

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

PARABLES OF JESUS



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**“And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable?
Then how will you understand all the parables?’”**

MARK 4:13

Parables of Jesus

Parables are short narratives that create pictures in the imagination of the listener/reader. These creative narratives drawn from nature or common life express truth in a way that cannot be expressed in abstractions. Parables arrest the hearer with their vividness or strangeness, leaving the mind in doubt about their meaning or application so as to provoke it into active thought. They make demands on their readers, insisting that they pay attention, compelling them to explore what the parable wants of them.

The goal of parables is to persuade hearers to see the world, themselves, God, and other people in strikingly new ways and then to put these changed perceptions into practice. Yet, parables coax listeners into their truth not through didactic language but by drawing them in as participants and challenging their minds, hearts, and imaginations. They are open-ended in the sense that their meaning is elusive, they are meant to be pondered rather than resolved, and they reveal new insights and applications even after many hearings.

Although parables were certainly known in the ancient world before the time of Jesus, there is no other teacher from whom we have received so many parables with such colorful and diverse material. No one before Jesus used them as creatively, consistently, and effectively. Jesus was a compelling storyteller, creating interesting plots, developments, and resolutions. Yet, his intent was never merely to entertain but to convey truth, persuade, and motivate. The parables of Jesus are meant to effect a change in the hearer, to lead to decision or action.

The subject and central theme of all of Jesus' teaching is the "kingdom of God," also translated as "reign of God" or "kingdom of heaven." The parables illustrate, portray, or lead hearers to experience that kingdom, the rule of God over creation. Jesus used parables to express the idea that the kingdom of God has come upon them, that the dynamic force of God's reign is a present reality in his ministry. The call of the kingdom is simple yet difficult: ultimate commitment to God's will. The power of God's reign will continue to grow as people respond to this divine call.

Parables of Jesus, like his healing miracles, are bearers of the kingdom, presenting an experience of God's reign for the listeners. Entering into the parable, the reader is oriented toward the kingdom, the presence of God who repeatedly challenges the world and continually shatters its complacency, making ultimate claims on human experience. Entering into these parables of Jesus, the reader is presented with a new vision of human existence, penetrated by the kingdom of God that has surprisingly come among us yet that we also await to be fully realized in the future.

The parables not only draw us into God's kingdom as the center of Jesus' teaching but also point to the person of the proclaimer—Jesus himself. He not only teaches about the kingdom but also proclaims its presence now. He not only brings the kingdom but also embodies that kingdom in himself. In Jesus, God is finally and forever present in the world. In Jesus, we may see who God is most fully and make a choice for or against his will.

Reflection and discussion

- Why are stories more influential on our minds and hearts than mere abstract teaching?

- In what sense are parables open-ended?

Prophetic Parables Transform the Heart

Jesus' analogical way of thinking, the images he uses, and the form of his parables point to the Old Testament as the primary influence on his use of parables in his teaching ministry. The parables in the Hebrew Scriptures are found most often in the mouths of prophets or in prophetic books. They are a verbal tool of the prophets in their conflicts with Israel and its leaders, mirroring the nation, its king, and the fate that awaits them. The prophets use parables to confront Israel, warn of divine judgment, and bring about a change of heart among God's people.

Perhaps the best-known parable in the Old Testament is told by Nathan, the court prophet of King David in Jerusalem. The parable is set within the narrative of David's adultery with Bathsheba. The king has taken the wife of Uriah into his bed in the royal palace, while Uriah, one of his most faithful officers, is fighting a war for him. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David orders Uriah back from the front, entertains him at the palace, and tries to get him to go home and sleep with his wife. But Uriah refuses, lying down instead with the guards at the palace gate. After the failure of David's first plan, he then sends Uriah back to the front, seeing to it that he is killed in battle. The king then takes Bathsheba as his wife.

God sends Nathan to David, and the prophet speaks this parable to the king:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him. (2 Sam 12:1–4)

After hearing the parable, David rages, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." David is blind, unaware of his profound guilt. He assumed the story was a legal matter that his prophet was presenting to him. But it is actually a metaphoric treatment of David's own behavior. He is

drawn into the story, pronouncing a death sentence on himself without knowing it. He understands only when Nathan says to him, “You are the man!”

Nathan’s parable begins like any narrative: “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor.” Jesus also told this kind of story: “Two men went up to the temple to pray,” “There was a man who had two sons,” “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,” “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple.”

The parables of Jesus often function in a similar way. At first, his listeners hear only an enticing story, but then they suddenly realize, “He’s talking about us!” The hearers are drawn into the story, and then they realize they are part of the story. The power of Jesus’ words confronts them at the deepest level. The encounter becomes a transformative experience. While Jesus certainly did not create the art of telling parables, he truly refined and mastered it.

Reflection and discussion

- How did Nathan draw David unknowingly into the story?

- Why did Nathan’s parable transform the heart of David like nothing else could?

Characteristics of Jesus’ Parables

Parables are meant to engage hearers/readers and draw them in. They use concrete details, dialogue, exaggeration, shock, and surprise to create interest. They often ask an explicit or implied question: “Which of these two?” “What do you think?” “Who is my neighbor?” By involving the listeners and bringing them into the story, the parable forces them to move past superficial thinking, to discern, and to imagine life in new ways.

Parables are brief and straightforward. They exclude all unnecessary details and use no more words than necessary. Most parables are only a few verses, and

even the longer ones omit details the listeners would like to know. Nearly all characters are anonymous, motives are rarely treated, and actions are so compressed that readers have to fill in the obvious.

