

How to Read the Bible:

The Parables of Jesus

VIDEO NOTES

Jesus was a master teacher. Some of his most well-known teachings are told in short stories called parables. They are beautiful and entertaining—yet often cryptic. How can we read parables in a way that leads to understanding? That’s what our video *How to Read the Bible: The Parables of Jesus* is all about.

These notes go a level deeper than we can cover in a five-minute video. In the following pages, you’ll be introduced to key concepts and passages that will guide your own exploration of the parables of Jesus.

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Introduction: An Imaginative Experiment

Imagine you're a Jewish farmer living in Galilee in the first century. You've grown up in a small town, knit together by family ties and a connection to this land. It's been your ancestral homeland for over 1,000 years! Your entire life is surrounded by the stories and poems of the Hebrew Scriptures, which are sung, read, and discussed daily and at Synagogue. What is that story?

The story of the Hebrew Scriptures tells of Israel's God as the creator and king of the world. He chose one people from among the nations, so that through them, his Kingdom and blessing would be restored to all. But there's a problem. Your ancestors were unfaithful to God. This has resulted in God allowing foreign nations to come and oppress Israel—Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Egypt, and Syria, and now the Romans.

Your grandpa remembers when the Romans first came to town and declared themselves and their emperor as the king of the world, the son of God. You've grown up in a militarized zone under Roman occupation with camps, garrisons, check points, tax collectors, the whole bit.

Your older cousins went missing two months ago. It's reported that they joined the Jewish "Kingdom of God" groups up in the hills, who perform secret raids on Roman camps. They believe that the time promised by the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures is near. It's time for the Kingdom of God to come and remove the Romans from power.

Then one day, you hear of a young prophet and teacher from the hills of a small town called Nazareth. He is going about announcing that God's Kingdom has arrived—here and now. He's able to heal the sick and perform wonders, and he's coming to your town. So you go to see him teach, and this is what you hear:

And he was saying, "The Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil;

and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. "The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

And he said, "How shall we imagine the Kingdom of God, or by with what can we compare it?"

"It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade."

MARK 4:26-32

*Most scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) with changes and emphasis added for understanding.

Your Reaction

What would your reaction be? You would likely find yourself saying one of two things:

1. "Huh? This guy's weird. My neighbor says he's crazy."
2. "Wait a minute, I think I've heard this before. A seed from God that grows into a huge tree for the beasts of the field? Those are images from the book of Isaiah. I remember it talking about God's word of restoration, which is like a seed that will create a new garden of Eden with a new tree of life. Another prophet, Daniel, also talks of a great tree-kingdom that rules the nations. Is this a clever symbol? What does he mean? Maybe I'll go ask one of his disciples and learn more."

This thought experiment is meant to get our modern minds thinking like Jesus' first century audience. One of Jesus' main modes of communication was through parables, like the one in Mark 4. Let's define and explore this concept.

Part 1: What Are Jesus' Parables About?

The four Gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell of the "good news" that through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the Kingdom of God has launched here on earth. Jesus himself announced the Kingdom of God through his famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This same sermon is preached "on the plain" in Luke chapter 6. Jesus also brought God's Kingdom into reality through his healings, exorcisms, and creation of a renewed family of Israel.

One of the most well-known and common ways that Jesus communicated was through stories, or in Greek, *parabole*. Let's dive in to learn more.

Defining the Term

In Greek, *para* means "alongside" and *bole* means "to set." Therefore, the word *parabole* refers to something that is set alongside another for comparison and contrast. However, the meaning of our English word *parable* doesn't quite allow us to understand what Jesus' parables are all about. Let's take a look at the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition:

Parable: A usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.

This definition views parables as "illustrations" or "explanations" relating to morality or religious truth. It assumes that there is a basic abstract idea that the parables illustrate, but this doesn't capture how and why Jesus used parables.

