



A 4-WEEK STUDY
FROM THE
GOSPELS ON

JESUS

FROM OUR ANNUAL *TEACHING STRATEGY*



please
explain



WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED WITH . . .

STEFANY BREMER & PORFIRIO CALDERA

OVERVIEW



STUFF FOR THIS SERIES

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WEEK 2

- ▶ [Game](#)
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- ▶ [Discussion Guide](#)
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WEEK 3

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SERIES OVERVIEW

Some things are hard to understand — like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

WEEK 1

This week, we'll unpack the parable of the wise and foolish builders and a praise from the Psalms about God's love standing firm.

BIG IDEA: God's words are a firm foundation.

BIBLE: Matthew 7:24-27; Psalm 89:1-4; Matthew 4:4

WEEK 2

This week, we'll be challenged by the parable of the workers in the vineyard and a Psalm that proclaims God's abundant love.

BIG IDEA: In God's kingdom, everyone belongs.

BIBLE: Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 145:8-14; Ephesians 2:8-9 3:28

WEEK 3

This week, we'll discover the meaning of the parable of the sower and hear from the Psalms about how we follow God.

BIG IDEA: God's words invite a response.

BIBLE: Matthew 13:1-23; Psalm 119:105-112; John 6:60-61 & 66

WEEK 4

This week, we'll unpack the parable of the mustard seed and how during trials, David, the writer of this Psalm knew God was compassionate and gracious.

BIG IDEA: God's kingdom is always growing.

BIBLE: Matthew 13:31-32; Psalm 86:11-13; 1 Corinthians 3:7-9

MEMORY VERSE: "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end." – Psalm 119:112 (NIV)

HOW TO DISCIPLE DURING THIS SERIES

We all know teenagers don't get disciplined just by sitting through a message every week. So here's what else we've provided to **help your students develop more consistent spiritual habits.**

THE 4 SPIRITUAL HABITS

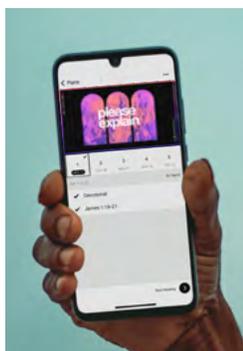
We feature one of Grow's 4 Spiritual Habits every month with a unique activity or experience. But the 4 Spiritual Habits show up year-round! **Here are a few of the places you can spot them in this series:**

SPEND TIME WITH GOD: Weeks 1 and 3 are all about spending time with God by reading, studying, and responding to Scripture. Plus, all four weeks will give students guided questions to help them reflect on the parables in this series as you read them.

SPEND TIME WITH OTHERS: In Weeks 2 and 4, students will be invited to join (and invite others) into the community that is God's kingdom. Plus, in Week 2, they'll be challenged to extend God's grace to others when it's difficult.

USE YOUR GIFTS: In Week 4, students will be challenged to bring heaven to earth by using their gifts (like showing others compassion, sharing the good news of Jesus, practicing generosity, and more).

SHARE YOUR STORY: In Weeks 2 and 4, students will be invited to invite others into God's kingdom by sharing the good news of Jesus with their words and actions.

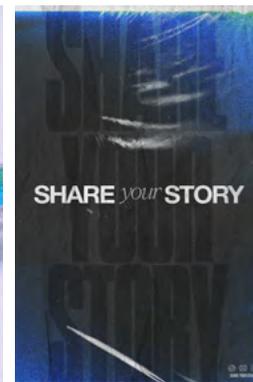


DEVOTIONALS

To help students regularly **spend time with God**, every series comes with daily readings and devotionals through The Bible App. You can access them on your browser or app [right here](#). And don't forget about your [Volunteer Devotional!](#)

DISCIPLESHIP ACTIVITY

If you're following along with our scope and sequence, our discipleship activity this quarter is Sent To Heal Challenge, an activity to help students **share their story**. We also made you some [posters and graphics](#) for this quarter's habit you can print, display, or share online.



MEMORY VERSE

Try challenging students to memorize a verse that corresponds with the Big Ideas or themes of this series. Here's the verse we chose — and [we made graphics](#) you can post, print, or show on screen too!



HOW TO PROGRAM FOR THIS SERIES

Outside of your teaching time, we have a few programming ideas to help this series really come to life — everything from how to **design your room**, to which **games to play**, to what **music to play and sing**.



ROOM DESIGN

First, you'll need a backdrop. There are tons of ways to create a backdrop that you can re-use multiple times each year. Check out [this post](#) for a list of ideas. For this series, we recommend using foam insulation boards.

To add some dimension to your room design create boxes with question marks. You could do this by simply buying all different shapes of cardboard boxes, then painting them with colors to match the series graphic. Using a stencil, draw and then paint a question mark on all sides of the box. Once you've created multiple of these boxes feel free to set them up however you want.



GAMES

If you have a designated time for games before your worship and teaching time, we have a few suggestions for games you can play! Since this series talks a lot about parables and words, the games for this series all have an element of words. To get the instructions and graphics for each game, click the images to the right or visit the

Games section of your Grow Students dashboard.

- [Gif That Parable](#)
- [Explain The Slang](#)
- [In So Many Words](#)
- [Please Explain](#)

MUSIC

Here are a few on-theme worship songs you may want to feature throughout this series . . .

- **"Until Grace"** (Tauren Wells, Gary LeVox)
- **"Promises"** (Maverick City Music | TRIBL feat. Joe L Barnes & Naomi Raine)
- **"Build My Life"** (Housefires)
- **"Cornerstone"** (Hillsong Worship)
- **"Your Will, Your Way"** (Bryan & Katie Torwalt)
- **"The Anchor"** (Crowder)
- **"His Kingdom Now Is Come** (Behold! Behold!)
(Porter's Gate)
- **"Crashing In"** (Cory Asbury)
- **"Let The Light In"** (Cody Carnes)
- **"Know You Will"** (Benjamin Hastings and Hillsong UNITED)

And if you want to sing or sample a non-worship song or two (maybe as an opener, a closer, a bonus song during your program), try some of these . . .

- **"Without You"** (Social Club Misfits, Riley Clemmons)
- **"I Trust You"** (Jonathan Traylor)
- **"Life Is Good"** (Courtne Ramirez feat. Apollo LTD)
- **"Lights In The City"** (Tedashii)
- **"Help Is On The Way"** (Unspoken)

We've added these songs to our [Grow Students \(Volume 6\) Spotify playlist](#) for your personal use only, according to Spotify's [terms and conditions](#). For more information on how to use copyrighted music in your services legally, [read this!](#)

GRAPHIC DESIGN

We give you editable graphics so you can make everything your own! If you're going to **edit our graphics** or **create something brand new** . . .

Use this font! Download it [here](#).

Helvetica Neue

And use these colors!

-  HEX: #FFDCDD
CMYK: 1-15-7-00
-  HEX: #FF8287
CMYK: 1-60-36-00
-  HEX: #B65AFF
CMYK: 45-64-00-00
-  HEX: #3F369E
CMYK: 90-93-00-00

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THIS SERIES

SHOPPING LIST

If you want to try all of our suggestions for this series, here's what you'll need to buy, borrow, Google, or dig for in your storage closet . . .

WEEK 1:

- [2 easels with built-in paper rolls](#)
- Jumbo permanent markers
- Jumbo markers or highlighters in gray, yellow, and green
- Wire fencing
- A round side table
- Wire
- Wire cutters
- Wooden dowels
- Plastic balls
- A children's storybook that means something to you
- A balance beam or long piece of sturdy wood
- Pink, purple, and black index cards
- Black and white permanent markers
- Tape
- The song "Build My Life" (Housefires)

WEEK 2:

- A simple game like [ring toss](#), [bean bag toss](#), or shooting a basketball
- Prizes
- A short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-1:41) from [Nacho Libre](#)
- An image of a gate like [this one](#)
- The handouts provided in your Week 2 folder
- Pens

WEEK 3:

- [Oversized index cards](#)
- Velcro strips
- A large marker
- Washi tape
- A large board or blank wall
- A short clip from a video [like this one](#) (2:30-5:04) of a dad following his kids' instructions on how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich
- Small succulents
- [Small terracotta planters](#)
- [Paint markers](#)
- [Plant markers](#)
- Pens
- The song "Future/Past" (John Mark McMillan)

WEEK 4:

- A few images of people who achieved sudden stardom
- At least one [16-foot-long jump rope](#)
- [Mustard seeds](#)
- The handouts provided in your Week 4 folder
- Pens
- The song "Kingdom Come" (Common Hymnal)

PREP LIST

WEEK 1:

- For **Wordle in the Wild**, use five sheets of paper on two easels to create ten blank [Wordle](#)-inspired game boards. For more details, see your Teaching Guide!
- For **Giant Kerplunk!**, create at least one giant Kerplunk! game. [Here is a tutorial!](#)
- Get a copy of **A Children's Storybook** that meant something to you as a child.
- For the **Above It All Balance Beam**, borrow a balance beam from a local school or gym (or make one with a long piece of sturdy wood).

WEEK 2:

- For **Playing Favorites**, choose and set up a simple game to play, and get some prizes.
- Print one copy of the **handout** provided for every two students. Cut each handout into halves.

WEEK 3:

- For **Simile Shuffle**, use washi tape to create a fill-in-the-blank template on the wall or board, which students will race to complete with common similes. Do the same for **Seeds & Similes**. For more details, see your Teaching Guide!
- For **Adopt a Succulent**, plant one succulent in each planter and arrange them on a table, along with the markers

WEEK 4:

- For **Someone's Sudden Stardom**, choose a few images of people who achieved sudden stardom that your students would recognize.
- Print one copy of the **handout** provided for every two students. Cut each handout into halves.

WHAT TO CUSTOMIZE

You know your students better than we do, so there are probably some things you'd like to change about this series before you start teaching. Here's what you'll need to update if you make changes . . .

- **TEACHING:** Add your own stories, jokes, and any pop culture references that make sense for your group. You can edit each message using the Word documents provided or the [Grow Message Builder](#).
- **DISCUSSIONS:** If you make any changes to your teaching, make sure your discussion questions reflect those changes. You can edit these using the Word documents provided.
- **GRAPHICS:** We've provided graphics in your [Graphics & Video](#) folder already, but we've also provided blank slides in case you need to make your own.
- **PRESENTATION:** Customize your weekly presentations in [SLIDR](#) and use it to show images and videos during your weekly program. Each week of Grow Curriculum comes pre-loaded with content to get you started.
- **EMAILS & HUBS:** Customize and send the [volunteer and parent emails](#) as well as the [Volunteer and Parent Hubs](#) content we've provided for this series to keep everyone's grown-ups in the loop.

