
A Study Of



The Parables Of Jesus

Volume One

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An Introduction to the Parables

The parables comprise more than one-third of the recorded teachings of Jesus. While they contain some of the most profound lessons taught by Him, at the same time they comprise some of His simplest, most easily understood lessons.

The writers of the New Testament, while using allegories and similitudes, do not use the story parable as Jesus did though it is found occasionally in the Old Testament such as the parabolic story of a vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7 and the parable Nathan spoke to David (2 Samuel 12:1-7). In the New Testament, though, its use seemed to be unique to Jesus which was a fulfillment of prophecy (Compare Matthew 13:34-35 with Psalm 78:2 and Matthew 13:13-14 with Isaiah 6:9-10).

By the time of His ministry which is recorded in Matthew 12 and 13, Jesus' form of public instruction had become principally parabolic. Why? Their leaders and the people as a whole had hardened their hearts against Him and His message because they were filled with prejudice, moral hardness, blindness, and willful ignorance. As opposition to Him grew in intensity, so did His parables in their force, solemnity, and number. His purpose in them reflected the conditions which prompted Him to teach in such a way.

Parable Defined

- A. Many people define a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," but such a definition is not broad enough to include all the parables.
 1. Luke 4:23, by the above definition, would have to be called a proverb.
 2. Mark 7:15-17, by the above definition, would be a kind of riddle that would prompt the hearer to ask, "What is there that comes out of me that is more important than what I take in?"
- B. "Literally denotes a placing beside, (akin to *paraballo*, to throw or lay beside, to compare). It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison." (W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 840)
- C. It is derived from the Greek word "*parabole*" that comes from two other Greek words.
 1. "*Ballo*" (verb): "to throw or cast."
 2. "*Para*" (preposition): "alongside of."
 3. "That which is thrown alongside of," thus resulting in a comparison.
- D. Generally speaking, a parable is a comparison or analogy drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson. In the parables of Jesus there are comparisons of spiritual realities and natural occurrences.
- E. A parable is not the same thing as an allegory.
 1. In ancient and medieval times it was customary to treat the parables of Jesus as allegories. Some still treat them that way today.

2. Allegory defined.
 - a. "An allegory in the Gk. came to signify 'to speak so that the facts stated are applied to illustrate principles.'" (Vine, 49)
 - b. "The veiled presentation, in a figurative story, of a meaning metaphorically implied but not expressly stated. That which figuratively stands for something else." (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*)
3. An allegory is like a parable in that it is a story told to make a comparison but their difference lies in the fact that every detail in an allegory has an inner meaning while in a parable the details are not necessarily significant but are often there only to add color to the story.
4. An illustration of the use of allegories is found in Galatians 4:24-31.
 - a. Hagar and Sarah are used to contrast the old and new covenants.
 - b. Every detail in this allegory corresponds to something.

The Purposes of Parables

- A. While the New Testament does not state, in so many words, the exact purpose of the parabolic teaching of Jesus, it implies it in Matthew 13:10-13: "And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?' He answered and said to them, 'Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.'" (*New King James Version*)
- B. The four goals of parables.
 1. **The revelation of truth.**
 - a. Parables often reveal more truth than a plain statement would.
 - b. Those who, with a proper attitude, were seeking truth would be able to understand more (Matthew 13:11-12) because they had seeing eyes and hearing ears. (Matthew 13:16)
 - c. Christ revealed deep spiritual truths in a way easy for His disciples to understand.
 2. **The concealment of truth.** (Matthew 13:11-14)
 - a. The use of parables did not make Jesus' teaching plain to all who heard it because, having no appreciation for it, some of His hearers would not seek to understand it for they loved darkness more than light. (John 3:19-21)
 - b. The concealment of truth is not inconsistent with God. Consider Romans 1:28 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12.
 3. **The preservation of truth.**
 - a. Parables are set forth in a vivid, striking form which commands attention and impresses the memory thus making them easy to recall.