Modern preaching further contributes to this misunderstanding. The goal of preaching today is to take the listener (with a desire to learn) from a place of non-understanding to comprehension. Therefore preachers often utilize illustrations that take something unclear and make it more clear and relatable through a story. However, parables are more than short fiction stories that Jesus used to clarify his point.

The assumption that parables are moralistic tales or theology lessons has produced widespread misuse of the parables in Christian teaching. Let's explore a few examples before we discover the true nature of parables.

Parables are Not Moralistic Tales

The parable of the good samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is most often assumed to be a moralistic tale. But is there a deeper meaning intended? Let's read it for ourselves and find out.

And a lawyer stood up and put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And he said to him, "What is written in the law? How does it read to you?"

And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.

And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'"

*"Which of these three do you think **became a neighbor** to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"*

And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

LUKE 10:25-37

What's the main point of this parable? Many would summarize the passage as a story about being a good person who doesn't neglect the hurting. But this simplistic summary neglects the actual context and content of the passage. What is actually going on here?

First, notice that it begins with a Torah scholar debating about the greatest commandment with Jesus. He wants to undermine Jesus' authority by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus goes on to tell a story where a Samaritan, someone considered despicable by the scholar, is the hero and the religious elite figures are the villains.

It is precisely not a story about being a good person. It's a story meant to challenge our assumptions that "we" are the good people and "they" are the bad ones. However, our lens of parables as moralistic tales may prevent us from seeing the main point.

Parables are Not Theology Lessons

Let's look at another parable that is often interpreted solely as a theology lesson. The parable of the talents is found in Matthew 25:14-30.

For [the kingdom of heaven] is like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them.

To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey.

Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner, the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

Now after a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, "Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, "Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents."

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours."

But his master answered and said to him, "You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents."

For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.

Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

MATTHEW 25:14-30

Is Jesus trying to illustrate a theology of salvation? Does this teach us about how we can either go to heaven or hell after death? If we attempt to fit this parable into that grid, all kinds of theological problems arise. For example, is my salvation entirely dependent upon my performance? Also, why does God act so harshly toward someone who is simply afraid?

This theological interpretation of the parable of the talents neglects the actual context Matthew has provided in the surrounding chapters. This parable is actually about Jesus' confrontation with the leaders of Jerusalem, who have squandered their chance to lead Israel toward covenant faithfulness. It's also connected with two other parables, the ten young women at the wedding and the sheep and the goats. These parables are all about his confrontation with Jerusalem and warning of the Day of the Lord that is coming if they don't accept his offer of God's Kingdom.

If we come to Jesus' parables with this conception of "explainer stories," we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and misunderstanding.

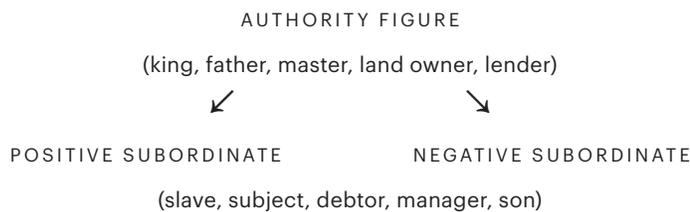
The Main Point of Parables

Jesus' entire mission was to announce and inaugurate the Kingdom of God as the climax of the covenant story between God and Israel. The arrival of God's Kingdom both *confronted* the Israel of Jesus' day and *comforted* them after their long period of exile and oppression.

The parables are one among many ways that Jesus confronted Israel with his offer of the Kingdom of God. This is why so many of Jesus' parables begin with the phrase "the Kingdom of God can be likened to" or contain the phrase "the Kingdom."

- The four soils (Matthew 13:1-23, esp. v. 19)
- The wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30)
- The mustard seed and the hidden yeast (Matthew 13:31-33)
- The great feast and ungrateful guests (Luke 15:15-24)

It's also why so many of Jesus' parables have three main character types:



In all of these parables, Jesus is offering a kind of commentary on his own mission, clarifying what his offer of the Kingdom means, what's at stake, and the particular moment within the long drama of Israel's history.

