

ARC 2 · STORIES ABOUT JESUS, 11-20

The Ones He Told

Ten stories about Jesus, fully prepped.



THE TEN STORIES

11. The Running Father	4
12. The Good Samaritan	7
13. The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin	10
14. The Sower	13
15. The Mustard Seed	16
16. The Two Builders	18
17. The Unforgiving Servant	20
18. The Workers in the Vineyard	23
19. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	26
20. The Sheep and the Goats	29

A few days before your table meets, learn the story the way hosts have always learned stories: **Recite, Retell, Recall.**

RECITE

Read it out loud to yourself a few times during the week.

RETELL

Say it in your own words with the text nearby to check yourself.

RECALL

Tell it with the text closed. That is it.

OR READ IT FIRST

Cannot get it cold? Read it aloud, close the book, tell it anyway — and ask the table to catch what you drop.

Twenty minutes across a week. Nobody is asking you to memorize a script — the five Cs are all you need to hold in your head, and every story here comes with them already worked out.

The sample telling is training wheels, not a script. It is told, never read — reading aloud makes a classroom, telling makes a table.

The Running Father

Read it first: Luke 15:11–32

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Tax collectors and notorious sinners keep coming to hear Jesus — and the religious leaders keep muttering about the company he keeps. Jesus answers the muttering with three stories. This is the third and biggest.

CHARACTERS

A father. A younger son who wants his inheritance early. An older son who never left. (Two lost sons — only one of them knows it.)

CONFLICT

The younger son's request means, in that world, *I wish you were dead* — and the father grants it. The son wastes everything, hits bottom in a pigpen, and starts rehearsing a speech to come home as a hired hand.

CLIMAX

The father sees him while he's still far off — which means the father was watching the road — and *runs*. Embraces him mid-speech, before the apology is finished, and calls for the robe, the ring, the feast.

CHANGE

The party starts — and the older brother won't come in. The father leaves the feast a second time, for the second lost son, and pleads with him. The story ends mid-conversation, with the older brother standing in the yard, deciding. Jesus leaves it there on purpose: the mutterers he told it to *are* the older brother, and the ending is theirs to write.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus told this one to a mixed crowd — sinners leaning in close, religious leaders muttering at the edges about the company he kept. Remember the mutterers. The story is aimed at them more than anyone.

A man had two sons. The younger one comes to him and says, "Father, I want my share of the estate — now." Understand what that meant: you get your inheritance

when your father dies. He's saying, *I can't wait for you to die*. And the father — this is the first shock — gives it to him.

The son converts it all to cash and leaves for a distant country, and burns through everything. Then a famine hits, and he ends up feeding pigs — for a Jewish boy, the absolute floor — so hungry the pig slop looks good, and nobody gives him anything.

And in the pigpen, he comes to his senses. My father's *hired men* eat better than this. So he builds a speech: *Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm not worthy to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand*. And he starts the long walk home, rehearsing it.

Here's the center of everything. While he was still a long way off — his father saw him. You only see someone a long way off if you've been watching the road. And the father runs. A landowner in that world did not run; it was beneath his dignity, robes hiked up, everyone staring. This father doesn't care. He runs, throws his arms around the boy who smells like pigs, and kisses him.

The son starts the speech — sinned against heaven, not worthy — and never gets to the hired-hand part. The father is already shouting over him: the best robe! A ring for his finger! Sandals! Kill the fattened calf — my son was dead and is alive again, lost and found!

The music starts. And the older son, coming in from the fields — where he's been working, like always — hears it and asks a servant what's going on. Your brother's back; your father's throwing a feast. And the older son is furious, and won't go in.

So the father leaves the party a *second* time — he goes out to the second lost son too. And the son unloads years of it: I've slaved for you, never disobeyed, and you never gave me so much as a goat — but *this son of yours* comes home from wasting your money and gets the feast?

The father says: son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we *had* to celebrate — your brother was dead and is alive.

