

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

SESSION TWELVE – THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The Gospels refer to the stories of Jesus as parables. Parable comes from a Greek term (parabole) used to describe an illustrative story that creates a vibrant contrast or image for the listener. In some cases, it creates nothing more than a word picture: “None of you lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead you put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light.” In other cases it may be a narrative or story that leads the listener to a critical punch line: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls ...”

Almost one-third of Jesus' teachings are in the form of parables. He rarely used technical theological language (although John often does in his Gospel!). Rather, Jesus preferred to tell stories, which would stick with his listeners, and be easily recalled and repeated, often using exaggeration and ridiculous comparisons to keep their listeners' attention. He used humor and puns, drama and harsh comparison in order to make their point. On one occasion Jesus criticized his opponents by telling them that their religious pursuits were absurd. They overlooked weighty spiritual matters but debated the minutia of religion as if the entire world depended on it. He told them, “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matt. 23:24).

No doubt when the crowd heard such statements, they couldn't help but laugh at the image of Pharisees picking gnats out of their teeth but swallowing entire camels. The gross comparison is both offensive and humorous - and it is clever. In Jesus' native speech (Aramaic), the word for gnat is galma while the word for camel is gamla. Jesus had actually said, "You strain out a galma but all along you swallow gamla." Reversing two simple letters gave the saying a sharp-edged and memorable poignancy. (Gary Burge – “Jesus, the Middle-Eastern Story-Teller”)

Jesus introduced many of these parables with a question. For example, in the parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus answered the question, "What is the Kingdom of God like?" One of the most striking features of Jesus' parables is how they reveal the nature of God. They draw listeners and readers into a real and intimate encounter with the living God who is Shepherd, King, Father, Savior, and so much more.

For instance, one of Christ's most famous parables in the Bible is the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. This story is closely tied to the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Each of these accounts focuses on relationship with God, demonstrating what it means to be lost and how heaven celebrates with joy when the lost are found. They also draw a keen picture of God the Father's loving heart for lost souls. Another well-known parable is the account of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In this parable, Jesus Christ taught his followers how to love the outcasts of the world and showed that love must overcome prejudice.

Work-World Stories Describe the Kingdom

Jesus captivated His listeners by presenting truth in terms that they could understand. In Matthew 13 we find eight different images from the work world. Jesus' stories connected with the real world of agriculture (sowing, harvesting, growing), the food industry (baking, fishing), real estate (land purchasing, home ownership), and retailing (the sale of pearls). His images and language helped bring His message alive to common people. It showed clearly that God takes an interest in the workplace and desires people to serve Him in the "secular" arena. Clearly, Jesus knew how to relate to the world in which everyday people lived and worked.

No wonder: Jesus probably spent most of His life working in His family's carpentry business. We know almost nothing of His youth from adolescence until He began His public ministry at about age 30. But we know that His father was a carpenter (or "builder") (Matt. 13:55) and that Jesus also practiced the trade (Mark 6:3). Carpenters worked with wood, metal, and stone to produce furniture and farm implements, and constructed houses and public buildings.

Jesus may have continued His occupation even after He began to teach and travel. Rabbis (or teachers) of the day commonly spent anywhere from one-third to one-half of their time working (most likely with their hands) to provide for themselves. And while Jesus' opponents, many of them rabbis, attacked Him on numerous grounds, they never accused Him of laziness or freeloading. In fact, He was known to them as a carpenter. That reputation passed on to the early church. One writer described Jesus as "working as a carpenter when among men, making ploughs and yokes, by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life."

It is no surprise, then, that Jesus' teaching was filled with workplace images and analogies such as those recorded here. Using parables—brief tales illustrating moral principles—He frequently spoke about the nature of His kingdom. Matthew 13 collects eight of these as listed below (with possible interpretations):

- (1) The Parable of the Soils (13:1–23) addresses the receptivity of those who hear about the kingdom.
- (2) The parable of the wheat and the weeds (13:24–30) perhaps warns that people who pretend to be part of the kingdom may be able to fool others, but they can't fool God. What they produce will reveal what they are.
- (3) The parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32) is a promise that the kingdom would become a force to be reckoned with. Do not despise small beginnings!
- (4) The parable of the leaven (13:33) describes the influence of the kingdom: it quietly but effectively spreads among people and accomplishes significant results.
- (5) The parable of the hidden treasure (13:44) puts a value on the kingdom: it's the most important thing one can possess.
- (6) The parable of the pearl of great price (13:45–46) also describes the kingdom's value: it's worth sacrificing everything in order to possess it.

