

PARABLES & MIRACLES

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

A parable is a simple story that uses familiar objects to teach an important lesson. A parable is a story that compares something we don't know (kingdom of God) with something that we do know (events from daily life). A parable usually has a surprise twist that helps us see things in a new way. It demands that we go beyond the story to seek the larger truth. In this way parables provide clues and signposts that lead us to insights and deeper understandings. A parable leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application so as to tease it into active thought. Parables do not define precisely but use comparisons to describe some aspect of how God acts or interacts with human beings. Jesus used parables to give us a glimpse of the mystery of the kingdom of God. Jesus used metaphors or similes drawn from nature or common life so as to capture the hearer's attention with its vividness or strangeness.

- Parables are true to life
- Parables depict situations and characters drawn from day – to – day living
- They differ from traditional morality tales in that there's a twist to the tale
- They leave us with more questions than answers and open the door at least somewhat to dissimilar interpretations
- Jesus used this instructional art, but it was equally familiar to other Jewish teachers of the day.

JESUS USED PARABLES

Jesus used parables as his main teaching device. He used many stories when he spoke to the people and he taught them as much as they could understand. Parables represent almost a third of Christ's preaching. Jesus knew that he was teaching difficult concepts and he appreciated that not everyone was ready to understand and accept his message. His "simple" parables, which centered on the most common elements and objects drawn from daily life – sheep, coins, yeast, weeds, workers, fishing nets, and the like – were meant to intrigue, to draw the listeners closer, to urge them to ponder the meaning, and to want them to hear more. The people had to be ready to listen.

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The word parable comes from a Greek word that means "casting beside" or "throwing beside". In his parables, Jesus takes similar and dissimilar things and puts them side by side. At first glance, we can say Jesus' parables are comparisons. But most of the parables are more than comparisons, because they usually contain metaphors. A metaphor compares a word, idea, or object to something that it does not literally represent. In other words, Jesus does not always explain to what or whom the comparison refers. It is up to the listeners or readers to infer the meaning.

Jesus' parables are more than just simple metaphors. They are also allegories. An allegory is a metaphor in which the people, actions, and objects in a story are symbols which represent a truth or meaning beyond the narrative of the story.

Estimates of the number of parables range from 35 to 72, the higher number including sayings that others would call similes or allegories. The parables of Jesus are preserved almost exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke. We call these three synoptic (syn += with, optic= lens, eye) because they share so much material. The Gospel of John records only two parables – The Good Shepherd in chapter 10 and the Vine and the Branches at the beginning of chapter 15. Known for classifying Jesus' great deeds as signs rather than miracles. John continues his non-traditional stance in labelling Jesus' stories figures of speech instead of parables

MULTIPLE USES OF THE PARABLES

Occasionally a parable is used to teach different lessons in different gospels, often by changing the setting in which Jesus tells the parable. Take the parable of the lost sheep

- Matthew puts the parable in the context of Jesus' answer to the disciples' question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Matt 18:1 Jesus uses the parable to illustrate his response that those who become like little children are most important in God's kingdom. After telling the parable, Jesus says, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Matt 18:14
- In Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep to teach a group of tax collectors and sinners about God's mercy. Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Luke 15:7
- Seemingly contradictory situations for telling the parable can be explained as follows:
 - Quite possible Jesus used the same story more than once to illustrate different points and that the Gospel authors simply differed in which version of the story they selected
 - An individual gospel author may have changed the setting of the parable to better illustrate the point he wished to make to his readers.

UNDERSTANDING PARABLES TODAY

Parables challenge us today to let them speak to our own life situations. And insofar as they give us a picture of the kingdom of God, they also challenge us to accept it – that is, to accept the will of God. We, as individuals and as communities of faith, are called to identify with the lost sheep, with the undeserving guests at the banquet, with the good Samaritan. And so on, just as Jesus' original listeners were. How can we meet these challenges? Here are a few suggestions to help us with parables:

