

The Parables of Jesus

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Introduction

Summary

The parables of Jesus are short stories and sayings about the Kingdom of God that came about in the person of Jesus meant to elicit a reaction and response from the hearer. They are much more than just moral fairytales meant to prescribe good behavior. Instead the parables are teaching us about who Jesus is, what He came to do, and what it looks like to live with Him as King. In a world that values clear and concise teaching, the puzzling nature of the parables is scandalizing, but an intention of Jesus as He told them.

Parables require intentional listening. Listening is hard work, especially in a culture with so many voices clamoring for our attention. But, in order to hear the parables as they were meant to be heard we must learn the lost art of listening closely. The parables require involvement on the part of the hearer, otherwise the intended effect will be totally lost.

The parables function similar to a good joke. That is, they rely on both familiarity and twists. They present a situation that the hearer can instantly connect with. However, just when the hearer comes to expect one ending, another is presented. This familiarity tied to surprise is what brings about the intended reaction. A joke that needs a lengthy explanation has totally lost its function: to bring about a laugh or smile. In the same way, a parable that is dissected and taught at length is in danger of losing whatever its intended reaction was meant to be.

Finally, maybe the most surprising aspect of all is that the parables rarely ever use theological language (let alone mention God). Instead, the parables speak of judges, farmers, and lost coins. You won't find any academic jargon here. Through everyday language, Jesus draws us in and opens us up to live in His kingdom.

Questions To Prepare

- What are some ways we teach life's most important lessons?
- What do we value in our teaching and learning today?
- Besides for parables, how else does the Bible teach? What forms of literature, besides for parables, do the Scriptures use?
- Do you have a favorite parable? Which one and why?
- Is there a parable that has confused you or puzzled you?
- Why do you think Jesus taught using parables?

What Parables Are

Simply put, the parables of Jesus are short stories and sayings He told in order to reveal the Kingdom of God that He came to bring to earth. They were meant to elicit a “Kingdom” response. At the foundational level, this response is usually faith or repentance. However, sometimes the hearer is led to renounce worldly possessions or treat their neighbors differently. Ultimately, the parables are all about Jesus. The question to be asked is not, “What does this story reveal about myself?” But, “What does this story reveal about who Jesus is and why He came?”

What Parables Are Not

The parables are not moralistic tales meant to teach simple obedience. This is what separates the parables from something like “Grimms’ Fairy Tales.” Grimms’ Fairy Tales (ex. “Cinderella”, “Snow White”, and “Little Red Riding Hood”) were a collection of German folk-tales that were meant to teach moralistic lessons (interestingly, they were originally not meant for children!). Which such stories have their place, the parables are different. While the parables may teach us what it looks like to think, speak, and act in the Kingdom, they are primarily about King Jesus: Who He is and what He came to do.

The parables are also not allegories. Allegories are stories in which every detail has a meaning. However, some Christians throughout history have read the parables allegorically. A great example of this is St. Augustine in his interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead.... The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine, the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage.

– Augustine, Quaestiones Evangeliorum, II, 19.

How To Read The Parables

Before we even begin to read the parables, we must learn to listen. Listening requires us to set aside our expectations and agendas. It means we must slow down and focus.

Once we're ready to listen, there are four helpful practices that can help us make sense out of what Jesus is saying:

First, we need to ask good questions: Who is Jesus speaking to? What is the occasion or reason that He is telling this story? Where is this taking place and when is it happening. Where is Jesus? Who is His intended audience? The more of these questions we are able to answer, the more we will understand what Jesus intends us to hear.

Example: A good example of this is the parable of the two debtors from Luke 7:41-42 (see vv. 36-50 for the entire context). This parable is told in the context of a dinner hosted by a Pharisee who questions Jesus' reception of the sinful woman who anoints His feet and head with oil and tears. Jesus tells this story to a particular man (Simon the Pharisee) who had particular concerns about Jesus ("If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." v. 39).

Second, we must try to pretend, as much as is possible, that we are hearing these words for the first time. As Jesus told these stories to His audiences, they were meant to shock, confuse, and surprise. Many of us, at least those of us who have read many of these stories many times before, have become calloused to the surprising nature of the parables. We take them for granted and have become comfortable with them. We need a fresh pair of eyes and ears.

Example: A good example of this is the parable of the sower. (Matthew 13:1-9) This story presents a very familiar situation to Jesus' first century hearers: a farmer planting seed. This would have been something everyone could relate to. Even the basic concept was self-evident: seed sown on the road, rocks, and thorns has little chance of growing up into abundance. The surprise is that this farmer would waste so much good seed on such bad soil. No right-minded farmer would spread seed on the road, the rocks, or the thorns. What might this surprising act on behalf of the farmer tell us?

