

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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What Is a Parable?

- 1) A parable [παραβολή (*parabole*)] is NOT a distinct, identifiable literary genre with intrinsic defining attributes.
 - A) The intrinsic genre of one parable [παραβολή (*parabole*)] can be very different from the intrinsic genre of the next one. In fact, a parable [παραβολή (*parabole*)] can involve communication through some means other than language.
- 2) Typically, a parable [παραβολή (*parabole*)] is any form of communication that employs language in some way other than employing it to make simple, direct, straightforward prose statements.
 - A) A parable [παραβολή (*parabole*)] can be any of the following:
 - a) Analogy
 - b) Allegory
 - c) Fable
 - d) Metaphor (brief or extended)
 - e) Proverb
 - f) Statement that employs symbolism
 - g) Any other creative and imaginative use of language that departs from communicating directly and straightforwardly in simple prose
 - h) An event that anticipates (by picturing) some other meaningful event
 - i) An established cultural or religious reality that creates an analogue to some other meaningful reality

Why Jesus Taught In Parables

- 1) The question that was posed to Jesus by his disciples and Jesus’s response to it:
 - A) In these passages:
 - a) *Matthew* 13:10–17
 - b) *Mark* 4:10–12
 - c) *Luke* 8:9–10
 - B) The right way to understand exactly what his disciples were asking in these passages:
 - a) “Jesus, why are you making it hard for the people to understand? Why don’t you make your teaching more accessible? If you would just speak to them plainly, would they not then understand you?”

- C) The right way to understand Jesus's response to his disciples' query in these passages:
- a) "The spiritual condition of this people has rendered them unable to understand what I am teaching anyway. By teaching them in parables, I am not preventing them from understanding anything that they are not already prevented from understanding by their own spiritual hardness."
- 2) Why (i.e., to what end) did Jesus use parables when he taught?
- A) We never have a direct answer to this question from Jesus himself.
 - B) However, from various things that Jesus taught, we can infer an answer to it. Namely, Jesus's various reasons for teaching in parables were these:
 - a) The use of a parable can make a truth clearer and more readily understandable or more impactful.
 1. An analogy (or other figurative device)—when fully spelled out—has great pedagogical and/or rhetorical value. Many of Jesus's parables are "unfinished" analogies (or other figurative devices). Once the analogy (or other device) is fully grasped, it has great pedagogical and/or rhetorical value insofar as it serves to make Jesus's point clearer and/or more impactful.
 - b) A parable can be presented in such a way that it "hides" the truth that Jesus wants to convey, thereby requiring that the interested person work hard to grasp the truth that Jesus intended to convey. If a person has to work hard to lay hold of the truth that is being conveyed, he is more invested in that truth. And if he is more invested in it, then he is more inclined to remember it and "own" it.
 1. If Jesus partially hid or cloaked the truth that he was teaching, then only those whose heart was eager to understand his teaching would put in the effort to seek out what he meant. Only those who were eager to understand Jesus's teaching would seek to discover the meaning of the parable.
 - A. A truth that is eagerly sought for and hard-won is a truth that one will be more inclined to remember and make one's own.
 - c) The use of a parable can shield an unbeliever from the harmful effects of being exposed to a truth that he is unwilling to embrace.
 1. If Jesus partially hid or cloaked the truth that he was teaching, then any adverse effects that confronting that truth might have on the person whose heart is hardened against it would be minimized.
 - A. The hardening effects that an exposure to truth would have on someone who is unwilling to receive it would be muted or lessened if that truth were hidden within a parable.