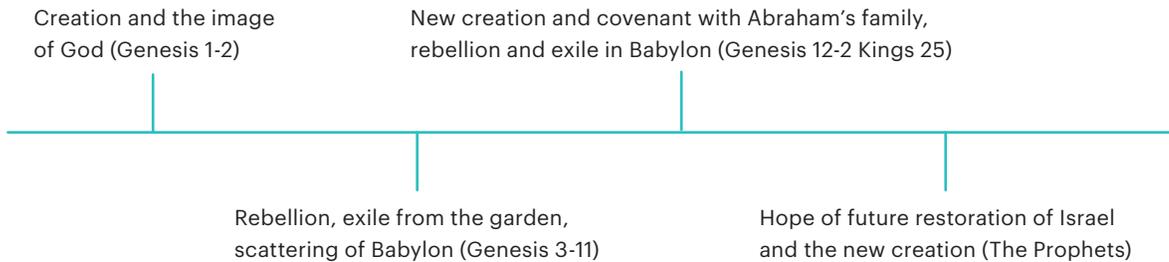
As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories.... They were, for the most part, not simply "illustrations," that is, preachers' tricks to decorate an abstract thought or complicated teaching. If anything, they were the opposite. Jesus' stories are designed to tease, to clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God's Kingdom in garb that would leave the listeners wondering, trying to think it out. They were stories that, eventually, caused Israel's leaders to decode his rich message in such a way as to frame a charge against him, either of blasphemy, sedition, or "leading the people astray." Whatever the parables are, they are not, as children are sometimes taught in Sunday school, "earthly stories with heavenly meaning." Rather, they were expressions of Jesus' shocking announcement that God's Kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven.

N.T. WRIGHT, SIMPLY JESUS, 87-88.

The first step in understanding the parables is to see that they are one expression of Jesus' main goal: to announce the arrival of God's Kingdom in and through himself and his new community.

Part 2: Jesus' Parables and the Story of the Hebrew Bible

The parables of Jesus, like Jesus' announcement of God's Kingdom, assume the larger biblical storyline. Let's recap.



The Prophets and Parables

Israel's prophets regularly used parables to accuse and warn Israel of God's coming judgement, while also pointing to their future restoration and hope. For example, take Isaiah's parable in chapters 5 and 6.

*Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning his vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
**He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And he built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then he expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.***

*"And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between me and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?
So now let me tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it."*

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah his delightful plant.
Thus he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.*

ISAIAH 5:1-7

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

He said, "Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive;

Keep on looking, but do not understand.'

Render the hearts of this people insensitive,

Their ears dull,

And their eyes dim,

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

Understand with their hearts,

And return and be healed."

Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And he answered,

"Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant,

Houses are without people

And the land is utterly desolate,

The Lord has removed men far away,

And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,

And it will again be subject to burning,

Like a terebinth or an oak

Whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump.

ISAIAH 6:8-13

In these passages, Isaiah refers to Israel as a corrupted garden that must be destroyed and then restored with a new planting and growth of a new people. Jesus adapts Isaiah's parable and applies it to his own announcement.

*"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. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

*The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his **son** (Heb. ben) to them. 'They will respect my **son** (Heb. ben),' he said.*

*But when the tenants saw the **son** (Heb. ben), they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

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

"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."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:
'The **stone** (Heb. eben) the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?'
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**. Anyone who falls on this **stone** (Heb. eben) will
be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was
talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the
crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

MATTHEW 21:33-46

Jesus parallels the story of the vineyard owner but adds another key element: the sending and
rejecting of the vineyard owner's son.

God's New Planting

The parallels between Isaiah and the Gospel accounts continue. Isaiah uses planting imagery
once again in chapter 55 to describe a new planting of God.