And the story just... stops. Right there. The older brother standing in the yard, the feast going on behind the father's shoulder, the invitation open. Jesus never says whether he went in. He was looking at the mutterers when he finished. He still is.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about God — a father who watches the road and leaves the feast twice?
- 03 Where are you in this story — the pigpen, the road home, or the yard? (Most of us have been all three. Which one are you in now?)
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

If there's a road you should be walking — a relationship where you're the one who left, or the one standing angry in the yard — take one step down it this week. A call. A text. A door left open on purpose.

The Good Samaritan

Read it first: Luke 10:25–37

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

A religion expert stands up to test Jesus: what must I do to inherit eternal life? They agree on the answer — love God, love your neighbor. Then the expert, wanting to justify himself, asks the fatal follow-up: *and who is my neighbor?* He's asking where the line is.

CHARACTERS

A man beaten and left half-dead on the Jericho road. A priest. A temple assistant. A Samaritan — to Jesus's audience, the despised enemy. The expert, listening.

CONFLICT

Two religious professionals see the dying man and cross to the other side. The audience expects the third passerby to be an ordinary Israelite — the hero of the pattern. Jesus makes him a Samaritan.

CLIMAX

The enemy is the one who feels compassion — kneels in the road, treats the wounds, gives up his own ride, pays the innkeeper, and promises to come back and cover the rest.

CHANGE

Jesus flips the expert's question. Not *who is my neighbor* but *which one was a neighbor?* The expert can't even say the word Samaritan — he answers, "the one who showed mercy." Jesus: go and do the same. The line the expert wanted drawn doesn't exist.

A SAMPLE TELLING

A religion scholar stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns it back — you know the law, what does it say? And the man answers perfectly: love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself. "Right," Jesus says. "Do that and you'll live."

But the scholar wants something more. Luke says he wanted to *justify himself*. So he asks the question that launches the story: "And who is my neighbor?" Hear what he's really asking: where's the line? Who am I allowed to not love?

So Jesus tells him about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho — a seventeen-mile road through desert canyons, famous for bandits. And bandits get him. They strip him, beat him, and leave him half-dead beside the road.

A priest comes along — and when he sees the man, he crosses to the other side and keeps walking. Then a temple assistant — same thing. Sees him, crosses over, gone. Two professionally religious men, and the dying man watches both sets of sandals pass on the far side of the road.

Now, everyone listening knows how stories like this work. Priest, temple assistant... the third one will be a regular Israelite. The everyman. The hero.

Jesus says: a Samaritan.

You have to feel how that landed. Jews and Samaritans hated each other — centuries of it, religious and ethnic both. To this audience, "good Samaritan" wasn't a phrase; it was a contradiction. The enemy is the third man on the road.

And the Samaritan sees the beaten man and feels compassion. He kneels in the dirt of a dangerous road for a stranger who'd probably despise him on a better day. He treats the wounds with his own oil and wine, bandages them, puts the man on his own donkey — which means the Samaritan walks — takes him to an inn, and stays the night caring for him. In the morning he pays the innkeeper and says: whatever else it costs, put it on my bill. I'll be back.

Then Jesus looks at the scholar and flips his question inside out. He'd asked *who is my neighbor* — who qualifies. Jesus asks: "Which of the three was a neighbor to the man attacked by bandits?"

The scholar can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan." He says, "The one who showed him mercy."

And Jesus says: "Yes. Now go and do the same."

The scholar asked for a definition. Jesus gave him a direction.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about the kind of love God is after — and who Jesus casts as the one who has it?

- 03 Where are you in this story — in the ditch, crossing the road, or kneeling? And who is the "Samaritan" you'd struggle to receive help from?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Neighbor is a direction, not a definition — so pick a direction. One concrete act of help this week for someone outside your circle: the coworker nobody eats with, the neighbor you've never spoken to, the person your politics or history tells you to pass. Oil-and-wine help, not thoughts-and-prayers help.

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Read it first: Luke 15:1–10

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The same frame as the running father — in fact, the same scene. Sinners crowding in to listen; Pharisees muttering, *this man welcomes sinners and eats with them*. These two little stories are Jesus's first two answers.

CHARACTERS

A shepherd with a hundred sheep, one missing. A woman with ten silver coins, one lost. And in both stories: the friends and neighbors called in to celebrate.