Important Background to Understanding Parables

In order to understand the point that Jesus is conveying through the parables he delivers, it is crucial that one have an understanding of the following equivalences:

- To be qualified **to find acceptance by God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to receive an inheritance in the Kingdom of God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be counted a member of the people of God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to receive the ultimate blessing** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **as belonging to Jesus, the Messiah** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to receive eternal Life** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to receive God's mercy** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be rescued from God's condemnation (wrath) and destruction** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to have one's sins forgiven** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be considered holy (i.e., sanctified by God)** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be counted as one who knows God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be counted as one who loves God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be counted as one who fears (respects / honors) God** is equivalent to ...
 - Being qualified **to be considered righteous,**
- *Etc.*

Jesus's Teaching Through Parables: The Themes and the Issues

Theme #1 > One important theme in Jesus's parables is the issue of his own person. Through his parables, Jesus made several different claims about himself—about his unique authority, status, role, identity, and mission:

- (A) Jesus taught that he was the touchstone of who would receive God's ultimate blessing, *aionic* Life. How a person relates to Jesus determines whether he will be saved or not saved. Jesus taught that only the person who "belongs" to Jesus in a certain sense is a person who belongs to the people of God and, therefore, will receive eternal Life:

- **PARABLE #1: PARABLE REGARDING JESUS AS THE TRUE SHEPHERD OF GOD'S SHEEP.**
 - Jesus compares the purpose and agenda that governs the actions of a shepherd of a flock of sheep as compared to the purpose and agenda of a thief. The thief is only interested in gaining some profit from the sheep and will gladly kill them in order to profit from them. The shepherd's goal is to care for and sustain the life of his sheep. The sheep recognize their shepherd and follow him. They do not recognize—and will not follow—a stranger. By analogy, only God's *messiah* has been duly appointed by God to be like a shepherd to God's people. Anyone else who presumes to nurture and care for God's people—e.g., the scribes, Pharisees, and other religious leaders within Judaism—is really just a stranger. While the true people of God will know and recognize God's *messiah* and will follow him, they will not recognize and follow these strangers. As their true shepherd, God's *messiah* has the well-being of God's people in mind. His purpose is to give them life. By contrast, the agenda of the "strangers"—the other religious leaders—is to exploit God's people for their own advantage. They are thieves and robbers.
 - By implication, one can know who belongs to the true people of God by observing whom one responds to and follows. If one responds to Jesus and follows him, then he belongs to the true people of God. If, rather, he responds to the religious leaders and follows them, he does not belong to the true people of God.
 - *John* 10:1–10 [notably, 1–5, 8, and 10] {John identifies *John* 10:1-5 as a *παροίμια* [paroimia].}
- **PARABLE #2: PARABLE REGARDING JESUS AS THE DOOR OF THE SHEEPFOLD.**
 - Just as the door to the sheepfold is the only way that the sheep have access to pasture and to the sustenance of their life that that pasture offers them, so Jesus is the only way that God's people have access to eternal Life. [Parable #2 is interpolated within Parable #1]
 - *John* 10:1–10 [notably, 1–5, 7, and 9]
- **PARABLE #3: PARABLE OF THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES.**
 - Using a series of metaphors that are derived from the practices of a vinedresser who is growing and tending a grape vine in a vineyard, Jesus makes a number of different assertions about what God wants and expects from a follower of Jesus and how he will deal with him. In summary, the one who has a part in God's agenda and is cared for and favored by God is the one who is "in" Messiah Jesus (i.e., who belongs to him) and who bears "fruit" for God by listening to, believing, and obeying the teaching of Jesus. If one does not remain a follower of Jesus and/or continue to bear "fruit" for God, then he will be cut off from the promised blessings of God.
 - *John* 15:1–11

(B) Jesus taught that the authority he has from God to command unclean spirits should be clear and convincing evidence that he is God's Messiah.