Third, we should not assume that each parable has only one intended meaning. Neither should we assume that every detail is of eternal significance. Instead, focus

on the main characters or objects of the story. Most often, these characters or objects frame the story and the major takeaway lessons.

Example: As noted above, the parable of the Good Samaritan is an example of a parable that has been allegorized, that is, in which every detail has been given eternal significance. It seems self-evident that St. Augustine's interpretation stretches the original intention of Christ. However, we should not also assume that there is only one intended meaning. This story teaches us who we are called to "neighbor," portrays two negative examples (the priest and the Levite), but also points us to Jesus - our great and eternal "neighbor."

Finally, we should always be looking for Jesus. As you read the parables, ask yourself: "Where is Jesus?" "What do I learn about Him as King?" "How am I called to live in His Kingdom?" And "What is different about life with Jesus?"

Example: Matthew 13:31-32 recounts the parable of the Mustard Seed. What could such a short story about seeds and trees have to do with Jesus? Well, this little story reminds us that when it comes to the Kingdom of God and our King Jesus looks can be deceiving. In the case of our Savior, one man's death brought about the salvation of many. In the case of our Savior's people, it means that even our small acts of love can have eternal significance.

The Result Of The Parables

In two places, Jesus tells us what the result of His parabolic teaching will be: Some will have ears to hear, and some won't (Matthew 13 and Mark 4). Another way to put it is this: Parables *reveal* and *conceal*. To those who believe, the parables reveal the Kingdom of God and the King Jesus Christ. They are a gift of grace. To those who have already closed off their hearts to God, the parables conceal. They are an act of judgment against the unfaithful.

However, the parables are not "code" or spoken in a secret language. Should those who don't have ears suddenly grow ears - that is - should they come to faith in Jesus, then the parables will still be there to reveal their Savior to them.

A Test Case

Read the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:25-37. As you do, follow our four helpful practices.

1. Ask good questions. Who does Jesus tell this story to? Who else is listening?
When in Jesus' ministry does this take place? Where is Jesus telling this story?
Is Jesus answering a question or responding to a situation?
2. Read the story as if you were hearing it for the first time. What is familiar?
What is new? What surprises you? What reaction do you have?
3. Don't assume every detail has significance, but also don't assume that there is only one correct meaning. What lessons could be learned from this story?
Who are the main characters or main objects of the parable? How do they help frame the main lesson(s).
4. What does the story reveal about the Kingdom of God and our great King Jesus?

The “Lost” Parables

Luke 15:1-32

Introductory questions

- Why do you think the Pharisees and scribes complained that Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners?
- What do you know about how tax-collectors and sinners were viewed and treated?
- Who are the religious “insiders” and “outsiders” today? Who would many consider to be spiritually “secure” or “lost”?
- Who or what kinds of people are we tempted to keep at arms-length? Who would you be most scandalized by if they walked into church?
- Why would God describe sinners as being “lost”? What does it mean then to be “found”?

Summary

The parables of the “Lost Sheep,” “Lost Coin,” and “Prodigal Son” are a series of parables spoken together to the tax collectors, sinners, Pharisee, and scribes. Both “insiders” and “outsiders” are addressed in these stories. Taken together, they are addressing same issue: The God who seeks after, welcomes in, and rejoices over lost people – however lost they are. The stories also address lost people, or the “outsiders,” with reminder that it’s never too late to repent – however far you’ve wandered. Finally, these three parables also address the “insiders” with a call to celebrate with the Father - whenever someone is found.

Context

These parables are spoken one after another to a mixed crowd of insiders and outsiders – religious leaders and those considered to be sinners. The immediate reason for the parable is that the Pharisees and scribes are complaining about Jesus, that He receives and eats with sinners. Eating had deep connotations in Jesus’ day. Who you ate with revealed who you considered yourself one with. Typically, people ate with others in their same socio-economic-religious circles. Eating implied a connection. Therefore, the Pharisees were complaining that this man, who was acting like one of their Rabbis, would connect Himself to such lowly and degrading people. Didn’t Jesus recognize that by eating with them, He was accepting them?

Jesus’ parables here will address both of the crowds before him with a different message. Those who are on the outside will hear one message, and those on the inside another. What they will both hear here are stories about a God who is truly

“prodigal,” in the sense that He recklessly and extravagantly (hence “prodigally”) chases after lost sinners.