CONFLICT

The math is unreasonable on purpose. Who leaves ninety-nine in open country to chase one? Who turns the house upside down all day for one coin, then throws a party that probably costs more than the coin?

CLIMAX

Finding — and what finding produces. The shepherd puts the sheep on his shoulders, *rejoicing*. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps every corner, and when she finds it, calls everyone she knows.

CHANGE

Jesus lands both stories the same way: there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who returns than over ninety-nine who never wandered. The mutterers thought the sinners at the table were the problem. Jesus says they're the party.

A SAMPLE TELLING

This one needs its setup, because the setup is the point. Tax collectors and notorious sinners kept crowding around Jesus to listen — and the religious leaders were muttering: *this man welcomes sinners and even eats with them*. It wasn't a compliment. So Jesus told them a story. Two, actually, back to back.

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep, and one wanders off. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that's lost until he finds it?

And every shepherd listening probably thought — well, honestly? That's terrible math. You don't risk ninety-nine for one. But Jesus isn't teaching flock management.

He's telling you what God is like, and God's math is scandalous: in this story, nobody is a rounding error. The one is worth the search.

And when he finds it — this is my favorite part — he doesn't drive the sheep home ahead of him, annoyed, muttering about the wasted afternoon. He puts it across his shoulders, joyfully, carries it home, and then calls his friends and neighbors: "Celebrate with me! I found my lost sheep!" He throws a party over livestock.

Then Jesus tells it again, smaller and closer to home. A woman has ten silver coins and loses one — a day's wage, real money in a poor house. What does she do? Lights a lamp, because houses then were dark. Sweeps every corner. Searches *carefully* until she finds it. Feel the verbs — this is not a casual look around. This is the whole house turned over for one coin.

And when she finds it? Same ending. She calls her friends and neighbors: "Rejoice with me! I found my lost coin!" The party might cost more than the coin. She doesn't care. Finding isn't finished until there's a celebration.

Then Jesus turns to the mutterers and lands it: "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed."

Look around the room he said that in. The "lost" ones were sitting right there, eating with him. The muttering was about *them*. And Jesus is saying: you hear scandal — heaven hears a party starting. God is not the one waiting with crossed arms for the lost to shape up and report in. God is the shepherd out in the hills, the woman on her knees with the lamp. God is the searcher. And every single person who's ever wandered is the reason for the music.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about God — the searching, and the celebrating?
- 03 Where are you in this story — the one being searched for, the ninety-nine, or someone muttering at the party?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Somebody has wandered out of your life quietly — a friend who stopped showing up, someone who slipped away from your table, your church, your family. Be the search party this week: one real reach-out, not to fix them, just to say *you're missed and worth finding*.

The Sower

Read it first: Mark 4:1–20

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The crowd by the lake is so big Jesus teaches from a boat. This is the parable he puts first — and the one he says unlocks the others.

CHARACTERS

A farmer, seed, and four kinds of ground: the hard path, the shallow rocky soil, the thorny patch, and the good earth.

CONFLICT

The same seed meets four fates. Birds take it off the path; the rocky soil sprouts fast and dies in the sun; thorns choke it; only the good soil produces.

CLIMAX

The harvest numbers: thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was planted — absurd abundance in a world where a good yield was seven or eight fold.

CHANGE

Privately, Jesus decodes it: the seed is the message, the soils are hearers. The farmer's method never changes — he scatters everywhere, extravagantly, path and rocks and thorns included. The question the story leaves in every listener: what kind of ground am I right now?

A SAMPLE TELLING

The crowd got so big that Jesus climbed into a boat and taught from the water. And he started with this one — later he told his followers that if you can understand this parable, you can understand them all. So lean in.

A farmer went out to plant, and he scattered seed the way farmers there did — broadcast, by the handful, everywhere.

Some fell on the hard path where feet had packed the ground, and it just sat on the surface until the birds took it.

Some fell on rocky ground — a thin skin of soil over stone. It sprouted *fast*, faster than everything else, because shallow soil warms quickly. And then the sun came up, and with no roots, it withered just as fast.

Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and strangled it — quietly, over time. It didn't die dramatically. It just never produced anything.

And some fell on good soil, and it grew, and produced a harvest of thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was planted. Those numbers made the farmers in the crowd blink — a *great* year was sevenfold. A hundredfold isn't agriculture. It's a miracle wearing work clothes.

Later, in private, his followers asked what it meant, and Jesus laid it out. The seed is the message — the word of God. The soils are hearts.

The path is the heart the message can't get into — it bounces, and it's gone by lunch. The rocky ground is the heart that receives it with instant joy — and joy is not the same as roots. Trouble comes, and the fast-sprouting faith wilts fast. The thorns — and Jesus names them — are the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, the desire for other things. Nothing hostile. Just crowding. The slow strangle of a full calendar. Most of us don't lose faith to an attack; we lose it to thorns.

And the good soil is the heart that hears the word, holds onto it, and produces — thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

Two things to walk away holding. First: look at the farmer. He scatters *everywhere* — path, rocks, thorns, all of it. No soil testing, no rationing, no writing anybody's ground off. That's how the message moves, and it's how we're meant to scatter it: generously, wastefully, without prejudging where it can't grow. Second: the soils aren't a personality test you take once. The same heart can be a path in one season and good earth in another. The question isn't which soil you *are*. It's which one you are *right now* — and soil, unlike rock, can be worked.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about how God's word works — and how the farmer scatters?
- 03 Where are you in this story — path, rocks, thorns, or good ground — in this season? And what are your thorns, specifically?

04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Two options — pick one. Work your soil: name your loudest thorn and cut it back this week in one measurable way (an app deleted, an evening reclaimed, a worry said out loud to someone). Or scatter like the farmer: share something of what you're finding at this table with one person, without prejudging their ground.

The Mustard Seed

Read it first: Mark 4:30–32

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Same teaching day by the lake. Jesus keeps reaching for pictures of the kingdom, and he picks the least impressive one available.

CHARACTERS

A mustard seed — proverbially the smallest seed in a Galilean garden. The ground. The birds, later.

CONFLICT

The mismatch is the whole story: the kingdom of God — the thing Israel expected to arrive like an empire — compared to a speck you could lose on your fingertip.

CLIMAX

Planted, it grows into the largest of garden plants, with branches big enough that birds nest in its shade.

CHANGE

Nothing happens to anyone in this story — the change happens in the listener's expectations. God's kingdom doesn't arrive impressive. It arrives small, gets buried, and outgrows everything — and ends up as shelter.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus asked the crowd: how can I describe the kingdom of God? What story should I use?

You can imagine what they hoped he'd say. Rome was standing on their necks. They wanted an army, a throne, fire from the sky. Something the size of their oppression.

He said: it's like a mustard seed.

A mustard seed is the smallest seed a Galilean farmer handled — the proverb for tiny. You could hold a hundred in your palm and sneeze them away. That, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of God is like. Not the empire. The speck.

But plant it — bury it, lose sight of it — and it grows. And it keeps growing, until it's the largest plant in the garden, ten feet of sprawling branches, big enough that the birds come and build their nests in its shade.

That's the whole story. One minute. But don't let its size fool you — the people who preserved it knew what they were holding. It says the kingdom starts embarrassingly small, on purpose. It says the growth happens underground first, where nobody's impressed. And it says the point of all that growing isn't the plant's own glory — it's *shade*. Branches something small and tired can shelter in.

Three people around a table somewhere is not a rounding error in God's economy. It's the seed. It's how the whole thing has always started.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about how God's kingdom actually grows — and what it grows for?
- 03 Where are you in this story — discouraged by the smallness of something, or maybe nesting in shade someone else planted?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Plant one seed this week and let it be small on purpose: one invitation, one kindness, one habit begun at speck-size. And name out loud at the table one big thing in your life that started embarrassingly small — practice trusting the pattern.

The Two Builders

Read it first: Matthew 7:24–27

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

The final words of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just spent three chapters teaching — and he closes by telling the crowd what will happen to everything they just heard.