WHAT TO COMMUNICATE

To make sure your students, volunteers, and parents are in the loop, follow along with the Marketing Checklist we've provided for this series to make sure you've got everything covered, like . . .

- **STUDENTS:** Throughout the month, post the [Graphics & Video](#) we've provided on social media, like the Big Idea images and Bumper Video. Post the [One-Minute Sermon Videos](#) we've provided or use the **One-Minute Sermon Scripts [JUMP]** to film a recap video each week and post it on social media.
- **FAMILIES:** Before you begin teaching this series, send parents the [Parent Email](#) we've provided (after you've customized it for your ministry, of course). After each week of the series, post the Big Idea images wherever you talk to parents online. And don't forget to update your [Parent Hub](#) with the information they need for this series!
- **VOLUNTEERS:** Before you teach each week of this series, send volunteers the weekly [Volunteer Emails](#) we've provided (after you've customized it for your ministry, of course). Before each week of the series, post the Big Idea images wherever you talk to volunteers online and make sure they have their Discussion Guides in advance! And don't forget to update your [Volunteer Hub](#) with the information they need for this series!

And hey! When you post on social media, **don't forget to use the #growcurriculum hashtag and tag us @stuffyoucanuse** to share your ideas and stories with our team and with other churches who are using Grow!

HOW TO HACK THIS SERIES

Every ministry is different. Whether you're teaching middle schoolers, high schoolers, teenagers with special needs, or all three, here's how to hack this series to fit your unique and diverse audience.

HACKS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

REVISE

To make this series more accessible for middle schoolers, here's what to adjust . . .

In Week 1, don't joke about the use of security blankets or other comfort items. When you tell a personal story about a security item you used as a child, remember some of your middle schoolers (especially the youngest ones) might still use security blankets, comfort toys, or special routines that make them feel safe. As you tell your story, be careful not to make fun of these things and defuse any laughter by talking about how helpful your security item was to you.

In Week 2, prepare your players in advance for Playing Favorites. Since middle schoolers can sometimes have difficulty regulating big feelings (and those feelings have the potential to distract them from your teaching time), choose your players in advance for Playing Favorites and let them in on the secret of the demonstration they'll be a part of. Otherwise, you might end up with a grumpy middle schoolers or two for the rest of your teaching time.

In Week 3, fill in some of the keywords in Simile Shuffle. To help speed up this game and make it less challenging for middle schoolers (who may still be learning to understand similes and metaphors) fill in the first word of each simile for them so there are fewer words to guess.

In Week 4, choose volunteers in advance for Jump Rope Growth. Because this activity is meant to be a quick illustration rather than a group competition (although it could be, if that's your preference!), select your participants in advance and give them some time to practice before your teaching time. This will help keep the teaching time moving, cause fewer distractions, and make sure you get the volunteers you need for this activity.

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

In all four weeks of this series, replace the large group parable reflection questions with a small group discussion or activity. In all four weeks of this series, the primary Scripture passage comes with three reflection questions to help students process the parable. If you'd like to make sure your middle schoolers engage with this element of the teaching, we recommend moving students into groups of three to five (with an adult leader, if possible) to respond to these questions. If you'd like to do something more hands on than a discussion, try providing [a deck of photos like this one](#) and have students choose a photo that they think connects to the parable and explain why.

REMEMBER

Keep in mind, many middle schooler are concrete thinkers and sometimes struggle to understand abstract ideas like metaphors. As you teach, check in with your students and ask them if they're following or if they have questions. Because Jesus' parables all rely heavily on metaphors to explain spiritual concepts, you may sometimes feel like you need to over-explain what some of these parables mean. That's okay! It's better to over-explain than under-explain and leave your students confused.

HACKS FOR HIGH SCHOOLERS

REVISE

To make this series more accessible for high schoolers, here's what to adjust . . .

In all four weeks, add at least one opportunity for students to explain what they think you're discussing. Since your high schoolers will be more capable than your younger students of thinking critically and abstractly, they may be able to think a step or two ahead of you to figure out where you're headed with your teaching — or, at least, they might think they can. To keep your high schoolers engaged, you might ask them (in the "What?" section) what they think you're talking about today, or (in the "So What?" section) what they think Jesus was trying to say, or (in the "Now What?" section) what they think we should do about what Jesus said.

In Week 2, add an object lesson to the "Now What?" section. Give your high schoolers something extra to think about this week by setting up a table with chairs around it, as well as one lone chair far away from the table. While explaining that everyone belongs, start setting up the lone chair and move some chairs around. Stand behind or sit in the lone chair as you invite high schoolers to consider who they struggle to have grace for and who they're quick to judge or exclude.

In Week 3, ask students to share their favorite words from God. Before the final Reflection in the "Now What?" section, add an opportunity for a few high schoolers to share their favorite passages of Scripture and what they mean to them. You might ask this question on social media and read students' responses, text a few students and ask permission to share their responses, or ask a few students to share by speaking out loud or submitting a video of their response.

In Week 4, challenge high schoolers to explain a parable to someone else. We often learn best by teaching someone else, so try concluding your series (or even each week) with a challenge to your high schoolers to explain one of the parables to a friend or family member and then share their experience. Were they able to explain it clearly? What questions did they still have? What questions did the person they shared it with still have?

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

In Week 1, replace your personal story with stories from students. Instead of talking about a time God's words gave you stability during a difficult time, ask a variety of students in advance to share their stories. You might ask this question on social media and read students' responses anonymously, or text a few students and ask permission to read their responses aloud, or ask a few students to share by speaking out loud or submitting a video of their response.

REMEMBER

High schoolers learn best through an engaging discussion (and sometimes even a good debate), rather than passively listening. They're also more likely to listen attentively to their peers than they are to an adult they don't know. Take advantage of that by giving your high schoolers plenty of opportunities to speak, share, ask questions, and share insights throughout your teaching time. You don't need to wait until a discussion time at the end to give your students the floor!

HACKS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

REVISE

To make this week more accessible for students with special needs, here's what to adjust . . .

In all four weeks, adjust the way students are instructed to write during their times of reflection. If you have students in your ministry who struggle to read or write on their own, provide different ways for them to engage, like providing a buddy who can help them adapt. Depending on their disability, their buddy might help write their thoughts, skip the writing and simply have a conversation instead, or help them use images to communicate their thoughts or retell the parable.

In Week 1, don't joke about the use of security blankets or other comfort items. When you tell a personal story about a security item you used as a child, remember some of your students might still use security blankets, comfort toys, or special routines that make them feel safe. As you tell your story, be careful not to make fun of these things and defuse any laughter by talking about how helpful your security item was to you.

In Week 2, choose your players in advance for Playing Favorites. Since some students with certain special needs have difficulty regulating big feelings (and those feelings have the potential to distract them from your teaching time), choose your players in advance for Playing Favorites and let them in on the secret of the demonstration they'll be a part of.

In Week 2, consider addressing special needs directly in your "Now What?" section. When you talk about belonging this week, remember students with special needs often feel excluded. Try reaching out to the families of your students with disabilities and asking if any of them would like to share stories, thoughts, or insights as you prepare.

In Week 3, fill in some of the keywords in Simile Shuffle. To help speed up this game and make it less challenging for students who struggle with communication or comprehension, fill in the first word of each simile for them so there are fewer words to guess.

In Week 4, choose volunteers in advance for Jump Rope Growth. Because this activity is meant to be a quick illustration rather than a group competition (although it could be, if that's your preference!), select your participants in advance and give them some time to practice before your teaching time. This will help keep the teaching time moving, cause fewer distractions, and make sure no one feels left out if you don't select them for the activity.

REPLACE

And here are the Building Blocks you may want to swap for something else . . .

In all four weeks of this series, replace the large group parable reflection questions with a small group discussion or activity. In all four weeks of this series, the primary Scripture passage comes with three reflection questions to help students process the parable. If you'd like to make sure your students all engage with this element of the teaching, we recommend moving students into groups (with an adult buddy) to respond to these questions. If you'd like to do something more hands on than a discussion, try providing [a deck of photos like this one](#) and have students choose a photo that they think connects to the parable and explain why.

REMEMBER

Because every week of this series incorporates a variety of activities, games, and object lessons to reinforce the parable, be aware of any students who are blind, deaf or hard of hearing, easily overstimulated, or have limited mobility. Make adjustments based on your group's unique needs by offering different ways for students to engage with each activity as needed.



WRITTEN & DEVELOPED WITH . . .

Stefany Bremer is an editor for educational books for elementary and middle school students. She served in the youth ministry at a church in Mexico for many years. She currently divides her time living in Chihuahua, Mexico, and in El Paso, Texas. She is a big book nerd and a huge Marvel fan. She loves baking and nothing makes me happier than seeing people enjoy a meal I made, especially when it's Mexican food.

Porfirio Caldera is the Executive Pastor of NextGen at Mountain View Church in Queen Creek, Arizona. He has been on staff for 10 years and in that span has gone from chaos creator (intern) to leader of the chaos creators. When Porfirio isn't doing ministry with the church, he's spending time with his wife and two energetic boys. On the weekends you can find him and his son scootering around the neighborhood on their electric scooter or at the local Costco taking all the food samples.

. . . AND THE REST OF THE TEAM!



SERIES DEVELOPMENT & REVIEW: Elle Campbell, Brooklyn Lindsey, David Magallanes, Crystal Quintero, Stephen Switzer, Linda Moon, Porfirio Caldera, Stephanie Whitacre, Jeremy Zach, Matty McCage

HACKS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL, AND SPECIAL NEEDS: Adam Mashni, Danielle Hayes, Yessenia De Alba, JC Mahaffey, Sunny Brown, Stephanie Newland

MENTAL HEALTH REVIEW: Laura Karr

STUDENT DEVOTIONALS: Cory Sullivan, Crystal Quintero

GAMES: Jeremiah Herring, Tyler Grant

ONE-MINUTE SERMON VIDEOS: David Magallanes, Elle Campbell, Jose Rodriguez, Erica Rodriguez, Vanessa Serrano Cruz, Damean Easter, and the Rescue a Generation team

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VOLUNTEER DEVOTIONAL



STUDY

Have you ever been confused about something very simple? Take palm trees for example – did you know that they are actually a type of herbaceous grass? Why are they called trees if they aren't trees at all? Then there are more serious things – like how simple numbers create complex math that no one but the exceptionally gifted can figure out. Sometimes, simple things feel like mysteries and the only people who can solve them are those with inside tips or information.

