

**Introduction to Jesus' Parables**  
**Selected Scriptures**  
**ABC 2/9/20**

Everyone loves a good story. Stories are universal & timeless. Good story-tellers don't have to be verbose & long-winded. Sometimes whole stories are told in just a few words. Here's one example: *Honey don't walk out. I'm too drunk to follow.*<sup>1</sup> That's just 9 words, but it tells a story, does it not? A slightly longer & better story is told by O. Henry called, *The Gift of the Magi*. Set in the early 1900s, it tells the story of Della & Jim, a young couple who want to buy Christmas presents for each other, but don't have much money. They have 2 prized possessions: Jim's gold watch, which belonged to his father & grandfather & Della's long, beautiful hair. Determined to give Jim something special, Della cuts & sells her hair in order to buy a platinum fob & chain for the watch he treasures. Jim, wanting to surprise his wife, sells his watch in order to buy her expensive, jeweled combs for her beautiful hair. They each sold their most precious possession for the sake of the other person, who could no longer use the gift because they'd also sacrificed their most prized belonging. Henry ends the story by explaining that the magi were wise men who brought gifts to the baby Jesus & that Della & Jim were similarly wise in their sacrificial gifts to each other. They chose selfless love as what was most valuable. This is an example of a parable, which is often defined as a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' parables were ingeniously simple word pictures with profound spiritual lessons. He was the master Storyteller & His parables are examples of this. We're going to be looking at some of His parables in the weeks ahead. PRAY VIDEO<sup>3</sup>

**1. What is A Parable?** It's a word picture. It's a drawn-out simile or metaphor. The word **parable** comes from 2 Greek roots meaning *beside* & *to throw*. Literally, *to throw or place alongside*. It suggests a comparison between 2 things that are alike in some way. It refers to the analogy being drawn between some commonplace reality & a profound spiritual truth. The juxtaposition of common things alongside transcendent truth is what's most distinctive about a parable. To put it

<sup>1</sup> Tom Petty, *Rebels*, Southern Accent album

<sup>2</sup> Lee-Barnewall, M. *Surprised by the Parables: Growing in Grace through the Stories of Jesus*, pp 1-2

<sup>3</sup> Bibleproject.com

as simply as possible, a parable is an illustrative figure of speech made for comparison's sake, specifically for the purpose of teaching a spiritual lesson. It can employ a metaphor, simile, proverb, or some other type of word picture. But it always makes a comparison that applies to some truth in the spiritual realm. The lesson revealed in the comparison is the central (& sometimes the only) point of the parable. A parable isn't an allegory like *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which every character & plot point conveys some cryptic but important meaning. Parables aren't to be mined for layer upon layer of secret significance. Their lessons are simple, focused, & without much embellishment. The term *parable* is used several ways in Scripture literature. It can refer to a prophecy (Num 3:7), a proverb (1 Sam 24:13), a satire or taunt (Ps 44:11), a riddle (Ps 49:4; Ezek 17:2), a figurative saying (Mk 7:14-17), an extended simile (Mt 13:33), a story (Mt 25:1-13), an example (Mt 18:23-25), & even an allegory (Judges 9:7-20; Mk 4:3-9, 13-20).<sup>4</sup> While there are many interesting differences between these literary devices, there's a common thread that runs through them all: they all involve the language & literary device of *comparison*. Something known is compared to something unknown in order to give understanding of the latter. Short figures of speech like *as strong as a horse* or *as quick as a rabbit* are plain similes, simple & straightforward enough not to require an explanation. A parable extends the comparison into a longer story or more complex metaphor & the spiritual truth isn't necessarily obvious. Most of Jesus' parables needed some kind of explanation. In Mt 15:15, for example, Peter asks Jesus to explain **this parable: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man** (11). That's actually a pair of simple propositions stated as a kind of proverb. It has none of the distinctive elements of story or narrative; it has no plot, no characters, & no series of events. Yet Scripture calls it a **parable** (cf Mk 7:17). In Lk 4:23, Jesus cites a proverb: **Physician, heal yourself!** but uses the same word normally translated *parable*. Obviously, the biblical idea of a parable is broader than most technical definitions & that's why an exact count of biblical parables is tricky. Depending on the definition, there are 30-6 of them & they take up about 1/3 of Christ's teaching. The word *parable* is used 5x in the NAS of the OT (Ps 78:2; Ezekiel 17:2; 20:49; 24:3; Hosea 12:10).