• ***PARABLE #4: PARABLE OF THE STRONG MAN.***

- Using an analogy, Jesus advances the most likely explanation for why he has the authority to command unclean spirits and to free individuals from their bondage to them. Namely, just as a man must be overpowered and bound by a stronger man before that stronger man can steal the possessions from his house, it makes sense that Satan must be overpowered by and bound by God (through Jesus the Messiah, the one who can act with the very authority of God himself) before God can steal individuals away from Satan and free them from his thrall. Hence, Jesus's remarkable ability to release people from the control of unclean spirits is best explained as God's Messiah working to snatch human beings out of the thrall of Satan.
- This parable is not used to directly and explicitly assert the unique authority of Jesus so much as it is used to *refute* the rationalization of the unbelieving Jews who refused to accept the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. It makes no sense to suggest that it is from Beelzebul that Jesus has his authority to command unclean spirits. Rather, it is much more rational to conclude that it is from God that Jesus has authority to command unclean spirits. For it can be expected that God would snatch individuals away from Satan by prevailing over him.
- *Luke 11:21–22*
- *Matthew 12:29* (cf. *Mark 3:27*)

(C) Jesus taught that he was a man who possessed a true knowledge and understanding—in significant detail—of God's purposes.

• ***PARABLE #5: PARABLE OF WALKING, WITHOUT STUMBLING, IN THE DAYLIGHT.***

- Just as a person can walk in the daylight without stumbling, but cannot walk in the night without stumbling, so also a person who has a detailed knowledge and understanding of God's purposes can navigate that reality without "stumbling." But a person who is without such a detailed knowledge and understanding of God's purposes is in the dark and can be expected to "stumble." On this particular occasion, Jesus is claiming such detailed knowledge and understanding for himself. His disciples have complained that it would be reckless and dangerous to return to the vicinity of Jerusalem. If Jesus had no knowledge and understanding of God's purposes and priorities, then his disciples would be right. It would be foolhardy for him to return to Bethany. But Jesus does have a detailed knowledge and understanding of God's purposes. Consequently, he is not "walking in the dark." He knows that his returning to Bethany would not be a mistake.
- *John 11:9–10*

(D) Jesus taught that part of his mission was to *reveal* God’s truth through his teaching.

- **PARABLE #6: PARABLE OF LIGHTING A LAMP IN ORDER TO ENABLE SEEING.** (applied to God’s intention)
 - Just as one does not light a lamp in order to conceal it under a basket, so God does not send his Light [true understanding] into the world in order to conceal it. He sends his Light [true understanding] into the world in order to reveal it and make it known so that that Light might illuminate people’s lives. Therefore, however much it might appear that Jesus is “hiding” the truth—because he is teaching in parables, for example—that is not, in fact, what Jesus is doing. God’s intention is for Jesus to *reveal* his truth to mankind, not to *hide* it from them. God desires that nothing he has chosen to reveal remain secret; and Jesus’s desire corresponds with God’s desire.
 - *Mark* 4:21–22
 - *Luke* 8:16–17

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(E) Jesus taught that he would be required to go to his death on behalf of mankind.

- **PARABLE #7: PERFORMED PARABLE OF THE FOOT-WASHING.**
 - Jesus acted out the role of a slave performing a humble act of service for his disciples. He did this in order to depict the fact that, in just a few hours, he would once again humble himself and perform a profoundly consequential act of service for his disciples. In fact, the act of service that he would later perform for them was absolutely essential if they were to receive forgiveness and Life. (To be specific, he was about to go to the cross to die for their sins.) Therefore, the washing of his disciples’ feet was intended to serve as a parabolic depiction of his going to the cross to die for his disciples.
 - *John* 13:5–17

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- **PARABLE #8: PARABLE REGARDING JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD.**
 - A good shepherd who is committed to the welfare of his flock will be willing to lay down his life for his sheep. An uncaring hireling is not willing to lay down his life for those same sheep. By analogy to a good shepherd, Jesus—God’s Messiah—is committed to the welfare of God’s people such that he will willingly sacrifice his life for them.
 - *John* 10:11–18

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(F) Jesus taught that he was the one who fulfilled the prophet Zechariah's prediction that one would come who had been appointed by God to serve as king of the kingdom that God had promised to establish.

