

PARABLES

Stories for Life
in God's World

REVISED



Richard J. Henderson

RESOURCE BOOK

the  KERYGMA
— program —

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*This revised edition
is dedicated to the memory of*

The Rev. Dr. John E. Mehl

*friend, scholar, mentor, advocate for justice,
faithful disciple*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Richard J. Henderson is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He attended Muskingum College (B.A.), Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (M. Div.), and Drew University Theological School (D. Min.). His doctoral dissertation involved an in-depth study of the parables of Jesus. He then applied his knowledge of Jesus's parables to the creation of original contemporary parables to be preached in worship.

After serving the First Presbyterian Church of Northville, Michigan, for four years Dr. Henderson was called to start a new church development in Novi, Michigan. He served that church, Faith Community Presbyterian Church, for forty years. In 2017 he left Faith Community to write, teach, and consult with churches. More recently he has been working part-time with the First Presbyterian Church of Sandusky, Ohio. He and his wife, Sheila, have two grown children, Jennifer and Jonathan, five grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

Dr. Henderson has published numerous parables, poems, and book reviews and has had scores of his sermons published. He confesses to having a love affair with the parables for most of his career.

Dr. Henderson wrote and has now revised and expanded both the Resource Book and the Leader's Guide for Parables: Stories for Life in God's World. Prior to publication he field-tested the study with the Faith Community congregation in Novi. We are grateful for their participation in this project and for their helpful comments and encouragement.

PREFACE

I grew up in the church, so I have heard the parables and explanations of them since I began Sunday school. Those early interpretations were often simplistic, but they caught my attention even as a young child. When I was in college, a member of the English department preached a parable sermon at a special Thanksgiving worship service. Again, I was intrigued by this way of communicating the Good News.

Later, when I had been ordained and was serving as an associate pastor, I was given the responsibility of preaching at the monthly “Family Worship Service” on Sunday mornings. This family service included adults and children of all ages. I then faced the task of speaking to preschool children, senior citizens, and all ages in between. One solution to this challenge was to create fables and parables that I hoped would interest and provide some meaning for everyone in the congregation. These efforts brought me even greater appreciation of the parables of Jesus.

Several years later when I began my Doctor of Ministry studies, I knew I wanted to focus my thesis on the parables of Jesus and the possibilities for using parables as an effective way to communicate today. As a result of that research, I have written a number of my own parables, one of which is included in this study.

Many people think of Jesus’s parables as brief stories, each with a simple, moral lesson. They can certainly be understood in that way. But Jesus’s parables also have such profound depth that they have been studied for centuries by the brightest scholars. An amazing achievement of Jesus’s parables is that they can be understood, at some level, by young children while at the same time they can speak in more complex ways to scholars who have studied them throughout their careers. Parables are unique in that they are simple and yet at the same time profound. For example, scholar Amy Jill Levine’s book about the parables of Jesus includes her 24-page discussion of the parable of the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 12:45-46) which is only one sentence long!¹

This study attempts to appreciate the simplicity of the parables of Jesus while at the same time opening and expanding their richness and meaning. We will do this by taking an in-depth look at what a parable is and how it functions, and then by engaging in careful analysis of individual parables. My hope is that at the completion of this study participants will have developed a new

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2014), 127-150.

appreciation for the expanding meaning of Jesus’s parables, will have grown in their faith by comprehending them more fully, and will realize that these stories can continue to affect the values and choices of their lives.

Most biblical scholars agree that the parables are among the most authentic words of Jesus. Some say that the heart of the Gospel message can be found in these simple stories. Because they are intriguing and memorable, parables were a favorite method of communication for our Lord. When we understand them at their most profound levels, the parables of Jesus can continue to startle, comfort, challenge, and encourage us.

A parable is a unique and fascinating way of communicating. It can capture the imagination of a small child, yet it can change the life of the most hardened adult. A parable teases us with its simplicity while drawing us deeper into its meaning as we read it again and again. Jesus chose this marvelous tool as a primary way to bring us the good news. I invite you to join me in exploring these wondrous stories that have continued to intrigue and transform people’s lives for centuries.

The title of this study, *Parables: Stories for Life in God’s World*, reflects the relevance of Jesus’s parables for our world today. These are not just marvelous stories someone told two thousand years ago; they are timeless stories which continue to speak to our faith and influence the decisions we make every day.

An Overview of the Study

We will begin our study with a definition of biblical parables and a description of their major characteristics. In subsequent chapters we will examine six categories of these narratives—parables of growth, parables of reversal, parables of preparedness, parables of decision, parables of discovery, and parables of lost and found. In each chapter we will also introduce an approach to use to understand more fully the meaning of the parables. In the final chapter, we will review examples of the on-going parable tradition in more recent literature and suggest guidelines for readers to use in creating parables of their own.

The Gospels on which we will focus our attention are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three books are called the “Synoptic Gospels” because they view and record the events of Jesus’s life and his teachings in similar ways. The word “synoptic” suggests this relationship (syn = together, optic = see).

A word about the origin of the Gospels may be helpful here. Jesus didn't write down anything—none of his parables or anything else as far as we know. He taught, told stories, and demonstrated the good news of God's reign with his life. His followers remembered what he said and did, and they told others who were not there. His teachings and stories about him were remembered and repeated until finally people began to write them down.

Some people may worry that this primarily verbal communication could be an inaccurate way to pass on information. Some may think of the old game of getting people together in a large circle and whispering a message to the first person, who then whispers that same message to the next person, and so on, until it has gone completely around the circle. At the end the message may have changed dramatically from what it was initially.

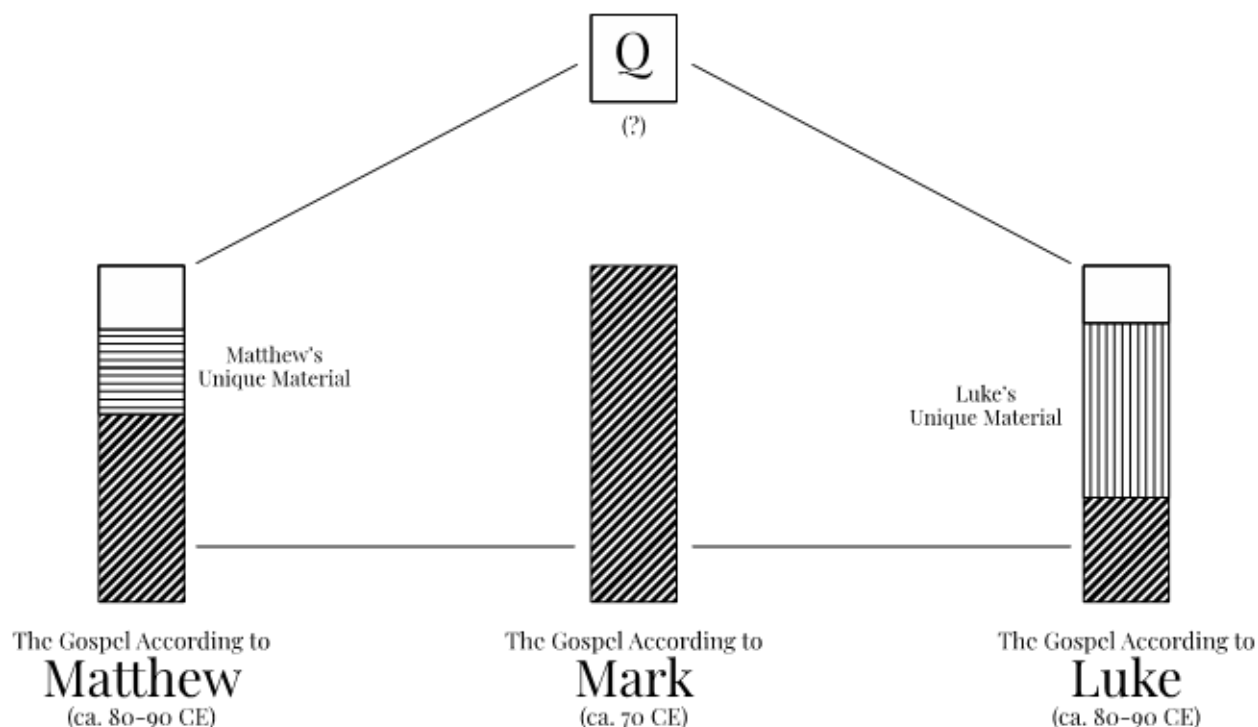
Remember, however, that Jesus lived in an oral culture. Few people were able to read or write. They passed on information by telling each other, rather than by writing (and obviously not by sending texts or emails). Because almost all communication was from memory, they were very good at remembering. They didn't have notes to rely on, so they had to remember and re-tell with accuracy. Because Jesus told fascinating stories, these were even easier to remember. Also, the people who passed on his message understood and believed it to be the most important information of their lives. They wanted the Gospel message to be heard accurately.

