



# **The Investigator's Gospel**

## **Session 15 – Chapter 15 – The Parables in Luke**

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 and Life-Situation Stories Describe the Kingdom**

Jesus captivated His listeners by presenting truth in terms that they could understand. 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). He told stories about family conflicts, weddings, and the big and little joys of everyday life. His images and language helped bring His message alive to common people. It showed clearly that God takes an interest in the workplace and home, 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, grabbing the attention of his listeners with images to which all could relate.

The "land of the Bible" is an often unmentioned character in the parables as well. When Jesus says, "Consider the lilies," or "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed," or "a farmer sowed his seed," it is very much a reflection of the land itself, and the way it was experienced and used by the people of the day. Even a parable about "salt losing its saltiness" is a reflection of the land; unlike our salt, salt mined from the Dead Sea, which is comprised both of salt and many other minerals, subject to damp conditions, could be leached of much of the salt content, and leave only the mineral content behind. As such, it became worthless.

## **Parables in Luke**

Luke's Gospel gathers more parables than Matthew, Mark or John (John focusses on the "sermons" of Jesus, rather than parables). Luke alone has "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son," two of the longest and most dramatic (and memorable) of Jesus' parables.

## **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 Matt 13:31-32). Jesus chose to teach in story form because stories engage the mind and emotions of listeners like no other form of teaching.

### **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, "*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*" 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 gets the most space? 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. For instance, the Good Samaritan is meant to be shocking precisely because Samaritans were viewed with contempt.

## **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 often signifies God; while sheep/servants/workers often 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 in Luke 15

*1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.’*

What do we learn from the introduction? Who are the audience? To what is Jesus responding?

*Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.*

Who is the main character? What is the “twist” in the story? What comes last (the punchline always comes last!)? Where do we find ourselves in the story? Why did Jesus tell this parable to his audience?

*8 ‘Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.” 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’*

Who is the main character? What is the “twist” in the story? What comes last (the punchline always comes last!)? Where do we find ourselves in the story? Why did Jesus tell this parable to his audience?

*11 Jesus continued: ‘There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them.*

*13 ‘Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*17 ‘When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” 20 So he got up and went to his father.*

*‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.*

*21 ‘The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

*22 ‘But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.*

*25 ‘Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”*

*28 ‘The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”*

*31 ““My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.””*

Who is the main character? What is the “twist” in the story? What comes last (the punchline always comes last!)? Where do we find ourselves in the story? Why did Jesus tell this parable to his audience?