Parables

The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told

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Introduction

Why did Jesus teach in parables, and how can we interpret them rightly?

Jesus' parables were ingeniously simple word pictures with profound spiritual lessons. His teaching was full of these everyday stories. Some of them were no more than fleeting remarks about commonplace incidents, objects, or persons. In fact, the most compact of all Jesus' short stories does not even fill a complete verse of Scripture. It is found in Matthew 13:33: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” In the original Greek text, that parable is just nineteen words. It is the most ordinary of anecdotes about the most common of activities told in the fewest possible words. But it contains a profound lesson about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Like all Jesus’ parables, it captivated His hearers and has sustained the interest of Bible students for two thousand years.

Jesus was the master storyteller. There is not a truism so familiar or a doctrine so complex that He could not give it new depth and insight through the telling of a simple story. These narratives epitomize the plain, powerful profundity of His message and His teaching style.

Sloppy Thinking About the Parables

Despite the popularity of the parables, both the method and the meaning behind Jesus' use of these stories are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented, even by Bible scholars and experts in literary genre.

Many assume, for example, that Jesus told parables for one reason only: to make His teaching as easy, accessible, and comfortable as possible. After all, the parables were full of familiar features—easily recognizable scenes, agricultural and pastoral metaphors, household items, and common people. This would naturally make His words simpler for His provincial audience to relate to and grasp. It was without question a brilliant teaching method, unveiling eternal mysteries for simple minds. Jesus' parables certainly do show that even the simplest stories and illustrations can be effective tools for teaching the most sublime truths.

Some suggest that Jesus' use of parables proves storytelling is a *better* method for teaching spiritual truth than didactic discourses or sermonic

exhortation. Stories, they say, "pack more punch than sermons. Want to make a point or raise an issue? Tell a story. Jesus did it."[1]

Some go further still, contending that the default form of discourse in the church should always be narrative, not hortatory or didactic. They point to Mark 4:33–34, which describes Jesus' public teaching during the latter part of His Galilean ministry this way: “With many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them.” Therefore, the argument goes, storytelling should be every pastor's preferred method—if not the *only* style of preaching we ever use. In the words of one writer:

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> A sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an *event-in-time*, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book. Hence we are not engineering scientists; we are narrative artists by professional function.
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> Does it not seem strange to you that in our speech and homiletical training we seldom considered the connection between our

[1.] Janet Litherland, *Storytelling from the Bible* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether, 1991), 3.

> work and that of the playwright, novelist, or television writer? . . . I propose that we begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story.[2]

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Indeed, that is precisely the kind of preaching that now dominates many evangelical and megachurch pulpits. In some cases, the pulpit is totally gone, replaced by a stage and a screen. The key people on the church staff are those whose main task is directing the drama team or the film crew. Declaring truth in propositional form is out. What's now in vogue is telling stories—or acting them out—in a way that encourages people to fit themselves into the narrative. Stories are supposedly more hospitable, more meaningful, and more genteel than brute facts or unambiguous truth claims.

That perspective on preaching has steadily gained acceptance for three or four decades alongside other pragmatic church-growth strategies (a trend that I have critiqued elsewhere).[3] Here's how a religious publisher advertises

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2. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xx–xxi.

3. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2010).

an influential book dealing with the late-twentieth-century revolution in preaching and ministry philosophy: “Preaching is in crisis. Why? Because the traditional, conceptual approach no longer works. . . . It fails to capture the interest of listeners.”[4] The book itself says, “The old topical/conceptual approach to preaching is critically, if not terminally ill.”[5]

Countless recent books on preaching have echoed that assessment, or something similar. The remedy? We are told again and again that preachers need to see themselves as storytellers, *not* teachers of doctrine. Here's a typical sample:

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> Contrary to what some would have us believe, story, not doctrine, is the Bible's main ingredient. We do not have a doctrine of creation, we have stories of creation. We do not have a concept of the resurrection, we have marvelous narratives of Easter. There is relatively little in

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[4.] Richard Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), publisher's description.

[5.] *Ibid.*, 11.

either the Old Testament or the New Testament that does not rest on narrative or story of some form.[6]

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Statements such as those are dangerously misleading. It is sheer folly to set story against doctrine as if one were hostile to the other, or (worse yet) to pit narrative against proposition as if they were somehow mutually exclusive.[7] The idea that "a doctrine of creation" or "a concept of the resurrection" cannot be conveyed through narrative is simply and obviously untrue. It is likewise patently false to claim that "we do not have a concept of the resurrection" taught in Scripture apart from the narrative accounts. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 15—a long chapter, all of which is devoted to a systematic, pedagogical, and polemical defense of the doctrine of bodily resurrection, replete with exhortations, arguments, syllogisms, and an abundance of propositional statements.