The first of the Gospels was probably written thirty to thirty-five years after Jesus's death and resurrection, which scholars place sometime around 30 CE. Most scholars believe that the first Gospel was Mark's. Luke and Matthew were written about fifteen to twenty years after Mark. Each of the three Synoptic Gospels was written for a different community of faith.

Many sayings, parables, and events appear in more than one Gospel using similar or often identical words. The most common explanation for these similarities is that Mark was written first and was available to Matthew and Luke. They drew on Mark for their outline and most of the experiences they report. It seems they also shared a separate collection of sayings called Q (for the German word *Quelle*, meaning "source"). No "Q" document has ever been found, but Matthew and Luke contain many passages that use close to or exactly the same wording. See the chart on the next page. Each Gospel also contains its own material not found in any of the other Gospels. An example is the Christmas story of the wise men, which is only found in Matthew, and the story of the shepherds traveling to the manger, found only in Luke.

The following chart illustrates the contents of each of the Synoptic Gospels.²

The Synoptic Problem



The Gospel According to John was written later than the Synoptics, likely sometime between 75 CE and 100 CE, and differs from them in style and emphasis. Many of the stories and events we find in the Synoptics are not mentioned in John. Among them are the parables. We can assume that the author of John would have known about these stories, so it appears that he intentionally did not include them, but we don't know why. Therefore, in our study you won't find any references to parables from John.³

² Copyright 2018 Jonathan Henderson, used by permission. (Artdept3@yahoo.com).

³ We will also limit our study to the canonical form of the parables. In parable research The Gospel of Thomas and other non-canonical materials are sometimes compared with the parables in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but those discussions are technical and beyond the scope of this study.

The Format of the Chapters

The format of the chapters in this Resource Book differs somewhat from other Kerygma studies. The primary sections of each chapter are designed for use in a fifty to sixty-minute group study session—for example, a Sunday morning Christian education program or weeknight Bible study. In this study, each chapter concludes with an additional section that is referred to as an **Extended Session**. This last section includes additional material related to the theme of the chapter and additional analysis of the parables. Including the **Extended Session** material in a group discussion will likely expand the time needed for your meeting—for example, to a one and a half to two hour session. Or groups may simply increase the overall number of sessions for this study to include the material in each **Extended Session**.

Preparing for the Group Sessions

Each person brings different skills and expectations to this study and will develop his or her own method of preparation. At the outset we suggest the following approach, which you may wish to modify later.

1. If you don't have one, obtain a good study Bible with notes and cross references, as this will be the major resource for your study. Several are available, including *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, *The Oxford Study Bible*, and *the New Jerusalem Bible* (with complete study notes). The New Revised Standard Version is the translation on which this course is based. Quotations of the biblical texts are from this version, unless noted otherwise, but you will be able to engage in the study effectively with another translation.
2. Note that each chapter begins with a **Summary**. The **Basic Bible References** for the chapter follow. These passages are the primary ones you should read to prepare for the group session. They are listed in the order in which they appear in the text. A **Word List** contains terms or phrases which may be new to you within the Resource Book chapter. Some of these terms may be explained in the notes of your Bible. For additional background you may want to look them up in a Bible dictionary or online.
3. We recommend that you first read the **Summary** and skim the chapter without looking up Bible references to gain an overview of the material. Next, go back and carefully read the chapter, reviewing the **Basic Bible References**. Use the margins of your Resource Book or a tablet

to make notes about comments you have or questions you would like to discuss. It will be important to know whether your group will be using only the main section of each chapter or will include material from the **Extended Session**.

4. At the end of each chapter, you will find several items designated **For Further Study and Reflection**. First, you will find recommended texts to be included in your **Memory Bank**. These are familiar passages that are so central to the biblical content that it will be helpful to memorize or to be able to recall them. The **Research** section suggests projects which will enrich your grasp of the material but are not essential. The **Reflection** section contains comments and questions that will challenge you to explore further the issues raised in the chapter. At the end of the book, you will find an **Appendix**, listing Jesus's parables from the Synoptic Gospels in alphabetical order.
5. Keep an open mind. Do not let the familiarity of a story or saying cause you to skip over the discussion. Be aware of the ways in which you may find something new in the parable that you didn't notice before. Come to the study with an eagerness to hear what the texts have to say, even if what you find is something quite different from what you had expected.
6. Be alert to how the parables of Jesus relate to our lives today and to the world in which we live. The Scriptures deal with human beings and their relationship to God. These are constants for all times and places. Ask yourself how these stories Jesus told apply both to your personal life and to the culture in which we live.
7. Surround your study with prayer. Pray before you begin and when you have finished a chapter. Ask for guidance. Ask for a deeper knowledge of God and therefore a deeper knowledge of yourself. Ask also for the strength to act as Christ calls us to act.

As we begin this journey with the parables of Jesus, our hope is that this experience will strengthen and enrich our faith. By understanding and, more importantly, allowing these disruptive stories to impact our lives with new and richer meanings, we have opportunities to delve into some of the most important messages Jesus brought to us. In small or dramatic ways these stories can change our lives. We encourage you to open your life to the message, and the messages, that the parables may have for your life. Enjoy the journey!

1

Summary

The parables of Jesus are among the most influential literature in Christian history. These are simple stories that a child can understand and yet for more than two thousand years they have also challenged biblical experts to explore their precise meanings. To better understand parables, we will investigate *mashal*, the Hebrew word for parable, and *parabole*, the Greek word. Then we will take an in-depth look at a classic definition of a parable.

Jesus was not the first person to teach in parables. Many leaders in the Old Testament also used such stories. The parable Nathan told David is a classic example of the power of this form of communication.

In the New Testament there are three types of parables: example stories, similitudes, and parables proper. Each type functions in a somewhat different way, and we explore the differences among them. The **Extended Session** includes Rudolf Bultmann's thirteen literary techniques of the parable form.

Basic Bible References

2 Samuel 12:1-9

Mark 4: 30-32

Luke 18: 9-14

Word List

parable

metaphor/simile

hyperbole

similitude

analogy

1



INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

What Is a Parable?

Parables are a unique form of communication. They are included in the Old Testament, in ancient Greek and Roman literature, and they were used by Jewish rabbis. Jesus was the master of the parable. He told these stories that are seemingly so simple, so easy to remember and true to life, and yet full of profound meaning. Because they are so memorable, we have in these stories some of the most authentic words of Jesus. Some scholars think that the parables of Jesus represent the Gospel in a nutshell.

Defining a parable is not an easy task. Some of the difficulty has to do with a technical definition of terms. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for parable is *mashal*. However, this term is so broad and inclusive that it doesn't help us to distinguish Jesus's parables from a wide range of other illustrative language. Included in the term *mashal* are several forms of figurative speech such as proverbs, riddles, wisdom sayings, allegories, minor comparisons, parables, and even predictions.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *parabole* also includes a wide range of figurative speech. It can refer to comparisons made in wisdom sayings and proverbs, as well as to the stories Jesus told. Variations of the proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself" (Luke 4:23) and the statement, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (Matthew 15:11) fit this broad definition of *parabole*. What we usually refer to as a parable is a more specific kind of story— a short story that communicates an important message in an

indirect way. Literally, the verb *paraballo* means “to lay alongside” or “to throw beside,” indicating the way in which a parable’s story makes comparisons. Jesus lays these stories beside the reality of our lives and encourages us to learn from the comparisons.