What's cool about Jesus and the parables he used to teach is that he gave us the Holy Spirit to help us every time we get involved in the story. The metaphors Jesus used may not match up to the everyday examples we might give, but the meaning can always be applied to our world today.

To get ready for this series, **spend a few minutes reading the stories we'll be teaching students this month.** As you do, think about what God has taught you (and is still teaching you) through these parables, and how these Big Ideas have been true in your life.

WEEK 1: God's words are a firm foundation.

Matthew 4:4, 7:24-27; Psalm 89:1-2

WEEK 2: In God's kingdom, everyone belongs.

Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 145:8-14; Ephesians 2:8-9

WEEK 3: God's words invite a response.

Matthew 13:1-23; Psalm 119:105-112; John 6:60-61 & 66

WEEK 4: God's kingdom is always growing.

Matthew 13:31-32; Psalm 86:11-13; 1 Corinthians 3:7-9

PRAY

What parable has been most confusing to you? Think about who or what in the story stood out to you most. Ask yourself why you might be needing a better explanation. Then, talk to God about it! The Holy Spirit is always available to help you grow. Jesus has some incredible things to say to us and will never leave us – which means Jesus will never stop having a conversation with you. No request for more of an explanation is ever offensive to a God who is always there and listening to you.

Which passage of Scripture or Big Idea from this month is most relevant to you right now?

Spend a few minutes asking God to show you how you've already grown in this area, plus the next step you need to take in order to keep growing.

GROW

So what's your next step? Do you need to revisit God's words this week? Do you need to be an advocate for someone who has been excluded (intentionally or unintentionally) from your community, church, or another group you are a part of? Do you need to respond to something God's words have been inviting you to do? Do you need to accept the invitation to keep growing?

Whatever your next step is right now, take it. Then help students do the same.

WEEK 1 TEACHING GUIDE



BIG IDEA

God's words are a firm foundation.

BIBLE

Matthew 4:4, 7:24-27;
Psalm 89:1-2

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | Riddle of the Week

- Welcome to *Please Explain*, where we're going to be spending a few weeks talking about some things that are — well, a little hard to understand. Kind of like this riddle.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to guess the answer to the riddle below.
 - **RIDDLE:** I am gentle enough to soothe your skin, light enough to fly in the sky, and strong enough to crack rocks. What am I?
 - **ANSWER:** Water!

ACTIVITY | Wordle in the Wild

- Remember when it seemed like the whole world was briefly obsessed with this game called Wordle? Let's see if we can bring it back.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this game, you'll need [two easels with large pads of paper](#), jumbo permanent markers, and jumbo markers or highlighters in gray, yellow, and green. Before your teaching time, use five sheets of paper on each easel to create ten blank [Wordle](#)-inspired game boards (but with five rows of four, rather than the traditional six rows of five, since the words students will be guessing will only be four letters long, instead of five letters). Split your students into two teams and explain the rules. Teams will be trying to guess the same words at the same time. For each game, they will have five chances to guess the word by writing a valid four-letter word (no curse words, please!) in the boxes. After each guess, have an adult volunteer grade their guess by coloring in each box with green marker (if a letter is in the correct place), yellow marker (if a letter is correct, but in the wrong place), and gray (if a letter does not show up in the word at all). The first team to guess each word correctly gets a point. The team with the most wins out of five games is the winner. Play with the following five words and keep the words displayed as you teach:
 - HEAR
 - WISE
 - ROCK
 - FOOL
 - SAND

- These words are the *foundation* of what we're going to talk about today.

ACTIVITY | Giant Kerplunk!

- But before we get there, let's play another game.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this game, you'll need wire fencing, a round side table, wire, wire cutters, wooden dowels, and plastic balls. Before your program, create at least one giant Kerplunk! game ([here is a tutorial](#)). If you create one game, give a few students a chance to play upfront or provide enough sets of the game for students to play in smaller groups.*
- What a "dropping" sensation we feel when everything falls apart, right? (And are you wondering what all of these things have to do with each other yet? Hang on. I'll explain.)
- For some of you, your life feels stable at the moment. If life was a giant game of Kerplunk!, you'd definitely be winning. But sometimes, life can get unstable quickly. Things start to fall apart.
 - Maybe your parents are getting a divorce, and you feel stuck in the middle.
 - Maybe the news is making you feel unsettled and afraid.
 - Maybe you have to move schools or houses and leave your friends behind.
 - Maybe someone in your life is sick, and you don't know how to help them.
 - Maybe your parent lost their job, and you hear them worrying about money.
 - Maybe you and a friend are fighting or drifting apart, and you wish things could go back to how they were before.
 - Or maybe you feel uncertain about what's true and what to believe.
- Living in uncertainty can be exhausting. We all long for a sense of safety and security — but how can we find it when the things in our lives (or in our minds) feel so unpredictable and unstable?

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about something silly that helped you feel safe as a child.

- When life feels chaotic or uncertain, it helps to have things that make us feel safe, stable, and grounded.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about something silly that helped you feel safe as a child. This might have been an object, like a blanket, toy, or lucky hat. Or it might be a routine, like always closing your closet door at night, eating cereal with your siblings before school, or exchanging a special phrase or greeting with a parent.*
- It's funny to laugh about some of the little things we clung to for security when we were kids. But when life gets difficult today, we still are in need of trustworthy things we can cling to.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **When you were a kid, did you have a security blanket or comfort toy? Tell us about it!**
 - **What are some reasons a person's life might start to feel unpredictable or unstable? Can you relate to any of those reasons?**
 - ★ **Tell us about a time or place you felt really safe. Who or what made you feel that way?**

OBJECT LESSON | A Children's Storybook

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As you teach, hold a children's storybook – preferably one that means something to you and communicates a lesson or moral principle. Briefly explain the story and what it taught you.*
- Do you remember the excitement you once had as a kid when a grown-up would read you one of the stories you loved most? You can probably still picture some of the pages, remember some of your favorite lines, or hear the voice of your loved one or teacher reading it to you. That's because stories are powerful. They stick with us!

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 7:24-27

- So where are we going with all of this? What do riddles, word puzzles, giant game of Kerplunk!, and children's stories have to do with each other?
 - If you're confused, it's okay. If you need some help connecting the dots, I get it! So let me explain.
 - When Jesus was here on earth, his followers often found themselves confused by what Jesus was saying. They needed help connecting the dots and making sense of his ideas.
 - That's partly because Jesus often taught in the form of stories, called parables. These fictional stories were designed to illustrate a big truth Jesus wanted us to remember.
 - Jesus chose to communicate these truths in story form because he knew stories have the ability to draw us in and invite us to think differently about ourselves and the world.
 - But sometimes Jesus' stories got a little confusing and left his followers wondering what in the world Jesus was trying to say.
- Over the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at four of these parables Jesus told. Just like those moments as children where we'd circle up on our teacher's reading rug, we're going to listen to some stories crafted by Jesus himself.
- As you listen to this first story, here are a few questions to think about:
 - **What do you think this parable is about?**
 - **What is confusing about this parable?**
 - **What do you think the spiritual lesson in this story could be?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 7:24-27.*
- First, Jesus talks about a person who built his house on a foundation of rock.
 - This person built their house on a rock, not necessarily because they were a genius or master house-builder. They simply understood that, one day, things could get difficult and unpredictable – and when they do, they wanted to make sure their home's foundation would withstand whatever storm it faced.
 - To make sure everyone listening knew exactly what he was trying to say, Jesus explained: this wise house-builder is like someone who not only hears Jesus' words, but puts Jesus' words into practice.
- Next, Jesus talks about a person who build his house on a foundation of sand.
 - You might try to give this person the benefit of the doubt and think, "Well, maybe they just didn't know sand was a bad place to build a house." But, no – Jesus makes it clear, this person knew better. Maybe this person was proud, or arrogant, or stubborn. Maybe they thought they didn't need anyone but themselves to help get them out of life's troubles. But when the storm came, they soon realized they were wrong.
 - Again, to make sure everyone understood, Jesus explained his story. The foolish house-builder is like someone who hears Jesus' words, but doesn't do anything about them.

- So what does all this mean? Well, it means when we build our lives on the foundation of God's words, we can face whatever difficulties life throws at us. When things feel uncertain, scary, confusing, or unstable, God's words will help us weather our storms.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - 🔄 **What would you say are some of your "firm foundations" that support you in difficult times?**
 - **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 89:1-4

- But this wasn't the first time Jesus' listeners would have heard God is a firm and steady foundation. Centuries earlier, a musician named Ethan wrote these words in a song of worship to God.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 89:1-2.*
- Because God's love stands firm forever:
 - We can trust it.
 - We can build our lives around it.
 - We can rely on it when not much else seems reliable.
- God's words are just as solid as God's love for us. God's words are like that solid rock Jesus talked about. When you build your life around what God has said, no matter how shaky life gets, you'll never crumble. Because **God's words are a firm foundation.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

OBJECT LESSON | Above It All Balance Beam

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this object lesson, borrow a balance beam from a local school or gym (or make one with a long piece of sturdy wood). Make sure the beam is low to the ground and wide enough for you to walk across it safely. As you teach, step on and off the balance beam and maybe jump on it carefully for emphasis. If you have the resources, you could also ask a trustworthy volunteer or two to assemble a simple wooden platform live while you teach. Then climb onto it as you continue to teach.*
- When life gets shaky and uncertain, God's words can do two things for us: comfort and guide.
 - God's words can comfort us as they remind us God loves us, is with us, and hasn't forgotten about us. The relationship we have with Jesus in the midst of chaos and uncertainty gives us a chance to understand God's love — the unchanging, always trustworthy love of God the psalmist talked about.
 - But remember what Jesus said? Just hearing God's words isn't going to give us safety and stability. We have to do what God says. That's why we have to remember God's words are meant to guide and direct us — not just comfort us. If we truly want to be safe and secure during life's biggest storms, we have to do something with the guidance God gives us.
- So what is your life built around? What's your foundation?
 - Is it built on others' expectations or opinions of you?
 - Is it built on your own intelligence or wisdom?
 - Is it built on wishful thinking that everything will work out in your favor?
 - Or is it built on God's trustworthiness?