CHARACTERS

Two builders. Two houses. One storm.

CONFLICT

The houses may look identical in fair weather. The difference — rock or sand — is invisible until it's tested.

CLIMAX

The storm hits both houses equally: rain, floodwater, winds beating against the walls. One stands. One collapses — and Jesus adds, *with a mighty crash*.

CHANGE

The dividing line isn't hearing versus not hearing — both builders *heard* the words. It's hearing-and-doing versus hearing-and-not. The sermon ends by telling the audience that listening to sermons is not the point.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Jesus had just finished the longest teaching we have from him — the Sermon on the Mount. Love your enemies. Forgive. Don't worry. Do for others what you'd want done for you. Three chapters of it, and the crowd on that hillside had heard every word.

And then he ended it with this.

"Anyone who listens to my teaching *and follows it* is wise — like a person who builds a house on solid rock. The rain comes, the floodwaters rise, the winds beat against that house — and it won't collapse, because it's built on bedrock.

"But anyone who hears my teaching and *doesn't obey it* is foolish — like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash."

Now notice a few things this little story is doing.

Both builders heard the same words. That's the uncomfortable part — the fool in this story isn't the person who never came to the hillside. It's the person who was there, listening, maybe nodding, maybe moved. The dividing line runs straight through the audience: not hearers and non-hearers, but hearers-who-do and hearers-who-don't.

Both houses probably looked fine. On a sunny day you can't tell rock foundation from sand. The difference is invisible right up until the day it's everything. Which is why nobody gets to grade their own foundation by how things look in fair weather.

And both houses got the storm. Read it again — the rain, the floods, the winds hit *both* houses, identically. Building on the rock is not storm insurance. Jesus never promises the obedient a life without weather. He promises that when the weather comes — and it comes for everyone at your table, eventually — what was built on doing will hold.

The crowd, Matthew says, was amazed at his teaching. But Jesus had just told them, as plainly as it can be said: being amazed is sand. Doing is rock.

That's why this story is in this canon, and why your table ends every gathering with the same question. A story that changes nothing was just entertainment. This is Jesus saying so himself, as his closing line.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about what Jesus actually wants from listeners — including this table?
- 03 Where are you in this story — and is there a storm that's already tested your foundations? What held?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Pick one thing you already know — one teaching of Jesus you've heard a hundred times and agree with — and do it this week, concretely, once. Not learn more. Do the known thing. Report back next gathering: that's the rock being laid, one stone at a time.

The Unforgiving Servant

Read it first: Matthew 18:21–35

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Peter comes with a question that sounds generous: Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times? (The rabbis said three. Peter doubled it and added one.) Jesus says: seventy times seven — and then tells this story to show why counting was the wrong idea entirely.

CHARACTERS

A king settling accounts. A servant who owes him ten thousand talents — a deliberately absurd number, more than the tax revenue of whole provinces, an unpayable debt. A fellow servant who owes the first man a few months' wages.

CONFLICT

The forgiven man walks straight out of the throne room, finds his coworker, grabs him by the throat over the small debt, ignores the exact plea he himself just made, and has him jailed.

CLIMAX

The king hears, calls him back, and names it: *I forgave you that entire debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?*

CHANGE

The forgiven-then-unforgiving man is handed over until the unpayable is paid — and Jesus lands the hardest ending of any parable: that's how it goes for the heart that receives forgiveness and refuses to pass it on. Grace received must become grace extended, or something in us curdles.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Peter came to Jesus with a question he probably thought was generous. "Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who keeps wronging me? Seven times?" The going rabbinic answer was three. Peter doubled it and threw in a bonus. He's expecting a gold star.

Jesus says: not seven. Seventy times seven. Which isn't math — it's the end of math. Stop counting. And then, because that sounds impossible, he tells a story about *why*.

A king decides to settle accounts, and they bring in a servant who owes him ten thousand talents. The crowd would have laughed out loud at that number — a talent was about twenty years of wages. Ten thousand of them is more money than existed in the province. It's a cartoon number, on purpose. It means: a debt no life is long enough to repay.