A Classic Definition of a Parable

The well-known biblical scholar C. H. Dodd published a classic study entitled, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. One of Dodd’s major contributions in that book was a foundational definition of a parable—a definition that has been built upon and expanded, but not radically revised. He defines a parable as:

At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.⁴

Let’s take a detailed look at this definition, one phrase at a time.

The parable is a metaphor or simile A metaphor implies a comparison of two dissimilar things without using “like” or “as.” For example, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” In this metaphor Jesus compares his presence among us to light flooding into the world. A simile, however, makes an outward comparison of two dissimilar things and uses words such as “like,” “as,” or “so.” Thus, Psalm 42 begins, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” This is a simile. The deer’s desire for water is compared with the author’s longing for God. The comparison is explicit and clear.

In John 10:11 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Here Jesus uses a metaphor to imply a comparison between himself and a loving shepherd. He does so by speaking as if he were that shepherd. Similes and metaphors communicate somewhat differently. Therefore, their effect on the reader is not the same. A metaphor is generally stronger and more personal. For example, notice the difference between saying, “You are like a sister to me,” and saying, “You are a sister to me.”

Drawn from nature or common life A prominent characteristic or quality of parables is their natural, secular realism. In the parables of Jesus, we rarely see the spectacular or the fantastic.⁵ We don’t find demons, fantasy, or sentimentality, nor do we find religious terminology. Parables are

4 C. H. Dodd. *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961) p. 5

5 Exceptions to this are Matthew 25:31-46, (the judgment of those who do not care for the hungry, naked, imprisoned, etc.), which some do not consider a parable in the sense that we are discussing here, and Luke 16:19-31(the parable of the Wealthy Man and Lazarus).

down-to-earth. The world of parables is a commonplace world in which ordinary people live and everyday events happen. The emphasis is on the here and now.

Arresting the hearer Because parables are a form of story, they have a built-in interest factor. A story begins and we are caught up in it; the story carries us through its narrative until finally it sets us down (or drops us) in a different place. As hearers, we form images of the story's events in our minds because these images aren't visualized for us. The author of the story takes the pictures, but the hearer develops them.

An old adage says, "If you want to put children to sleep, tell them a story. If you want to keep adults awake, tell them a story." The parables of Jesus capture our imagination because they are stories, but they also hold our attention for another reason: Jesus's parables demand a response. We don't just listen to these stories; we are involved in them and we have to come to some decisions about them. When reading the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), we ask ourselves if it is fair to pay a person who has worked only one hour the same as a person who has worked in the hot sun all day long. How do we react to the tax collector in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)? How do we react to the Pharisee? Because parables are well told stories, they not only command our attention, but they also demand our participation. They ask for a response.

By its vividness or strangeness Vividness or strangeness within a parable stands out because the context of the story is so commonplace. These two characteristics of parables help make them especially enticing. First, certain critical features are presented with detail and clarity. A feature of good story telling is being specific about important elements of the story. For example, we are told the precise gifts that the father offers his prodigal son when he returns. Exact amounts of money are specified in many parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Talents. Jesus tells these stories vividly, including details when they are important.

Secondly, a parable captures our attention through unique events within the story. These unusual elements surprise us because they present such a contrast to the normalcy of the parable's setting. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the Samaritan's care for the victim is overwhelming. He not only treats the man's wounds and takes him on his own animal to an inn, but he stays with him through the night, pays his bills, and promises that when he returns, he will pay for whatever else the man needs.

Some parables seem strange to us because they often include hyperbole. Circumstances or specific parts of a parable are exaggerated for effect. For example, a woman bakes bread which

produces enough to feed a crowd of a hundred people or more (the parable of the Yeast). A man throws a party, and every one of his invited guests turns him down (the Great Feast). A father sees his wayward son returning and responds with actions and gifts which are outlandish (the Lost Sons).⁶ The shock of the unusual happening within an ordinary experience grabs our attention, leading us to notice the features of the story which need emphasis. However, another rule is that a parable may strain the bounds of probability, but not of possibility. Events in the parable may be unlikely—lots of unlikely things happen in life—but they aren't impossible.

And leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application The greatest temptation in dealing with parables is to attempt to state conclusively what they mean. When we try to close off the meaning of a parable, we do it serious injustice. For example, we might approach a parable as we would a crossword puzzle—figure it out, complete it, then set it aside.

The history of parable interpretation is cluttered with explanations that attempt to offer singular and conclusive interpretations of Jesus's parables. We will understand a parable better if we question attempts to confine it to a single meaning, especially if that meaning is a simple moralism. As we study the parables of Jesus, their meanings can expand rather than remain closed off. We may be closer to Jesus's intention for using parables if we ask, "What are the ways in which this parable speaks to me?" rather than "What does this parable mean?"

Doubt is thus essential to understanding the parables. When we have no questions about a parable's meaning, most likely we have not understood it fully. It is as if the parable says to us, "Yes, that's true, but there's more...." We understand this when we note that biblical scholars have studied the parables for centuries and still do not agree on final interpretations for them. Certainly, drawing meaning from a parable is critically important, as that is the reason for its telling. However, we cannot say finally and exclusively that this is its only meaning. When we close a parable, we separate ourselves from its power.

To tease it into active thought Just as Jesus intended a parable to be open, not closed, he intended to engage the mind of the hearer, not shut it down. The uncertainty of a parable's message and the activity of the mind are closely related. If the message of a parable could be stated unequivocally, the mind would have completed its task. With shadows of ambiguity surrounding a parable's ultimate meaning, however, the story teases the mind into ongoing thought, continuing to generate ideas, applications, and implications long after the parable has been heard. When we approach

⁶ In this study we will refer to the parable traditionally known as the Prodigal Son with the title the Lost Sons. As we will see later, both sons were lost in different ways.

a parable for the second or third time, we often find new meanings that stimulate our thinking. As we live our lives, we may find new ways in which the parable applies to our everyday choices.

A Parable from the Old Testament

Jesus was not the only person to use parables. They were popular in ancient times and are still written today. Socrates and Aristotle are among the most famous people to communicate through parables. Rabbis before and after Jesus used parables in order to communicate more effectively in their teaching. One of the most powerful parables in the Bible is the one Nathan told to David after the king's affair with Bathsheba. Scan **2 Samuel 11** to review the events that led up to the parable. Then read **2 Samuel 12:1-9**.

In this parable the prophet Nathan communicates a message to David in a more powerful way than he could have through direct speech. Nathan is in a precarious position; if he explicitly condemns David, he may lose his job... or his head. If David does away with him, David may not see his failures and would remain unchanged. Nathan must bring God's word to David in a way that will make him see the evil of what he has done without directly confronting him.

Nathan uses a parable and thus can confront David in a subtle, indirect way. He tells him a story about a wealthy man with several herds of cattle and sheep who takes the only lamb from a poor man who has no others. As David begins to understand Nathan's story, he makes a judgement about the wealthy man. David gets so caught up in the story, that after condemning the rich man, he later realizes that he is the wealthy man he has just denounced. The power of the parable is evident in David's being drawn into the story. He feels the insensitive greed of the wealthy man and is made to see how similar his own actions are to that man's. The story is so captivating that David cries out for God's forgiveness and changes his life.

Types of Parables

For some time, scholars have recognized three major types of parables—similitudes, example stories, and parables proper—representing three ways in which parables function. Exploring the meanings of these categories will help us to understand why a parable is effective.

Similitudes are accounts of real-life situations. They attempt to persuade by making a comparison with something that is universally understood. The appeal is to the known, typical, and reoccurring. A similitude tries to gain acceptance for a concept by comparing it to that which is

already accepted. Everyone knows what it is like to lose something of value and to search to find it. By using this common experience Jesus is able to show us new insights into the love of God. Baking bread and planting seeds are ordinary experiences with which everyone can identify. Jesus uses these normal events to help us understand how God interacts with us.

