

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



Presented by  
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### The Parables – Study #12

#### Introduction:

A study of the parables is one of the most fascinating studies in the Bible. The discussion over how to interpret the parables is voluminous, and unfortunately, has dragged the parables into the realm of academia, rather than keep it in the arena of ordinary people.

Our study will attempt to bring sense and balance to this fascinating and important genre.

#### What is a Parable?

"A parable is a brief story that is true to life, given for the purpose of teaching spiritual truth." (This form was Jesus' favourite mode of teaching)

Elements of a parable are often representing other things, for instance, in Luke's parable of the lost son, the father in the story represents God. The challenge is determining what elements of the story represent something else.

#### Opening Point of Clarification

Read Mark 4:11-12

He (Jesus) replied, "You are permitted to understand the secret of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables for everything I say to outsiders,<sup>12</sup> so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

'When they see what I do,  
they will learn nothing.  
When they hear what I say,  
they will not understand.  
Otherwise, they will turn to me  
and be forgiven.'"

Many have interpreted Jesus' words in this passage (quoting Isa. 6:9-10) as the parables were meant to conceal truth. That is not the case. They were intended to illuminate truth. However, in that illumination there would be some who would have their hearts hardened because of the indicting message they had for them

### Basic Principles of Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

1. Determine the nature and character of the original hearing audience of the parable as told by Jesus.

The parables are very audience specific (rich young ruler, Pharisees, disciples). Inevitably, however, they have two audiences (e.g. Luke 7 - the Pharisee and the prostitute).

The impact of the parable will be different for each audience (attack vs. affirmation).

2. Recognize that the parables inevitably are describing the nature of the "already but not yet" kingdom of God.

Jesus brought the kingdom. His message was that "it was at hand." Thus, he sought to cause people to enter that kingdom through repentance and faith, and by demonstrating the moral and ethical values of his kingdom.

There is a further point to this. While they are describing the kingdom, they are stressing the *imminence* of that kingdom. Therefore, there needs to be haste in doing what is necessary to enter the kingdom *now*. This helps explain the very difficult parable of the shrewd (deceptive) manager in Luke 16:1-15.

3. Understand that the parables, while they intended to teach, are primarily intended to create a response.

Certainly, the parables *taught* about the nature of the kingdom of God. However, they were meant to anger and encourage, to startle and amaze, to cause to think and reflect on the incontrovertible and inevitably uncomfortable. They bring the world of ideas of the listener (and reader) into intersection with the world of ideas of the kingdom, and often these worlds are very different and confrontive.

Fee and Stuart compare a response to the parables to "interpreting a joke." The meaning is self-evident and there is a "punch" (line) to it.

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<sup>1</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 126-134.

4. There is essentially one major point to each parable.

We should be careful to not make the parables "walk on all fours." Even though we recognize that there are allegorical characteristics to the parables. Allegorizing a text is applying hidden spiritual meaning (often symbolic) to the normal, literal sense of a text.

The Early Church Fathers were sometimes the most guilty for allegorizing a text (Song of Solomon as one of the best examples of this).

One of the justifications that the Early Church Fathers had for allegorizing the parables comes from Jesus himself. In the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:1-23), Jesus proceeds to interpret the parable in a semi-allegorical way.

The parables were considered as stories for those outside the kingdom, but the "real" meaning was a mystery that was hidden, and only the church could uncover the meaning through the means of allegory.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) was a brilliant scholar of the early church. Here is his interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>2</sup>

<i>A certain man went from Jerusalem to Jericho</i>	=	Adam
<i>Jerusalem</i>	=	the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell
<i>Jericho</i>	=	the moon, which signifies Adams mortality
<i>Thieves</i>	=	the devil and his angels
<i>Stripped him</i>	=	namely, of his immortality
<i>Beat him</i>	=	by persuading him to sin
<i>Left him half-dead</i>	=	as man he lives, but died spiritually, therefore he is half-dead
<i>The priest and Levite</i>	=	the priesthood and ministry of the OT
<i>The Samaritan</i>	=	said to mean Guardian, therefore this means Christ himself
<i>Bound his wounds</i>	=	means binding the restraint of sin
<i>Oil</i>	=	comfort of good hope
<i>Wine</i>	=	exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
<i>Beast</i>	=	the flesh of Christ's incarnation
<i>Inn</i>	=	the church
<i>The morrow</i>	=	after the Resurrection
<i>Two-pence</i>	=	promise of this life and the life to come
<i>Innkeeper</i>	=	Paul

<sup>2</sup> Fee and Stuart, *Reading the Bible for All its Worth*, pg. 136.

This is quite a novel idea but surely this is not what Jesus meant in answering the question which prompted the story, "Who is my neighbour?" Besides, why would Jesus "hide" the prediction of the church and the apostle Paul?

However, there are allegorical characteristics in the parables

1. People and things in the parables often do stand for or symbolize something.
  - Parable of the Sower / Wheat and Tares (notice Jesus' interpretations - Mk 4:3-9; 13-20; 13:24-30, 36-43)
2. The literature of Jesus' day (OT and intertestamental) had imagery and certain fixed ideas or symbolism associated with them.
  - Father, king, judge, shepherd = God
  - Vineyard, vine, sheep = God's people
  - An enemy = the devil

3. There is the presence of the fantastic in several of the parables (exaggeration).
  - The ridiculous excuses in Luke 14:18-20

But they all began making excuses. One said, 'I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.'<sup>19</sup> Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.'<sup>20</sup> Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' Luke 14:18-20

- Enormous size of mustard seed in Mk 4:32

... a mustard seed planted in the ground. It is the smallest of all seeds,<sup>32</sup> but it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches, and birds can make nests in its shade."

- Unusual hiring practices in Matt 20:1-16

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard.<sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.<sup>3</sup> "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing.<sup>4</sup> So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day.<sup>5</sup> So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. Matt. 20:1-5

4. It would appear that there are usually two or three main characters in each parable, and that the parable has a point to make about each of them.
  - Parable of the moneylender (Lk 7:41-42) is a classic example of this

Then Jesus told him this story: “A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other.<sup>42</sup> But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?” Luke 7:41-42

- The Prodigal Son - with points revolving around the Father, son, and eldest brother
- Good Samaritan - four main characters. The fourth one is the kicker, not only because he is a Samaritan, but also, he is not a *lawyer*! (An “expert in religious law” prompted the telling of the parable)