Parables reflect Jesus' first-century Palestinian context. The settings of the stories are realistic, reflecting social structures, cultural customs, political dynamics, and economic choices that shaped their hearers' lives. We should first seek to enter into the narrative from within the oral culture in which the parables were first spoken and heard, listening in a context that is not our own. Because Jesus' audience was an oppressed people, living under the domination of the Roman Empire, we must avoid domesticating Jesus, ignoring his radical message and social critique.

The parables were told by a Jewish teacher to a largely Jewish audience. These stories of Jesus arose from within the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and can be understood only within the context of first-century Judaism. Ideas and metaphors from the Old Testament and Jewish religious life fill the parables, so readers must often clear the parables of centuries of distorted Christian interpretations, removing anti-Jewish readings and dangerous stereotypes of Jews.

The parables are shaped to fit with the purpose and plan of each gospel writer. They are woven into each gospel, as a story within the wider narrative. So, in a sense, they are told twice—once by Jesus and then again by the evangelists. We must interpret parables, looking for the intent of Jesus and the intent of the gospel writer. These are not always identical, which is why the same parable is told differently in each gospel. Yet the wider gospel narrative and the individual parables shed light on each other.

The parables elicit a response and a change of heart. Parables surprise and jolt the hearers, disrupting their familiar world and presenting them with a new view of reality. The listeners then have to decide between their accustomed understanding and the new one that confronts them in the parable. The aim of parables is to convince readers that the kingdom of God is present in the ministry of Jesus and to persuade them to bind their lives to Jesus and his message.

The parables are open-ended and perpetually unfinished. The understanding of a parable is established through the shared engagement of the author, text, and readers. Jesus must have told the same parable several times, to different audiences and in different contexts. We can distinguish between the understanding of the historical Jesus, the early church, the gospel authors, and interpreters through the ages. To say that the parables contain within themselves only one true meaning is to close off the possibilities of the listener's participation in the parable anew. Rather, the text provides basic constraints and possibilities within which a variety of understandings may be perceived. A parable is understood through the dynamic interaction between the creator and the contemplator, between the narrative and the reader, between the text and its context.

Reflection and discussion

- Which of these characteristics of Jesus' parables seem most important for me to keep in mind?

- In what sense is my understanding of a parable established through the interaction between Jesus, his audience, the gospel text, and my own context?

Interpreting the Parables

The parables of Jesus make up over a third of the gospel texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This study will consider the major parables of each gospel. We begin with Mark's gospel, which contains the fewest parables. Most of these parables are retold in Matthew and Luke, sometimes in different contexts of Jesus' ministry.

In the next section, we will study those parables that appear both in Matthew and in Luke. These parables seem to have a common written source, although each evangelist recounts the parable in different words and in dif-

ferent settings. In the following section, we examine those parables told only in Matthew's gospel, and finally, we will explore the parables that are found exclusively in Luke's gospel, which contains more parables than any other gospel account.

Whether or not John's gospel contains any parables is a matter of debate, yet certainly those gospel teachings about Jesus as the good shepherd and as the vine supporting branches bear a different form than the parables of the three synoptic gospels. There are no parables found in the other New Testament literature, since the teaching of the those early writers focused on proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus and how to live in him.

We begin to study these parables of Jesus in the same way we interpret any other biblical text. We focus first on the literary aspects of setting, character, point of view, and plot, with the interpretive goal of coming to understand how the parable fits into the purpose of the gospel. We must begin with the stories themselves, to determine exactly what they say and how they function in the teachings of Jesus. We want to glimpse how Jesus' first hearers might have heard these parables as they came from his lips. When we move too quickly away from the story itself in order to seek some abstract lesson, we can settle for easy platitudes: invest your talents well, be prepared like the bridesmaids, be charitable like the good Samaritan, and so forth. When we seek a single meaning or a simple moral, we limit both the parable and ourselves. We lose the genius of Jesus' teaching and the transforming impact it may have on us.

Each parable works differently and each must be studied separately to determine its significance, how it functions, and how it calls its readers to respond. We should think not only about what the parables mean but also about what they can do. They are designed to shake us up, to shock, to confront, to provoke, and to indict us. Each one challenges each of us to ask and answer the question, "What does this parable want?"

Each interpreter of Jesus' parables stands on the shoulders of previous interpreters. A fundamental way to expand our own vision is to engage with the ideas of others, especially those who have perspectives, insights, and responses different from our own. There are no mere spectators in encountering parables; everyone participates, joining a community across time and space in response to these narratives of God's kingdom.

When we speak of parables, it is best not to speak of “meaning,” as if we were trying to recover some ready-made message that is hidden there. A parable is not like an ancient artifact that must be uncovered by archeologists. Seeking hidden meaning closes off interpretation. Rather, we should speak of “understanding,” which is a reinterpretation in a new context. All true understandings of parables occur in the interaction between Jesus and the hearer, a relationship that is both historical and contemporary, both personal and dialogic.

Parables are like thresholds, each of them inviting us to enter and experience God’s kingdom. Each one gives us a different view of God’s will for creation. As we study the parables, we strive not just for accuracy of knowledge but also depth of insight. They compel us and empower us to think, teach, and act like Jesus did. They awaken within us a desire to accept this new vision of life and to participate wholeheartedly in God’s reign.

Reflection and discussion

- Why should I seek a deeper understanding from a parable rather than just a singular meaning?

- What do I want to experience through this study of the parables of Jesus?

Prayer

Lord our God, the beginning and the end of all creation, send your Holy Spirit to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I begin this study of your inspired Scriptures. As I examine the parables of Jesus, help me to sit with the stories, being patient not to seek quick and easy interpretations. Help me to realize that Jesus is addressing me, seeking to jolt my habitual way of understanding my life, probing my heart, moving me to new insights, and transforming my motives. As I ponder these parables, lead me into conversation with Jesus, drawing me ever closer to him and forming me into his disciple.