The man can't pay — obviously — so the king orders him and his family sold. And the servant falls on his face: "Be patient with me, and I will pay it all." Which is also absurd; he couldn't pay it in a thousand lifetimes. But the king — here's the gospel hiding in a parable — is *filled with pity for him*, and doesn't extend the deadline. He erases the debt. All of it. The man walks out owing nothing.

And walking out — the very same day — he finds a fellow servant who owes *him* a few months' wages. Real money, but a knowable, payable, human-sized amount. And he grabs him by the throat. "Pay up." The man falls down and pleads — listen to the words — "Be patient with me, and I will pay it." The *identical sentence* he himself said an hour ago. And he refuses, and has the man thrown into prison.

The other servants see it and they're sick about it, and they tell the king. And the king calls him back in: "You evil servant. I forgave you that entire debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?" And the forgiven man is handed over until the unpayable is paid.

Then Jesus turns to Peter — to everyone — with the hardest closing line he ever put on a parable: that's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.

Sit with the story's logic rather than rushing past the ending. The man's problem wasn't that he broke a forgiveness rule. It's that the forgiveness never got *into* him — he walked out of the throne room with his debt erased and his heart untouched, still living in the accounting world, still grabbing throats. Forgiveness we receive but won't extend curdles into something that imprisons *us*. Peter asked for a number. Jesus answered: you've been forgiven the ten thousand. Live like it.

(A host's note for the room: someone at your table may be carrying a wound where forgiveness feels impossible or even unsafe — abuse, betrayal, real harm. This story is not a demand that they reconcile with someone dangerous or pretend harm didn't happen. Forgiveness and safety are different questions; forgiveness and trust are different questions. If that's live at your table, say this out loud, go gently, and bring it to your church contact rather than resolving it in one night.)

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about the size of what God forgives — and what he expects that forgiveness to produce?
- 03 Where are you in this story — and is there a debt you're still holding someone to?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

One step on one debt this week — your pace, your safety respected: write the name down and pray for them daily, or release a grudge you've been rehearsing, or — if it's safe and you're ready — the conversation itself. Passing the mercy on is the act; the size of the step is yours.

The Workers in the Vineyard

Read it first: Matthew 20:1–16

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

This follows straight after the rich young man walks away and Peter says, *we left everything to follow you — what will we get?* Jesus promises reward — and then tells this story, which dismantles the scorekeeping inside the question.

CHARACTERS

A vineyard owner. Workers hired at dawn for the standard daily wage. More hired at nine, noon, three — and a last batch at five o'clock, one hour before quitting time.

CONFLICT

Payday. The owner pays the five-o'clock crew first — a full day's wage. The dawn crew watches, recalculates, and expects more. They get the exact wage they agreed to at sunrise.

CLIMAX

The grumbling: *those men worked one hour, and you've made them equal to us who bore the day's burden and heat.* And the owner's answer: friend, I've done you no wrong — didn't you agree to this wage? Should you be jealous because I am generous?

CHANGE

No one is underpaid in this story. Everyone goes home able to feed their family. The only thing injured is the dawn crew's sense of rank — and Jesus closes with the line that reorders every line ever formed: the last will be first, and the first last.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Peter had just asked the question we'd all ask: "We've given up everything to follow you — what will we get?" And Jesus, after promising him plenty, told this story. Keep Peter's question in your ear the whole way through; the story is its answer.

A landowner goes out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard. He agrees with them on the normal daily wage — a denarius, enough to feed a family for a day — and puts them to work.

At nine he's back at the marketplace, finds more men standing around, and sends them in too — "I'll pay you what's right." Same again at noon. Same at three. And

then at five o'clock — one hour before the workday ends — he finds still more standing there. "Why haven't you been working?" "Because no one hired us." Sit on that line a moment. These aren't the lazy ones. They're the leftovers — the men nobody picked, standing in the market all day with families to feed and nothing to bring home. "You go too," he says.

Then evening comes, and the owner does something deliberately provocative: he pays the last crew first, in front of everyone. And the five-o'clock men — one hour of work in the cool of the evening — receive a full day's wage.

