

1. Two reports (single-spaced, and about three pages each) on our course textbooks (*Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, and *Exploring the Financial Parables of Jesus: The Economy of Grace and the Generosity of God*), due no later than Friday, November 20th prior to our week of class. Please present these reports as a WORD document and email them to the professor, and discuss both the content of the text and provide a summary of what the student has learned (10%).

Mid-Course Assignment:

2. End of course reflections: after our final Zoom meeting there will be an “end of course reflection” assignment (due by the close of the day on Friday) providing an opportunity to respond to six questions from our class discussions (10%).

Post-Course Assignments:

3. Creative Responses: *The Workshop* (50%). During the course of our study, we will explore a series of “Workshop” discussion questions (all of which are listed below, with examples such as: “What are the main contours of the parable of the *Net*, and how should it be interpreted?”; “What does the *Thief at Night* in Luke 12:39-40 (cf. Matthew 24:43-44) want to steal, and what is this parable primarily about?”; “Comment on the main features of the the *Rich Man and Lazarus* parable in Luke 16:19-31”; “Discuss the parable of the *Sheep and Goats* found in Matthew 25:31-46”). The student will provide a written response of approximately 300 words for each question, and the completed workshop should be emailed to the professor as a WORD file not later than **January 22nd**.

4. Research and Reflection essay: (30%). This is a standard 2000 word paper, single-spaced in Chicago format to be emailed to the professor as a WORD file no later than **January 22nd**. Topics can include a close reading of the parables we have studied (or any other that might be of interest).

Workshop Questions:

Part 1:

- 1) Comment on the Old Testament background for the genre of the parable, and review the example of 2 Samuel 12: how does the parable work, and what does it aim to accomplish, and why would it be used?
- 2) Still with the Old Testament material, comment on other parabolic examples such as Amos 5:18-20 and Proverbs
- 3) Discuss the meaning of the *Treasure in the Field* in Matthew 13.
- 4) In your opinion, how does the parable of the *Leaven* illuminate the message of the gospel?
- 5) What are the main contours of the parable of the *Net*, and how should it be interpreted?

Part 2:

- 6) Discuss the parable of the *Sower* and include your opinion about whether it is about conversion or sanctification.
- 7) What are your thoughts on the parable of *Salt* that can found scattered throughout the Gospels?
- 8) After reviewing the long parable of the *Prodigal Sons* in Luke, have any new insights emerged?

9) Compare Matthew's parable of the Two Sons with the version in Luke: do you think this is a variation on the same story, or a different parable altogether?

10) Share your thoughts on the parables of the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* in relation to the Kingdom of God.

Part 3:

11) Outline the similarities and differences that you notice in the parables of the *Tower Builder* and *House on the Rock*?

12) Provide some ideas about the parable of the *Friend at Midnight* in Luke 11:5-8 and how it should be interpreted.

13) What does the *Thief at Night* in Luke 12:39-40 (cf. Matthew 24:43-44) want to steal, and what is this parable primarily about?

14) Comment on the parable of the *Banquet Invitation* in Luke 14:15-24 and evaluate the plot of this episode and the various excuses that proffered by those who were invited.

15) Compare Luke's *Banquet Invitation* with the parable of the *Royal Wedding* in Matthew 22:1-14 and reflect on some similarities and differences that you observe.

Part 4:

16) Define the terms "eschatology" and "apocalyptic," and explain how these concepts are illustrated in some of the parables of Jesus.

17) Discuss the plot and purpose of the parable of the *Wheat and the Weed* in Matthew 13:24-30.

18) The subsequent interpretation of the *Wheat and Weed* in Matthew occurs in Matthew 13:36-43. Why is there a delay, and how does the explanation illuminate the meaning of the parable?

19) Comment on the importance of the parable of *Mustard Seed* in Luke and its variations in Matthew and Mark.

20) Reflect on the parable of the *Oil Lamps* in Matthew 25:1-13 and its interpretation.

