

How to Understand and Apply the Bible

Michael Cranford

Interpreting the Parables

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables,

I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." (Matt 13:34-35)

1. The parables are one of the most mistreated parts of Scripture. Because some of the parables are explained allegorically by Jesus, people have had a tendency to regard them all as allegories.
2. There are different kinds of parables, which means we must approach each parable in its own right and not assume they all function the same. Regardless, when we come to a parable, we should attempt to locate one central point.
3. Parables are stories/similes/analogies with an intent. They express truths of the kingdom. Jesus expected his hearers to react to his message, either by thinking differently or acting differently.

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

4. Some parables have explanations at the end or in a concluding section. Some are attached to a narrative that implies the meaning of the parable.

⁹ **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else,** Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

5. Parables are not an excuse to find meanings in all the elements in a story. If not clearly indicated, we should ignore details that simply advance the plot.

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. (Matt 25:1-4)

6. When an image in the parable is clearly representative of something in reality, we should only match other elements that are a given, either by stock images or the conclusion to the parable.

³³ “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and **he will rent the vineyard to other tenants**, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that **the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.** ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, **they knew he was talking about them.** (Matt 21:33-46)

Purpose of Parables

1. Parables are one of the methods Jesus uses to penetrate hard hearts and communicate truths of the kingdom.

¹⁰ The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

¹¹ He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² 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. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

¹⁵ **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.’**

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.”
(Matt 13:10-16)

2. Like most scripture, parables are directed first and foremost to those who heard Jesus’ message of the kingdom during his earthly ministry. We should therefore think about how the parable would be understood by his followers (and his enemies) in 1st c.

Palestine, in light of their political situation, agrarian society, religious assumptions about the kingdom, and desire for relief against Gentile oppressors.

3. The truth hidden in the parables can often be found clearly explained in Jesus' teaching to the disciples.

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. **But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.** (Mark 4:33-34)

Categories of Parables

1. Aphoristic sayings (i.e., proverbs).

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this **parable**. (Mark 7:14-17)

2. "Similitude" parables

He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is **like** yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." (Matt 13:33)

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is **like**, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is **like** a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." (Mark 4:30-32)

3. "Interrogative" parables

And so He told them this parable, saying, "**What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the other ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?** And when he has found it, he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my sheep that was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance." (Luke 15:3-7; NASB)

4. Narrative parables – 3 types

Single indirect communication treats the hearer indirectly but the subject directly.

Double indirect communication treats both the hearer and subject indirectly.

a. Double-indirect “story” parables

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9)

b. “Juridical” parables

Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. (Luke 7:40-43)

c. Single-indirect “example” parables

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

¹⁸ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

²¹ **“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”** (Luke 20:16-21)

Sample Passage – Parable of the Dishonest Steward

Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

³ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’

⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. **For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.** ⁹ **I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.** (Luke 16:1-9)

Sample Passage – Parable of the Unjust Judge

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable **to show them that they should always pray and not give up.** ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:1-8)

Parable Name	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Kingdom References	Parable Type
Barren Fig Tree			Luke 13:6-9	B	STORY
Dishonest Steward			Luke 16:1-13	P, R	EXAMPLE
Good Samaritan			Luke 10:25-37	O	EXAMPLE
Hidden Treasure	Matthew 13:44			A or H	SIMILITUDE
Laborers in the Vineyard	Matthew 20:1-16			A	STORY
Leaven (Yeast)	Matthew 13:33		Luke 13:20-21	C	SIMILITUDE
Lost Coin			Luke 15:8-10	A	INTERROGATIVE
Lost Sheep	Matthew 18:12-14		Luke 15:3-7	A	INTERROGATIVE
Mustard Seed	Matthew 13:31-32	Mark 4:30-32	Luke 13:18-20	C	SIMILITUDE
Net (Dragnet)	Matthew 13:47-50			B	SIMILITUDE
Pearl of Great Price	Matthew 13:45-46			A or H	SIMILITUDE
Pharisee and the Tax Collector			Luke 18:9-14	M, N	EXAMPLE
Prodigal Son			Luke 15:11-32	A, M	STORY
Reluctant Friend (The Friend at Midnight)			Luke 11:5-13	K	INTERROGATIVE
Rich Fool			Luke 12:13-21	P	EXAMPLE
Rich Man and Lazarus			Luke 16:19-31	B, O, P	EXAMPLE
Scattered Seed		Mark 4:26-29		B, C	SIMILITUDE
Sheep and Goats	Matthew 25:31-46			B	Not really a parable
Sower & Purpose of Parables	Matthew 13:3-23	Mark 4:3-20	Luke 8:5-15	D, G	STORY
Talents, Three Servants	Matthew 25:14-30		Luke 19:11-27	B, J	STORY
Ten Virgins	Matthew 25:1-13			B, F, Q, R	STORY
Tower Builder and the Warring King			Luke 14:28-32	H	INTERROGATIVE
Two Debtors			Luke 7:41-43	A, I, N	JURIDICAL
Two Builders, House Upon the Rock	Matthew 7:24-27		Luke 6:46-49	J	SIMILITUDE
Two Sons	Matthew 21:28-31			A, I	JURIDICAL
Unforgiving Servant	Matthew 18:21-35			B, L	STORY
Wicked Tenants	Matthew 21:33-46	Mark 12:1-12	Luke 20:9-19	B, F, I	STORY/JURIDICAL
Wedding Banquet and Garments	Matthew 22:1-14		Luke 14:15-23	A, B, I, R	STORY
Wheat and Tares (Weeds)	Matthew 13:24-30			A, C, B	STORY
Widow and Unjust Judge			Luke 18:1-8	K (B)	STORY