- What do you hold onto when life gets complicated?
 - Do you hold onto people or things that make you feel better in the short term, but don't actually have the power to help or protect you in the long term?
 - Or do you hold onto Jesus, who will never let you down?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **Why would someone turn to God's words in times of trouble?**
 - **Read Matthew 4:4. Just like eating, sleeping, or checking our phones, what are some ways we could make God's words a more regular part of our days?**

STORY | Talk about a time God's words gave you stability.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time God's words gave you stability during a time of crisis. Try to identify a time when God's words both comforted you and guided you. Share how God's words gave you peace, but also share how you acted on what God had said.*
- Jesus invites us to make his words the foundation of our lives. Here's how:
 - **NOTICE GOD'S WORDS.** When life feels unstable, pause and look to what God says in Scripture – especially the words God says through Jesus. Jesus gives us words to build a life on. What we do with them can strengthen our faith and help others grow.
 - **REMEMBER GOD'S WORDS.** Write down some of the words you find in Scripture and put them somewhere you can see them every day. You might want to remember words like . . .
 - I am with you.
 - Be courageous.
 - I will love you no matter what.
 - I will never leave or forsake you.
 - Love God and love others.
 - **ACT ON GOD'S WORDS.** Remember, we can't just hear what God has said. We have to put those words into practice. This can be difficult, but it's so much easier in a community of people who are committed to following Jesus just like you are. This week, find someone you know who follows Jesus and ask how God's words shape their lives.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ✪ **Have God's words ever brought you comfort during an uncertain time? If so, tell us about it. If not, tell us about a time you needed God's words to comfort you.**
 - ✪ **Talk about a time you let God's words guide or direct you. How do you think following God's words kept you safe from harm?**
 - This week, what's one way you're going to build more of your life on the foundation of God's words?

REFLECTION | I Will Build My Life

- God's words are a firm foundation, ready and available for anyone to build their lives on. But we have to choose it. It won't just happen by accident.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give students pink, purple, and black index cards to match the series graphic, along with black and white permanent markers. Invite them to write down one of God's promises or instructions that they want to build their life around. These might be passages they already know, but if they need help finding a passage, encourage them to circle up with other students and volunteers and search Scripture together (maybe using the Bible app or a Google search) for something relevant to their life right now. When they've finished writing, invite them to tape the index card to your balance beam or wooden structure. While students reflect, play the song "Build My Life" (Housefires), but make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. For more information, [read this! Here's a link](#) to preview the song for your personal use.
- With Jesus, the difficult things in our lives don't go away. He never promised us that. But he did promise to give us a solid and unchanging foundation we can build our lives upon. **God's words are a firm foundation.**

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

God's words are a firm foundation.

BIBLE

Matthew 4:4, 7:24-27;
Psalm 89:1-2

QUESTIONS

- When you were a kid, did you have a security blanket or comfort toy? Tell us about it!
- What are some reasons a person's life might start to feel unpredictable or unstable? Can you relate to any of those reasons?
- Tell us about a time or place you felt really safe. Who or what made you feel that way?
- What would you say are some of your "firm foundations" that support you in difficult times?
- Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!
- Why would someone turn to God's words in times of trouble?
- Read Matthew 4:4. Just like eating, sleeping, or checking our phones, what are some ways we could make God's words a more regular part of our days?
- Have God's words ever brought you comfort during an uncertain time? If so, tell us about it. If not, tell us about a time you needed God's words to comfort you.
- Talk about a time you let God's words guide or direct you. How do you think following God's words kept you safe from harm?
- This week, what's one way you're going to build more of your life on the foundation of God's words?



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

God's words are a firm foundation.

BIBLE

Matthew 4:4, 7:24-27;
Psalm 89:1-2

QUESTIONS

- When you were a kid, did you have a security blanket or comfort toy? Tell us about it!
- What are some reasons a person's life might start to feel unpredictable or unstable? Can you relate to any of those reasons?
- Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Now how would you explain it to me?
- Why would someone turn to God's words in times of trouble?
- Read Matthew 4:4. Just like eating, sleeping, or checking our phones, what are some ways we could make God's words a more regular part of our days?
- This week, what's one way you're going to build more of your life on the foundation of God's words?



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 2 TEACHING GUIDE



BIG IDEA

In God's kingdom,
everyone belongs.

BIBLE

Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 145:8-14;
Ephesians 2:8-9

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | Riddle of the Week

- Welcome back to *Please Explain*, where we're talking about some things that are a little hard to understand. Ready for another riddle?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to guess the answer to the riddle below.
 - **RIDDLE:** Sometimes it's silver, but also gold. Printed on paper, it's a treasure to hold. What is it?
 - **ANSWER:** Currency!

ACTIVITY | Playing Favorites

- And now that we've warmed up your brains, let's warm up your arms.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this activity, the exact game you play isn't as important as how you play it (and how you award your winners), so get creative based on whatever supplies you have available. We recommend a simple game like [ring toss](#), [bean bag toss](#), or shooting a basketball. Whichever game you choose, just make sure there are three different difficulty levels (maybe achieved by different throwing distances, target sizes, or obstacles). Set up these difficulty levels, but don't acknowledge them to your students. To play, invite at least three students to compete (or more, depending on the time you have) and keep track of their scores. When everyone has competed, line all the players up in order from highest to lowest scores, make a big deal about their final scores, and then give everyone the same prize. If you hear any questions or complaints from your students, pretend you don't know what they're talking about.
- I heard some confusion from the crowd during this game, and definitely during our award ceremony. Did something seem strange? Maybe a bit unfair?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!
 - **When you were little, were you the kid who cheated at every game or the kid who tattled on the cheaters?**
 - **These days, how do you usually feel or react when something seems unfair?**

QUESTION | When you or a friend are treated unfairly . . .

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Ask the questions below and give a few students a chance to respond to each one.
- **When you or a friend are treated unfairly . . .**
 - **What emotions do you feel?**
 - **What sensations do you feel in your body, and where? (Heart pounding? Tight chest? Warm face? Tense stomach?)**
 - **What do you do (or want to do)?**
- When we (or someone we love) are treated unfairly, all of those responses are totally reasonable. Sometimes we really do get treated unfairly!
- We live in a world that categorizes people. We tear down some and praise others. Because of that, we can sometimes feel like we've been treated unfairly when . . .
 - We feel overshadowed by others' success and worry we're not good enough.
 - We see what other people are up to on social media and decide our lives aren't as happy or interesting.
 - We look around and feel like everyone else is thriving in areas where we're lacking.
- Comparing ourselves with others can often leave us feeling like life isn't fair or we're not getting what we deserve. But sometimes, the thing we call "unfair" might actually be something else entirely. Let me explain.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

VIDEO | A Clip from *Nacho Libre*

- Has anyone ever seen the movie *Nacho Libre*? It's a story about a friar who lives in a monastery doing the important work of caring for orphans. But secretly, he dreams of becoming a *luchador*, a Mexican wrestler.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** As a teaching tool, play a short clip [like this one](#) (0:00-1:41) from *Nacho Libre*, where Nacho is struggling with his current vocation and his desire to be a wrestler. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)
- Nacho is really struggling!
- He believes being a friar is his highest calling . . . but he still feels jealous of the *luchadores* in the spotlight. As he compares himself to the wrestlers he wants to be like, he can't help but see his situation as unfair.
- To make matters worse, as Nacho begins to participate in more tournaments, he realizes that wrestlers are an exclusive club, and he's not welcome in it.
- All of this leads to a growing sense of unfairness and frustration in Nacho. He can't seem to enjoy or celebrate the success of the other wrestlers while he's on the outside.
- So why do I tell you this story? Because stories are powerful things! They can often capture ideas, feelings, and lessons so much better than a lecture or sermon alone.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - ⊛ **Have you ever found it difficult to be happy for someone else when something good happened to them? Why was that so difficult for you?**
 - ⊛ **Has a friend or loved one ever found it difficult to be happy for you when something good happened to you? How did that make you feel?**

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 20:1-16

- That's, in part, why Jesus often spoke in story form. When he was here on earth, he often used stories (which we call parables) to communicate complicated or hard-to-hear truths.
 - So have you ever felt frustrated when comparing yourself with others?
 - Have you ever felt like an outsider who didn't belong?
 - Have you ever felt like you weren't getting the recognition or reward you deserved?
 - Have you ever felt mistreated, overlooked, or cheated?
- If you have, there's a story Jesus wants you to hear. As you listen to this story, here are a few questions to think about:
 - **What do you think this parable is about?**
 - **What is confusing about this parable?**
 - **What do you think the spiritual lesson in this story could be?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 20:1-16. If you'd like, have a few students share their answers to the questions above.*
- Maybe you're wondering why Jesus told this story about some people working in a field.
 - At the end of the work day, these workers all got paid the same amount of money, even though some people didn't have to work as long as the others.
 - Maybe that doesn't seem fair at first, but with this fictitious story, Jesus was trying to make a point.
- Have you ever been part of a team where things were hyper-competitive? Or maybe your family has broken tables over contested games of Monopoly? At the time Jesus told this parable, people were in competition with each other too.
 - Some people wanted to prove they were more holy and worthy than their neighbor. Some wanted public recognition for how holy, religious, and generous they were.
 - So when Jesus spoke to this crowd, he was aware some people listening saw themselves as more worthy of God's love than others.
 - With this story, Jesus presented a different vision of how God works, what God values, and what God's kingdom would be like. In God's kingdom, Jesus was saying, people who are placed last will actually be first.
- If "the last will be first" feels unfair to you, keep listening. Jesus was saying that in this world, powerful people are accustomed to being first, often at the expense of people who are less powerful.
 - Wealthy people often win at the expense of the less fortunate.
 - Popular or influential people often win at the expense of people who get overlooked.
 - Bullies often win at the expense of the people they hurt.
 - Strong people often win at the expense of people who are weaker.
- But in God's kingdom, Jesus was saying everything is flipped upside down. In God's kingdom, God intentionally makes room for the people the world overlooks. The powerless, the poor, the outcasts, the hurting, and the weak are all invited to the front of the line.
- Imagine the workers who showed up toward the end of the day.
 - The people who had been there all day might have been thinking, "These people don't deserve the same treatment — they just got here!" They assumed those people were lazy, undeserving, or somehow trying to cheat them out of what was theirs.
 - But in this story, the man in charge saw something different. He saw these people had waited all day to find work to feed their families. No one had invited them, chosen them, or given them a chance — so they were going to go home empty-handed. But then, at the last

moment, in the late hour of the day, this man gives them the chance to work. Not only that, he paid them a full day's wage. Think of the relief they would have felt to be receiving such an invitation.

- The story isn't about money or hard work — it's actually about God's love and grace and who gets to belong in God's kingdom. Jesus was saying God's love isn't just for the people who got there first or followed all the right rules. God's love is for everyone. That's not something to be angry about. It's something to celebrate!