Furthermore, there is a clear and significant difference between a *parable* (a story made up by Jesus to illustrate a precept, proposition, or

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[6.] William R. White, *Speaking in Stories* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 32.

[7.] Appendix 1 answers the common misconception that doctrine and story are fundamentally opposed to one another.

principle) and *history* (a chronicle of events that actually happened). The parable helps explain a truth; history gives a factual account of what happened. Although history is told in story form, it is not illustrative fiction but reality. One of the main ways the essential propositions of Christian truth have been preserved and passed down to us is by including them in the infallible record of biblical history. Again, that is the very principle on which Paul built his argument about the truth of bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. His defense of that doctrine begins with a recounting of historical facts that were amply confirmed by multiple eyewitnesses. In fact, the doctrines deemed "of first importance" (v. 3, NASB) were all key points in the story of that final Passover weekend: ". . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (vv. 3–4).

The notion that stories are always better and more helpful than straightforward truth claims is a shopworn postmodern canard. To differentiate stories from propositions with such a hard line and set one against the other (as if it were possible to tell stories *without* propositional statements) is sheer nonsense—rhetorical sleight of hand. That kind of intellectual gibberish is a

typical tool of language deconstruction. The real goal of such an exercise is to confound meaning, eliminate certainty, and overthrow dogma.[8]

But the flagrant mistreatment of Jesus' parables by modern commentators sometimes gets even worse than that. An even more radical view, rapidly gaining popularity in these postmodern times, is the notion that stories by their very nature have no fixed or objective meaning; they are entirely subject to the hearer's interpretation. By this way of thinking, Jesus' use of parables was a deliberate repudiation of propositions and dogma in favor of mystery and conversation. One commentator says it like this: "It is the nature of narrative to lend itself to an auditor's imagination and become whatever the auditor wants it to be—in spite of the narrator's intention. Narratives are essentially polyvalent, and therefore subject to a wide range of readings."[9]

[8.] For a succinct explanation and analysis of postmodernity see John MacArthur, *The Truth War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007). In short, postmodern philosophies are dominated by the notion that truth is subjective, hazy, uncertain—perhaps even unknowable. Or, to use a brief statement from *The Truth War,* "Postmodernism in general is marked by *a tendency to dismiss the possibility of any sure and settled knowledge of the truth*" (10).

[9.] Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 102.

That same author cites other commentators' varying interpretations of Jesus' parables and cynically declares, "Parables work any way interpreters and auditors want them to work—in spite of whatever Jesus may have intended with them. . . We simply do not know how Jesus used parables and clearly have no hope of ever discovering his intention."[10]

He's not finished:

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> Interpreters of parables are not telling readers what Jesus actually meant with the parable; they simply do not, and cannot, know that. Interpreters describe what *they think* Jesus meant—something vastly different. An explanation is evoked in a particular reader's mind from an engagement with a parable, and responses depend as much on what that interpreter brings to the parable as on what the parable itself says—perhaps more so. Had the interpreter been present in the audience when Jesus first spoke the parable, the situation would have been no different. My hypothetical modern interpreter, whom I have just taken back in time to the feet of Jesus, would still have to make

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[10] *Ibid.*

> sense of the parable as interpreters do today. Then as now, others in the audience would have had rather different responses. In this sense the situation with interpretations of parables today is identical to what would have been the case in the first century. Thus, no "right" interpretations of the parables of Jesus ever existed. By "right" I mean interpretations that capture Jesus' intent. Given the nature of narrative, no one explanation of a parable can rule out all others.[11]

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Why anyone who holds such a view would bother writing a book on the parables is a mystery to me, I confess. If a person rejects the propositional truth being illustrated by a parable, *of course* it remains an open riddle. The problem is not that the parable has no true meaning but that those who come to the story with a heart fixed in unbelief have already rejected the truth the parable was given to illustrate.

The view that author is advocating is an exaggerated version of *reader-response criticism*, another favorite tool of postmodern language deconstruction. The underlying idea is that the recipient, not the author, is the

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[11.] *Ibid.*

one who creates the meaning of any text or narrative. It's a two-edged sword. If applied consistently, that approach to hermeneutics would expose the incomprehensibility of the commentator's own prose. At the end of the day, it is just another expression of the postmodern agenda to confound rather than clarify meaning—motivated by a stubborn rejection of biblical authority and inerrancy.

Why Parables?