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<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, p 137

The Hebrew word in those texts can refer to a prophetic saying, a proverb, a riddle, a discourse, a poem, a short story, & almost any kind of short axiom or anecdote. The word is used some 40x in the OT, usually translated *proverb* (though it's rendered *oracle* in the book of Numbers, & *discourse* in the book of Job). The Greek word translated *parable* throughout Mt, Mk, & Lk is used 50x in 48 vss. Twice the word is used in the book of Hebrews to signify figurative speech (9:9; 11:19). All 48 other uses are found in the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 gospels, where the word is always translated **parable(s)** & always in reference to Jesus' stories. Here are 2 definitions I like: *A parable is a brief story that is true to life, given for the purpose of teaching some spiritual truth.*<sup>5</sup> & *a parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.*<sup>6</sup> When we say a parable is true to life, it doesn't mean every incident in it is something that would happen in everyday life; but they could happen & the situations are familiar to the hearer. Parables are grounded in the real world, thus they are different from fables or fantasy. These are stories that could really happen in history as it is understood by the 1<sup>st</sup>-century audience. Jesus' parables were all stories of real life in Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. All of us have heard of Aesop's fables. After you tell a child a fable, you point out the moral of the story. A parable is like a fable in that it also has a moral or message behind the story. But parables are true to life. Jesus' parables never feature elements of myth or fantasy. They're nothing like Aesop's fables, where personified forest creatures teach moral lessons. The parables of Jesus are all believable, true-to-life illustrations. They could in fact all be true. The power of a parable comes from the fact that you recognize that's the way it is in real life. It's usually a simple story, grounded in the real world, & used to provoke the audience on a spiritual matter or to make a spiritual point.<sup>7</sup> It's designed to teach a lesson through comparison. When you hear the story, you can relate it to your own life. It conveys its message of truth through analogy, comparison, or contrast. Parables are a great teaching method because they tell a story that's easy to remember. How many of you can tell me the story *Goldie Locks & the 3 Bears*? How many of you studied it this morning before you came to church? Stories are easier to remember than

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<sup>5</sup> R.C. McQuilkin, *Our Lord's Parables*, p 21-22

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, *Parables*, p xxvi

<sup>7</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*

lists of principles or facts. There's something powerful & memorable about Jesus' parables. In them we see how Jesus' teaching causes people to come to the point where they must decide whether their hearts will be open or closed to Him & His kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

In some ways, parables are like jokes because they aren't supposed to be interpreted as much as experienced. Jesus' audience, those seeking to know the truth, would have known the points of reference & would have gotten the point, or the twist, because they'd instantly recognize what He was implying when the story took an unexpected turn. They were in on the joke, so to speak. Also, not a single parable is recorded anywhere in the gospel of John & they are scarce in Mark. In other words, all but one of Jesus' recorded parables are found in Matthew & Luke. It's also worth noting that Mt & Lk have somewhat different ways of recounting Jesus' parables. Matthew tells the stories with brevity including the basic facts. Luke's accounts tend to give the characters in the stories more life & personality.

**2. How Do We Interpret Parables?** Studying this week I came across this quote: *Preaching a parable is a novice preacher's dream but often an experienced preacher's nightmare.*<sup>9</sup> As one commentator says, *At 1<sup>st</sup> glance, the parables appear familiar & straightforward, but thoughtful Christians soon realize they've fallen into a quagmire of interpretive debates.*<sup>10</sup> In other words, we have to be careful in our interpretation. One fact we have to keep in mind about Jesus' parables is that they are simple on purpose & the lessons they teach are likewise uncomplicated. The symbolism in Jesus' parables is never thickly layered & rarely multidimensional. Trying to find meaning in every element of the story leads to all kinds of problems. Even the most detailed parables (like the *Good Samaritan* & the *Prodigal Son*) usually teach fairly straightforward, uncomplicated lessons. Minor elements in the story aren't to be laden with spiritual meaning. For example, the oil & wine the good Samaritan used to dress the traveler's wounds (Lk 10:34) have no necessary symbolic or spiritual significance beyond showing that the Samaritan gave the man tender, time-consuming care. Neither is there any need to inject some secret spiritual meaning

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<sup>8</sup> Lee-Barnewall, M. *Surprised by the Parables: Growing in Grace through the Stories of Jesus*, p 2

<sup>9</sup> Thomas O. Long, *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible*, p 87