Chapter four of Mark's Gospel contains a series of parables about the reign of God. Read **Mark 4:30-32**. In the similitude of the mustard seed, the smallness of the seed is dramatically set over against the large mustard bush—a shrub big enough that the birds can take cover in its shade. The growth of God's impact is compared to the tremendous growth of that minute seed into a large shrub. Here, as in most similitudes, the point of comparison is emphasized, and the heightened comparison comes at the end. The similitude is persuasive because it makes comparisons with ordinary, real-life situations.

An **example story** is a created story that points to models of action to be imitated or warnings to be heeded. Rather than point beyond itself to a comparable situation, the example story incorporates its meaning into the story itself. Read **Luke 18: 9-14**. When Jesus talks about the pride of the Pharisee, he provides an example of an attitude that is not acceptable to God. In the same way the humility of the tax collector is lifted up as exemplary.

With an example story, we generalize from one specific situation to a broader understanding and application of its meaning. The conclusion to many example stories is just what is intended: "Go and do likewise." The example story doesn't need to be translated into another level of meaning; it needs only to be applied to similar situations in different times and places.

The **parable proper** differs from a similitude and an example story in that it is a story invented to tell of a specific event or series of events and is used as an analogy to point beyond itself. An analogy makes a comparison between two things which otherwise are dissimilar, but which in a particular way or under certain circumstances are seen as similar. The parable proper deals not with the universal but with the particular—an individual person, not people in general. Through the specifics and the realism of its story, the parable attempts to convince.

The parable proper persuades in subtle rather than obvious ways. We don't know what the storyteller thinks or how he feels because the bias of the author is not apparent. The story is told objectively, and created to influence, rather than browbeat, the hearer. The persuasion is gentle, coming as much from within the hearer as from the one who tells the parable. Because the persuasion unfolds from within, it is all the more forceful.

Much of a parable's effect comes from a growing sense of involvement. The movement often builds to a point of intense contrast, usually at the end of the narrative. Here a dramatic reversal may take place, as in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), or the development may be such that it is quite moving, as in the parable of the Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-24).

A parable proper is a story that has been created and designed to speak to an intended purpose. The plot of the story requires a certain amount of staging of events for effect. All of this is done to serve the author's purpose. However, such staging should not become grossly unrealistic or interfere with the authenticity of the story. Events might not be told in chronological order, for example, or a dramatic building of suspense may alter what would be normal routine in a given situation. In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) those who were hired last are paid first. In this way those who have worked the entire day will know that they are being paid the same amount as those who have worked only one hour. If the workers hired first thing in the morning were paid first, the impact of the parable would be weakened. The order in which the workers are paid is not highly unusual, but it is an important dramatic device which is necessary if the parable is to have its intended effect.

The parables of Jesus can be divided into these three categories—similitude, example story, and parable proper—each type attempting to persuade in a slightly different way. After spending some time with the parables, we begin to realize that these are not neat, exclusive categories. Not every parable will clearly fit into one of these categories, and some parables may have characteristics of more than one category.

EXTENDED SESSION

Techniques of the Parable Form

Parables are extended narratives which follow particular techniques of storytelling. These stylistic forms have been carefully analyzed by Rudolf Bultmann in *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*.⁷ Below is a summary of the main characteristics he presents in that important work. Being aware of these techniques helps us not only to appreciate the parables themselves but also to understand the ways in which parables are created.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, translated by John Marsh (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1963)187-192.

- a. *The story is as concise as possible.*** The parable includes only the necessary people, rarely more than three main characters. “Thus, in the story of the Prodigal Son there is no mother, or in the parable of the Importunate Friend,⁸ no wife of the disturbed sleeper.”⁹ In most parables there are only two characters, often set against each other—Pharisee and tax collector, slave and master, judge and widow. Sometimes, however, there are more characters, as in the parables of the Lost Sons and the Unmerciful Servant. At times, according to Bultmann, groups of people are treated as one character, as with the Wicked Tenants or the Ten Maidens.
- b. *Parables follow the “law of stage duality.”*** This means there are only two characters acting or speaking in a scene at one time. Any other character remain in the background, and if they must speak, they do so in later scenes. For example, in the parable of the Talents, the master hears reports of his servants one at a time, and in the parable of the Lost Sons, the father speaks to his sons individually.
- c. *Related to this is the “law of the single perspective.”*** The parable is told one scene at a time so that the hearer is not asked to visualize two series of events happening at once. The stories are told from a single point of view.
- d. *Generally speaking, the characters are shown by what they do, rather than through descriptions of what they are like.*** We know about them by their actions and words, rather than by descriptions of their characters. The unmerciful servant is presented as being harsh by the way he acts. Sometimes we learn about characters through the way another character describes them. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule. In Matthew 25:2, the ten maidens are described as wise or foolish, and in Luke 18:2, the judge is characterized as one who neither fears God nor regards humans.
- e. *Parables mention emotions, feelings, and motives only when they are critical to the meaning of the story.*** Generally, these factors are shown indirectly in the actions of the characters or left for us to imagine. The five foolish maidens may have been angry about the others not sharing their oil, but we don’t know that from the parable. The feelings of the characters are presented only where it is necessary, and then they are simply stated rather than explained.
- f. *Secondary characters appear only when they are central to the story and are described only to the extent necessary.*** Because they are concise, parables provide no unnecessary descriptions—especially not for secondary characters. Thus, the widow before the judge, the sower planting seeds, and the innkeeper in the story of the Good Samaritan are not described.

8 We refer to these parables as the Lost Sons (Luke 5:11-32) and the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8) respectively.

9 Bultmann, p. 188.

- g. *Motives behind the actions of most characters are left unknown.*** In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, we don't know the reason why the vineyard owner went "into a far country." Neither is it specifically explained why the younger son wanted his inheritance in the parable of the Lost Sons.
- h. *Often parables will not have conclusions if the outcome seems obvious or if it is not necessary or relevant.*** In some parables not revealing how the story ends is part of the impact of the parable. Did the barren fig tree bear fruit? Was it necessary that the good Samaritan pay more of the wounded man's expenses when he returned to the inn? In matters which are not central to the story, we are often left up in the air. However, not knowing how the story ends in the parable of the Lost Sons is part of the parable's meaning. Did the older brother come into the party, or did he stay outside? Speculation about that uncertainty is part of what the parable wants us to deal with.
- i. *All unnecessary descriptions are excluded.*** Economy of wording is the rule in describing actions and events. There is no mention of the scenery or background of a situation unless it is crucial to the story. However, what is described is often related in very specific terms. There is no description of the banquet hall in the parable of the Great Feast, nor do we know where the lost sheep was found in the parable of the Lost Sheep. However, we are told exactly how much money was paid out in the parable of the Talents. We know the exact amount of wheat and oil that the unjust steward took for payment. The situations of the Rich Man and Lazarus are presented in detail as well.
- j. *The use of direct speech is important in the creation of parables.*** The plot of the story moves forward by means of the content and the ways in which the characters talk to each other. We find this direct speech, for example, in the parables of the Lost Coin, the Children Playing in the Marketplace, and the Laborers in the Vineyard. There are soliloquies in the parables of the Lost Sons, the Unjust Servant, and the Wicked Tenants, as well as in the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We get to know these characters by hearing them speak.
- k. *The "law of repetition" is common in these extended narratives.*** Phrases are often repeated in exactly the same way. The younger of the lost sons confesses twice in the same wording. When the servants return with their profit in the parable of the Talents, they use the same phrases in speaking to their master, and the master repeats the same phrase to each of the first two who have made a profit with their talents.

l. The “law of the end stress” is used frequently. The most critical events take place at the end of the story. In the parable of the Talents, the servant who buried his talent is the last one to report. The last seed sown turns out to be the fruitful one which survives in the parable of the Sower. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the tax collector is the last one to speak, and his prayer changes how we feel about both of the characters in the story.

m. In some stories, moral judgment about the characters is suspended because this does not have direct impact on the meaning of the parable. For example, we may not be called to make judgments about imprisonment to pay off a debt as stated in a parable. Some characters, such as the master in the parable of the Talents, appear to be unethical: “I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter” (Matthew 25:26). But judging their actions may not be part of the story. We need to be aware of his unethical behavior and what that tells us about the character, but often the meaning of the parable isn’t about judging him or her.