- ***PARABLE #9: PERFORMED PARABLE OF RIDING INTO JERUSALEM ON A DONKEY.***
 - Jesus's act of entering Jerusalem on a donkey was a reenactment of a vision that the prophet Zechariah had described. Zechariah's vision was a vision of the one appointed to be king of God's kingdom coming to the people of Israel in anticipation of God fulfilling his promise to Israel to establish them as a righteous and prosperous kingdom. In Zechariah's vision, the king comes to Israel riding on a donkey. This feature of Zechariah's vision would seem to predict that, at least at his initial introduction to the people of Israel, God's king would be less than impressive. He would be rather humble, ordinary, and unremarkable.
 - *John 12:14–15*
 - *Matthew 21:1–7*
 - *Mark 11:1–7*
 - *Luke 19:29–35*

Theme #2 > Another important theme in Jesus's parables is his prediction that the religious establishment of his day would reject him and his teaching:

(A) Jesus predicted that the religious establishment would reject him and would then be judged by God as a consequence.

- ***PARABLE #10: PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD OWNER'S SON.***
 - Consistent with their history, the Jewish establishment was about to reject and mistreat Jesus, even though he was God's Son. In this parable, Jesus tells a story that is loosely analogous to how Israel has responded to and treated God's prophets and predicts, by analogy, how they are about to treat God's Son. Jesus's primary point and emphasis is to predict the judgment that will fall upon his contemporaries for their murder of God's Messiah.
 - *Matthew 21:33–45**
 - *Mark 12:1–12**
 - *Luke 20:9–19**
- ***PARABLE #11: PARABLE OF THE REFUSED INVITATIONS TO THE BIG DINNER PARTY.***
 - Jesus tells a story where men invited to a big dinner party decline their invitation to the party for a variety of different reasons. They deem something else

more important and interesting than attending the dinner. In a manner loosely analogous to this, Jesus is predicting that the Jewish establishment of his generation will find other things more important and more interesting than dining with him in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, by analogy to the story he is telling, he predicts that God will—in place of the contemporary Jews who refuse his invitation—grant many “sinners” from among the Jews, as well as many Gentiles, a place at the table with Jesus in the coming Kingdom of God.

- *Luke 14:16–24*

- ***PARABLE #12: PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST.***

- Jesus tells the story of a king inviting various individuals to the wedding feast of his son. When he sends his slaves out to inform the invitees that the wedding feast is ready, the invitees are unwilling to come. So he sends out more slaves to summon the invitees to the dinner. Most of the invitees ignore the summons—going about business as usual—and some invitees mistreat the slaves, even sometimes killing them. As a consequence, the king sends out his army to destroy the city of these individuals who have refused his invitation. He then instructs his slaves to fill the wedding hall with many otherwise “uninvited” people to take the place of those individuals who declined his invitation. However, when one of those “uninvited” individuals was found not to be dressed in a manner worthy of the feast, he was thrown out of the dinner and punished severely. Jesus is utilizing this story to recite, by analogy, the history of Israel. Israel has been uninterested in God’s invitation to his wedding feast. Israel has mistreated and even killed the prophets who came to them to summon them. As a consequence, God is going to destroy the people of Israel who have refused his invitation and mistreated his servants. And he is going to give their place at the wedding feast to Gentiles. (However, only some of those Gentiles will be qualified to enjoy the wedding feast.)

- *Matthew 22:1–14**

- ***PARABLE #13: PARABLE OF THE DOOMED FIG TREE.***

- Jesus tells the story of a vineyard owner disappointed in a fig tree because it is not bearing fruit. He instructs the keeper of his vineyard to cut it down. The vineyard-keeper asks for one more year to try to coax it into bearing fruit in that next year. If it does not, he agrees that it should be cut down. By analogy, Jesus is describing his own mindset and desire. He has come to a point in his ministry where—in view of Israel’s unbelief—he agrees that they deserve to be judged. However, Jesus desires for God to wait “one more year” before he commits to judging Israel for their unbelief and lack of repentance. The significance of this parable for Jesus’s contemporaries is this: just as the fig tree in the story is existing on borrowed time, so are Jesus’s contemporaries living on borrowed time. Repentance is urgent. The time to repent is now.