<sup>10</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, p 13

into **the pods that the swine were eating** in the prodigal son's story (Lk 15:16). That detail is given because it shows in just a few words how far he'd fallen into the poverty of a defiled & degrading lifestyle. The important thing in every parable is the central lesson, & in those cases where the symbolism is more complex (such as the parable of the soils (Mt 13:3-9) & the parable of the tares(13:24-30)), Jesus almost always explains the symbolism for us. Historically, Jesus' parables have been treated as elaborate allegories, with every detail having some spiritual or symbolic significance. Periodic voices protested against this form of interpretation (Irenaeus, Chrysostom, & Aquinas). The Reformers, especially John Calvin, took huge steps away from this method of interpretation. But even as recently as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the majority of interpreters continued to find many lessons & symbols in almost every parable.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, there are many ways of interpreting parables badly. Most of them come from trying to read too much into them. Augustine (350-430 AD) infamously interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan. Let's just read it & then look at his interpretation.<sup>12</sup> **Lk 10:30-37**

Here's Augustine's interpretation:

The man = Adam

Went from Jerusalem = the heavenly city from which Adam fell

To Jericho = the moon, & thereby signifies Adam's mortality

Was attacked by thieves = the devil & his demons

Who stripped him = of his immortality

& beat him = by persuading him to sin

& left him half dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he's half dead

Along come a priest = the priesthood & Law of the OT

& a Levite = the ministry of the prophets

Eventually a Samaritan = Christ Himself

Who bound his wounds = which means binding the restraint of sin

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, p 13

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Enarationes in Psalmos 118, 121, & 125; De Doctrina Christiana 1.0.31ff, Sermo 299*

Pouring oil = comfort of good hope

& wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit

Then set him on his animal = the flesh of Christ's incarnation

& took him to an inn = the church

Gave the innkeeper 2 denarii = promise of this life & the life to come

Told the innkeeper, *I'll pay more when I come back* = after the Resurrection

& the innkeeper? = the Apostle Paul. Try to figure that one out?!?

While an elaborate interpretation, it isn't an explanation the 1<sup>st</sup> audience could have understood. Besides that, it communicates a very different message than the context would suggest. As a result, Augustine does something very different with the parable than what Jesus was doing with it. We don't want to make the same mistake. Obviously, allegorizing has a disastrous effect on the authority of the Bible for its message becomes completely obscured & there's no reasonable method way we can decide between competing interpretations. In 1899 a German theologian<sup>13</sup> showed how most of the allegorical approaches to each parable differed from one another, calling into question the method itself. He defended his approach to the parables, stressing that parables were as far from allegory as possible & that each passage makes only one main point. His work served to correct an error in one direction, but as it turns out, & as is often the case, it swung the pendulum perhaps too far in the other direction. Jesus' parables can have more than one main idea (or more than one important point, corresponding at times to the characters in the parable, though this isn't always the case. Again, they aren't highly developed allegories where every point & detail stands for something else.

Here are a few principles to remember & use as we study the parables:<sup>14</sup>

**First**, we must note the literary setting of the parable in the gospel. This can provide clues to the overall interpretation of the parable.

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<sup>13</sup> Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from Greg Herrick, *The Interpretation of Parables: Exploring "Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads,"* bible.org/print/2114

*Second*, we must note the wording, structure, plot, & suspense. Remember these are stories & need to be read as such & thus it's helpful to note any changes in the same parable in another gospel.

*Third*, we must read the parables in their original historical situation. Nothing should be read out of them that isn't consistent with the customs of that day & certainly no later theology or church experience should be read *into* them. In other words, no interpretation should be given that wouldn't have been understandable to those who 1<sup>st</sup> heard these parables.

*Fourth*, we must note the main characters/things in the parable & any parallels & or contrasts between them. The main characters are often clues as to the main points being made.

*Fifth*, we must recognize that there are 2 different audiences being addressed by the parables. Those who understand & those who don't. A different audience signifies slightly different functions for the parables & thus a different emphasis in interpretation.

*Sixth*, we must avoid allegorizing & note carefully what occurs at the end of a parable as a clue to the meaning of the parable.

*Seventh*, we must seek to place the teaching of the parable in the overall ministry of Jesus & His teaching as a whole. In this way, it will be seen that most of His parables deal with the kingdom of God in some way.

*Eighth*, we must through prayer & study discern the meaning of the parable for the original hearers & its significance for us.