On the other hand, the need for judgment is obvious in such parables as the Unforgiving Servant, the Wise and Foolish Maidens, the Lost Sons, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The parable is directed toward the judgment that must be made in these cases. It is inherent in the story’s meaning.

Frequently judgment is heightened because of the “antithesis of two types.” One person or type is set over against another, acting as positive and negative examples. We see this in the Samaritan’s actions as opposed to those of the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The “antithesis of the two types” is also seen in the Wise and Foolish Maidens, the Two Debtors, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

While not part of Bultmann’s techniques, the “law of three” is evident in some of Jesus’s parables. In these cases, three characters are presented and contrasted with each other. Two of the three may be commended for their actions and the third denounced for what he did, as in the parable of the Talents; or two of the three may fail to do the right thing, while the third is shown to act correctly, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

These rules of storytelling are not original with the parables of Jesus, but they are important in understanding what parables are and how they function. The effectiveness of parables is in large measure because of these techniques.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

- Memorize C. H. Dodd's definition of a parable as found in the section, A Classic Definition of a Parable, in this chapter.

Research

1. Ask your pastor or explore online an extended definition of *mashal* in Hebrew and *parabole* in Greek.
2. Using a Bible commentary or searching online, review the account of Nathan's confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12:1-9. Note or list any further insights you discover from your research.
3. Create a brief definition in your own words for each of the types of parables: similitude, example story, and parable proper.

Reflection

1. Parables by their very nature are open to interpretation. Why do you suppose Jesus chose the parable form to tell us about something as important as the reign of God? Why do you think that Jesus chose to use a literary form that is so filled with ambiguity and uncertainty to present such a crucial message? In what ways would direct, non-fiction statements be more effective? In what ways are parables more effective?
2. In reviewing the techniques for creating parables, we see that character development is not important. Why is character development critical in writing a novel, but not in creating a parable?

PARABLES

Stories for Life
in God's World

REVISED



Richard J. Henderson

LEADER'S GUIDE

the  KERYGMA
— program —

PARABLES

STORIES FOR LIFE IN GOD'S WORLD

REVISED

RICHARD J. HENDERSON
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the KERYGMA
— *program* —

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Richard J. Henderson

Richard J. Henderson is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He attended Muskingum College (BA), Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (MDiv), and Drew University Theological School (DMin). His doctoral dissertation involved an in-depth study of the parables of Jesus and explored using parables as a way of preaching in the church today. He created original parable sermons which he preached in worship services.

After serving the First Presbyterian Church of Northville, Michigan for four years, Dr. Henderson was called to start a new church development in Novi, Michigan. He served that congregation, Faith Community Presbyterian Church, for forty years. In 2017 he left Faith Community to write, teach, and consult with churches. More recently he has been working part-time with the First Presbyterian Church of Sandusky, Ohio. He and his wife, Sheila, have two grown children, Jennifer and Jonathan; five grandchildren; and two great grandchildren.

Dr. Henderson has published a number of parables, poems, and book reviews, and has had scores of his sermons published. He confesses to having a love affair with the parables for most of his ministry. Prior to the publication of the first edition of *Parables*, he field-tested the study with several churches, including the Novi congregation. We are grateful for their participation in this project and for their helpful comments and encouragement.

Dr. Henderson has now revised and expanded both the *Resource Book* and the *Leader's Guide for Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*.

All of the author's profits from *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World* are being donated to the Bread for the World Institute, which provides policy analysis and strategies to end hunger. The Institute and its sister organization, Bread for the World, are dedicated to combating hunger both here and around the world.

Learn more at www.bread.org.

PREPARING TO LEAD A KERYGMA STUDY GROUP

This Leader's Guide has been developed to assist you in leading a group in a creative approach using the study *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*. As you may have noted, the format of Resource Book chapters for this study differs somewhat from other Kerygma studies. In this study, the primary sections of each *Resource Book* chapter are designed for use in a fifty- to sixty-minute Sunday morning adult education program or Bible study group. Each chapter also contains an "**Extended Session**" which adds additional material pertaining to the theme of the chapter and requires additional time for the group session. For example, **Extended Session** materials can be included in groups that meet for ninety minutes, or the group may choose to extend the number of weekly sessions. We will say more about this in the pages which follow.

The Leader

Whether you are clergy, a church educator, or a lay person, it is less important how much you remember about your previous experiences in study groups than that you are now willing to engage in an intensive process of reading, studying, planning, and facilitating. There are no short cuts to successful leadership of a study group using the Kerygma approach. It requires a significant commitment of time and energy in order to design effective session plans for those who are engaged in this study with you. The Leader's Guide is designed to help and guide you through that process.

As a leader of a Kerygma study group, you will function in a variety of roles at different times. First and foremost, you will be a learner. Being a Kerygma leader will provide you with a wonderful opportunity to learn more about the parables. You are not expected to be an expert on the material on which the study is based. However, you are expected to be prepared for each session so that you are able to guide the members of the group in a productive study.

As a result of your preparation for facilitating each session, you will also become a resource person. You are not expected to know all the answers to every question that is raised, but you should be able to direct group members to resources that will assist them in finding answers for themselves.

Furthermore, you will be a planner who works intentionally to consider suggestions in the Leader's Guide for each session plan, the time available, the needs, interests, and abilities of participants, and the resources needed to develop an appropriate plan for each session. The session plans provided in the Leader's Guide offer more activities than you will be able to use in the time you have. The best session plans are ones you construct using the suggestions here, as well as your own resources and experiences.

Being a *facilitator* of group process is also a very important role for you as the leader. The eight session plans include many activities that involve participants in investigation, discussion, reflection, and application. The more comfortable you become in guiding these processes, the more effective the study will be for others. At first, some participants may expect you to tell them what they should know about the material. There will be times when you may be tempted to tell them all that you know. However, you will be most effective as a leader and group members will gain more from the study when they are guided by you in a variety of participatory activities as you explore the parables together.

Over the course of this study, you will also be called upon to exercise several important qualities. With the constraint of time and the great body of material to explore, you must be flexible. Unplanned questions will arise, activities will take longer than anticipated, and participants may want to go more slowly, taking more time than you had planned. Also, unpredictable occurrences in the life of the group and the church will require patience and may require the group's attention.

Those Who Participate in Kerygma Groups

The people who choose to participate in a group that is studying the Bible using Kerygma resources do so for a variety of reasons and bring with them many levels of readiness and ability. When individuals are invited to attend a Kerygma group, they should be made aware from the beginning that this is not a study where the leader does all the work of preparation and presentation. Every participant is expected to have read the Basic Bible References and the appropriate material in the Resource Book prior to each session. Familiarity with this material is assumed by the session plans that are developed in the Leader's Guide.

Given participants' busy schedules, there will be times when some come to a session with minimal preparation. You should not compromise the expectation of adequate preparation. The experience for the whole group is the focus and is best accomplished when participants take the reading seriously.

Here are several ways to graciously handle the lack of participant preparation.

1. Encourage persons who have not read the assignments to delay participation in the discussion until the others have had a chance.
2. Provide some time, as a part of your session plans, to review the key texts that serve as the foundation for the session.
3. When working in pairs or small groups, be sure that those who are not prepared are distributed among the groups, rather than placed together.

Some participants may have had a lot of experience with study groups; for others, this may be the first time they are involved in an in-depth study as adults. It is important for each person to feel that he or she belongs to the group. You will need to encourage both the experienced and inexperienced participants to be thoughtful and appreciative of each other.

Number of Sessions and Amount of Time

When planning to offer a Bible study for adults, it is important to ask and answer several key questions, such as: How will this study fit into our adult education program? How many weeks or sessions will we schedule? How much time should be planned for each session? Perhaps these questions have already been answered in your church and the necessary arrangements have been made. If so, you and your group will have to adjust to what is already planned. If these questions have not been addressed, you will want to consider various options for your study.

This Leader's Guide contains learning strategies for eight sessions, one session for each of the Resource Book chapters. As mentioned above, the initial sections of each session are designed for a fifty-to-sixty-minute period, perhaps on a Sunday morning, a weekday, or an evening. Following this section, we have added suggestions for an **Extended Session**. This material parallels the section in the chapters of the Resource Book and is provided for groups who wish to expand their study sessions.