- b. Their use is especially beneficial to those who are just beginning to study spiritual things because it enables them to feed upon simpler things and to retain the stories more easily than just plain facts.
- 4. **The elicitation of truth from those otherwise reluctant to acknowledge it.**
 - a. Nathan's parable to David caused David to condemn himself. (2 Samuel 12:1-7)
 - b. The parable of the wicked husbandmen spoken by Jesus to the Jews caused the Jews, in effect, to admit that God would be just in destroying them for their wickedness. (Matthew 21:23-46)

Understanding Parables

- A. It is impossible to lay down strict rules for understanding parables.
 - 1. For example, in some parables small details have significance while in others details are not important.
 - 2. "The primary lesson or lessons of a parable must be grasped but not each and every detail is always to be forced to yield a distinct lesson. Parables are like pictures, in that they require details to make up the general picture but without each detail having of necessity a special and separate lesson. It may or may not be so." (G.H. Lang, *The Parabolic Teaching of Scripture*, 17)
- B. In general, a parable has one central meaning.
 - 1. In most cases, the details or incidents of the parable are merely "drapery," i.e., they serve as the background for the main thought or lesson.
 - 2. Some incidents, though, have meanings which are given by Jesus Himself.
- C. "In understanding the parables of Jesus, there are at least six points that we need to remember. (1) 'The material of parables may be real or fictitious.' (2) 'The material of parables may be borrowed from nature or from human life.' (3) 'The purely fanciful details of a parable may correspond accurately to the men who are instructed, and to their doings.' (4) 'Parts or the whole of a parable may be prophecy.' (5) 'The essential lesson taught is the main matter; details may or may not have separate significance.' (6) 'Application of details not explained must be on the lines of explanations given; then they will be sober and valuable, not fanciful or idle. Then also they will harmonize naturally with the whole picture, will add to its completeness, heighten its effect, and will not be foreign to it or irrelevant to the main lesson.'" (Lang, 17-18)

Conclusion

A very careful reading and study of the parables of Jesus will prove to be a great blessing to you. Giving serious consideration to their lessons will allow you to gain much knowledge and wisdom.

Lesson One: The Parable of the Sower

Lesson Texts: Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-8, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

1. In what part of Palestine was this parable spoken? Do you think that would have any particular significance in relation to the content of the parable? Explain your answer.
2. What four types of soil are referred to in the parable?
3. What resulted when the seed fell on each type of soil?
4. What were the various reactions to this parable?
5. Why was Jesus speaking in parables?
6. What does the “seed” represent? Why, in your estimation, is this such an appropriate figure?
7. What does the “way side” soil represent?
8. What does the “stony” soil represent?
9. What does the “thorny” soil represent?
10. What does the “good” soil represent?
11. What do you believe is the main lesson to be learned from this parable?

Lesson Two: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Lesson Text: Matthew 18:21-35

1. What prompted Jesus to speak this parable?
2. What does it mean “to reckon” (v. 24)?
3. Why did the king forgive the servant?
4. How does the amount owed by the fellow-servant to the unmerciful servant compare to the amount forgiven by the king to the unmerciful servant?
5. Contrast the attitude of the unmerciful servant toward his fellow-servant to the attitude of the king toward the unmerciful servant.
6. Were the fellow-servants of verse 31 wrong in informing their master of the actions of the unmerciful servant? Explain your answer.
7. What is the central meaning of this parable?
8. Cite other passages of Scripture which teach the same idea as this parable.

Lesson Three: The Parable of the Two Sons

Lesson Text: Matthew 21:28-32

1. Where did this teaching take place?
2. What events caused Jesus to teach this parable?
3. What did the father command his sons to do?
4. What was the first son's initial response to the command of his father? What did he ultimately do?
5. What was the second son's initial response to the command of his father? What did he ultimately do?
6. What is the crucial difference between the response of the two sons?
7. How did the audience which was listening to Jesus fit the description of the two sons?
8. Could the two sons represent anyone other than the audience of Jesus? Explain.
9. What is the main lesson of this parable?
10. What purpose of parabolic teaching did Jesus accomplish with this parable? Explain.
11. How does this parable relate to authority?
12. Cite, if you can, some secondary lessons that might be learned from this parable.