Watch the dawn crew do the math. If one hour pays a denarius, then twelve hours pays... They step up expecting a windfall. And they receive: one denarius. Exactly what they agreed to at sunrise, exactly enough to feed their families, exactly what they'd have gone home delighted with — if they hadn't seen the others get it too.

They grumble, and you can't entirely blame them: "Those men worked one hour, and you've made them *equal* to us — us, who carried the whole day and the burning heat!"

And the owner answers, and every word matters: "Friend, I haven't been unfair. Didn't you agree to work for this wage? Take it and go. I choose to give the last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Or" — here it is — "should you be jealous because I am kind?"

Nobody in this story is cheated. Nobody goes home hungry. The only casualty is the seniority system the dawn crew was carrying in their heads. Their pay didn't shrink when the latecomers were blessed; it just stopped being a rank.

And Jesus lands it: "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Here's why this story sits in this canon: every table this model ever gathers will hold both crews. The one who's followed Jesus since childhood, borne the heat of decades — and the one who walked in the door last month after twenty years away, or walked in last week having never followed at all. And the vineyard owner pays in full, either way. Grace doesn't prorate. If that offends something in us, the story says, look hard at what it's offending — because it isn't our wage. It's our rank.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about God's generosity — and about the five-o'clock people nobody hired?
- 03 Where are you in this story — the dawn crew doing the math, or the ones picked last? How does the owner's question ("should you be jealous because I am kind?") land on you?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Find a five-o'clock person — someone standing outside the thing everyone else got picked for: the new person, the returner, the one nobody hired — and treat them like a full-wage member this week. A real welcome, a real inclusion, no probation period.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Read it first: Luke 18:9–14

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Luke tells us exactly who this is for: Jesus told it to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else. If that sentence stings a little, the story is for us too.

CHARACTERS

Two men who go up to the temple to pray: a Pharisee — the respected, disciplined, genuinely observant religious man — and a tax collector, the collaborator everyone despised.

CONFLICT

Two prayers. The Pharisee, standing apart, thanks God that he isn't like other people — cheaters, sinners, or like *that tax collector over there* — and lists his credentials: fasting twice a week, tithing everything. The tax collector stands at a distance, won't lift his eyes, beats his chest: God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

CLIMAX

Jesus's verdict, which would have shocked the original audience cold: I tell you, *this man* — the tax collector — went home justified before God. Not the other.

CHANGE

The scoreboard inverts in one sentence: those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. The door into God's presence turns out to be exactly one prayer wide — and it's the short one.

A SAMPLE TELLING

Luke does something unusual with this story — he tells us who it's aimed at before Jesus even opens his mouth: *some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else*. Hold onto that, and notice if it describes anyone you know. Including, some days, the mirror.

Two men went up to the temple to pray.

The first is a Pharisee — and before we make him the cartoon villain, be fair to him: this is a genuinely disciplined, respected, religious man. What he says about himself

is probably true. He stands by himself and prays like this: "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people — cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like *that* tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of everything I get."

Read that prayer again and count. Five I's in two sentences. He's technically addressing God, but God is really just the audience for a performance about himself. And notice the prayer needs a *them* to work — it's not "thank you for your goodness," it's "thank you that I'm not like *those* people." His righteousness is comparative. It only stands up if someone else is beneath it. Which is why he's so glad the tax collector showed up: fresh material.

The tax collector, meanwhile, is standing at a distance — even his geography is honest; he doesn't feel entitled to the front. He won't lift his eyes. He beats his chest — in that culture, a gesture of extreme grief, something men almost never did — and he prays seven words:

"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

No credentials, because he has none. No comparison to anyone, because from the floor there's no one to look down on. No promises to do better, even. Just the truth of what he is, handed to God, with a plea for mercy.

And Jesus delivers the verdict: "I tell you, *this* sinner — not the Pharisee — returned home justified before God." Right with God. The religious professional's prayer bounced off the ceiling; the traitor's seven words went straight through.