Printed Resources

In addition to the *Resource Book, Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*, other important resources will offer significant contributions to the whole program.

The Bible

The major resource for all Kerygma study programs is the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is the translation on which this study is based. Bible citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted. However, participants will be able to engage effectively in this study with another translation. In fact, the study will be enhanced by the presence of several translations. We recommend that both the leader and the participants use a study Bible with notes for each section of the text and other study aids. A number of such Bibles are available. Among those containing good study notes are *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (the New Revised Standard Version is the text for this Bible), *The Oxford Study Bible*, and the *New Jerusalem Bible* (with complete study notes).

The Resource Book

The Resource Book is the text both leaders and participants will use to guide their study. Each chapter consists of eight to ten pages of text. This volume and the Bible contain all the necessary information to enable persons to participate profitably in the group sessions.

As you review the Resource Book you will note that each chapter begins with a Summary followed by a list of Basic Bible References and a Word List. Toward the end of each chapter, you will find a section entitled “**Extended Session.**” As noted above, the initial sections of each chapter are designed for a fifty-to-sixty-minute period. The **Extended Session** provides additional content for groups that meet for longer periods or who have added to the number of sessions.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a section entitled “**For Further Study and Reflection.**” You will want to review this section with the option of directing the group members’ attention to it generally or on a week-by-week basis. From time to time this section will encourage participants to use additional study resources. For this purpose, the group should have available from the church library or other sources several basic reference works, such as a Bible dictionary and commentaries on Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

As a leader, you should read the Resource Book from beginning to end before you begin planning the group sessions. This effort will provide you with a useful overview of the total study. Then, as you begin planning for a session, you will want to reread the specific Resource Book chapter.

Digital Resources

The Leader Resources on Disc or Flash Drive

The Leader material, on disc or flash drive, includes all the tools the leader will use for planning each session. The Leader material includes the Leader's Guide in PDF, a slide presentation and slide index and 8 short videos by the author.

The Leader's Guide

The Leader's Guide is what you are reading at this moment. It is the indispensable resource you will use for planning each session. The Leader's Guide contains the following for each group study session:

- 1. Notes to the Leader.** These notes include background information from the author on the focus of the chapter and insights for leading the corresponding group study session.
- 2. Session Plans.** Extensive suggestions for planning your leadership strategy are provided for each session of the group study. Kerygma groups have been successfully led with an emphasis on participatory activities as well as with a lecture and discussion format. Kerygma's recommended approach is based on overwhelming evidence that adult learning is increased and enhanced when group members participate directly in the learning process. This is not a new understanding. A Chinese proverb says, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." Therefore, it is strongly recommended that leaders review the session plans and incorporate as many suggestions for active and engaged learning as appropriate into each session.
- 3. Slide Presentation.** On this Leader's disc or flash drive you will find a slide presentation file that will add a visual dimension to the group sessions. For in-person meetings, the slides can be shown using a computer. For online group sessions, the slides can be shown using the screen-sharing feature.
- 4. In the Leader's Guide,** appropriate places to show the slides are indicated with this symbol ■. The slides have been created for *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World* and are intended for use within this Bible study. The images are either in the public domain or have been included with permission. JPEG files for each of the slides are also included.

These files can be used in a variety of ways:

- Creating a shorter teaching session by eliminating some slides
 - Adding other slides for an expanded teaching session
 - Replacing some existing slides with images that are meaningful to your faith community
 - Replacing some slides with contemporary artistic expressions
 - Publicizing the Bible study within the church
5. **Slide Index** for *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*. You will find a Slide Index PDF indicating the content of each slide.
 6. **Videos**. Eight short videos (each, approximately 5 minutes) are included. In each video, the author, Dr. Richard Henderson, addresses study participants with introductory remarks and background information about the session.

Planning the Group Sessions

The first group session will be most effective if you have distributed copies of the Resource Book to members of the group ahead of time. Ask them to read the Preface and Chapter One and to bring any questions that arise from the reading to the first session.

As you prepare your Session Plan keep in mind the unique situation of your group: the number of participants; the amount of time for each session; the interests, abilities, and needs of each participant; and circumstances of ministry in your church. Knowing this, you can prepare a session plan that is truly appropriate for your particular group.

In your plan you will want to give special attention to the following elements that appear at the beginning of each chapter of the Resource Book.

1. **Summary**. This is the focus of the chapter. This statement provides the main emphasis for the group's discussions and activities.
2. **Basic Bible References**. These are essential references on which you and the participants will focus. These Bible texts provide the basis for the group session. They will be used in one or another of the suggested activities.

- 3. Word List.** These words or phrases are important terms included in the Resource Book or the biblical texts of the study. They may be unfamiliar to members of your group. Yet they are words for which you, as the leader, should have working definitions.

The Session Plans in the Leader's Guide include:

Learning Objectives

These three or four statements will provide the learning objectives that the group can aim for as a result of their study. It is appropriate to share these objectives with the members of the group at the beginning of each session. The selection of activities is then guided by the objectives considered most important. The learning objectives can also be used as a basis for evaluating whether you and the participants have accomplished what was intended. Please be aware that accomplishing the learning objectives is not all there is to leading a study group. Some of the most important outcomes cannot be evaluated by learning objectives, outcomes such as: forming a Christian community, growing in faith, developing the ability to speak comfortably about our faith, living our faith and values in everyday life, nurturing the spiritual life, and other important matters and benefits beyond the learning objectives.

Resources You May Need

In addition to the Bible and Resource Book, a list of those items needed for the learning various activities for each session is provided.

Leadership Strategy

This is the heart of each session plan. The leadership strategy is organized in six sections:

- Setting the Stage** is a time for inviting persons to become involved with the subject of the session. Ordinarily ten to fifteen minutes are needed for this segment of the session.
- Exploring the Scripture** is what the study is all about. Most of the time of the session will be spent with activities that involve exploration of biblical texts which are integral to the theme. Usually, two or three activities are planned for this portion of the session.
- Extended Session** is a supplementary section which provides additional learning activities for the biblical texts featured in the **Extended Session** of the Resource Book chapter.

- d. **Closing** is a time to bring closure to the session, to summarize what has been explored, and to suggest applications of what has been learned to one's own faith and life experiences.
- e. **Looking Ahead.** In order to work effectively at the next session, some or all participants may be asked to do special preparation. For example, a brief report requiring some research may be suggested in the session plans. Participants are invited to volunteer for these assignments. Of course, the weekly assignment for all participants is reading the Resource Book chapter and the recommended Bible texts.
- f. **Worksheets.** These pages in the Leader's Guide may be duplicated for use in session activities.

Using Leadership Strategies

As you read the suggestions in each **Leadership Strategy**, notice that several activities are usually offered for each segment of the session. These activities are clearly separated by **or**, **and**, or **and/or** in the center of the page. Ordinarily no group would be able to complete all activities that are included for each session. And there will be times when you, as the leader, will decide to do something different from what is suggested. You should feel free to utilize your own creativity, but be sure that what you do relates directly to the theme and learning objectives of the session.

When choosing from among the suggested options, there are several things to keep in mind:

1. The amount of time available is a critical factor to consider in making your decision. When faced with the choice of trying to do two activities quickly (perhaps superficially) or doing one activity thoroughly, it is usually best to do the one in-depth activity.
2. Activities that involve participants interacting with one another, preparing a presentation to share with others, or working cooperatively on a task, will always take more time than it takes for the leader to present the same information. However, when persons are significantly involved in the process of their own learning, they will be more motivated and will accomplish more in the end.
3. Some activities are designed to probe in depth, and others are intended to provide an overview.
4. In addition, there are activities for individuals, pairs, small groups, or the whole group. The important thing is to develop a session plan that has balance, so that there are some in-depth and some overview activities. Also, a balance among individual, small group, and whole group activities will be helpful.