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it give birth and sprout,
And providing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
It will not return to me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
For you will go out with joy
And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy
before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will rise up,
And instead of the nettle the myrtle will rise up,
And it will be a memorial to the Lord,
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.*

ISAIAH 55:10-13

Does this imagery sound familiar? When Jesus told the parable of the four soils, he built upon
Isaiah 55. He explicitly said that the "seed" symbolized his "word about the Kingdom."

And he spoke many things to them in **parables**, saying, "Behold, the sower went out **to sow seed**; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.

Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears **the word of the Kingdom** and does not understand it..."

MATTHEW 13:3-9, 18-19A

Given to a Lost Crowd

Like the prophet Isaiah, Jesus fully anticipated that his parables would arouse interest in a select few while turning others away. Notice the similarities between Jesus' statement below and Isaiah 6:9-10.

And the disciples came and said to him, "**Why do you speak to them in parables?**" Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

For this reason I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;

You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

For the heart of this people has become dull,

With their ears they scarcely hear,

And they have closed their eyes,

Otherwise they would see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart and return,

And I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

MATTHEW 13:10-17

Crucial Points for Interpreting Matthew 13

Matthew 13 is strategically placed as a reflection on the diverse responses (Matthew 11-12) from the people to Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom found in Matthew 4-10.

- Matthew 11:1-6: John the baptist doubts Jesus
- Matthew 11:7-19: Crowds who reject Jesus

- Matthew 11:20-24: Galilean towns that reject Jesus
- Matthew 12:1-45: Pharisees and religious leaders accuse Jesus
- Matthew 12:46-50: Jesus' own family misunderstands him

The parable of the four soils is a meta-reflection of Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom. What is Jesus to do with a large audience that ranges from hostile and dangerous, to interested but confused, to enthusiastic support? His response is to use parables.

Jesus uses the parables in order to both conceal and reveal because he believes he is replaying the story of the prophet Isaiah, who was sent to an Israel that was hardened and unbelieving with a small, believing remnant.

PARABLES TO A HOSTILE AUDIENCE	PARABLES TO AN OPEN-MINDED AUDIENCE
Jesus' parables harden their hearts. They seem to convince them that he is a dangerous religious kook.	The parables intrigue and stimulate dialogue and further understanding. This open-mindedness is embodied by Jesus' disciples.

Jesus' appeal to Isaiah is ultimately about why parables are an appropriate medium for the proclamation of his message. It is because people are so different and react so differently. A parable is a story which does not carry its meaning on the surface. It challenges the hearer to engage with it in an educational process, which, if the hearer brings to it an open attitude, will result in their perceiving and responding to the truth. But it can equally be resisted and dismissed as a mere story. So parables, given without explanation, are open-ended. In a situation where some are open to truth and some are not, parables, as imaginative challenge rather than simple proposition, are an appropriate way to communicate new ideas. For some, they will break through the barriers to understanding, and to such people (like the disciples), the "secrets of the Kingdom of heaven" will be "given." But others will remain impenetrable, and the seed will be lost, scorched, or choked.

R. T. FRANCE, THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLICATION CO., 2007), 509-510.

A Pragmatic Strategy

In addition to Jesus' clever challenge to his listeners through parables, there's also a pragmatic strategy on Jesus' part. He needs to buy time in order to launch his Kingdom movement, so subtle and cryptic communication allows his message to be dismissed by the dismissive. Scholar N.T. Wright reflects on this point:

If someone had asked Jesus why he spoke so cryptically, he might well have replied with the famous and otherwise puzzling words from Isaiah 6, "So that they may look and look but never see, and hear and hear but never understand." If they were really to see and understand, there might be a riot. Those who have ears to hear will hear, and for the moment it is just as well that those who do not will not. Jesus' Nazareth manifesto in Luke 4:16-30 was a bit too clear, perhaps, and it almost got him killed. If the prophet is not to perish away from Jerusalem, his subversive message must be clothed in disguise which only the seeing eye will penetrate. Jesus' parables, then, are reworking and reappropriating Israel's prophetic traditions... They are the ideal vehicle for the paradoxical and dangerous campaign that Jesus was undertaking, expressing the very heart of his message. The parables belong substantially within the specific period of his public career and ministry as a prophet announcing judgment and renewal for Israel.