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
 - **When someone judges or excludes other people, what do you think they're trying to gain? Do you think that's true for you too?**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 145:8

- To understand more about God's love for us and the ways of God's kingdom, it's essential to know more about *who* God is.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 145:8.*
- This psalm tells us something about God's character. God is not described as far-away, but as a God welcoming and inviting us into this kingdom — not because we are more worthy or deserving than anyone else, but because God loves us.
- In God's kingdom, it's not our actions or status that make us worthy. It's God's free gift of love and grace, which is offered to everyone — even people we think shouldn't deserve it. In God's kingdom, everyone is invited to experience God's love. **In God's kingdom, everyone belongs.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

QUESTION | What is grace?

- We've used the word "grace" a few times today, but haven't yet defined it. It's a word you hear a lot in the Bible, so what does it mean? What do you think? **What is grace?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Give a few students a chance to respond.*
- When we talk about God's grace, we're talking about God giving us a gift we didn't earn or deserve. In the story we heard today, everyone received grace.
 - The people who had been working all day received a paycheck that was incredibly generous! They were paid more than they deserved for their work — that's gracious.
 - The people who showed up late and received that same big paycheck were also given grace, just like the first group — but to an even greater degree.
 - The first group wasn't cheated, robbed, or tricked. They could have been celebrating the gift of grace they had all received together, but they chose a different response instead.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Read Ephesians 2:8-9. What did Jesus want us to understand about God's grace?**

- ✪ **Why do you think some people in Jesus' time thought his message about God's kingdom was controversial? Do you think there are any similarities in Christianity today?**

IMAGE | Gatekeepers

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** As you teach, show an image of a gate like [this one](#). This image is free for you to use under the [Unsplash license](#).
- Have you ever heard the term "gatekeeper" before?
 - In literal terms, a gatekeeper is someone who guards a gate to make sure no one gets through who shouldn't.
 - But in metaphorical terms (and we know Jesus loved speaking in metaphors), a gatekeeper can also be someone who tries to decide who's in and who's out – who's valuable and who's not.
- Gates have a couple of different functions. On one side, they are used to keep things safe. On the other side, they are used to keep things out.
- As followers of Jesus, sometimes we make the mistake of thinking we need to be God's gatekeepers. We think it's our job to decide who's in and who's out, who's deserving of God's love and who's not. This is the mistake many religious people were making during Jesus' time too!
 - But Jesus once said he is the "gate." He's how we get access to God's love and grace. So if Jesus is the gate . . . does he really need us to protect him? Does he need us telling him who to let in and out? I don't think so.
 - If you've experienced God's love and grace, your job isn't to try to keep anyone out of God's kingdom – it's to invite more people inside!
- So in God's kingdom, how can you be someone who invites instead of gatekeeps? Here are a few ways.
 - **RECEIVE GOD'S GRACE FOR YOURSELF.** You don't need to earn the love and grace God has for you. You just have to receive the gift that's already been given to you by God, who is more generous than we could ever imagine.
 - **CELEBRATE GOD'S GRACE FOR OTHERS.** When God's love and grace reaches someone else (especially someone you don't think deserves it), ask God to help you celebrate that. Ask God to change your heart until it's full of joy for anyone who discovers they can belong in God's kingdom.
 - **SHARE GOD'S GRACE WITH OTHERS.** If you've found belonging with Jesus, don't keep it to yourself. Share God's love and grace with others.
 - You could do this by telling people about the grace you found through Jesus.
 - And you could do it by extending God's grace to others, even when it's difficult. We can live God's love when we give whatever we can – a smile, a random act of kindness, an encouraging word, and treating others with respect and compassion.
- Whether you identify with those who work longer hours and think it's unfair that others join in for the same reward, or you identify with the those who worked in the last hour . . .
 - You are welcome in God's kingdom.
 - You are welcome to invite others too.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - ✪ **Which is most difficult for you: receiving God's grace for yourself, celebrating God's grace for others (especially people you don't think deserve it), or sharing God's grace with others? Why is that a challenge for you?**

- This week, what's one way you could show others that everyone belongs in God's kingdom?

REFLECTION | Personal Parables

- Jesus chose to use the imagery of a vineyard and some really generous paychecks to help us see what the kingdom of God is like. But **what is the kingdom of God like to you?** What images come to mind?
 - **What is God's love like?**
 - **What is God's grace like?**
 - **What is it like to find belonging with Jesus?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Before your program, print and cut the handouts provided in your Week 2 folder. Place one under each seat, along with a pen. Encourage students to write a one-sentence parable, using modern imagery. As students write, play some reflective music. When they're done, ask a few students to share what they wrote and provide a brief explanation.
- Jesus came to show us what God's kingdom is really like.
 - It's not a kingdom with an exclusive guest list. In God's kingdom, everyone's invited.
 - It's not a kingdom that shows favoritism to the powerful, wealthy, popular, or strong. In God's kingdom, everyone is cared for.
 - It's not a kingdom that categorizes people based on their worthiness. **In God's kingdom, everyone belongs.** Even you and me.

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

In God's kingdom,
everyone belongs.

BIBLE

Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 145:8-14;
Ephesians 2:8-9

QUESTIONS

- **When you were little, were you the kid who cheated at every game or the kid who tattled on the cheaters?**
- **These days, how do you usually feel or react when something seems unfair?**
- **Have you ever found it difficult to be happy for someone else when something good happened to them? Why was that so difficult for you?**
- **Has a friend or loved one ever found it difficult to be happy for you when something good happened to you? How did that make you feel?**
- **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
- **When someone judges or excludes other people, what do you think they're trying to gain? Do you think that's true for you too?**
- **Read Ephesians 2:8-9. What did Jesus want us to understand about God's grace?**
- **Why do you think some people in Jesus' time thought his message about God's kingdom was controversial? Do you think there are any similarities in Christianity today?**
- **Which is most difficult for you: receiving God's grace for yourself, celebrating God's grace for others (especially people you don't think deserve it), or sharing God's grace with others? Why is that a challenge for you?**
- **This week, what's one way you could show others that everyone belongs in God's kingdom?**



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

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BIBLE

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- **This week, what's one way you could show others that everyone belongs in God's kingdom?**



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

The kingdom of God is like . . .



The kingdom of God is like . . .



WEEK 3 TEACHING GUIDE



BIG IDEA

God's words invite a response.

BIBLE

Matthew 13:1-23; Psalm 119:105-112;
John 6:60-61 & 66

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | Riddle of the Week

- Welcome back to *Please Explain*, where we're talking about some things that are a little hard to understand. Ready for another riddle?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to guess the answer to the riddle below.
 - **RIDDLE:** I'm tall when I'm young, and I'm short when I'm old. What am I?
 - **ANSWER:** A candle!

ACTIVITY | Simile Shuffle

- You're getting pretty good at these word games, so let's see how good you are at similes. Similes are those things that compare two ideas using the word "like" or "as."
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this activity, you'll need [oversized index cards](#), [velcro strips](#), a large marker, [washi tape](#), and a large board or blank wall. Before your teaching time, use washi tape to create a fill-in-the-blank template on the wall or board, which students will race to complete with common similes. On your board or wall, use the washi tape to create at least five rows of fill-in-the-blank similes in two columns, so two teams can compete at the same time. Each fill-in-the-blank should read "____ as ____." Identify at least five similes you want students to guess, write the key words on the index cards (twice, so each team can have a copy – plus some extra words to throw them off) and shuffle the cards. When you're ready to play, divide your students into two teams, give each team a stack of cards, and give them one minute to put as many cards in the right place as possible. At the end of one minute, the team with the most completed similes is the winner. Here are a few to get you started:
 - **Busy as a bee.**
 - **Awkward as a cow on roller skates.**
 - **Clean as a whistle.**
 - **Cute as a button.**
 - **Easy as apple pie.**

- Words are pretty amazing things, aren't they? We can use them for so much. We use them to share how we feel, make each other laugh, make complicated ideas clear, give instructions, and so much more. Where would we be without them?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **What's the weirdest word you've ever heard?**
 - **If we didn't have words, what's one way your week would have been way worse?**

VIDEO | A Clip of a Dad Making a Peanut Butter & Jelly Sandwich

- Take instructions, for example. When we're reading a set of instructions, we really need them to make sense. But when we're given a set of instructions . . .
 - Some of us skip them entirely and try to figure out the task ourselves.
 - Some of us read every little detail and try to follow them perfectly.
 - So when those instructions are a little off, well, things can get kind of weird.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a short clip from a video [like this one](#) (2:30-5:04) of a dad following his kids' instructions on how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*
- Instructions can be hard to decipher at times. Take the instructions we find in the Bible for example. We might read or hear them and wonder . . .
 - But how do I actually do what God is asking?
 - Is that instruction even meant for me?
 - What if I tried doing that already and it didn't work out the way I thought it would?
- Or maybe if we're honest, like the dad in this video, we're not really trying that hard to understand the instructions God gives us. Maybe we hear what God is asking us to do and think . . .
 - Well, that doesn't sound like a very good idea.
 - That seems like too much work.
 - That doesn't sound very fun.
 - I'd rather do it my way.
- Whichever category you fall into (or maybe you fall into both, depending on the day), I get it. Trying to understand what God is trying to communicate can already be a challenge, but actually following God's instructions can be even more difficult.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ✪ **What are some reasons people struggle to understand God's words? Can you relate to any of those reasons?**
 - ✪ **What are some reasons people are hesitant to follow God's instructions? Can you relate to any of those reasons?**

STORY | Talk about a time you struggled to follow God's instructions.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time you struggled to follow God's instructions. This might be because you didn't understand what God wanted you to do, or because you were struggling to do it, or because you didn't want to do it, or a little bit of everything. Share why you were struggling and what held you back from doing what God said.
- When Jesus was here on earth, he understood people (like me) struggled to understand and follow God's instructions.
 - When he knew people had misunderstood what God was trying to say, Jesus cleared things up.
 - When he saw people were struggling to follow God's instructions, even though they wanted to, Jesus gave them help and encouragement.
 - And when he saw people simply didn't want to follow God's instructions, Jesus invited them to see things differently.
- One of the ways Jesus did all of this was by telling stories. These stories make people think, challenged how they lived, communicated new ideas, and connected with people's hearts (as well as their minds).

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 13:1-9

- The stories Jesus told are often "parables," which aren't factual stories that actually happened. They're stories that communicate a message.
 - But when some people heard the parables Jesus shared, they didn't always understand what message he was trying to communicate at first. And that was actually okay with Jesus!
 - See, the stories Jesus told were meant to get people thinking. They weren't meant to confuse his followers, but get them curious about how they (and the world) could be different.
- As you listen to this story, here are a few questions to think about:
 - **What do you think this parable is about?**
 - **What is confusing about this parable?**
 - **What do you think the spiritual lesson in this story could be?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Read Matthew 13:1-9. If you'd like, have a few students share their answers to the questions above.