5. The interests, abilities, and previous experience of the members of the study group will influence your choices regarding which of the suggested activities to implement. Becoming acquainted with the members of the group is very important in making such judgments. It may be self-defeating to plan an activity that you feel will be resisted by many in the group.
6. Your own interests, skills, and concerns must also be considered when deciding which activities to choose. You should be reasonably comfortable with an activity and confident that it can be used effectively to guide the group's study. However, as the study develops and you become comfortable with the group and the subject matter, consider trying some of the activities that may be new to you.
7. Planning for leading a study group is an art. There is no right session plan for every topic or every situation or every leader. Neither is there just one right way to plan. Practice the art of planning until you find a process that works effectively for you.

A Final Word

You are about to embark on a wonderful journey with a number of companions. This time together has the potential for building relationships among those who participate, for increasing their knowledge and appreciation of the parables, and for providing a time of spiritual nurture and renewal. May this be a period of fruitful study and reflection for you and those who join you on the journey.

Additional Leadership Resources

In addition to the preceding suggestions, below are some resources to assist you in developing your leadership skills.

1. **Guidelines for Adult Education.** These guidelines, provided on the next page, summarize eight general principles on which contemporary effective adult education is based.
2. **Session Planning Form.** This form provides a tool to organize your plans for each session. It is found at the end of this section. Feel free to make as many copies as you need.

Guidelines for Adult Education

The following guidelines provide a summary of the convictions about adult education on which Kerygma resources are based.

- **Adults are responsible for their own learning.**

Therefore, it is important not to develop dependent relationships whereby the learners look to the leader as the authority and primary source of information.

- **Adults learn best when they can participate directly in the process of their own learning.**

Therefore, opportunities should be provided in each session for participants to make decisions about what and how they will learn and to interact with the subject matter and other learners.

- **Adults represent a variety of learning styles as well as different stages of physical, emotional, and spiritual development.**

Therefore, learners will be related to individually without assuming that all adults are the same. Learners will be encouraged to work at their own pace and to make applications that are appropriate to themselves.

- **Learning is reinforced best when adults have the opportunity to practice skills and to express ideas in their own words.**

Therefore, in each session there will be opportunities to practice particular skills and to express personal insights and interpretation.

- **Learning occurs within an environment of trusting relationships.**

Therefore, it is important to develop a process whereby persons will be free to share feelings, needs, and concerns as well as information and ideas. In such a setting, persons will be encouraged to care about and support each another.

- **It is not necessary to use competitive activities to motivate adults to participate and learn.**

Therefore, the activities and resources will represent a cooperative, collaborative style of learning.

- **Adults who have positive self-concepts are less threatened by new information and experiences.**

Therefore, leaders will be encouraged to use strategies that enhance a person's sense of self-worth.

- **Adults will increase their knowledge and skill to a greater extent when they gain a sense of satisfaction and experience success in those activities that are planned for them.**

Therefore, the session plans of the Kerygma Program study resources will present a variety of activities that are designed to enable participants to achieve satisfaction and success.

Kerygma Leader's Session Planning Form

Course: _____ Leader: _____

Session: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Learning Objectives:

Real Time (e.g. 7:30-7:40)	Strategies/Activities	Resources Needed



1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

NOTES TO THE LEADER

Participants may come to this first session underestimating the power of the parables of Jesus. They may think of them as nice stories that teach a moral or lessons presented as stories to make them a little more interesting. In this session we attempt to define a parable in a way that opens our minds to understand that parables are profound and often complex stories that can change our lives. Emphasizing the mystery and depth of the parables as you move through the material in this session will be helpful. Plant the idea that we can look at parables from different angles and find meanings that may not have occurred to members of the study group.

As you lead the group through this study of the parables, I hope you will continually lift up the dynamic nature of these stories. We will find meanings in these stories that are crucial to our lives. Suggest to the group that these stories may very well transform the way we look at various parts of our lives. A parable can help us comprehend God better, know ourselves more realistically, change what we value, and deal with people in healthier relationships. Parables show us what it means to forgive or fail to forgive, to show compassion or withhold it, to act decisively or allow the moment to pass. These are potentially life-changing stories.

Try not to limit a parable's meaning to a simple moralism, but suggest that there may be more than one meaning available. Most parables have such depth that we can come back to them again and again, continuing to learn from them. The revival of parable studies demonstrates how we can return to these stories and find new meaning in them. Personally, I have studied the parables for

more than forty years. When I look in depth at a parable, I almost always learn something new from it. Like yeast, the parables expand with meaning. Suggest to the group that as we get to know the parables better, they can speak to us in new ways.

Jesus chose parables as a primary way to communicate. We can readily understand some of the reasons why: they are easy to remember, they capture our attention, they are simple enough for a child to understand and can be complex enough to intrigue the most brilliant scholars. But they are not a form of communication to use if you want to give clear, exact directions. If you wanted to tell someone how to get to your house, you wouldn't tell them a parable. They'd never find you.

Throughout this study try to acknowledge the importance of what people find in a parable and reaffirm its value in their Christian faith. Our purpose is not to demean anyone's understanding of a parable, but to help all of us move beyond one single, "right" answer. We can acknowledge someone's singular interpretation of a parable and also ask questions that will encourage the person and the group to probe more deeply into its meaning. Enjoy these discussions about the parables. They are important and they can be filled with meaning. Something wonderful is happening.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Retell Nathan's parable (2 Samuel 12:1-9). Explain why it had such an impact on David.
2. Describe the three different types of parables Jesus used.
3. List at least seven of the techniques used in creating parables.

Resources You May Need

- Name tags
- Copies of Worksheet 1A (questions for Activity #1) in **Exploring the Scripture**
- Computer, whiteboard, or newsprint and markers
- Slide presentation on the disc or flash drive.

- A copy of Worksheet 1B to use to create slips of paper with phrases about the three kinds of parables
- Copies of Worksheet 1C for Activity #2 option using four parables
- Copies of Worksheet 1D (Bultmann's list of the techniques of the parable form)
- Seeds, potting soil, and cups, for **Closing** activity
- Copies of Worksheet 1E {Responsive reading of Psalm 8) for **Closing**

Leadership Strategy

Setting the Stage

The first slide (#1) in the presentation PDF features the cover of the Resource Book and the title of this study, *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*.

- Project slide #2 (Mark 4:1-2 passage) to be viewed as participants are gathering.
 - Project slide #3 (Parable medallion, session one title) to signal that the session is beginning.
 - Project slide #4 (Quote: C. H. Dodd, definition of a parable)
1. Welcome participants to the first session of this study, *Parables: Stories for Life in God's World*
 2. Open the session with prayer. You may wish to include thanks to God for this opportunity to study together and ask for the presence of God's Spirit as you review and discuss the parables of Jesus. You might also ask God to open your hearts to better understand what Jesus was communicating through these stories, to open your minds to be aware of new and challenging implications in the parables, and to open your spirits to allow yourselves to be moved and affected by what you discover.
 3. Unless you are certain that all participants in the group already know each other, you will want to provide name tags. It will be helpful to make these before the meeting. This indicates that you are prepared and that you are expecting each individual at the session. Be sure to make a name tag for yourself.

4. Take time at this first session for participants to introduce themselves. Go around the room asking each participant to say their name. In addition, ask them to tell something about why they signed up for this study, or what they hope to get out of the study, or what is the earliest parable they can remember hearing. It is important that participants feel comfortable talking with each other. If the group is large, you will need to do the introductions in small groups of five to seven.
5. If the Resource Books have not been distributed prior to this session, hand them out at this time. Review the theme for each session in the table of contents and mention briefly what will be covered. Tell the group that unless they are ill or out of town you look forward to seeing them each week. Let participants know that they should read the corresponding chapter in the Resource Book before they come. Also, encourage them to make notes as they read through the material and especially jot down any questions or difficulties they have with the texts. They will then have opportunities to raise these concerns and discuss them with the group.

Exploring the Scripture

- Project slide #5 (2 Samuel 12:1-9; Telling a parable to a king)

Introduce the parable Nathan told David in 2 Samuel 12:1-9. Ask everyone to turn to the passage in their Bibles, and then lead a discussion about the parable, using the questions below.

- Project slide #6 (Questions about Nathan's parable)

If the group is large, you will need to divide into smaller groups, providing each group with copies of Worksheet 1A, which also contains the following:

1. Which aspects of the story caused David to get caught up in Nathan's parable?
2. At what point does David realize that the story is about him?
3. To what degree does the story change David's life?
4. What does this say to us about the power of a parable?

