

Mid-Week Study, 2011-2012
Folsom Church of Christ

The Parables of Jesus

Introduction

About one-third of the teaching of Jesus was in the form of parables. Some count as many as 65 that are attributed to him, when we include such statements as recorded Mt. 7:3-5, the “beam and speck” illustration.

“Parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole*, “to cast alongside.” The word may properly describe any figure of speech that offers a comparison of a known reality to an unknown concept, whether analogy, metaphor, story or simile.

Mark has only four story parables. Most of the parables are in Matthew and Luke; John has no parables as defined traditionally. Some of the parables are unique to Matthew (at least 12) and Luke (at least 15). Others are recorded by both, and a few by all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

The parables are not Jesus teaching itself. Nor are they stories to be enjoyed for their own sake. They are illustrations that must be interpreted, since they point beyond themselves to something else. They hold up one reality as a mirror of another reality. Most of the parables illustrate some aspect of the kingdom of heaven.

Aim of Class

The goal of the class is to understand the nature, scope and character of the kingdom of God through a study of the parables of Jesus.

The kingdom of God (or “kingdom of heaven,” in Matthew) was the central teaching of Jesus during his ministry on earth. It is the heart of His saving message. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17).

Our aim is to understand the nature of this kingdom as we study the parables. But it is helpful to have a working definition of the term “kingdom” in mind. While “kingdom” and “church” are sometimes referring to the same people, they are different words, in Greek as well as English. Kingdom (*basileia*) means, primarily, “reign” or “rule”; the kingdom of God, then, is the “rule of God.” The church (*ekklesia*) refers to the called out people of God. The connection is clear: the called out (church) are those in whose heart God reigns.

It is best if you think first of the primary definition of “kingdom of God”: *the reign of God*. Then, expand your understanding of the concept through the teaching of the parable. It may refer to God’s overall reign, to the church, to the messianic reign of Jesus, to the victorious kingdom at the end of time, or to the perfected kingdom in heaven. When we’ve completed the study, you should discover more about what the kingdom is, and what it means to you.

Strategy for Discovery (Ah ha!)

1. Read the parable a few times.
2. Observe the elements. Determine the main point and discuss how point is made and why it was made using this particular picture / analogy. Write your conclusion on the chart.
3. Think about the meaning to individuals and / or church at the time.
4. Think about the meaning to individuals and / or churches today.

Parables: More Than Stories

[Unless noted otherwise, Scripture references are from Matthew].

Although Jesus lived among a story-telling people, His approach to instruction was still unusual. His stories were memorable, but they were not transparent. People heard them but did not necessarily understand them. They are clearer to us because of the apostle Paul's writings, but few of the first hearers of the parables understood them. At one point the disciples asked in frustration, "Why do you speak to (the people) in parables?" (13:10). The disciples did not grasp the stories any better than the rest of the crowd did.

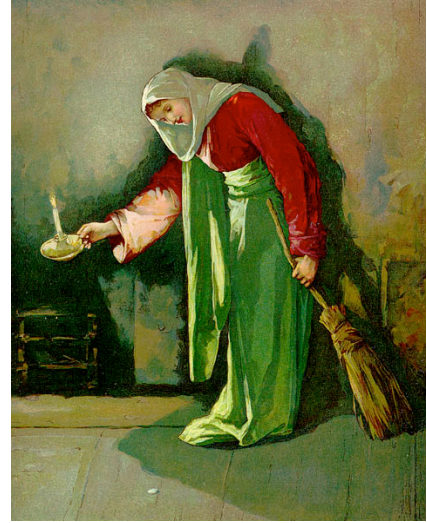
Jesus' answer to the disciples reveals much about the purpose of His teaching. He quoted Isa. 6:9, 10 to demonstrate that those with physical sight and hearing may still not be able to perceive the truths presented to them. For Isaiah, the "dullness" or hardness (13:15) of the human heart directly affects spiritual insight and understanding. People need to soften their hearts, humble themselves before God, and honestly seek the truth in order to find it.

Jesus' stories are like wrapped gifts. The packaging of the story can either distract or captivate. But unless the package is opened, the gift itself remains unseen. Likewise unless one seeks the core of the parable—its truth and application—the lessons will remain hidden.

Yet when discovered, these lessons prove extremely valuable. The testimony of millions of changed lives over two thousand years attests to this fact.

When unwrapped, Jesus' stories include powerful multiple applications. The same parable can strike people in different ways. For example, the parable of the Soils (13:1-23) may be "heard" by at least four distinct people depending on their identification with one of the soils. The parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32) will affect a father in quite a different way than it does a rebellious younger son or a jealous older brother.