This is not the first time that Jesus has addressed the issue of who He came for. In Luke 5:32 Jesus says, “I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” That is, Jesus didn’t come for those who thought they didn’t need Him, but for those who recognized they were hurting, lost, and alone without Him. These parables are an expansion on that theme.

Reading the parables with fresh eyes

Each of the three stories presents a situation that is relatable. In Jesus day, shepherds were aplenty, and we’ve all lost something like a coin. We also all know the joy that comes from finding something of value to us. We are also all too well aware of wayward children. Most, if not every, family has one.

Although these religious leaders might have been slightly offended that Jesus was inviting them to see themselves as shepherds and women, the real “twist” or surprise in this case is revealed in the third parable. The father’s response to his rebellious boy is truly shocking, especially considering the command of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 to deal with wayward children harshly and to “purge the evil from among you.” When this father welcomes in his child, who by asking for his inheritance (which he went on to waste) was in effect wishing his dad dead, we are left in awe.

Characters

The first two parables revolve around things that are lost: animals and coins. In both cases, there is a main character (a shepherd in one and a woman in the other) who searches diligently until what is lost is found. When the owner is reunited with what they had once considered lost, there is great rejoicing. In the final parable, it is a person (the “prodigal” son) who is lost. Once again there is rejoicing, this time by a father. This third parable adds in an additional character and feature that the other two parables lack: a third main character referred to as the older son. This older son does not rejoice when that which was lost is found. Instead, he grumbles and complains.

As the stories unfold, we come to see God in the shepherd, woman, and father. God is the one who seeks after, patiently waits for, and rejoices over lost people. Sinners are represented by the lost sheep, coin, and son. They are reminded that their God is searching for them in their wandering, and that it is never too late to repent and return home to His love. Finally, the Pharisees and scribes are depicted in the older son who refuses to rejoice with his father over his brother. Every religious “insider” is thereby challenged to rejoice along with God whenever a lost sinner is found.

What is revealed about life in the Kingdom of God and our King Jesus?

First, each of the parables highlights the joy that the Lord has when one lost sinner comes to faith. All three stories teach us about the love that God has for all people especially lost people. His love and welcome is truly “prodigal”. To the outside world it looks radical, extravagant, or even wasteful. But, our God rejoices over every sinner that is found and returned to Him. Ours is God of relentless pursuit, boundless grace, and endless joy. While God never condones or promotes sinful behavior, He does love and welcome in all sinners through faith. The basis of our acceptance before our Father is not our behavior—good or bad—but God’s grace and forgiveness that are ours through faith.

Second, sinners, especially those who would be considered “outsiders,” are comforted with the promise of God’s love. They are not forgotten and are never given up on. While sinners wander alone and scared, their God is pursuing them in love. He is searching for them with diligence. Sinners, even the worst of sinners, are reminded that it is never too late to turn to Jesus in faith. No matter where they’ve been or what they’ve done, their God will be waiting for them as the Father who loves them. His arms are stretched out wide, ready to embrace. He rejoices over them in love.

Finally, religious “insiders” are challenged to share in their Father’s love. The temptation for those who have resided on the inside for any amount of time is to create boundaries and borders. Like the Pharisees and scribes, we all too often have decided that some people just aren’t worth God’s love. They haven’t kept up their end of the bargain or they have scorned His grace. But, instead of reacting with anger and self-righteousness, God calls us to join in His celebration of each and every sinner who is found. If God can forgive and show grace to all who believe, so can His people.

Concluding Questions

- How expansive is God’s love and acceptance?
- In what ways is God’s love “prodigal”?
- How can the Church rejoice with God over every sinner who is found? What might it look like for us to join in the joy the Lord has over repentant sinners?
- Who can you pray for, that they would be found? How can you join in the work of searching and finding?

“The End Is Coming” Parables

Matthew 25:1-30

Introductory Questions

- Are you a preparer or a procrastinator? What are the benefits and pitfalls of each?
- How often do you think about Christ’s return?
- How do you feel about His return? Excited? Scared? Unsure?

Summary

The parables of the Ten Virgins and the Talents follow on the heels of Jesus’ teaching about His eventual return. He has explained several times now that He must suffer, die, and rise to be with His Father. But, Jesus has also made it clear that one day, and no one except the Father knows which day, He will return. These two parables instruct and warn His believers on how to live until that day. Christian living in the time before the glorious return of our Savior is to be defined by wakefulness and watchfulness, as well as stewardship and sacrifice. Christians do all this not in hopeless fear and trembling, but in confident and joyful faith.