- *Luke 13:6–9**

(B) Jesus warned his followers that—due to their stubborn self-centeredness and/or spiritual blindness—the Jewish people of his day would stubbornly refuse to believe the truth about him.

• ***PARABLE #14: PARABLE OF CHILDREN AT PLAY IN THE STREET.***

- The generation of Jews contemporary with Jesus are responding to God’s messengers like entirely self-centered, petulant, whiny children who want what they want and who refuse to be happy with anything except what they want. (They complain that John the Baptist is too much of an ascetic, while they complain that Jesus is not austere enough.) Like completely self-centered children, they will not accept as their Messiah anyone who is not exactly who they want him to be.

• *Luke 7:31-35*

• ***PARABLE #15: FABLE OF RICH MAN AND LAZARUS.***

- This story is a fable where the “moral of the story” is that, if a people are hardened against God and his truth, then even a man coming back from the dead would not be enough to convince them to believe the truth and repent.

• *Luke 16:19–31*

(C) Jesus—using a parable—rebuked the religious establishment for their inexcusable rejection of the truth about him. Jesus suggests that they have no excuse for their failure to believe.

• ***PARABLE #16: PARABLE OF ASSESSING THE WEATHER FROM THE SKY.***

- It is possible, from an assessment of the observable atmospheric conditions, to know what the weather is and to predict and anticipate what will happen in the weather. By analogy, it is possible—from the observable signs accompanying him (that is, from the miracles being performed by him)—to know that the Messiah has come and is present with us.

• *Luke 12:54–56 [cf. Matt. 16:1–3]*

Theme #3 > Another important theme in Jesus’s parables is his critical assessment of the attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, and teachings of the religious establishment of his day:

(A) Jesus warned his followers that they should not seek to emulate the religious leaders of their day, for those leaders are without any true understanding and are not worthy to be followed.

• ***PARABLE #17: PARABLE OF A BLIND MAN LEADING A BLIND MAN INTO A PIT.***

- Just as a blind man cannot be safely guided by another blind man, so is an ignorant, self-deceived Pharisee unable to serve safely as a guide, counselor, or teacher to another ignorant, self-deceived human being.

- *Luke 6:39–40**
- *Matthew 15:14*

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• ***PARABLE #18: PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES.***

- Just as leaven placed into a batch of flour is a silent, invisible contagion that spreads throughout the whole lump of dough, so also does the desire for respectability infect and spread to a whole mass of people. It is such a desire for respectability that induces the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians to engage in pretense and hypocrisy in their own lives and—through their teaching and counsel—to encourage pretense and hypocrisy in others. One must be on one’s guard against the influence of their teaching and their example. For the desire for respectability is an invisible contagion that can affect whole masses of people.
- *Matthew 16:5–12* [leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees / leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees]
- *Mark 8:13–21* [leaven of the Pharisees and Herod]
- *Luke 12:1–12* [leaven of the Pharisees] > different occasion, but same teaching using the same “metaphor”

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(B) Jesus taught that his teaching was in many important respects continuous with and compatible with what the religious establishment of his day taught; but, at the same time, his teaching was so new and different that it constituted an entirely different paradigm—it involved a paradigm that was incompatible with the paradigm being taught by the religious establishment of his day.

• ***PARABLE #19: PARABLE OF SCRIBE BEING LIKE A HOUSEHOLDER.***

- A paradigm shift is required in order to understand the truth concerning God’s kingdom. On the one hand, that paradigm shift will lead the student of the Scriptures to discover significantly new things. But, on the other hand, it will also support and confirm old, well-established truths that are completely familiar to Jewish culture and thought.
- *Matthew 13:51–52* (cf. *Matt 13:53**)

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• ***PARABLE #20: PARABLE OF NEW WINE / NEW WINESKINS AND NEW GARMENT / NEW CLOTH.***

- Jesus teaches a significantly different perspective on *the conditions under which* God will grant mercy to an individual. He also teaches a different perspective on *the basis upon which* God will grant mercy to an individual. He teaches that mercy will come because of him and his intercession on one’s be-