When Jesus taught in Jerusalem during His last week, His parables focused on the acceptance or rejection of Him. This time even the priests and the Pharisees "perceived He was speaking of them." They were stung by Jesus' parables, and they despised Him and His message. But they were unwilling to give up their pride, learn at Jesus' feet, and seek the forgiveness they so desperately needed. They sensed they would not appreciate what they found if they unwrapped the parables, so they refused to seek the truth any further. In doing this, they perfectly conformed to Isaiah's description of a people with dull hearts, hardness of hearing, and closed eyes. These religious leaders who should have been leading the people into the truth were the very ones who were the most blind to it.



How Should You Read a Parable?

Getting the Most Out of the Stories of Jesus

When Jesus told the parable of a man who went out to sow seed and then described how some of the seed fell on different kinds of soil, thereby yielding different fruit (if any), some of his audience left scratching their heads. Even his disciples wondered why Jesus told such a simple story. Why, indeed?

We look at the parables today with the eyes of insiders. Jesus explained several of them to his disciples and we are privy to those explanations. Plus, we have the benefit of hindsight and the full revelation of God at hand to aid us in our understanding. But the first-century audience didn't have all these tools available to them. Doubtless, to many in Jesus' audience, the parables were just simple stories and they had to be asking, "so what?" Even the insiders, the disciples, were missing it most of the time.

Even with our extended knowledge, some of Jesus' "simple stories" defy exact interpretation. Some are clearly applicable to the Jews, but is that the only application of those parables? And does the oft-quoted maxim that a parable is always unified around one central truth really so? If they're not full-blown allegories, don't some of the parables come awfully close? Mark 12:1-11 certainly looks like an allegory or something very close.

Who ever said a parable has just one point anyway? Did Jesus or one of the apostles say that? Perhaps we've met another of those cases where something is asserted so long that it becomes law; yet, God never made the rule. The parable of the sower is an illustration to demonstrate the principle of "take heed how you hear" (Lk. 8:18), but is that all? Jesus gives each element of the parable some value in His explanation of it. Of course, it's an illustration, but in some sense the world is like a field, the word like seed (see I Pet. 1:23; cf. Jas. 1:21), the soil like hearts of hearers, etc. Isn't there value in each one of those images?

Thomas G. Long, in his book, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, points out that, in the history of the interpretation of parables, "three major images emerge which describe the ways in which people have understood the rhetorical functioning of Jesus' parables: the code, the vessel and the object of art" (p. 95). He goes on to describe how each of these images work.

Code

The code parable views the kingdom of God allegorically. Each significant feature of the parable becomes an emblem for some unspoken reality about the kingdom. It's called a "code" because only those who have the necessary knowledge to "crack" it can understand it. Code parables are like formulas to a chemistry student: he has the necessary prerequisites to understand what the mysterious numbers and diagrams mean, while others do not. Spiritually, these parables are for students who have taken "kingdom 101." In the first century, all of the Jews who had access to the Old Testament *should* have had "kingdom 101." And the main prerequisite is spelled out in the first kingdom parable: *a good and honest heart* (Luke 8:15).

This helps us understand the oft-misunderstood statement in Mt. 13:10-17. The reason some people could not understand the teaching of Jesus is because their minds were made up. They had another agenda besides the truth.

Codes affect readers in three significant ways. First, they confirm what a reader already knows and believes. The code parable does not contain any new information, but dresses old information up in new clothes. Second, codes clarify what readers *already* know and believe. When a reader who knows about God and Israel “sees” that relationship in a story about an owner leasing land to vinedressers (Mk. 12:1-11), then the nature of the relationship between God and Israel is clarified. Finally, codes certify the status of the reader as an insider (“it has been *given to you to know* the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” Mt. 13:11). Outsiders hear the literal meaning, but only “insiders” understand the full symbolic meaning. “Reading a coded parable and being in the know certifies a person as one of the faithful.”

This is not to suggest that Jesus played favorites and spoke in a way to intentionally confuse people. But it does suggest that He preached to those who were willing to hear, those who, in the words of his parable, have *good and honest hearts*. These parables serve a purpose in strengthening the faith of the believer. Long points out that the reader of the code says to himself, “Ah, yes, I know,” and gives him confidence about his progress in the faith. It tells him he’s on the right track.

Paul and John employ this device in their letters when they say, for example, “We know” or “you know” (cf. Rom. 2:2; sometimes, Paul says, “do you not know?” That’s a rhetorical question that essentially says, “you know” (Rom. 6:3, 16; 7:1).

Vessel

Some parables are similes, a figure of speech in which something we do not fully understand is said to be like something we do understand. The statement “children are like wet cement” uses something with known characteristics to explain something that is often hard to explain (children). It doesn’t mean that children are like wet cement in every way—they are not mixed with water and you can’t get stuck in them. The connection is at only one point and that often needs to be explained: “Children are like wet cement; they are impressionable and what we do today will leave a lasting imprint.”