- Look for the central message of the parables – the details in some of the stories can make them more interesting, but we should not try to read too much into them. The messages of Jesus are often far more direct and to the point than we might expect or recognize.
- Look for the questions posed in the parables – Jesus sometimes asks his listeners to offer their own response to a parable, before he gives his intended message. For example, following the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus asks his listeners, "Which of these three (men) do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Luke 10:36 Whenever such questions are posed directly or indirectly in the parables, we should pause and attempt to answer them ourselves.
- Compare our answers with those recorded in the gospels -

Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 30 – 35 The Traits of parable

- **A parable is a story:** here it is a story of a traveller between Jerusalem and Jericho who falls into the hands of robbers, is severely wounded and receives help from a Samaritan.
- **A parable is a comparison:** This parable compares the kingdom of God with the story of the man wounded by robbers who is lying in the ditch.
- **A parable contains a crisis:** The wounded man expects to be helped by the priest and the Levite, who are, after all, fellow Jews and religious people. But they both pass by on the other side of the road to avoid any contact. Help does not come from those from whom we might expect it.
- **A parable has an ending:** A Samaritan, who would normally not be expected to help a Jew because of their religious biases against each other, arrives on the scene and goes far out of his way to assist the wounded man. He is moved with pity and goes to him, bandaging his wounds and soothing the pain with wine and oil. He then puts him on his animal, brings him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper, probably a Jew, for any expenses incurred. He even promises to come by on his return and pay any additional expenses. This is generosity gone to the limit. Imagine doing this for someone who would normally be considered an enemy.

- **A parable is about God's kingdom or way of acting among us:** Such is the reality of God. God's help comes from an unexpected source. God will surprise us again and again with help that is so bountiful, so generous, that we can only gasp with surprise and joy. That is the kingdom of God that is among us.

Parable of the Lost Sheep Luke 15: 1 – 7 & Matt 18:12 - 14

- It weaves metaphors into an allegory that points the listener to a deeper understanding of God's limitless love and, at the same time, gives us an insight into what the Kingdom of God is like.
- To people of his time a shepherd would never consider risking the entire flock for the sake of one sheep. He turns things around for the listeners.
- Jesus begins by answering a question from the Pharisees and scribes about why he eats with sinners. He answers with a question in story form: "If any one of you has a hundred sheep, and one of them gets lost, what will you do? Won't you leave the ninety-nine in the field and go look for the lost sheep until you find it? And when you find it, you will be so glad that you will put it on your shoulder and carry it home. Then you will call in your friends and neighbours and say, 'Let us celebrate! I've found my lost sheep' Jesus said, 'In the same way there is more happiness in heaven because of one sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine good people who don't need to.'"
- To understand fully the parable, the listener must recognize that Jesus is comparing the lost sheep to those who have been lost to sin. We must further infer that Jesus is telling us that God seeks out sinners in the same way that Jesus welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Jesus is also telling us that a change of heart is a source of great rejoicing in heaven; those who are complacent and satisfied with their religious practice will never be "found". Finally, we can conclude that when we sin and repent, we, too, will be welcomed back by our loving God, the Shepherd. This parable speaks of God's boundless and forgiving love for those who have gone astray.
- The parable is rich in metaphors and contains a rich allegory about God. Jesus never mentions that he is comparing the lost sheep to us and to all people. He never explains that God is the loving shepherd. Yet, those are the essential truths found in the parable.

Some parables are:

Prodigal son: that the errant sinful son is not disowned but welcomed home No matter how far we have gone astray, God is waiting joyfully to welcome us back Luke 15:11 - 32

Rich man and Lazarus, taught that a rich person who ignores needs of poor are not part of the kingdom of God Luke 16:19-31

Good Samaritan, taught that even those who aren't Jews can be members of the Kingdom of God. If people want to be part of the Kingdom they must open their hearts to everyone, even outcasts of society Luke 10:30 -37

Lost sheep, shepherd leaves 99 sheep to look for and find the lost. No ordinary shepherd would do this. Shows God's gracious love. Tells us God takes the initiative and seeks out those who stray. Matt 18:12 – 14; Luke 15:4 – 7

Lost coin, shows God will go to great lengths to find us and then will rejoice when we are finally found. Luke 15:8 – 10