The lessons Christ has built into His word pictures are truly profound & well worth our study & attention. As Jesus said privately to His disciples, **Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; for I tell you that many prophets & kings have desired to see what you see, & have not seen it, & to hear what you hear, & have not heard it** (Lk 10:23–24). Built into the parables is a promise of blessedness to those who understand the truth they teach.

**3. Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables?** The common belief is Jesus used parables to make hard truths as clear, familiar, & easy to grasp as possible. But when Jesus Himself explained why He spoke in parables, He gave practically the opposite reason. **Mt 13:10-15**

While the parables do illustrate & clarify truth for those with ears to hear, they have the opposite effect on those who oppose & reject Christ. The symbolism hides the truth from anyone without the discipline or desire to seek out Christ's meaning. That's why Jesus adopted this style of teaching. It was a divine judgment against those who met His teaching with scorn, unbelief, or apathy. Next week we'll look into this & see the circumstances that prompted Jesus to begin speaking in parables. Jesus' teaching in parables wasn't just an act of judgment, although it was that. It was also an expression of His mercy. Notice how Jesus (quoting Isaiah's prophecy) described the unbelievers among those who followed Him. They had stopped up their own ears & held their own eyes tightly closed **otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, & understand with their heart & return, & I would heal them** (15). Their unbelief was stubborn & deliberate. The more they heard Jesus, the more truth they were accountable for. The more they hardened their hearts against the truth, the more severe their judgment would be (Lk 12:48). By concealing spiritual truth in everyday stories & symbols, Jesus was keeping them from piling guilt upon guilt on their own heads. The parables (like any good illustration) would naturally arouse interest & increase attention in the minds of people who weren't necessarily hard-set against the truth but who lacked a measure of aptitude or had no taste for hearing doctrine expounded in plain, dogmatic language. No doubt the parables had the effect of awakening the minds of many such people who were struck by the simplicity of Jesus' parables & therefore became eager to discover the underlying meanings.

As mentioned earlier, stories are easier to remember than facts & principles. Richard Trench, a nineteenth-century Anglican bishop, wrote one of the most widely read works on Jesus' parables. He highlights the mnemonic value of these stories:

*Had our Lord spoken naked spiritual truth, how many of His words, partly from His hearers' lack of interest in them, partly from their lack of insight, would have passed away from their hearts & memories, & left no trace behind them. But being imparted to them in this form, under some lively image, in some short & perhaps seemingly paradoxical sentence, or in some brief but interesting narrative, they aroused attention, excited inquiry, & even if the truth did not at the moment, by the help of the illustration used, find an entrance into the mind, yet the words must thus often have fixed themselves in their memories & remained by them.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, p 25



So there were several good & gracious reasons for Jesus to package spiritual truth in parables in the face of widespread unbelief, apathy, & opposition to Him & His ministry (Mt 13:58; 17:17). When explained, the parables were eye-opening illustrations of crucial truths. & Jesus freely explained His parables to the disciples. For those who remained unyielding in their refusal to hear, however, the parables remained obscure without clear meaning, thus they hid Jesus' teaching from their already dull hearts. In short, Jesus' parables had a clear twofold purpose: They hid the truth from self-righteous or self-satisfied people who thought themselves too sophisticated to learn from Him, while the same parables revealed truth to eager souls with childlike faith, those who were hungering & thirsting for righteousness. Jesus thanked His Father for both results: **I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven & earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise & intelligent & have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight** (Mt 11:25–26).

One more misunderstanding needs to be cleared up: Jesus didn't always speak in parables. Most of the SOTM is a straightforward sermon. Though He closes the sermon with a short parable (the wise & foolish builders, Mt 7:24–27), the substance of the message, starting with the Beatitudes, is delivered in a series of direct propositional statements, commandments, exhortations, & words of warning. There are many vivid word pictures in the mix (a courtroom & prison scene (5:25); the amputation of offending eyes or hands (5:29–30); the eye as the lamp of the body (6:22); lilies arrayed in finery that surpasses Solomon in all his glory (6:28–29); a plank in the eye (7:3–5); etc). But these aren't parables. In fact, Matthew's account of the sermon is 107 vss long & only 4 vss near the end could be described as parable.