A parable that uses the simile to make its point is called a vessel because it is *contains* concepts, maxims, or theological ideas. Descriptions from everyday life are used to describe one aspect of the kingdom. “The kingdom is like a mustard seed” is a vessel containing a truth about the kingdom. Our job is to figure out what about a mustard seed is like God’s kingdom (of course, Jesus helps us in this case by explaining it!). The result is a deeper understanding of the nature of the kingdom — the kingdom grows by leaps and bounds. While the reader of the code parable says, “Yes, I know,” the reader of the vessel says, “Aha, I see!”

Object/Metaphor

A simile is a figure of speech that says “*a is like b.*” A metaphor, though, says that “*a is b,*” though only symbolically. For example, “the seed *is* the word of God” (Luke 8:11) and “you *are* the light of the world” (Mt. 5:14) are *metaphors*. “This generation...*is like* children sitting in the marketplace” and “he who doubts *is like* a wave of the sea” (Jas. 1:6) are *similes*.

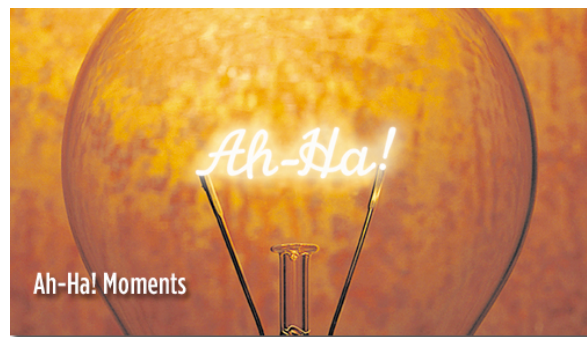
Parables that employ the metaphor draw the reader into the story and help them experience some aspect of the kingdom personally. Norman Perrin says, “the metaphor produces a shock to the imagination... which induces a new vision of the world” (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 202, quoted by Long). The reader of these parables does not say, “Ah yes, I know,” nor “Aha, I see!” but “*Oh! I never imagined!*”

Sometimes, you'll hear a sermon, even on a subject or text that you are very familiar with, and you'll catch something new and be compelled to say, "I never looked at it that way before." Jesus used parables to reach honest-hearted Jews who had been steeped in years of tradition and teach them the true nature of the kingdom. Those who had agendas other than knowing the truth would never understand the profound truths that lay beneath the surface of these simple stories.

Not all parables are just code, vessel or object. Some parables are combinations of these types. The Sower, for example, bears many marks of the code (for the insider), but also functions as a vessel, since it contains the truth that the state of one's heart determines his entrance into the kingdom. It may also function as a metaphor, as when we view ourselves as a sower of the seed. From the metaphor, we learn at least two lessons: (a) There is often repeated failure, but eventually there is fruit from the efforts of sowing; (b) the onus is on the hearer to believe; our job is to sow.

When you are reading a parable, do not be locked in to one view. Look at the parable from different viewpoints, and you'll discover truths about the kingdom of God that you never saw before. You'll find yourself saying, "Aha!" or "Oh, my!" Or, perhaps, your confidence will grow as you read and discover that you knew it all the time because, after all, you're one of the "insiders."

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Parable Types

| Type | Description | Expression |
|---------------|--|--|
| Code | Allegorical. "Insiders" are able to understand the meaning of the terms describing the kingdom. They confirm what a reader already knows, clarify what he knows and certifies that he is a believer. | "Yes, I know that." |
| Vessel | Simile. The parable is a container for a theological or doctrinal truth. "The kingdom is like. . ." We must figure out in what way the kingdom is like the thing used to describe it (e.g., a "mustard seed" or "leaven"). | "Aha, now I get it!" |
| Object | Metaphor. Produces a shock to the senses, presents the concept in a new way not seen before. | "Wow, I've never seen that before!" |

| Parable & Text | Type (a b c) | What We Learn About the Kingdom of God From This Parable |
|--|-------------------------|---|
| Introduction Mt. 13:10-17 | | |
| The Sower Mt. 13:3-9, 18-23 (Mk. 4:3-8; Luke 8:5-8) | | |
| The Good Samaritan Luke 10:30-37 | | |
| The Rich Fool Luke 12:13-21 | | |
| The Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32 | | |

| Parable & Text | Type (a b c) | What We Learn About the Kingdom of God From This Parable |
|--|-----------------|--|
| <p>The Faithful Servant & the Evil Servant Luke 12:35-40</p> | | |
| <p>Wise & Foolish Virgins Mt. 25:1-131</p> | | |
| <p>Dishonest Manager Luke 16:1-9</p> <p>Rich Man & Lazarus Luke 16:19-31</p> | | |