

## 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 *luchadors* 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.

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  - ✪ **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

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### QUESTIONS

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- **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?**
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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 2

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers



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The kingdom of God is like . . .



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