Lesson Four: The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen

Lesson Texts: Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-18

1. What is a husbandman?
2. What improvements did the householder make to his property for the husbandmen?
3. What did the husbandmen do to the servants of the householder who were sent to them? Why?
4. Why was the householder's son sent to the husbandmen? What did they do to him? Why?
5. What did the chief priests and elders of the Jews who were present say that the householder would do to the husbandmen?
6. What application did Jesus make of the answer of the chief priests and elders?
7. What did the chief priests and Pharisees want to do with Jesus? Why did they not do it?
8. What do the following figures represent?
 - a. The husbandmen.
 - b. The householder.
 - c. The vineyard.
 - d. The son.
9. What is the main lesson of the parable?
10. What secondary lessons could be drawn from this parable?

Lesson Five: The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Lesson Text: Luke 16:1-14

1. Why did the master call his steward before him?
2. What is a steward? What was a steward's task? What authority did a steward have?
3. Upon learning that his stewardship would soon be terminated, what alternatives did the steward consider? Why did he reject each of these?
4. What was the steward's ultimate course of action? How would it solve his problems?
5. Why did the master commend him even though the steward was still cheating him?
6. How do you reconcile Jesus telling His followers to be like an unjust man?
7. In what way(s) are we to be like the steward?
8. What is the "unrighteous mammon?"
9. What are "true riches?"
10. Why is it impossible to serve two masters?

Lesson Six:

Parables Teaching Persistence in Prayer

Lesson Texts: Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:1-13)

1. What request did the disciples make of Jesus that prompted this parable?
2. Why did the man go to his friend's house? What, do you suppose, made his need so urgent that he would go to his friend's house at such a late hour?
3. Why did the friend not answer the door at first?
4. Why was his friend at first reluctant to give him what he wanted? What finally moved him to give him what he requested?
5. What is the main lesson of this parable?

The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

6. What was the setting of this parable? What future event prompted its teaching?
7. Describe the judge found in the parable.
8. Why did the woman come to the judge?
9. Who or what do you think the following figures might represent?
 - a. The judge.
 - b. The woman.
10. What is the main lesson of this parable?

Lesson Seven: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Lesson Text: Luke 10:25-37

1. What prompted Jesus to teach this parable?
2. Why did the lawyer ask Jesus to tell him who his “neighbor” was?
3. Was there anything significant about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho?
4. Why would you expect a priest to help the man who had been beaten and robbed?
5. Why would you expect a Levite to help the man who had been beaten and robbed?
6. What was a “Samaritan?” What was the attitude that the Jews of Jesus’ day had toward Samaritans?
7. Why was the Samaritan such a fitting character to serve Jesus’ purpose in the parable?
8. What error(s) do you think Jesus was combating by teaching this parable?
9. What do you think is the central lesson of the parable?
10. What other lessons can be learned from this parable?
11. What bearing, if any, does the teaching of Matthew 7:12 have on this parable?
12. How can we imitate the Samaritan today? Be specific.

Lesson Eight: The Parable of the Rich Fool

Lesson Text: Luke 12:13-21

1. What caused Jesus to teach this parable?
2. What is covetousness?
3. Why is “the abundance of the things” one possesses not a valid measure of the worth and value of ones life? What is a valid one? Why?
4. Was Jesus teaching that it is wrong to be rich? Explain.
5. Was Jesus teaching that it is wrong to be at ease or to enjoy leisure activities? Explain.
6. Was Jesus teaching that it is wrong to save and provide financial security for oneself and his family? Explain.
7. Why did Jesus call the farmer in the parable a “fool?”
8. How does one “lay up treasure for himself?” Where is one to “lay up treasures?” How does one do it?
9. What does it mean to be “rich toward God?”
10. What is the central lesson of this parable?
11. How do verses 22 through 34 of this chapter apply to what Jesus taught in this parable?
12. What application(s) can be made of this parable today?

Lesson Nine: The Parables of Luke Fifteen

Lesson Text: Luke 15:1-32

1. What charge did the Pharisees and scribes level at Jesus? What bearing did it have on the parables found in this chapter?
2. Briefly summarize the parable found in verses four through seven.
3. What is the main lesson to be learned from the above parable?
4. Briefly summarize the parable found in verses eight through ten.
5. What is the main lesson to be learned from the above parable?
6. Briefly summarize the parable found in verses 11 through 32.
7. What is the main lesson to be learned from the above parable?
8. Who do the following characters seem to represent? Why?
 - a. The son who left home.
 - b. The father.
 - c. The son who remained at home?