Context

These parables are spoken by Jesus to His disciples just a few days before His death. Jesus has already ridden into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with the purpose of laying down His life there. He has gathered them together on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple to explain to them what awaits them all (Chapter 24). Jesus has warned them about the hardships that are coming, given them signs to watch and wait for, and promised them that He will return. Jesus has made it clear that no one knows when He will return. On the one hand, it will happen quickly and unexpectedly. On the other hand, some days it will feel like it is taking so long it might never happen.

Reading the parables with fresh eyes

Each of these two stories revolves around situations that we can relate to – even if we haven’t experienced them ourselves. The parable of the Ten Virgins tells a story of waiting through a long night. It is a story about being prepared. Many of us have found ourselves in situations for which we were woefully underprepared – even when we knew better. Jesus’ use of the “groom” metaphor should also be familiar to the reader of Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew 9:15 Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom, and in Matthew 22:2 Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a King throwing a marriage feast for his son.

The parable of the Talents tells the story of a property manager who leaves his employees in charge while he's gone. He gives money to each one according to what they can handle. He expects his employees to be good stewards with what they've been given. Many of us, in work or family life, have experienced similar situations.

Both of the stories are meant to leave us shocked and forewarned. The harshness of both the groom and the master is surprising. In these stories, there is no grace given. The judgment is final.

Characters

Each parable contains three main "characters". In the first, there are the wise virgins, the foolish virgins, and then the groom. The wise virgins show us how we should live until Christ returns, while the foolish virgins show us how we should *not* live. Two paths are presented to us, and we are encouraged to pick the path of wisdom. This story follows in a long tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures that compare and contrast the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness. For example, the book of Proverbs contrasts Lady Wisdom with Lady Folly, and often presents us with two possible ways ("He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame" Pr. 10:5). This parable is nudging us towards the path of wisdom as we wait for our groom, Jesus, to return.

The parable of the Talents, likewise, offers the same dynamic. There are two wise servants who are good stewards of what they've been given. They are contrasted with the foolish, faithless servant who acts in fear and timidity and buries his treasure. The master in this story, like the groom in the parable above, does not waver in his decision. His judgment is final.

What is revealed about life in the Kingdom of God and our King Jesus?

Perhaps a word from N.T. Wright would be helpful to remember here,

"But we must also, and always, insist that this parable and others like it do not give a complete picture of the creator God, the maker and lover of the world, the God who sent Jesus as the personal expression of his love. Remember where this parable occurs. It comes near the end of a story which is about to reach its great climax; and that climax comes when the son of man 'gives his life as a ransom for many' (20.28). When Jesus speaks of someone being thrown into the darkness outside, where people weep and grind their teeth, we must never forget that he was himself on the way into the darkness, where even he would sense himself abandoned by God" ("Matthew for Everyone pt. 2" p. 139).

These stories remind us that our Savior Jesus is going to return one day. To those who trust in Him, Christ welcomes them with open arms and puts them to work in His eternal kingdom (what a joy and honor!). To those who have rejected Him, wasted His gifts, and purposefully lived a life of careless foolishness, there will be a final

judgment. However, Jesus tells these stories so that no one would ever experience that judgment. Jesus doesn't relish in telling "horror" stories where men and women are shut out of the party and cast out into the outer darkness. No, Jesus tells these stories as a warning and encouragement to with faith so that His love might be experienced for all eternity.

Finally, these stories tell us about the important part that we have to play in the Kingdom of God. God's children have been given work to do. They have assignments, some of which continue on into eternity. As Martin Luther once said, "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone" it's accompanied by acts of service and sacrifice. To the good stewards in the second parable, Jesus does not promise an eternity where one puts their feet up to eternally "chillax", but instead says, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much." There is an ancient rabbinic saying that goes, "The reward of duty (done) is a duty (to be done)." The work we do in this world seems to continue on into the next! God loves to work through His people.

Concluding Questions

- How can you watch and prepare for Christ's return?
- Who can you serve as you wait?
- Who can we look to as an example of how to faithfully serve as we wait?
- What gifts has God blessed you with, and how can you use them in His Kingdom? How can you make the most out of what you've been given?
- What does the next passage in Matthew 25:31-46 add to our understanding of watchfulness and stewardship?

“The Seed” Parables

Mark 4:1-20; 26-32

Introductory Questions

- Why do you think Jesus taught in parables?
- What is the hardest part of doing the Lord’s work?
- Where do you find encouragement as you work for the Lord?