Labourers in vineyard, shows overwhelming generosity of God, shows that God operates out of a completely different economic system than one used by people Matt 20:1 – 16

Pharisee and tax collector, tells us we should adopt basic attitude of humility if we are going to participate in the Kingdom. Tax collector recognizes that the need for repentance in life is real Luke 18: 9 – 14

Rich fool, shows need to rely on God's graciousness rather than solely on our own resources Luke 12: 16 - 21

Talents, tells us we are to make good use of our talents in order to reveal the kingdom Matt 25: 14 – 30

Great feast, two points made about God's invitation to heavenly banquet of Kingdom – all are invited, even those who world considers undeserving, those who think of themselves as deserving of God's invitation, but refuse to accept it, do so at own risk Luke 14: 16 – 24

Weeds among the wheat and ten bridesmaids, both point to the end time, or future day of judgement by God. Matt 13:24 – 30; Matt 25:1 - 13

Unforgiving servant, taught that even though God is quick and generous to forgive, we cannot be part of God's kingdom if we do not practice forgiveness ourselves. Golden Rule Matt 18:23 – 35

THEMES OF THE PARABLES

Descriptions of the King: some parables describe the King of the Kingdom, namely God. These parables deal primarily with God's nature, qualities, attitudes in dealing with people, and so on.

- **The Parable of the Lost Sheep:** Matt 18:12 – 14, Luke 15:4 – 7 demonstrates God's gracious love. It tells us that God takes the initiative and seeks out those who stray.
- **The Parables of the Lost Coin and of the Prodigal Son** Luke 15:8 – 10 (coin) and Luke 15:11 – 32 (son) In the parable of the lost coin we learn that God will go to great lengths to find us and then will rejoice when we are finally found. From the parable of the prodigal son we learn that no matter how far we have gone astray, God is waiting to joyfully welcome us back.
- **The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard** Matt 20:1 – 16 a landowner apparently pays some labourers more than they deserve. Jesus' point is to illustrate the almost overwhelming generosity of God, to show that God operates out of a completely different economic system than the one used by people.
- All four of these parables reflect the wonderful image of the Father presented by Jesus – the image of a God whom people can call Abba

Kingdom responses: Some of the parables emphasize how we should act if we hope to enter the kingdom

- **The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector** Luke 18:9 – 14 tells us that we should adopt the basic attitude of humility if we are going to participate in the kingdom. The Pharisee is self-righteous, congratulating himself on his strict religious practices, whereas the tax collector feels deep sadness for his sinfulness. Jesus says that the tax collector is the more righteous of the two because he recognizes, as all people must, that the need for repentance in life is real.
- **The Parable of the Rich Fool** Luke 12:16 – 21 we find a man who is self-satisfied because he has grown huge amounts of grain. He plans to build large barns in which to store the grain. God, however, interrupts the man's planning and says to him "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" This parable illustrates the need to rely on God's graciousness rather than solely on our own resources.
- **The Parable of the Talents** Matt 25:14 – 30 a man gives each of his three servants a different number of talents, or weights of silver. He then leaves the servants to their own resources as to how they will manage the silver. Two of the servants work to turn a profit with their talents, but one servant fearfully hides his, afraid that he will lose it. Upon returning, the master angrily rebukes this servant for not doing something beneficial with what he has been given. The lesson to Jesus' listeners is that we are to make good use of our talents – both in the sense of our resources and of our abilities – in order to reveal the kingdom

Relationships with our neighbours: other parables address people's relationships with one another and the world at large.

- **The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant** Matt 18:21 – 35 a servant begs his master to relieve him of a debt. The master, moved with pity, completely cancels the debt, only to find later that the servant went out and had a fellow servant thrown into prison for not paying a debt owed to him. In great anger the master has the unforgiving servant tortured. The parable vividly demonstrates Jesus'

teaching, often called the Golden Rule, which says, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." Matt 7:12

- **The Parable of the Good Samaritan** Luke 10:25 – 37 parable which taught that if people want to be part of the kingdom of God, they must open their heart to everyone, even the outcasts of society

The fulfillment of the kingdom: some of the parables refer to the future coming of God's kingdom in its fullness.