9. What is meant by the statement of the father to his son who had remained home that his brother who “was dead... is alive again” seeing that it is apparent that the son who had left home had not died? Does the statement have any impact on man today?

10. How does each parable in this chapter compare to the other two?

11. How does each parable in this chapter differ from the other two?

12. What common lesson can be learned from all three parables in this chapter?

Lesson Ten: The Parable of the Talents

Lesson Text: Matthew 25:14-30

1. Why did a man call his servants to him?
2. What was a “talent?”
3. Why did the master distribute the talents to his servants as he did?
4. What did the man who had been given:
 - a. Five talents do?
 - b. Two talents do?
 - c. One talent do?
5. What did the master demand of his servants when he returned?
6. What did the man who had been given five talents report to his master? What did the master do in response?
7. What did the man who had been given two talents report to his master? What did the master do in response?
8. Why was the master angry at the man who had been given one talent? Was he justified in his anger? Explain.
9. Who or what do you think is represented by:
 - a. The master?
 - b. The servants?
 - c. The talents?
10. What do you think is the main lesson of this parable?

Lesson Eleven: The Parable of the Two Debtors

Lesson Text: Luke 7:36-50

1. What prompted Jesus to teach this parable?
2. Who was Simon? What was his religious background?
3. What was Simon's reaction when he saw a sinful woman washing and anointing the feet of Jesus?
4. What do you think was the basis of Simon's reaction?
5. Why do you think Jesus spent so much time associating with sinners? Explain your answer in the light of His statement found in Luke 19:10.
6. What differences exist between the way God looks upon people and man looks upon them? (cf. 1 Samuel 16:7)
7. In terms of the two debtors, should one have been more grateful to the moneylender than the other? If so, which one and why?
8. What is meant by the statement in verse 47, "But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little?"
9. What, in your own terms, is the main lesson to be learned from this parable?
10. What are some of the ways Christians should express their gratitude to God for the forgiveness of sins He has granted to them?

Lesson Twelve: The Parable of the Tares

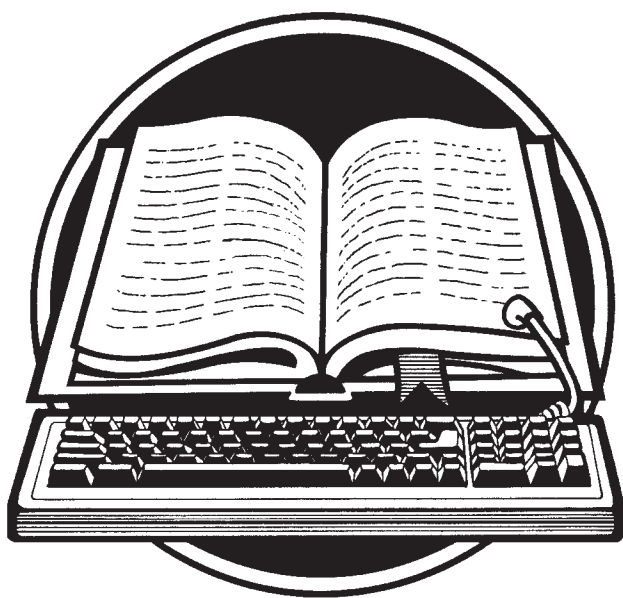
Lesson Text: Matthew 13:24-30

1. Briefly summarize the story of this parable.
2. What does the sower of the good seed represent?
3. What does the “field” represent? Explain.
4. Who does the “enemy” represent?
5. What is represented by:
 - a. The wheat?
 - b. The tares?
6. Why did the householder not allow his servants to gather up the tares? What do you think it represents?
7. When did the householder say the tares should be gathered? What is represented by “the harvest?”
8. What application, if any, can be made of this parable today?

Lesson Thirteen: The Mystery of the Seed Growing

Lesson Text: Mark 4:26-29

1. Briefly summarize this parable.
2. List other parables of Jesus which used “seed” to teach their lesson. Tell the meaning of each.
3. What does the “seed” represent in this parable?
4. In what way does man not know how a seed grows?
5. In what way is it true that “the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself ” (NKJV: “yields crops by itself ”)?
6. What do the following figures represent?
 - a. The sower.
 - b. The earth.
 - c. The harvest.
7. What is the main lesson of this parable?
8. What applications can be made of this parable today?



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