Summary

Jesus begins to tell a series of parables about seeds. He begins with a parable about parables. Jesus tells this story to explain how His stories function. The next two parables also revolve around seeds – how they mysteriously grow and yield a harvest, and how even the smallest of seeds will grow into a large plant. Even for those of us who don’t have a green thumb on us, these stories illuminate how the kingdom of God works. In the end, we are led to trust in the Word of God which Jesus promises will bear fruit. Full of faith in God’s Word, His people go out and share the Word as they trust in God to yield a harvest.

Context

In chapter 3, Jesus has just radically redefined what it means to be a part of His family. For our Savior, the water of baptism run thicker than blood. God’s kingdom is certainly not like any other kingdom. The kingdom of God is “upside down” from the rest of the world – how it works and what it values.

Now, Jesus begins to speak to a large crowd of people. Some, most likely, believed in Him. But, most likely, others did not. For a moment, Jesus pulls the disciples aside to explain the Parable of the Sower, but then He returns to teaching the crowds.

Reading the parables with fresh eyes

Most of us, even those of us who are not farmers or even backyard gardeners, can understand the basic principles of these stories. As children, we’ve all stuck a seed in a Styrofoam cup to watch it grow. We understand that seed will grow best in good soil, that there is something unexplainable about seeds, and that from something as small as a seed a large plant will grow.

While the second two parables don’t include our typical “twist” or surprise, the first parable does. Why would this farmer waste so much good seed on the road? Why would he bother spreading it on the rocky and thorny soil? Wouldn’t any level-headed farmer know to only sow your valuable seed on the good soil? This “prodigal” sower shows us something special about the heart of God and who He came for.

Characters

Each of the parables share two “characters” in common: a sower and a seed. The sower is Christ (and by extension, His people who follow in His ways) and the seed is the Word of God.

The first parable includes four other characters: the road, the rocky soil, the thorny soil, and the good soil. Each of these soils represent someone who hears the Word of God. Jesus explains in verses 13-20 exactly who each of these different soils are.

What is revealed about life in the Kingdom of God and our King Jesus?

The first parable reminds us of the relentless grace of God. Although He knows that the road and the rocky, thorny soils won't bear fruit, that doesn't stop Him from sowing the seed of His Word there. Jesus wants all people to hear of His grace and love. Unlike Jesus, we can never know what the soils is like when we sow, so we just go out and spread the seed and leave the rest up to God. In God's Kingdom, no seed is ever wasted – even if it ends up not bearing fruit. The parable reminds us that if growth does not occur, it's not the fault of the seed, that is God's Word, but of the soil. As God's children, we follow in our Savior's footsteps by sowing the seed of God's Word generously, but also are led to reflect on the kind of soil we have been.

The second parable reminds us that God's Word yields a harvest and bears fruit even when we can't explain it. Most home gardeners could not explain exactly how or why the seeds they plant will grow, but they do. The kingdom of God works in the same way. We don't often get to peek behind the curtain and see how God is working through us. That is not for us to know. Instead, we simply share the Good News and wait for God to bear its fruit. This parable seems to suggest that the growth of the Word is both predictable (it will grow – you can count on it!) but also not something we can manipulate (God's in control!). Jesus is working overtime, even while we are ignorant to all that He's up to.

The final parable reminds us that despite the seemingly insignificant nature to the Kingdom, it will grow into something big and beautiful. God's Kingdom might not look like much now, the Word might seem to be pretty weak, but it will bear fruit and increase. The same could be said of Jesus Himself. Despite His humble beginnings (born in a manger in the small town of Bethlehem), His humble life (an itinerant preacher who relied on the generosity of others), and His humble end (death as a common criminal on the cross), Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was working something amazing for His people.

The result of the parables

In Jesus' aside to His disciples (verses 10-12) He explains to them the result of the parables. To those who believe in Him, the parables illuminate what life is like as a child of God. To those who don't believe, the parables leave them more confused than before. Although they see, they don't perceive, and although they hear they don't really understand.

In this way the parables confirm what is already going on in a person's heart. If you have a heart of faith that trusts in Jesus, the parables will result with greater faith and trust. If you have already rejected Jesus, the parables will not get you any closer to Him.

Concluding Questions

- How do these parables comfort you as you work for the Lord?
- How do these parables challenge you to live, think, or speak differently?
- How is the way that God's Kingdom works different from what we're told the way our world works? Describe the "upside down" nature of God's Kingdom, as described in these stories.
- Do we get to pick and choose who to share God's Word with? Are we able to discern who is "worth it"? Why or why not?