

# Interpreting the Parables of Jesus

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<sup>10</sup>The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" <sup>11</sup>He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. <sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." <sup>14</sup>In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. <sup>15</sup>For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" <sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. <sup>17</sup>For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. ~ Matthew 13:11-17

The parables of Jesus are some of the most beloved parts of Christian Scripture that are known by those who might otherwise have no contact with the Bible. It isn't unusual to hear news anchors or radio broadcasters making references to 'good Samaritans'<sup>1</sup> or 'prodigal sons'<sup>2</sup> in Western nations. But what is a parable? And how are we meant to interpret them?

A parable is a form of teaching that Jesus used where an illustration (in a story or situation) is laid next to some truth about the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> It was used in order to distinguish between listeners who cared enough to discern what similarities were present between the illustration and the kingdom, and listeners who had no interest in figuring it out. More specifically, parables laid an illustration alongside the truth of God's kingdom *in order to* call listeners to respond to the teaching of Jesus. Quite often in the Gospels, we see crowds divided after Jesus has taught a series of parables between those who desire to hear and understand, and those who heard and walk away.

This means that parables are not just stories that are designed to illustrate truths. Often they do, but parables are more than that. In the original Jewish context, parables perform a function of judgement against those who heard it. Jews who heard and did not understand the words were actively fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 to hear but never understand and to see but never truly perceive the truth of God. But for those who do hear and understand, parables are a sweet and delightful expression of the messages of the kingdom of God. The New Bible Dictionary says the following about Parables:<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, as it were, stands where his hearers stand, and uses imagery familiar to them to bring new and unfamiliar insights to them. Just as a lover finds himself restricted by the language of prose and must resort to poetry to express his feelings, so Jesus expresses the message of the kingdom in the appropriate forms of language.

How then, can we better understand how to read them? The most obvious place to start is to remember that Christians rely on the power and grace of the Holy Spirit to understand God's word (1 Corinthians 2:6-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4704596/Good-Samaritan-bit-bobcat-latched-unto-arm.html>, accessed 22 July 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ft.com/content/360b06f2-2c06-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c>, accessed 22 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The word for 'parable' itself is derived from a Greek word that means 'putting things side by side'.

<sup>4</sup> New Bible Dictionary 1996, p. 867.



16). We should ask God's Spirit to grant us understanding of His word. Here are 5 guidelines that you can use in order to assist on a literary level.

**1) Remember the source and subject of the parable.**

We interpret parables as the words of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, descended from David, who is on His way to die on the Cross and be raised to life on the third day. He is the source of the parables – the one who said them. And the subject of the parables is the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:10-11) which means that we should be seeking to read them in light of that. We may be able to *apply principles* from the parables to numerous situations like friendship, spending, and wage inequality etc. but the central concern of the parables themselves is the kingdom of God.

**2) Seek to understand the context of the parable.**

When we look at parables, we must read them as stories that have contextual references that the original audiences would have understood. That is why it may be hard to understand what is meant by certain words and terms (e.g. lamps, talents, Levites). It also means that we cannot invent meanings of particular terms, but should strive to reconstruct the original context and understanding that the hearers would have been immersed in. Commentaries and research will assist you in reconstructing the ancient near eastern world.

**3) Avoid allegorising a parable unless the passage explicitly does so.**

The parable of the soils and sower (Matthew 13:1-9) is given an explicit explanation that allegorises parts of the illustration and gives them significance (Matthew 13:18-23). However, most other parables don't have this. As a general rule of thumb, it is advisable to avoid trying to assign a special significance to each part of a parable's illustration because, quite simply, it is easy for our speculation to result in reading concepts into the parable that aren't there. Instead, try and find a big point or idea that the parable tells us about the kingdom of God. There may be several, but we can avoid error by keeping away from allegorising ourselves.

**4) Refer to the situation that Jesus is in to help determine the meaning of the parable.**

In Luke 15:1-2, Jesus is openly criticised by the Pharisees and teachers of the law for welcoming sinners and associating with them over a meal. It is clear to see that the following three parables are given in response to this – the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. The situation helps inform our interpretation of the meanings of these three parables. Wherever possible, seek to understand the story that the Gospel writer is telling as it can shed light on how we are meant to understand what Jesus meant.

**5) Don't avoid a parable's ability to divide.**

We should expect parables to confuse, offend, and turn away listeners – we have already seen that this was part of their use and function in the ministry of Jesus. If your interpretation or explanation of a parable seeks to soften Jesus' words or avoid this, then your interpretation may be unfaithful. Note that we do not want to go out of our way to find a controversial interpretation. Rather, we want to hone in on the point Jesus was trying to make and focus on it in our reading.

Thank God for the revelation of His word to us. May we be those who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

