

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

John A. “Jack” Crabtree

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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