- **The Parable of the Great Feast** Luke 14:16 – 24 an owner of a house gives a great dinner and invites many people. But those invited give all kinds of excuses why they cannot come. The host, now angry at their rejection of the great feast, decides to bring in people from the streets – the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame – and so fills his house with guests. In this parable, Jesus makes two points about God's invitation to the heavenly banquet of the kingdom: first, all are invited, even those the world considers undeserving; second, those who think of themselves as deserving of God's invitation, but refuse to accept it, do so at their own risk
- **The Parables of the Weeds among the Wheat and of the ten Bridesmaids** Matthew 13:24 – 30 (weeds) and Matt 25:1 – 13 (bridesmaids) in the parable of the weeds among the wheat Jesus says that the weeds must be allowed to grow together with the wheat, and they will be separated from the wheat at the harvest. In the parable of the ten bridesmaids, some foolish bridesmaids get locked out of the wedding banquet because they are unprepared for the arrival of the bridegroom,. Both of these parables point to the end time, or the future day of judgment by God.

PARABLES	WHEN WHERE TO WHOM	WHAT IS SURPRISING ABOUT THIS PARABLE	WHAT DOES IT TELL YOU ABOUT THE KINGDOM	THE QUESTION JESUS IS ASKING US TODAY	COMMENTS
The Sower Matt 13: 3 – 9	To people on shore while in a boat on Sea of Galilee	It is the wonder of the sower starting with a small bag of seeds and ends up with bushels full	God's kingdom will bring harvest no matter what difficulties it encounters	Are you willing to believe that God will come through, even though things aren't good so far?	The thought about this parable is "Don't despair when God's word seems to have little effect. God's will is done, though sometimes we are not aware of it."
The Mustard Seed Matt 13: 31 – 32	To people on shore while in a boat on the Sea of Galilee	Don't be fooled by appearances: small beginnings can have great endings	The kingdom may have small beginnings – but it will have a great ending	Are you discouraged by my apparent insignificance?	The kingdom of God may be barely discernible in our world; but it grows and spreads just as that mustard seed grew into a mighty bush
Lost sheep	The Pharisees	It's surprising	Jesus reaches	Will you accept	A lost sheep is

and Lost Coin Luke 15: 1 – 10	and scribes who were grumbling at the company Jesus was keeping	that the shepherd leaves the 99 to look for one, and it's surprising that Jesus spends time with sinners, but he does it on purpose to bring them into the kingdom	out to the outcasts and the lost. The kingdom is for all, especially the outcasts. The dignity of the human person.	that God lives you no matter how small you are, as if there is no one else?	usually the weakest and the most helpless. Unless the shepherd searches for it, the sheep will be unable to return by itself and will therefore do. God actively searches out the lost and weak and carries them like a shepherd, into the kingdom.
Hidden Treasure Matt 13:44	One of many parables Jesus told his disciples by Sea of Galilee	Such a gamble! But with persistence it's worth it, because the kingdom is so great	The kingdom is pure gift	Are you big enough to be able to accept something that's beyond your wildest imagination	Decision: I'll do anything for this
The Unmerciful servant Matt 18: 23 – 35	While in the house at Capernaum to his disciples	He got thrown in jail for wringing his rights out of a labourer	The kingdom demands that you live up to it. If you have been forgiven, you must forgive	When you are right and you know you are, can you forgive the one's who's done you wrong?	Illustrates forgive us our sins as forgive those who sin against us.
The Two Sons Matt 21: 28 – 32	To Jewish leaders during Holy Week	The man who said "no" turns out to be the better one in the end	It's not what you say, it's what you do	Can you do what you say it right, even when the pressure is on	The righteous one does the will of God rather than simply saying he or she will do it. Jesus pointed out that those sinners who believed and repented were far more righteous than the so-called faithful Jews who spoke of

					righteousness but did not practice it.
The Good Samaritan Luke 10:25 – 37	To young lawyer in answer to question “who is my neighbour?”	The surprise is that an outcast did better than the religious people, and really knew what a neighbour was	The kingdom demands that we respect the rights of everyone, give love freely, recognize the worth of all	Are you prepared to accept everyone, even those your society (group) tells you to hate or avoid?	Deals with “Who is my neighbour” Jesus includes as neighbour everyone who you’d rather not include