- (7) The parable of the dragnet (13:47–50) shows that a fisherman knows which fish are useful and which are not, and separates them accordingly. A day of reckoning is coming, when those who accept the kingdom will be separated from those who reject it.
- (8) The parable of the householder (13:51–52) places a responsibility on those who understand about the kingdom to share their insight with others. (Word in Life Study Bible)

10 Tips for Understanding and Interpreting Jesus' Parables

1. Understand the nature of the parables.

Parables are tools to compare something physical to something spiritual. Jesus begins several parables by saying “The Kingdom of God is like...” so he could tie an abstract concept (the Kingdom of God) to something more concrete and visible (like a mustard seed in Matt13:31-32). Jesus chose to teach in story form because stories engage the mind and emotions of listeners like no other form of teaching. One great example of this is when Jesus painted a beautiful picture of what “loving your neighbor as yourself” meant when he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

2. Understand the purpose of parables.

Jesus taught with parables for two main purposes: to explain truth to some and to keep truth hidden from others. For those eager to follow God, parables were memorable illustrations of a kingdom principle. For those opposed to God's plans, the meaning of the parables would be hidden in a form of judgment. Jesus explained this in Matthew 13 and Mark 4:10-12: *“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’”*

3. See the parable in its proper context.

Often times a parable has a brief introduction that will greatly affect its meaning and interpretation. Luke 18:1 shares a key for interpreting the parable that followed when it said, “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Other times, a parable's context will inform us that it is directed toward a certain group of people (for example the Pharisees in Luke 15).

Parables are often grouped thematically, and understanding the main thread that ties related parables together can shed light on their overall meaning and interpretation. Luke 15 groups three parables together (the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son) to respond to the Pharisees and scribes who, because of their sense of religious superiority, often failed to understand the grace of God.

4. Remember the cultural gap.

Some of the images and metaphors have rich meaning to people in Jesus' time that are not as easy to recognize for those living in the 21st century. The Parable of the Ten Virgins

(Matthew 25:1-13) makes much more sense when one understands the Jewish marriage customs present at the time of Jesus. A good study Bible will have helpful explanations.

5. Parables usually have one main point.

Our understanding of a parable and its details should all flow from the main point. This is a crucial step, because the main point of the parable is the reason Jesus said it in the first place! Some recommended questions for finding the main point are: Who are the main characters? What occurs at the end? What occurs in quotation marks? Who/What is the focus of the story?

6. Take notice of surprise details.

Certain parables have shocking and unexpected twists in the story that help us understand the point Jesus was trying to make. Although a careful reading will usually expose the special details, sometimes these details are hard to pick up on due to cultural differences and our familiarity with the parables.

An example of an important and surprising detail is found in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35). The surprise detail of this parable is the difference in the amounts of money forgiven by the king and by the servant (thousands of dollars compared with millions of dollars), which shows the great magnitude of God's forgiveness of us and how that should lead us to forgive others.

7. Not every minor detail has significant meaning.

Because parables are stories, they sometimes need supporting information in order for the main idea of the parable to make sense and have its power. For example, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the story shares that five virgins were wise and the other five foolish. It would be wrong to conclude that 50% of people today are wise and 50% of people are foolish (the ratio is probably closer to 20-80!). Often times pressing on insignificant details can make the story unravel and make one miss the entire point of the story.

8. Notice "stock imagery" in the parables.

"Stock imagery" is a term for many of the images used repeatedly throughout the parables. Many times repeated images are paralleled in the Old Testament and would have been common spiritual ideas understood by Jesus' original hearers. For example, whenever there is a Master/Judge/King figure in the parables, it signifies God; while sheep/servants/workers illustrate followers of God.

9. The ending of parables is very important.

While longer parables share a lot of important details along the way, the key to understanding the implication of the parable is often found in its conclusion. In the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30), the ending reveals what happens to the wheat and tares respectively and shows the ultimate purpose of the parable which is to indicate that God will judge who is really a true disciple at the final judgment.