OBJECT LESSON | Seeds & Similes

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this object lesson, prepare a board or blank wall like you did for the activity Simile Shuffle. But this time, you'll need only one column of fill-in-the-blanks. Ask students to help you identify all the similes in the parable and make guesses about what they represent. Write their answers down and add them to the board. You'll want to include:
 - **The farmer is like ____.**
 - **The seeds are like ____.**
 - **The birds are like ____.**
 - **The path is like ____.**
 - **The rocky ground is like ____.**
 - **The thorns are like ____.**
 - **The good soil is like ____.**
 - **The crop is like ____.**

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 13:18-23

- We aren't the only ones who get confused when Jesus tells parables. Even the disciples who lived and learned directly from Jesus didn't always understand what was going on. But fortunately, Jesus took the time to explain.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Read Matthew 13:18-23. Adjust your similes from the previous activity with Jesus' explanation as you read.
- In this story, Jesus says God's words are like seeds, and people who hear them are like different kinds of soil.
 - First, Jesus addresses people who heard him teach, but had a hard time understanding what he meant. **Anyone ever felt that way?**
 - Next, Jesus mentions people who got excited about Jesus' message at first, but when life's challenges came, they got discouraged. **Anyone ever felt like that?**
 - Then Jesus talks about people who hear his words, but prioritize other interests, pursuits, and distractions over following Jesus. **Can anyone relate to that one?**
 - And finally, Jesus talks about people who hear his teachings, understand them, and then let his words change their lives. **Has anyone ever experienced that?**
- I'm guessing we've all been all of these people from time to time — or if you haven't, you will! That's to be expected!
- Jesus' point is that, when God speaks, we always have an opportunity to do something about what God has said. Will we let those words take root and change us . . . or not?

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
 - **Jesus talked about four different kinds of soil — how many of them can you relate to? How?**
 - ☆ **Do you think we have any control over which kind of soil we are? If so, how can we become more like the "good" soil Jesus talked about?**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 119:105-112

- There's a passage of Scripture in the Old Testament that can help us understand the importance of hearing the words of God and living them out. Psalm 119 is an ancient song of worship and love for the things God has said.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Read Psalm 119:105-112.
- Like the seed that fell on good soil, the psalmist has clearly found joy in what God says and lets those words guide them, despite the challenges they've faced.
 - For the psalmist, what God says isn't just for enjoyment or encouragement. God's words are truths they follow and act on!
 - The psalmist asks God to do something that would be helpful for us to do as well: ask for God to guide them — to give them clear instructions to follow.
- This psalm, as well as Jesus' parable, reveal that when God speaks, we're invited not just to hear the words, but to do something about them. Because **God's words invite a response.**

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

OBJECT LESSON | Adopt a Succulent

- So who do you identify yourself with in Jesus' story?
 - Is it the person who struggled to understand what God was saying?
 - Or the person who has faced difficulties that have made it hard for you to believe or follow what God says?
 - Or the person who was once excited about what God had to say, but has now gotten distracted by other things?
 - Or do you feel like the person who's growing and letting God's words transform and grow you?
- No matter which type of "soil" you feel like you are today, let me tell you something. God's words aren't fragile little things. They're not easy to uproot. God's words are more like succulents — those plants that are almost impossible to kill, even if you forget to water it and your soil isn't perfect.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, purchase plenty of small succulents, [small terracotta planters](#), and [paint markers](#). Plant one succulent in each planter and arrange them on a table, along with the markers. Invite students to take a planter and some markers and decorate the planter with a Bible verse, the Big Idea, or whatever they'd like!*
- Take home one of these plants, put it somewhere you'll see it often, and see for yourself. Like this succulent . . .
 - God's words are taking root in your life already, even if you feel like you haven't done a great job responding to them in the past.
 - God's words are tough. They can withstand so much of our forgetfulness, distractions, and discouragement.
 - But when we decide to take care of the seeds God's words have planted in our hearts and minds, we'll see them grow and flourish. So how can we do that?
- **READ.** Reading God's words in the Bible is the place to start. Scripture . . .
 - Teaches us by helping us understand who God is, what Jesus wants for us, and what it means to follow Jesus in our everyday lives.
 - Encourages us by giving us promises from God to hold onto during times of complications and difficulty.
 - Inspires us by giving us examples of real people who have responded to God's words in their own ways.
- **REFLECT.** When we've heard what God has to say, there's usually some reflecting we need to do. We need to consider what God's words mean for us, what they reveal about us, and how they're inviting us to respond. So in addition to setting apart daily time to get into the Bible, what if we also . . .
 - Dedicated time to privately think about, write about, and think more deeply about what God's words say?
 - Talked to God about what we've read while we sit quietly, or walk, or hike, or ride our bikes, or sing songs?
 - Did more research about the things we read to better understand what God is saying?
- **RESPOND.** Throughout Scripture, we have both specific instructions from God and the example Jesus gave us through his life. Through them both, we're invited to do something about what God has said by . . .
 - Loving God.
 - Loving others.
 - Serving and caring for others with our words and actions.

- Sharing the good news of Jesus with our words and actions.
- Continuing to learn and discover more about the God who made us.
- And so much more!
- **READ AND RESPOND TOGETHER.** You don't have to figure it all out by yourself. The journey you are in has been walked by millions of other people around the globe for centuries. As you connect to others and learn alongside them, your faith will continue to flourish.
- Learning how to hear and respond to God's words is a lifelong journey. Sometimes we'll be better at it than we will be at other times. But if we walk this path together, we'll have a much better chance of being like that "good" soil — the soil where God's words can take root.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Read John 6:60-61 & 66. When God's words leave us feeling confused or uncomfortable, what can we do (besides giving up on Jesus)?**
 - ★ **Are you hesitating to respond to any of God's words right now? If so, what's holding you back and how can we help?**
 - **This week, what's one way you're going to respond to God's words in a new (or more consistent) way?**

REFLECTION | The Invitation

- So now that you know you're invited to respond to God's words, will you? And if so, how?
 - Is there something you know God has said, but you've been hesitant to listen? If so, how will you respond differently this week?
 - Do you need to respond to Jesus' invitation to know God for the very first time? If so, how will you do that?
 - Do you need to simply accept the invitation to read, reflect, and respond to God's words this week? If so, how will you do that?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your program, purchase [plant markers](#) for every student. Place one under each seat, along with a pen. Invite them to write one way they're going to respond to God's words this week and place it in their succulent planter. As they write, play a song like "Future/Past" (John Mark McMillan) but make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. For more information, [read this!](#) [Here's a link](#) to preview the song for your personal use.*
- The more you respond to God's words, the more you'll find yourself longing to follow them. So when God speaks this week, remember, **God's words invite a response.**

WEEK 3

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

God's words invite a response.

BIBLE

Matthew 13:1-23; Psalm 119:105-112;
John 6:60-61 & 66

QUESTIONS

- What's the weirdest word you've ever heard?
- If we didn't have words, what's one way your week would have been way worse?
- What are some reasons people struggle to understand God's words? Can you relate to any of those reasons?
- What are some reasons people are hesitant to follow God's instructions? Can you relate to any of those reasons?
- Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!
- Jesus talked about four different kinds of soil – how many of them can you relate to? How?
- Do you think we have any control over which kind of soil we are? If so, how can we become more like the "good" soil Jesus talked about?
- Read John 6:60-61 & 66. When God's words leave us feeling confused or uncomfortable, what can we do (besides giving up on Jesus)?
- Are you hesitating to respond to any of God's words right now? If so, what's holding you back and how can we help?
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Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 3

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers



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WEEK 4 TEACHING GUIDE



BIG IDEA

God's kingdom is always growing.

BIBLE

Matthew 13:31-32; Psalm 86:11-13;
1 Corinthians 3:7-9

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

QUESTION | Riddle of the Week

- Welcome to our final week of *Please Explain*, where we're talking about some things that are a little hard to understand. Ready for our final riddle of this series?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to guess the answer to the riddle below.
 - **RIDDLE:** I am very large but look very small. When night falls, I am cherished by all. What am I?
 - **ANSWER:** A star!

QUESTION | "Who are some of the biggest stars alive today?"

- A "star" isn't necessarily one of those bright shining balls of gas in outer space. Sometimes it's a person — like, a really famous one. **Who are some of the biggest stars alive today?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.

IMAGE | Someone's Sudden Stardom

- Some of the stars we mentioned had a pretty slow and steady rise to fame. But for others, their stardom happened seemingly overnight.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Show a few images of people who achieved sudden stardom and briefly share their stories. Choose people your students would connect with, but here are a few examples:
 - [Daisy Ridley](#) and [John Boyega](#), who became famous through their roles in *Star Wars*.
 - [Billie Eilish](#), who recorded her first album in her bedroom before quickly reaching the top of the music charts.
 - [Patrick Mahomes](#), quarterback of the Kansas City Chiefs, who rose to fame after winning a Super Bowl.
 - Your students' current favorite TikTok creator who blew up after one viral video.
- There are probably a lot of reasons why these stars collect such big following so quickly. Maybe it's because their talent really is amazing! But there might be other reasons too, like . . .

- People not wanting to miss out on the excitement.
- People wanting to be into what their friends are into.
- People wanting to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

ACTIVITY | Jump Rope Growth

- These stars saw their fandoms grow from something small to something really big, really quickly. Kind of like this . . .
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Get one [16-foot-long jump rope](#) (or two, if you'd like to turn this into a competition). To begin, have two adult volunteers spin the rope, with a student jumping. Then add a second student. Then a third, and a fourth, until you can't add anymore. For the second round, speed things up by doubling the players each time: one, then two, then four, then eight.
- See how quickly a group of people can grow? Sometimes the growth is slow and steady. Other times, a group can grow exponentially.

QUESTION | Have you ever loved something so much you wanted others to experience it?