N.T. WRIGHT, JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD, 180-181.

Part 3: Jesus' Parables About the Kingdom are Indirect, Subversive, and Surprising

Jesus' Indirect Communication

Jesus' parables are all expressions of his announcement of the arrival of God's Kingdom and the challenge that it brought to the Israel of his day. They are not meant to explain general theological or moral truths. They do explain Jesus' behavior in going about announcing the arrival of God's Kingdom, but they do so in a very cryptic and indirect way that often confused or frustrated people. Let's look at an example.

In Luke 9:57-58, Jesus and his disciples are walking along the road and someone approached them and said, "I will follow you wherever you go!"

Scholar Kenneth Bailey reflects on how we may expect Jesus to respond to something like this.

If Jesus had been a modern Westerner, he might have responded like this: "Bold statements are easy to make, but you should seriously consider what it will cost you to follow me. Let me make it plain: I can offer you no salary or security if you follow me. If my point is not clear, an illustration may help. Even I do not have a bed of my own to sleep on."

KENNETH BAILEY (THROUGH PEASANT EYES, XI-XII)

What was Jesus' actual reply?

*Foxes have holes,
Birds of the air have nests
But the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.*

LUKE 9:58

Jesus' reply does not explain or illustrate as we may expect. Rather, it is a cryptic riddle that gives the listener another puzzle and forces them to ponder and draw their own conclusion. Notice how the actual point that Jesus wants the man to consider is unstated: "Consider the cost of your decision."

Parables as Prophetic, Indirect Communication

Through the parables, Jesus was a master of indirect communication. Theologian Klyne Snodgrass expresses the value of indirect communication over direct communication.

Direct communication is important for conveying information, but learning is more than information intake, especially if the learner is someone who already thinks they understand. People entrenched in their current understanding set their defenses against direct communication and end up conforming the message into the channels of their current understanding of reality. But indirect communication finds a way in through the back window to confront a person's view of reality... A parable's ultimate aim is to draw in the listener to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, and move to action. Jesus' parables...are prophetic instruments...used to get God's people to stop, reconsider their way of viewing reality, and to change their behavior.

KLYNE SNODGRASS, STORIES WITH INTENT, 8-9

Let's look at an example from Luke 14. Jesus was invited into the house of one of the Pharisee leaders on the Sabbath. As they were eating, they were watching him closely. Jesus was paying attention as well, noticing how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table. He responded with this parable:

When one of those who were reclining at the table with him heard this, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!"

But he said to him, "A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' Another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' Another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.'

And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.'

And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"

LUKE 14:15-24

Let's reflect on this passage. First, notice that Jesus is not using this parable to explain anything. He hasn't been teaching! Rather, he's been invited to a normal dinner party. In Greco-Roman style, the seating arrangement corresponds to social status. Jesus is offering a public critique of the dinner party by describing the values of the Kingdom of God (Luke 6). Jesus' take totally upends the values of an honor-shame society. Once again, Jesus leaves the actual point of the story unstated. He purposefully allows the listeners to ponder and draw their own conclusion.

For Jesus, the parables were not used to explain things to people's satisfaction, but to call into question all of their previous explanations and understandings... Far from being illustrations that illuminate what people haven't yet figured out, the parables are designed to pop every circuit breaker in the mind... Mention "messiah," and the disciples pictured an armed king on horseback; mention "forgiveness," and they start setting up rules about when it should run out. From Jesus' point of view, the sooner their misguided minds had the props knocked from under them, the better. After all their yammer about how God should or shouldn't run his own operation, getting them to just stand there with their eyes popped open and their mouths shut would be a giant step forward."

ADAPTED FROM ROBERT FARRAR CAPON, KINGDOM, GRACE,
JUDGMENT IN THE PARABLES OF JESUS, PP. 5-7.