10. Be careful with allegorical interpretations of parables.

There have been some throughout church history who have thought that the meaning of parables was hidden and unable to be explained without applying special meanings to the text. The problem with this is that they normally disregarded the plain reading of Scripture and offered confusing ideas from the mind of the interpreter.

An example of this is the third century theologian Origen's interpretation of the Good Samaritan. He reads several details into the text: the man walking down the road signifying Adam, the priest signifying the Law, the Levite signifying the Prophets, the donkey signifying the body of Christ that bore our sins, and the Samaritan signifying what Christ did for us.

What becomes lost is that Jesus used the parable to answer a man's question, "Who is my neighbor?" The Great Reformer Martin Luther called some allegorical interpretations of the parables "amazing twaddle" and "altogether useless." Avoid these types of interpretations! (Kevin Halloran – Unlocking the Bible)

Four Additional Points to Remember

1. A parable is like a joke - the story has one main point that the hearer should catch at once. Jesus sets up an ordinary situation, then gives it an unexpected twist to make His point.
2. A parable is not meant to be a riddle or puzzle with a hidden meaning. Instead, just as you are meant to get the point of a joke and respond with laughter and perhaps a change of heart, so the point of a parable should hit you at once, startle you into looking at things differently, and move you to respond.
3. In order to "get" a joke about a traveling salesman, you have to know something about the culture. Likewise, in order to get the point of a parable, you have to understand relevant parts of Jewish culture.
4. Most parables are not allegories, where every element has symbolic meaning. Rather, a parable has "points of reference" on which the story hinges and a single "point" that calls for a response. The points of reference are chosen to draw the audience into the story so that they will respond when they get the point. For instance, in Matthew 13:44, the points of reference are the treasure (the kingdom of heaven) and the man (a believer). The parable startles the hearer and demands a response: the kingdom is so valuable that it deserves our very best. For us, the question is, "Do I value the kingdom of heaven above everything else? Do I see it as an incomparable treasure?" (LifeChange: Matthew by Steve Halliday)

The Parables of Jesus (in Alphabetical Order)

Parable Name	Mark	Matthew	Luke
The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9
The Dishonest Manager			16:1-13
Feasting and the Bridegroom	2:19-20	9:14-15	5:34-35
The Fig Tree	13:28-31	24:32-35	21:29-33
The Fish Net		13:47-50	
Good and Faithful Servants		24:45-51	12:42-46

Parable Name	Mark	Matthew	Luke
The Good Samaritan			10:25–37
The Great Banquet			14:16–24
The Household Servants	13:34–37		
The Laborers in the Vineyard		20:1–16	
The Lamp	4:21	5:15	8:16–18
The Lost Coin			15:8–10
The Lost Sheep		18:12–14	15:1–7
Marriage of the King's Son		22:1–14	14:16
The Master of the House		13:51–52	
The Mustard Seed	4:30–32	13:31–32	13:18–19
New Cloth	2:22	9:16	5:36
New Wine	2:21	9:17	5:37–39
The Persistent Friend at Midnight			11:5–8
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector			18:9–14
The Prodigal Son			15:11–32
The Rejected Stone	12:10–11	21:42–46	20:17–19
The Rich Fool			12:13–31
The Rich Man and Lazarus			16:19–31
The Seed and the Harvest	4:26–29		
The Sheep and the Goats		25:31–46	
The Sower and Soils	4:1–9	13:3–23	8:4–8
The Talents		25:14–30	19:11–27
The Talents and the Servants			19:12–27
The Ten Virgins		25:1–13	
The Thief at Night		24:43–44	12:39–40
The Treasure and the Pearl		13:44–46	
The Two Debtors			7:40–45
Two Sons		21:28–32	
The Unmerciful Servant		18:23–25	
Watchful Slaves			12:35–48
The Wedding Banquet		22:1–14	14:15–24
The Wheat and the Weeds		13:28–31,36–43	
The Wicked Tenants	12:1–9	21:33–41	22:9–16
The Widow and the Judge			18:1–18
The Wise and Foolish Builders		7:24–27	6:46–49
The Worthless Salt	9:50	5:13	14:34–35
Yeast		13:33	13:20–21