- **Have you loved something so much you wanted others to experience it too? What was it?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Give a few students a chance to respond.
- Whether it's a favorite musician, movie, hobby, or viral video, it makes sense that we want to share the things we love with others. And when we hear about something someone else loves, it makes sense that we want to learn more about it too.
- There's something inside all of us that wants to be part of something bigger than ourselves — something that's meaningful and something that's still growing.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about a time you were part of something bigger than yourself.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or a student to tell a story) about a time you were part of something bigger than yourself. This could be something fun, like a sports team, music group, or adventure, or it could be something meaningful, like a ministry, project, or mission-driven organization. Either way, share why it was so compelling to you and what you accomplished together that you couldn't have achieved alone.
- Sometimes when we talk about following Jesus, we make it sound like something we do all on our own.
 - In some ways, that's true. Much of our faith journeys are personal and individual. We're the only ones who can choose to follow Jesus, decide to spend time with God on our own, and take responsibility for our own faith.
 - But when Jesus talked about following God, he often talked about it differently. He talked about something bigger than any of us on our own. He talked about something that was always growing.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - **Whether you're a fan of a sports team, musician, show, or game, how can being part of a passionate fan base make you feel like a part of something bigger than yourself?**
 - ★ **What are some other ways people might try to be part of something bigger than themselves?**

- ❖ **Do you think everyone is created with a desire to be part of something bigger than themselves? Why or why not?**

OBJECT LESSON | A Mustard Seed

- If you've been with us the last few weeks, you know when Jesus was here on earth, he often taught in the form of stories, called parables.
 - These fictional stories were designed to illustrate a big truth Jesus wanted us to remember. He chose to communicate these truths in story form because he knew stories and images often stick in our minds better than words alone.
 - But sometimes Jesus' stories got a little confusing and left his followers wondering what in the world Jesus was trying to say.
 - As we wrap up this series this week, we're going to look at one more story Jesus told and wonder about what he was trying to explain.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As you teach, hold a [mustard seed](#). If you'd like, pass around a jar of mustard seeds and invite each student to take one.*
- **Does anyone here know a lot about mustard seeds?**
 - Maybe you know a thing or two (or maybe you've just eaten mustard a lot), but it's understandable if you're not exactly a mustard seed expert.
 - You and I might not be particularly familiar with mustard seeds today, but the people who would have heard this parable the first time Jesus told it would have been pretty familiar. That's because Jesus liked to use images in his stories his listeners would have easily been able to identify and relate to.

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 13:31-32

- As you listen to this story, here are a few questions to think about:
 - **What do you think this parable is about?**
 - **What is confusing about this parable?**
 - **What do you think the spiritual lesson in this story could be?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 13:31-32. As you break down this parable, invite a few students to respond to each of the questions below. As students respond, assure them all of their guesses and observations about this parable are welcome!*
- In this parable, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is compared to a mustard seed — a tiny seed that has the potential to grow into a much larger plant. But what is "the kingdom of heaven?" And what does Jesus want us to understand about it? Let's break it down.
 - Usually when we hear the word "heaven," we think about another world or a place we go when we die. **Do you think that's what Jesus is talking about here? Or could he be talking about something else?**
 - If Jesus isn't talking about what happens when we die, what do you think he is talking about? **What do you think Jesus meant by "the kingdom of heaven?"**
- When you see the Bible talk about "the kingdom of heaven," we're talking about God's will becoming a reality here on earth. If God is the ruler of "the kingdom of heaven," then anything that happens according to God's will is part of God's kingdom! In the words of Jesus, we're bringing "the kingdom of heaven" to earth when . . .
 - We love God with our hearts, souls, and minds.
 - We love others like we love ourselves.
 - And we help others do the same.

- So now that we know what "the kingdom of heaven" is, let's find out why it's like a mustard tree.
 - A mustard tree is actually considered an invasive species. If left unattended, this plant will grow out of control and continue expanding, as long as it finds good soil in which to grow. With that in mind, **what do you think Jesus might be trying to say about "the kingdom of heaven"?**
 - A mustard tree isn't a particularly rare or expensive plant. It's not hard to find or difficult to get your hands on! **What do you think that might tell us about what God's kingdom is like?**
 - Jesus said the mustard tree could grow large enough to let birds rest in its branches. **What do you think that might tell us about what God's kingdom is like?**
- One thing I love about Jesus' parables is how they encourage us to think, question, and wonder about what Jesus was saying. And, like we've said before in this series, that's a big part of why Jesus taught this way! He wanted us to use our minds to try to decipher what he was trying to say.
- There are so many things we could say about what this metaphor of a mustard seed could mean, but here are a few things I see:
 - Like a mustard tree (which grows easily and in so many places), the kingdom of heaven isn't difficult to find or access. God's love is available to anyone who's looking for it.
 - Like the birds in Jesus' parable discovered, God's kingdom provides a place for us to find rest, safety, and comfort. With Jesus, we always have a safe place to land.
 - Like this "invasive species," God's kingdom doesn't require expert gardeners in order to get it to grow. God's kingdom is going to keep growing even when you or I mess up, fall short, or aren't the best representatives of Jesus we could be.
 - Like that tiny little mustard seed, in God's kingdom, small insignificant things often grow into things that are hugely important — and nothing can stop what God is doing.
- And when you join in on what God is up in the world, by sharing the good news of Jesus with your words and actions, you get to be part of that growth.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
 - ★ **How would you explain "the kingdom of heaven"? What questions do you still have about what that means?**

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 86:11-13

- But before God uses us to help the kingdom of heaven grow here on earth, God wants to make the kingdom of heaven grow in our hearts too. It isn't just here on earth where God's will can be done — it's in our own lives too.
- If you want to see the kingdom grow in your life, you might try praying something like this . . .
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 86:11-13.*
- You can see God's kingdom grow as you . . .
 - Learn to follow God's ways.
 - Learn to trust God.
 - Learn to focus on God.
 - Choose to worship God with your life.
 - Let Jesus' love transform you and give you a new life.

- This is how a seed becomes a tree. When Jesus transforms people like you and me, his work doesn't end with us. As we learn to follow him and tell others about the new life we've found in him, we become part of something so much bigger than us. **God's kingdom is always growing**, and we get to be a part of it.

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

REFLECTION | Kingdom Invitation (Part 1)

- God's kingdom is going to grow whether you or I participate in it or not. But don't you want to be a part of something so much bigger than you? Don't you want to see what happens when heaven comes to earth?
- It starts by letting God's kingdom grow in our own lives. Remember, "the kingdom of heaven" is wherever God's will is done! So how could your life fall more in line with what God wants for you? Does it look like . . .
 - Getting to know Jesus for the very first time?
 - Spending more time with God on your own?
 - Following God's ways instead of your own?
 - Trusting God more?
 - Worshiping God with your life?
 - Letting Jesus transform you in an area where you're feeling stuck?
- **God's kingdom grows in us** when we learn to love God more and look more like Jesus.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your program, print and cut the handouts provided in your Week 4 folder. Place one under each seat, along with a pen. Invite students to write in the first box how they want to see the kingdom grow in their own lives.*

REFLECTION | Kingdom Invitation (Part 2)

- As God's kingdom grows within us, we're invited to join Jesus in his work to see God's kingdom grow all around us too.
- If "the kingdom of heaven" is wherever God's will is done, how could you be a part of making this world look more like the way God wants it to look? Could it mean . . .
 - Reaching out to someone who needs a friend?
 - Meeting a need no one else has met?
 - Loving someone like Jesus loves them?
 - Standing up for someone no one else is standing up for?
 - Sharing your story of faith with someone who's never heard it before?
 - Setting an example that inspires others to know Jesus better?
- Like that tiny mustard seed teaches us, tiny actions and choices can help the kingdom of heaven grow. When we show the world what Jesus is like through our love, mercy, and compassion (instead of hate, violence, or fear), we're inviting others to experience the goodness of God! **God's kingdom grows in the world** when people are loved like Jesus — and when new people choose to love Jesus in return.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *In the second box, invite students to imagine a new metaphor to describe how God's kingdom can grow here on earth. Then challenge them to write at least one way they be a part of helping God's kingdom grow this week.*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*

- ✪ Is there an area of your life where you're hesitant to let God's "will be done"? If so, what's stopping you from letting God help you grow in that area?
- What are some small ways you've seen other people help God's kingdom grow here on Earth? Which of those things do you feel inspired to do too?
- Read 1 Corinthians 3:7-9. How is this a helpful reminder when we're trying to grow in our faith? How is it a helpful reminder when we're trying to help God's kingdom grow?
- This week, how do you want to see God's kingdom grow in your life or in the world? And what are you going to do to help make that happen?

MUSIC | "Kingdom Come" (Common Hymnal)

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Play the song "Kingdom Come" (Common Hymnal), but make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. For more information, [read this! Here's a link](#) to preview the song for your personal use.
- Just like God made that mustard seed grow, God has the ability to make our lives' impact grow beyond anything we can imagine. But that kind of impact doesn't happen by accident. It happens when we let our lives be changed by Jesus' love and then invite others to do the same.
- In both our lives and in the world around us, **God's kingdom is always growing** — and isn't it amazing that Jesus invites us to be a part of it?

WEEK 4

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

God's kingdom is always growing.

BIBLE

Matthew 13:31-32; Psalm 86:11-13;
1 Corinthians 3:7-9

QUESTIONS

- **Who's the most overrated performer, creator, or athlete you can think of? Who's the most underrated?**
- **Whether you're a fan of a sports team, musician, show, or game, how can being part of a passionate fan base make you feel like a part of something bigger than yourself?**
- **What are some other ways people might try to be part of something bigger than themselves?**
- **Do you think everyone is created with a desire to be part of something bigger than themselves? Why or why not?**
- **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
- **How would you explain "the kingdom of heaven"? What questions do you still have about what that means?**
- **Is there an area of your life where you're hesitant to let God's "will be done"? If so, what's stopping you from letting God help you grow in that area?**
- **What are some small ways you've seen other people help God's kingdom grow here on Earth? Which of those things do you feel inspired to do too?**
- **Read 1 Corinthians 3:7-9. How is this a helpful reminder when we're trying to grow in our faith? How is it a helpful reminder when we're trying to help God's kingdom grow?**
- **This week, how do you want to see God's kingdom grow in your life or in the world? And what are you going to do to help make that happen?**



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 4

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers



Some things are hard to understand – like chemistry, verb conjugations, the blockchain, or why your friend is mad at you. When we face a problem, situation, or idea we're struggling to understand, it always helps to know someone we trust can explain it to us. When Jesus was here on earth, he spent a lot of time helping his followers understand some pretty hard-to-understand ideas about God. One of the ways Jesus often made complicated ideas simpler was by explaining them through stories and metaphors, which we call parables. In this four-week series from the Gospels, we'll explore four of the parables Jesus told his followers to explain four important truths about God. These parables help us see that **God's words are a firm foundation, in God's kingdom, everyone belongs, God's words invite a response**, and that **God's kingdom is always growing**.

THIS WEEK

BIG IDEA

God's kingdom is always growing.