Jesus Following the Tradition of Communication

This mode of metaphorical, indirect communication places Jesus square in the tradition of Israel's prophets. Israel's prophets regularly used extended metaphor and parables to indict and challenge the Israel of their day. Let's take a look at the story of Nathan the prophet in the book of Samuel.

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said,

"There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; And it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, And was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; Rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion."

Nathan then said to David, "You are the man!"

2 SAMUEL 12:1-7

Notice that Nathan's purpose is not to communicate information but to confront David's terrible deed. Instead of directly accusing him, he communicates in an indirect way that first invites David into a narrative as an observer. The parable tricks David into a judgment about the characters before he realizes who they represent! Once the parable is over, David is forced to ponder his behavior in a new light. The parable puts the ball in David's court, forcing him to draw the conclusion. Jesus falls in line with this effective mode of communication.

Part 4: Main Themes in Jesus' Parables

The parables in the Gospel accounts reflect three important themes.

1. Parables About the Surprising Arrival and Nature of God's Kingdom

- The four soils (Matt 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:5-15)
- The seed growing at night (Mark 4:26-29)
- The wheat and the weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)
- The mustard seed and the hidden leaven (Matt 13:31-33)
- The treasure and the pearl (Matt 13:44-46)

2. Parables About the Upside-Down Value System Arriving with God's Kingdom

- Radical forgiveness of sins
 - The two debtors (Luke 7:41-43)
 - The unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35)
- Reorientation to wealth and status
 - The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
 - The foolish farmer (Luke 12:13-21)
- The inclusive character of God's Kingdom people
 - The workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)
 - The Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14)
 - The lost sheep, coin, and son (Luke 15)
- The image of scattered, lost sheep being found is a common one for exile and restoration (Exodus 34:11-13)
- The imagery of a foolish son who dishonors his father and goes into exile in the land of the gentiles is a patent image of exile (Hosea 11:1-12)

- The analogical pairing of a lost/dead son who is now found/alive pairs exile/death and restoration/resurrection imagery from Genesis 3 and Ezekiel 36-37 in a profound way.

3. Parables About the Crisis of Decision Caused by Jesus' Offer of the Kingdom

- The evil vineyard managers (Matthew 21:33-46)
- The wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14)
- The builders on rock or sand (Matthew 7:24-27)
- The tower builder and the warring king (Luke 14:28-32)
- The servants and the talents (Matthew 25:14-30)
- The ten young women at the wedding (Matthew 25:1-13)
- The sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46)
- The shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-13)

Part 5: An Approach to Reading Jesus' Parables

How can you read parables in a way that allows you to discover the intended meaning? Before we dive into our recommended method, we'd like to address a common approach that we may not necessarily support.

Allegorical Interpretation and Modern Reductionism

Once the early Jewish roots of Jesus' parables were forgotten, it became easy for later interpreters of the Gospel accounts to read them through very foreign lenses. Allegorical readings of the parables became widespread. They sought to determine every symbol in the parables and connect them to a meaning which was likely far beyond Jesus' intention. Let's look at an example from Augustine of Hippo (350-430 A.D.). He was a scholar and Church leader, whose allegorical reading of the parable of the good samaritan has become famous.

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, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called 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. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the gospel."

AUGUSTINE, QUAESTIONES EVANGELIORUM, II, 19

The main problem with this approach is that it imposes meaning onto the parables by fitting it within a symbolic system of fourth century Christian theology; therefore, no two interpreters can agree on how to interpret the symbols.

In response to this allegorical approach, scholar Adolf Julicher developed a modern reductionist approach to the interpretation of parables. In this modern era of research, Julicher wrote *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1899), a massive two-volume work in which he showed how the parables of Jesus reflect the true-to-life conditions of first century Palestine. He argued that the meaning of a parable must be connected to what Jesus himself intended by it in his historical and cultural context. We would agree. But he went one step further and claimed that the parables are simply comparisons that make only one main point, and all the extra imagery and detail are merely for realism. In Julicher's perspective, the parable of the talents is simply saying, "be faithful to God."