Then the line that runs like a spine through everything Jesus taught: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Here's the trap to name before you leave this story, because it's sneaky: the moment you catch yourself thinking *thank God I'm not like that Pharisee* — you've just prayed his prayer. The story isn't giving you a new *them* to stand above. It's showing you the only prayer that ever gets home, and offering it to everyone at this table on equal terms: God, be merciful to me.

That prayer is why nobody needs credentials to sit here.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about the prayer God actually receives — and the kind he doesn't?
- 03 Where are you in this story — and who is *your* tax collector, the person your inner Pharisee compares down to?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

Two-part act, both private. First: pray the seven words, daily, all week — God, *be merciful to me, a sinner* — and let them be enough. Second: catch yourself in one comparison prayer this week ("at least I'm not...") and, instead of finishing it, pray something kind for that exact person.

The Sheep and the Goats

Read it first: Matthew 25:31–46

THE FIVE CS

CONTEXT

Jesus's final parable in Matthew — days before his arrest, the last teaching before the passion begins. His closing word, and he spends it on this.

CHARACTERS

The Son of Man in glory, all nations gathered, and a shepherd's separation: sheep to the right, goats to the left. And running through it: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner.

CONFLICT

The separation turns on six concrete acts — food, drink, welcome, clothing, care, a visit — done or not done. No one is examined on anything else.

CLIMAX

The double surprise. The sheep are baffled: *Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you?* The goats are equally baffled: *when did we see you in need and not help?* Neither group knew. And the King's answer, twice: whatever you did — or didn't do — for the least of these, you did it to me.

CHANGE

The last teaching Jesus gives before the cross puts his own presence in the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned — and measures everything by love that showed up in person. Whatever else your church teaches about the day this story pictures, the standard Jesus names in it is unmistakable: the least of these is where he's been all along.

A SAMPLE TELLING

This is the last parable Jesus told in Matthew's gospel. Days later he'd be arrested. So this is where he chose to land the plane — his closing word. Whatever comes last in a man's teaching, he means most.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he said, all the nations will be gathered before him, and he'll separate them the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats — sheep to his right, goats to his left.

And to those on his right the King says: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father — inherit the Kingdom prepared for you. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me."

Now here's the first surprise, and it's the sheep themselves who raise it. They're *confused*. "Lord — when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison?" They have no memory of doing any of this for *him*. Whatever they did, they did without a scoreboard, without knowing it counted, apparently without even thinking about it. It was just who they'd become.

And the King answers: "I tell you the truth — when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me."

Let that sentence get all the way in. Jesus is saying he has been in the hungry person. In the stranger at the door. In the body in the hospital bed and the prisoner nobody visits. All along. The people we walk past are where he's been standing.

Then the other side — and the second surprise is that the goats are just as confused. "Lord, when did we ever see *you* hungry or thirsty or a stranger or sick or in prison, and not help?" You can hear the protest underneath it: *we would have shown up for YOU*. If they'd known it was Jesus — if there'd been a sign, a camera, some credit involved — of course they'd have helped. They weren't monsters. They were busy. The need just never looked important enough, because it only ever looked like the least of these.

And the answer comes back the same, inverted: when you refused to help the least of these, you were refusing to help me.

Notice, finally, what nobody in this story is asked. Not one question about what they believed, what they'd studied, how they worshiped, or what they'd have said about any doctrine. This isn't the whole of what Scripture says about faith — your church will teach you that fullness, and should. But it is the exam Jesus chose to describe in his final parable, and every question on it is something done with hands: food, water, welcome, clothes, presence, a visit.

Don't just tell me what Jesus said. Show me. This story is where that sentence comes from — and it's Jesus who's asking.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, TUNED

- 01 What stood out to you?
- 02 What does this show us about where Jesus says he can be found — and what he counts?
- 03 Where are you in this story — and be specific: which of the six (hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prisoner) do you most consistently not see?
- 04 So what are we going to do about it?

AN ACT

This one is a group act, and it's the doorway into your table's "so what do we do about it?" conversation if you haven't had it yet. Pick one of the six — hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned — that exists within ten minutes of where this table sits. Do one thing about it together, in person, this month. Not a donation. A visit. He said he'd be there.

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