Luke does include one saying not found in Matthew's record of the Sermon & Luke calls it a parable: **A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?** (Lk 6:39). That isn't a classic story-style parable. It's a maxim framed as a question. Luke calls it a **parable** because of the way it paints such a vivid picture that could easily become a story. But even after raising the parable count in Jesus' SOTM to 2, we're still left with the fact that Jesus' best-known public discourse isn't an example of story-telling preaching. It's a classic sermon, dominated by doctrine,

reproof, correction, & instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). The few scattered word pictures simply illustrate points of the sermon. Beyond that, some of the longest, most detailed records of Jesus' public sermons are recorded in John's gospel, & none of them includes any parables. There are no parables mentioned in the record of Jesus' teaching in the synagogues at Nazareth (Lk 4:13–27) or Capernaum (31–37). So it isn't accurate to say He always used stories or that He always spoke in parables. So why does Mk 4:33–34 say, **He did not speak to them without a parable?** That's a description of Jesus' public teaching style during the final year or so of His public ministry. It refers to His intentional change in teaching style that took place about the same time His Galilean ministry entered its final phase. Next week we'll look at the events that triggered Jesus to adopt this style. It was a sudden & striking shift, & a response to hard-hearted, deliberate unbelief & rejection. By Jesus' own testimony, the main reason He started using parables had more to do with hiding the truth from hard-hearted unbelievers than explaining the truth to the disciples. It was Jesus' own declared purpose thus to **utter things hidden** & His parables still serve that same dual purpose today. If it seems the stories Jesus told are capable of endless interpretations & therefore without any objective meaning, that's because understanding them requires faith, diligence, & a genuine desire to hear what He's saying. It's important also to know that unbelievers lack that capacity. Jesus' parables **speaks God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory; *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:7–8)**. No unbeliever will ever grasp the mysteries of the kingdom by viewing these stories through the framework of human wisdom. Scripture is clear on that. The unbelieving **eye has not seen & ear has not heard, & which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God (9–10)**. In other words, faith, prompted & enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for understanding the parables. These stories do have meaning. They have a divinely intended, & therefore correct, interpretation. Jesus Himself explained some of them in detail, & the

method He used gives us a model to follow as we learn from His stories. But we must come to the parables as believers, willing to hear—not as skeptics with hearts hardened against His truth.

**Blessed are your eyes, because they see; & your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets & righteous men desired to see what you see, & did not see it; & to hear what you hear, & did not hear it. (13:16–17)**

When men choose to believe God’s Word & trust in His grace, He gives them salvation & more & more truth by which to walk & worship. **Blessed are your eyes**, Jesus said to His disciples, **because they see; & your ears, because they hear** (Mt 13:16). Christians can understand the deep things of God’s Word, because they have them written in the NT & illumined by the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:9–10). When Jesus finished explaining the parables to His disciples & asked, **Have you understood all these things?** they could honestly answer, **Yes** (Mt 13:51). It wasn’t that they were smarter than the unbelieving Jews. The scribes & Pharisees were highly educated & had studied the Scriptures since their youth. But their eyes were blinded to the truth of Jesus’ teaching because of their unbelief. The **eyes** of the disciples, on the other hand, were able to **see** & their **ears** were able to **hear**, because they *did* believe. Part of the Jesus’ ministry was to give understanding of His Word to those who trusted Him. In his account of this occasion, Mark says Jesus **was explaining everything privately to His own disciples** (4:34). During perhaps His last appearance to the disciples after His resurrection, Jesus **opened their minds to understand the Scriptures** (Lk 24:45). The psalmist knew he couldn’t comprehend God’s Word in his own intellect & so he prayed, **Open my eyes, that I may behold Wonderful things from Your law** (Ps 119:18). Not even the most faithful & enlightened saints of the OT were given the insights that the apostles & every believer since have been given the privilege of having. **For truly I say to you**, Jesus continued, **that many prophets & righteous men desired to see what you see, & did not see it, & to hear what you hear, & did not hear it** (Mt 13:17). & Peter tells us,

**As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches & inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ & the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look** (1 Pt 1:10–12).

Even for believers there must be divine illumination, & that is promised to every Christian who searches God's Word & relies on the Holy Spirit within him (1 Cor 2:9–16; 1 Jn 2:20, 27). As Christians, we not only have God's completed revelation in Scripture but the very author of that Scripture living within us—to explain, interpret, & apply its truths.<sup>16</sup> As we come to our study of Christ's parables, be praying that we all would have our eyes & ears open to the truths God has for us in them.

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<sup>16</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, pp 353-354