We would conclude that both Augustine and Julicher's stances may not be helpful in grasping the full meaning of Jesus' parables. This is our recommended approach.

A More Balanced Approach

Parables are extended metaphors, symbolic stories with two levels of meaning. But the challenge is in discerning what symbols are most important. A balanced approach to reading parables involves developing the skill of identification of crucial and non-crucial details.

For example, in the parable of the four soils (Mark 4), Jesus demonstrates this approach by giving a symbolic interpretation to each type of soil. The seed is the message of the Kingdom, the birds symbolize Satan, and the thorns symbolize the cares of this world, etc.

Further reading that demonstrates this approach:

- Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*
- Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*
- Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*

Practical Steps for Interpreting the Parables

1. Pay Attention to Context

It is important to pay attention to the narrative context provided by the Gospel authors and the context of Jesus' Kingdom of God announcement to Israel.

Example: The Nobleman and His Servants (Luke 19:11-26)

*While they were listening to this, **he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the Kingdom of God was going to appear at once.***

He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.'

But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.'

He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it.

The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.'

'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.'

The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.'

His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.'

Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.'

His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?'

Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.'

'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!'

He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.'"

LUKE 19:11-26

One popular interpretation of this parable has been that Jesus is predicting a long interval to take place between his mission in Jerusalem and the full consummation of the Kingdom of God, when God's servants will be judged according to their actions. Does this interpretation stand up when taking a closer look at the context?

It turns out that this interpretation has little relevance to Jesus' listeners and his approach to Jerusalem. The fact that they "thought the Kingdom of God was going to appear at once" does not primarily relate to its timing, but to its manner and meaning. A parable about the long interval between Jesus' resurrection and return would be meaningless to the disciples in this moment. They don't even understand that he is going to die!

The plot design of the parable does not place emphasis on the long absence; rather, the focus is on the moment of the king's return. The clear emphasis is on the fact that when the king returns, it will mean judgment for the rebellious and not a blanket blessing on all his servants. The parable does not mean, "actually the king is not going to return for a long time." Rather, it is saying, "the king's return will bring judgment on those who have squandered the king's generosity." This is what all of Jesus' "crisis" parables are about: the decision that he is placing before Israel in that very moment.

Paying attention to the stories before or after the parable can also help clarify their meaning. Immediately after this parable, Jesus rides into Jerusalem and is hailed as Israel's returning king (Luke 19:28-40). Then he looks at the city and weeps over it because of what he knows is coming: rejection and inevitable destruction.

*As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize **the time of God's visitation.**"*

LUKE 19:41-44

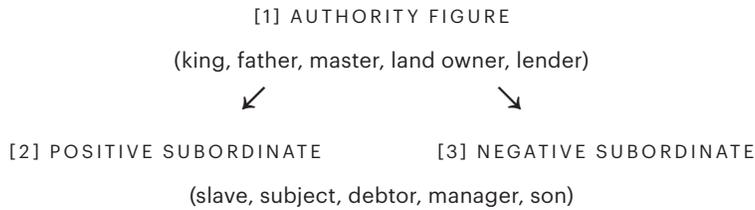
Jesus is not the king **leaving** on a long journey, he is the returning king **arriving** back to his own people, but it will result in judgment. The irresponsible steward and the hostile rebels are all images of the current leadership in Jerusalem, a nation that has rejected its true king.

It is also helpful to note the similarities to all of the other parables with a king/judge/father. These always stand for the God of Israel represented by Jesus himself.

2. Identify the Main Characters/Objects or Indispensible Plot Elements

The most important symbols of any parable are the main characters. Each "character" embodies one of the "main points" of the parable (Blomberg). Parables typically have three, two, or one characters. Let's look at patterns that emerge from each type.

Three-Character Parables



Example: The Prodigal Son (Luke 15)

The prodigal son parable perfectly fits this mold. Understanding the function of each character reveals the key takeaways of the passage.