JESUS’ MIRACLES

- People did not believe him just because he had an inspiring vision of the kingdom of God – they believed him because he actually lived the reign of God. People who were around Jesus experienced God’s love and power in a profound way. His whole life, his love for the people, his care for the poor and unnoticed, his miracles, his acceptance of his suffering and death made his words real and revealed the nature of the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus’ miracles are a powerful sign that he made the Kingdom of God present and real.
- There are many stories in the gospels of Jesus performing miracles.
- They are often grouped into four categories
 - Physical healings – curing people of paralysis, blindness, leprosy etc
 - Exorcisms – driving out demons
 - Bringing the dead back to life
 - Nature – feeding 5000 people with a few fish, walking on water, calming storms etc
- Miracles show Jesus had power over all creation – even demons – and that, in the kingdom of God, we are rescued from evil, suffering, pain, and death. Those who walked with Jesus and watched him perform these mighty deeds, were convinced he was the Messiah
- Miracles in the scriptures are all signs of God’s power and loving presence.

BEAUTITUDES MATT 5:1 – 11 ARE THE BEST SUMMARY OF JESUS’ WEALTH OF TEACHING

- **BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD**
 - Poor in spirit not material poverty but of our helplessness as humans. We are all poor. We need God. We could not exist, without God. Jesus taught us to recognize our dependence on God.
 - Called to also keep our focus on the poor; be in solidarity with those whom the world denies the basics of life, including the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the illiterate, the unemployed.
- **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED**
 - Jesus talking about value of suffering. Jesus suffered and his suffering revealed the value of who he was. His suffering revealed how much he valued his relationship with God and with all humans.
 - Jesus was surrounded by people broken by life. He went to work healing and comforting.
 - We are called to offer our friendship with the lonely, the abandoned and those society consider different; create a dialogue with those who apparently differ from us in an attempt to break down barriers that keep us in ghettos of religion, ethnic groups, nations, groups or gangs.
- **BLESSED ARE THE MEEK, FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH**
 - The meek know that everything and everyone is a gift from God. Everything and everyone that exists is a sign that God is always with us. Gentle, reflective, compassionate.
 - Called to take the side of the lowly, those who have no voice, or whose voice is not heard, Not an invitation to be passive or spiritless.
- **BLESSED ARE THEY WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED**

- Blessed are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires. Intense longing for social justice.
 - Calls us to seek to be in right relationship with God, the world and each other; know that each of us is a child of God, who calls to God not with our tongue but with our lives.
- **BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL OBTAIN MERCY**
 - Being merciful does not mean looking at the world, feeling sorry for it, and then turning away. Rather it means looking at the world, loving it, living in it and healing with its struggles and sufferings.
 - Ability to get inside another's skin, to see with the other's eyes, to feel their feelings.
 - Calls us to overcome the negative situations that produce suffering among us.
- **BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD**
 - Pure can be translated as single-minded – all our actions and living points to God. Focus not on ourselves but on others in which they see the face of God
 - Calls us to live with a pure heart, where there is transparency and openness, with no hidden agendas, intentions, hypocrisy
- **BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS, FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD**
 - Work of a peacemaker is to establish right relationships among people; one who faces head-on the difficulties of building relationships between human beings that are based on God's values, the values God has placed into every human heart.
 - Calls us not to accept violence, and the competition and hate that lead to violence and separation.
- **BLESSED ARE THEY WHO SUFFER PERSECUTION FOR JUSTICE'S SAKE, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**
 - Called to imitate Christ: depend on God and have God at the center of our lives, use our emotions wisely and be understanding, merciful and comforting toward others, serve God by working for the dignity and rights of others, be willing to accept discomfort, even persecution for this.
 - Jesus showed us his work is to be done not just in context of our homes, but in greater world. Living our faith out daily, living out the beatitudes can cost us.
 - Calls us to be a person of hope, trust, and joy because Jesus is with us, helping to make possible a new life.