

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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Version 1.0

December 4, 2023

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* [parοimια].}
- **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*