5. In what way was Nathan's story an effective way to deal with his encounter with David? What were the risks he took in approaching it this way?

If these discussions are held in smaller groups, ask one person from each group to report back by summarizing their group's discussion.

■ Project slide #7 (What makes a parable a parable?)

In this activity we will explore the three types of parables by asking group members to identify phrases characteristic of a similitude, example story, or parable proper. Before the group session make a copy of Worksheet 1B. The bold text is for the leader only. Cut the individual phrases under each category into separate slips of paper, making sure there is one for each person in the group. If you have a smaller group, give some participants a second slip of paper from the same type of parable.

Ask participants to review the section entitled "Types of Parables" in Chapter 1 of the Resource Book that describes the three types. Then give each person a slip of paper with a phrase describing a similitude, an example story, or a parable proper. When everyone has a slip of paper, ask them to get up and move around the room to find others who have a phrase describing the same type of parable.

First, ask each participant to determine which type of parable is indicated by their phrase. Ask group members to then move around the room and read their phrases to each other and ask other participants if they agree about the type of parable it defines. Through this process they will try to find others who have phrases defining the same kind of parable. The goal is to form a group with other people who have phrases representing the same type of parable.

For example, if someone received the phrase "Go and do likewise," she would determine that it represented an example story and look for other people whose phrases are also characteristic of example stories. As people talk together and groups form, they will need to be sure that all the phrases in their group are part of the same type of parable. Remind participants that some phrases may apply to more than one type of parable.

When everyone is in a group, they should all have phrases defining the same type of parable.

Ask participants in each group to read their phrases to the whole group.

and/or

■ Project slide #8 (Types of parables) or make copies of Worksheet 1C, or post the following titles and scripture references at the front of the room. Divide the group into subgroups of three or four people. Ask each small group to analyze the following parables and come to a consensus about which type of parable it is: similitude, example story, or parable proper. Then ask each subgroup to discuss their answers with the whole group, explaining the reasons behind their choices.

the weeds and the wheat	Matthew 13: 24-30	(parable proper)
the two builders	Matthew 7:24-27	(similitude)
the rich fool	Luke 12:16-21	(example story)
the fish net	Matthew 13:47-50	(similitude)

Extended Session

■ Project slide #9 (What makes a parable a parable?)

Ask participants to review the information about the techniques in the **Extended Session** of Chapter 1 in their Resource Books.

■ Project slide #10 (Bultmann's 13 techniques of the parable form) or post at the front of the room a list of the “Techniques of the Parable Form”.

Ask if anyone has questions about any of the techniques and if all of them seem to be valid. Now read out loud (or ask a volunteer to read) the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37. Tell participants that after the parable has been read, we will ask how many of the techniques listed are evident in this parable. Participants may want to jot down notes as they look at the techniques and hear the reading of the parable. After the parable has been read, ask participants to join in identifying different techniques that are included in the parable. If time permits, repeat this activity using the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-13) and/or the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8).

Techniques of the Parable Form

1. As concise as possible
2. The “law of stage duality” (only two characters speaking or acting at a time)
3. The “law of the single perspective” (parable told one scene at a time from a single point of view)
4. Characters are shown by what they do, rather than being described
5. Only mention emotions, feelings, and motives when they are critical for the meaning of the story
6. Secondary characters appear only when they are central to the story and are described only to the extent necessary
7. Motives behind the actions of most characters are left unknown
8. Often parables will not have conclusions
9. Unnecessary descriptiveness is excluded
10. Use of direct speech is important
11. The “law of repetition” (phrases often repeated for emphasis)
12. The “law of the end stress” (critical events at the end of the story)
13. Suspend moral judgment about characters if it is not relevant to the parable

and/or

- Project slide #10 (Bultmann's 13 techniques of the parable form).

Divide the group into small groups of four to six people. Ask participants to turn to the list of “Techniques of the Parable Form” in the **Extended Session** of Chapter 1 in their Resource Books and read through the characteristics noted there. Ask each sub-group to discuss which of the techniques are the most powerful in making a parable effective. Which are least critical? Have each group list the five most important techniques in developing a parable. When they have completed this, have each small group report its answers to the whole group, explaining why they chose the five they listed. Compare the lists and discuss them as a group.

Closing

■ Project slide #11 (Planting a seed).

1. Prepare materials for each person to plant his or her own seed. You will need the seed, potting soil, and a cup or small container for each participant. Have each person plant the seed and water it. While the seeds are being planted you may want to talk about the amazing way in which plants grow from seeds. Explain that the seed will be an on-going part of the group sessions. Don't say too much about it at this point.
2. Try to get perennial seeds, if possible, but you will also want a seed that germinates fairly quickly, and one that participants will enjoy taking home. Plant a few extra seeds for those who were not able to attend this first session and in case some of the seeds don't germinate. Save one of these plantings which you care for or ask one person in the group to care for one planting which can be used at the last session. In many areas this exercise will be most effective and supplies more available if done in the spring or early summer.
3. Ask the group for any concerns they have, either for themselves or for friends and relatives, which they would like to include in your closing prayer. Listen carefully to the concerns and note the first names of those mentioned. Include the persons named in the closing prayer.

and/or

- Distribute copies of Worksheet 1D (Responsive Reading: Psalm 8) to participants.

or

- Project slide #12, followed by slide #13 (Responsive reading of Psalm 8). Divide participants evenly into two groups (Group A and Group B), to alternate in the reading of Psalm 8. Then close the session with a prayer expressing thanks for the many ways in which God speaks in our lives.
- Project slide #14 (8 parable medallions) for a time of discussion of assignments for session two.
- Project slide #15 (blank slide) indicating the end of the slide presentation for session one.

Looking Ahead

1. Ask for a volunteer to offer the opening prayer at the next session.
2. Invite someone with interest in chemistry or culinary arts to research the way in which yeast works. Ask them to review the chemical reaction in yeast, how long it takes to work, and how it affects the dough in which it is placed. The volunteer should be prepared to give a brief (two or three minute) talk about these matters as part of **Setting the Stage** in the next session.
3. If you are going to use the video “The Last Leaf” for session two, search the internet for “The Last Leaf” by O. Henry, starring Art Carney. (It can be rented or purchased from Amazon or watched on Amazon Prime.) I recommend that you preview the video before you show it. See “Resources You May Need” in the next session for more information about the video.

Nathan's Parable

2 Samuel 12:1-9

1. Which aspects of the story caused David to get caught up in Nathan's parable?
2. At what point does David realize that the story is about him?
3. To what degree does the story change David's life?
4. What does this say to us about the power of a parable?
5. In what ways was Nathan's story an effective way to deal with his encounter with David? What were the risks he took in approaching it in this way?

Three Types of Parables

Cut slips of paper with the following phrases to give to participants. (Bold headings are only for the leader.)

(Similitudes)

Accounts of real-life situations

Appeals to common experience

Comparison with what is already understood

Makes a comparison with something that is similar, uses what is already accepted as true

(Example Stories)

Created story of action to be imitated

Hearer may be warned about behavior or attitudes to avoid

Story encouraging others to do the same

Generalize from a specific situation to a broader understanding and application

Worksheet 1B-2

“Go and do likewise”

Incorporates meaning in its story, rather than pointing beyond itself

(Parables Proper)

Created story of analogy, rather than illustration

Compares two different things to point beyond itself to a new meaning

Often includes a growing sense of drama

Tells of a specific event, rather than typical situations

Not the universal but the particular

Persuasion is subtle, not overt

Worksheet 1C

Which type of parable is it?

the weeds and the wheat.....Matthew 13:24-30

the two buildersMatthew 7:24-27

the rich foolLuke 12:16-21

the fish netMatthew 13:47-50

Techniques of the Parable Form

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A Responsive Reading of Psalm 8

All: O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Group A: You have set your glory above the heavens.

Group B: Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

Group A: When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

Group B: What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Group A: Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor;

Group B: You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

Group A: All sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

Group B: the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

All: O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!