- Like the **foolish prodigal son** who returns and finds forgiveness, even the most serious human failure doesn't close the door on God's mercy.
- Like the **generous father** who goes to great lengths to reconcile and forgive the son, so God's desire to forgive and reconcile is liberal and extreme.
- Like the **older brother** who should not have begrudged his brother's restoration, so those who claim association with God shouldn't elevate themselves above those who are supposedly "undeserving" of God's grace.

Two-Character Parables

TWO CONTRASTING CHARACTERS	TWO CHARACTERS RELATED BY AUTHORITY
Good/positive character (tax collector/wise builder/land owner) ↓ Bad/negative character (Pharisee/foolish builder/thief)	Authority figure (master/farmer/judge/God) ↓ Subordinate figure (servant/seed/widow/the rich man)
The focus is on the contrast between the characters' motives, behavior, or fates. *The difference from three-character parables is that there is no unifying authority figure to evaluate between the two.	The focus is on the authority figures' evaluation of the subordinate, whether negative or positive. *The difference from three-character parables is that there is no contrasting subordinate

Example: The Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13)

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.

For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches?"

LUKE 16:1-13

Could you spot the two main characters? The master shows us that all of God's people will be called to give a reckoning of the nature of their service to him. The steward shows that preparation for that reckoning should involve a prudent use of our resources.

Most agree that this is a crisis parable. Jesus' eschatological preaching presented a crisis to his hearers generally and to his disciples in particular. Like the parables of the Friend at Midnight (11:5-8) and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8), this is a "how much more" parable that makes its point by a contrast. Just as the steward acted in his world to safeguard his well-being, how much more in this eschatological crisis should Jesus' hearers act to safeguard their own eternal well-being. Dishonesty is no more endorsed than is rudeness with the Friend at Midnight or lack of respect for God and people with the Unjust Judge. What is commended is action born of wisdom in view of the crisis.

KLYNE SNODGRASS, STORIES WITH INTENT, 416.

Example: The Tax Collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14)

And he also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

LUKE 18:9-14

Jesus himself provides the two-point summary derived from the actions of the characters: (1) “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, (2) and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Example: The Unjust Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

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

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

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 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? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”

LUKE 18:1-8

Notice the nuance of the judge character. He is likened to God as a contrast. If even a selfish judge eventually brings justice, how much more justice will the God of Israel bring? What can we learn from these characters?

1. God will hear and answer the cries of his people against injustice.
2. God’s people must persist in faithful prayer for the coming of God’s Kingdom and final justice.

One-Character Parables

These parables only have one character whose actions are not evaluated by an authority figure or contrasted with another character. Rather, the reader is left to evaluate, or Jesus himself evaluates.

Example: The Tower Builder and the Warring King (Luke 14:28-33)

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."

LUKE 14:28-33

What's the point of this parable? Anyone who is considering a life of following Jesus should also consider the cost.

3. Discern the Parable's Meaning vs. its Significance

The meaning of a parable is determined by Jesus' intention as far as we can discern it given the literary, historical, and cultural context provided by the Gospel authors (E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*). Jesus' meaning is focused on a specific historical moment: his inauguration of God's Kingdom and his confrontation with Israel. The significance of a parable is about how specific aspects of the parable's meaning strike later readers as especially important and relevant.

4. Brainstorm the Parable's Significance for Audiences Beyond the Original

We should pay attention to the original context of the parables, but this does not mean they do not have wisdom to offer us today. Take for example the prodigal son (Luke 15). Jesus is addressing Israel's religious leadership accusing him of unfaithfulness to God by including sinners, tax collectors, and outsiders into his "new covenant people." Jesus' response fits into his historical mission to Israel. However, Jesus' portrait of God can provide wisdom for later generations who deal with other socio-ethnic boundary lines. These boundaries can still prevent Jesus' followers from allowing God's grace to extend to others, and the message of the parable still rings true today.

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