Part 5:

21) Outline the main events, characters, and interpretation of the parable of the *Talents* in Matthew 25:14-30

22) Discuss the variations of the parable of the *Talents* in Luke 19:11-27 and the unique contribution of each story.

23) Provide a reading of the *Vineyard Tenants* parable in Mark 12:1-11.

24) Identify some variations of the *Vineyard Tenants* parable in Matthew 21:33-44 and reflect on the significance of this version.

25) Still with the *Vineyard Tenants* parable, comment on any other variations in Luke 20:9-18 and overall meaning: in your opinion, is it a short summary of the Bible in 2 minutes or less?

Part 6:

26) Why is the *Dissected Servant* somewhat neglected in preaching circles, and what do think is the primary message of this parable?

27) Give your impression of the *Fig Tree Without Fruit* in Luke 13:6-9.

28) Provide a short analysis of the dual parables of the *Patch* and *Wineskins* in Mark 2:21-22 and its variations in Matthew and Luke.

29) Comment on the main features of the the *Rich Man and Lazarus* parable in Luke 16:19-31.

30) More specifically, in your opinion does the parable of the *Rich Man and Lazarus* provide a realistic description of the afterlife, or is there a different purpose to this story in Luke?

Part 7:

- 31) Provide your reflections on the *Camel and the Needle's Eye* in Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25.
- 32) Discuss the parable of the *Sheep and Goats* found in Matthew 25:31-46.
- 33) Compare the *Wheat and the Weed* parable in Matthew 13 with the *Sheep and Goats*.
- 34) In your opinion, is Mark 7:24-30 ("First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs") rightly considered to be the most politically incorrect of all the parables?
- 35) After analyzing the parallel story in Matthew 15:21-28, what further insights emerge with respect to the powerfully sketched female character in both versions of the parable?

Part 8:

- 36) How would you interpret the parable of the *Storeroom* in Matthew 13:52, and why does it come at the end of a sequence of seven parables in this section of Matthew?
- 37) Discuss the genre of the embodied parable at its Old Testament background, and then discuss the plot and main characters in Matthew 17:24-27.
- 38) Comment on this parable of Jesus and how it contributes to Matthew 17:24-27: "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?"
- 39) Who are the Sadducees, and why does it matter that they are the writers of the parable of the *Unfortunate Widow* in Mark 12:18-27?
- 40) In your opinion, what is the overall meaning of the parable of the *Unfortunate Widow* (including the variations in Matthew 22:23-31 and Luke 20:27-40) and its contribution to a larger biblical theology?

SEMINARY CALENDAR

Students are expected to be aware of the policies that govern course work at Briercrest Seminary, all of which are published in the current Seminary Calendar: [Seminary Calendar](#).

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to attend 100% of each modular they register for. If this is impossible, arrangements must be made with the course professor. A maximum of 1 full day of class can be foregone. Students should request to withdraw from the course or move the course to an audit if additional time is missed.

Course Schedules

Classes begin at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning and run a minimum of 30 hours through the course of the week. The schedule is determined by the course professor. Students should check the syllabus for specifics. When the syllabus does not state class times, students are responsible to check with the professor prior to making travel plans.

Assignment Submission

All assignments must be submitted no later than eight weeks after the last day of class as stated in the syllabus. The correct due dates will be clearly noted in the syllabus and each faculty member will state in their syllabus how assignments should be submitted. Assignments submitted within a week after the due date will be accepted with a 10 per cent penalty. For additional information refer to the late assignment policy or the extension policy in the [academic calendar](#).

Return of Graded Assignments

Professors are expected to return graded assignments within six weeks of the due date. If they fail to do so, students may submit an inquiry to the [Seminary](#). If an extension is granted, the professor is no longer obligated to meet this deadline.

Academic Honesty

Students are accountable to perform each task according to principles of academic honesty. Please refer to pages 25-26 in the [academic calendar](#) for more information.

Academic Accommodations

Any student with a disability, injury, or illness who may need academic accommodations should discuss them with the course instructor after contacting the Student Success Centre in person (Room #215), by telephone (1-306-756-3230) or by email (studentsuccesscentre@briercrest.ca).