BIBLE

Matthew 13:31-32; Psalm 86:11-13;
1 Corinthians 3:7-9

QUESTIONS

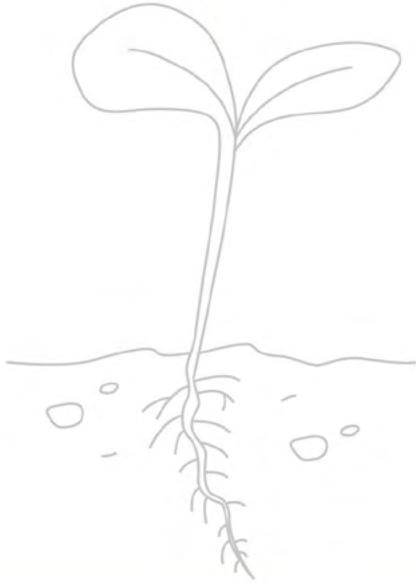
- **Who's the most overrated performer, creator, or athlete you can think of? Who's the most underrated?**
- **Whether you're a fan of a sports team, musician, show, or game, how can being part of a passionate fan base make you feel like a part of something bigger than yourself?**
- **Retell me Jesus' parable as though I've never heard it before. Then explain it to me!**
- **What are some small ways you've seen other people help God's kingdom grow here on Earth? Which of those things do you feel inspired to do too?**
- **Read 1 Corinthians 3:7-9. How is this a helpful reminder when we're trying to grow in our faith? How is it a helpful reminder when we're trying to help God's kingdom grow?**
- **This week, how do you want to see God's kingdom grow in your life or in the world? And what are you going to do to help make that happen?**



Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

God's kingdom is always growing.

IN MY LIFE...

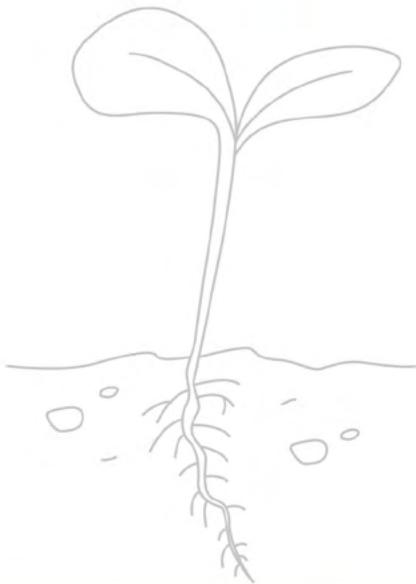


IN THE WORLD ...



God's kingdom is always growing.

IN MY LIFE...



IN THE WORLD ...



ONE-MINUTE SERMON SCRIPTS



ONE-MINUTE SERMONS

After you teach each week, we recommend **filming a video of yourself re-teaching your message in one minute or less**. Then post it on social media! We've written the beginnings of a script for you each week, and we've also filmed complete [One-Minute Sermon Videos](#) for you too, in partnership with [Rescue a Generation](#). Make your own or post ours – whatever you want!

WEEK 1

Do you ever feel like you're on shaky ground? Maybe you're stressed because your parents are getting a divorce, and you feel stuck in the middle. Or you have to move schools and leave your friends behind. Or your parent lost their job, and you hear them worried about money. Or maybe you and a friend are fighting or drifting apart, and you wish things could go back to how they were before. Living in uncertainty can be exhausting, which is why I love this story Jesus once told about rocks and sand. In this story, he imagines one person who builds a house on a solid rock, and another who builds their house on sand. Then a storm comes and, well, can you guess what happened? The house on the sand collapsed while the other stood strong. So what's the point of this story? Jesus explains: God's words are like that solid rock. When you build your life around what God has said, no matter how shaky life gets, you'll never crumble. Because **God's words are a firm foundation**.

WEEK 2

You know that feeling when you get treated unfairly? The pounding heart? Tight chest? Warm face? Burning stomach? It's not a great feeling. Sometimes we really do get treated unfairly! But sometimes, the thing we call "unfair" might actually be something else entirely. Let me explain. Jesus once told a story about some people working in a field. At the end of the day, these workers all got paid the same amount of money, even though some people didn't have to work as long as the others. Maybe that doesn't seem fair at first, but with this fictitious story, Jesus was trying to make a point. The story wasn't about money at all – it was actually about God's love and grace and who gets to belong in God's kingdom. Jesus was saying God's love isn't just for the people who got there first or followed all the right rules. God's love is for everyone – even the people who showed up a little late. That's not something to be angry about. It's something to celebrate! Because **in God's kingdom, everyone belongs**.

WEEK 3

So, sometimes I do this thing where, when someone is telling me a story, I get so into it that I kind of forget to respond. Like when they stop talking, I just sort of look at them, like I'm watching a YouTube video, while they wait for me to say something – anything. Yeah, it's weird. I don't recommend it, because when people say things to you, they usually want a response. Not blank stares. And you know what? God's no different! Jesus once told this story about God's words being like seeds, and people being like different kinds of soil. Some people are fertile soil where God's words take root and begin to grow, while other people are more like gravel roads, where the seeds never get a chance to grow. Jesus' point is that, when God speaks, we have an opportunity to do something about what God has said. Will we let those words take root and change us . . . or not? It's up to you. But **God's words invite a response.**

WEEK 4

I don't know if you've spent much time learning about trees, but they're pretty amazing. They might seem a little boring at first glance (I mean, all they do is sit there and blow in the wind, right?) but they're actually super powerful. Given enough time, a tree can actually break through rocks, cement, and even whole buildings. When a tree is healthy, almost nothing can stop its growth. Which reminds me of a story Jesus once told. In this story, a man plants a tiny little mustard seed. Over time, that seed grows, and grows, and grows, until it becomes an enormous tree. Jesus says this mustard seed represents the kingdom of God, because in God's kingdom, small insignificant things often grow into things that are hugely important – and nothing can stop what God is doing. And when you join in on what God is up in the world, by sharing the good news of Jesus with your words and actions, you get to be part of that growth. **God's kingdom is always growing,** and we get to be a part of it.

MARKETING CHECKLIST



BEFORE THE SERIES

✓ TO DO

	Print your Series Promo Poster and Series Promo Cards and display them where families and volunteers can see them.
	Customize your Volunteer Hub and Parent Hub web pages for this series.
	Customize and send the Parent Email for this series.
	Send the Volunteer Email for Week 1 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.
	Review the suggested Social Media Posts and Captions for this series.
	Post the Bumper Video on social media with this caption: We're starting a new series on evangelism this week called <i>Please Explain!</i>

AFTER WEEK 1

✓ TO DO

	Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 1 on social media with this caption: In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about sand, rocks, and houses. Huh? Here's a recap!
	Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 1 on social media and/or send with this caption: Remember, with Jesus, the difficult things in our lives don't go away. He never promised us that. But he did promise to give us a solid and unchanging foundation we can build our lives upon.
	Send the Volunteer Email for Week 2 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.

AFTER WEEK 2

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 2 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about a bunch of people getting paid to work in a field. Why? Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 2 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>Remember, God's kingdom doesn't have an exclusive guest list, show favoritism, or categorize people based on their worthiness. In God's kingdom, everyone belongs. Even you and me.</p>
	<p>Send the Volunteer Email for Week 3 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.</p>

AFTER WEEK 3

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 3 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about . . . uh, seeds? Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 3 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>Remember, learning how to hear and respond to God's words is a lifelong journey. Sometimes we'll be better at it than we will be at other times. But if we walk this path together, we'll have a much better chance of being like that "good" soil where God's words can take root.</p>
	<p>Send the Volunteer Email for Week 4 of this series. Then text your volunteers a link to the email.</p>

AFTER WEEK 4

✓ TO DO

	<p>Post the 1-Minute Sermon Video for Week 4 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about mustard. The tree. Not the condiment. Here's a recap!</p>
	<p>Post the Big Idea Graphic for Week 4 on social media with this caption:</p> <p>Remember, just like God made that mustard seed grow, God has the ability to make our lives' impact grow beyond anything we can imagine. But that kind of impact doesn't happen by accident. It happens when we let our lives be changed by Jesus' love and then invite others to do the same.</p>
	<p>Get ready for the next series!</p>

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS & CAPTIONS



Need some help deciding what to post on social media before and during this series? Here's our suggestion: each week, share the media we've provided in your Graphics and Videos folder using the captions below.

BEFORE THE SERIES



BUMPER VIDEO

We're starting a new series on evangelism this week called *Please Explain!*

AFTER WEEK 1



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 1)

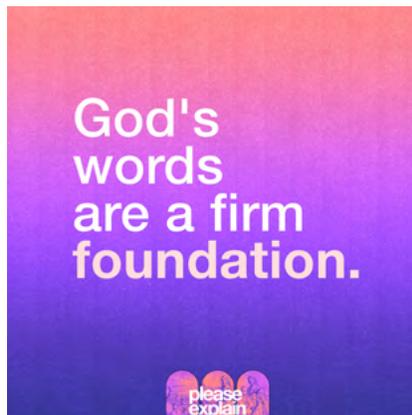
In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about sand, rocks, and houses. Huh? Here's a recap!

AFTER WEEK 2



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 2)

In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about a bunch of people getting paid to work in a field. Why? Here's a recap!



BIG IDEA (WEEK 1)

Remember, with Jesus, the difficult things in our lives don't go away. He never promised us that. But he did promise to give us a solid and unchanging foundation we can build our lives upon.



BIG IDEA (WEEK 2)

Remember, God's kingdom doesn't have an exclusive guest list, show favoritism, or categorize people based on their worthiness. In God's kingdom, everyone belongs. Even you and me.

AFTER WEEK 3



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 3)

In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about . . . uh, seeds? Here's a recap!

AFTER WEEK 4



TEACHING VIDEO (WEEK 4)

In case you missed it, this week we heard a story from Jesus about mustard. The tree. Not the condiment. Here's a recap!

God's words invite a response.



BIG IDEA (WEEK 3)

Remember, learning how to hear and respond to God's words is a lifelong journey. Sometimes we'll be better at it than we will be at other times. But if we walk this path together, we'll have a much better chance of being like that "good" soil where God's words can take root.

God's kingdom is always growing.



BIG IDEA (WEEK 4)

Remember, just like God made that mustard seed grow, God has the ability to make our lives' impact grow beyond anything we can imagine. But that kind of impact doesn't happen by accident. It happens when we let our lives be changed by Jesus' love and then invite others to do the same.

**What We're
Teaching**



ADD YOUR LOGO HERE

**What We're
Teaching**



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