All the above views are wrong—and dangerously so—because they take only part of the truth into account. Consider, for example, the common belief that the sole reason Jesus used parables was to make hard truths as clear, familiar, and easy to grasp as possible. When Jesus Himself explained why He spoke in parables, He gave practically the opposite reason:

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> The disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"
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> 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. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah [6:9–10] is fulfilled, which says:

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,

And seeing you will see and not perceive;

For the hearts of this people have grown dull.

Their ears are hard of hearing,

And their eyes they have closed,

Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,

Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,

So that I should heal them.’”(Matt. 13:10–15)

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While the parables do illustrate and clarify truth for those with ears to hear, they have precisely the opposite effect on those who oppose and reject Christ. The symbolism hides the truth from anyone without the discipline or desire to

seek out Christ's meaning. That's why Jesus adopted that style of teaching. It was a divine judgment against those who met His teaching with scorn, unbelief, or apathy. In chapter 1, we'll look more closely into this idea, and we'll examine the circumstances that prompted Jesus to begin speaking in parables.

This is not to suggest that the parables were *merely* a reflection of the severity with which God condemns unbelief; they were also an expression of His mercy. Notice how Jesus (citing Isaiah's prophecy) described the unbelievers among those who followed Him. They had stopped up their own ears and held their own eyes tightly closed “lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them” (v. 15). Their unbelief was stubborn, deliberate, and by their own choice irrevocable. The more they heard Christ, the more truth they were accountable for. The more they hardened their hearts against the truth, the more severe their judgment would be, for “to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Thus by concealing spiritual lessons in everyday stories and symbols, Jesus was keeping them from piling guilt upon guilt on their own heads.

There were surely other merciful benefits of this teaching style. The parables (like any good illustration) would naturally arouse interest and increase attention in the minds of people who were not necessarily hard-set against the truth but simply lacked a measure of aptitude or had no taste for hearing doctrine expounded in plain, dogmatic language. No doubt the parables had the effect of awakening the minds of many such people who were struck by the simplicity of Jesus' parables and therefore became eager to discover the underlying meanings.

For others (including, surely, some whose first exposure to the truth may have provoked skepticism, indifference, or even rejection), the graphic imagery of the parables helped keep truth rooted in the memory until it sprang forth in faith and understanding.

Richard Trench, a nineteenth-century Anglican bishop, wrote one of the most widely read works on Jesus' parables. He highlights the mnemonic value of these stories:

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Had our Lord spoken naked spiritual truth, how many of his words, partly from his hearers' lack of interest in them, partly from their lack

> of insight, would have passed away from their hearts and memories, and left no trace behind them. But being imparted to them in this form, under some lively image, in some short and perhaps seemingly paradoxical sentence, or in some brief but interesting narrative, they aroused attention, excited inquiry, and even if the truth did not at the moment, by the help of the illustration used, find an entrance into the mind, yet the words must thus often have fixed themselves in their memories and remained by them.[12]

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So there were several good and gracious reasons for Jesus to package the truth in parables in the face of widespread unbelief, apathy, and opposition to his ministry (cf. Matt. 13:58; 17:17).

When explained, the parables were illuminating illustrations of crucial truths. And Jesus freely explained His parables to the disciples.

For those who remained unyielding in their refusal to hear, however, the unexplained parables remained riddles without clear meaning, so the parables further obscured Jesus' teaching from their already dull hearts. Thus

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[12.] Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (New York: Appleton, 1856), 28.

Jesus' immediate judgment against their unbelief was built right into the form of discourse He used when He taught publicly.

In short, Jesus' parables had a clear twofold purpose: *They hid the truth* from self-righteous or self-satisfied people who fancied themselves too sophisticated to learn from Jesus, *while the same parables revealed truth* to eager souls with childlike faith—those who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Jesus thanked His Father for both results: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight" (Matt. 11:25–26).

One more common misunderstanding needs to be cleared up: Our Lord did not *always* speak in parables. Most of the Sermon on the Mount is precisely the kind of straightforward sermonic exhortation some of today's more stylish homileticians repudiate. Though Jesus closes the sermon with a short parable (the wise and foolish builders, Matt. 7:24–27), the substance of the message, starting with the Beatitudes, is delivered in a series of direct propositional statements, commandments, polemical arguments, exhortations, and words of warning. There are many vivid word pictures in the mix—a

courtroom and prison scene in 5:25; the amputation of offending eyes or hands in verses 29–30; the eye as the lamp of the body (6:22); lilies arrayed in finery that surpasses Solomon in all his glory; the plank in the eye (7:3–5); and so on. But these aren't parables. In fact, in Matthew's account, the sermon is 107 verses long and only 4 verses near the very end could technically be described as parable.

Luke does include one saying not found in Matthew's record of the Sermon, and Luke expressly calls it a parable: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?" (Luke 6:39). [13] That, of course, is not a classic narrative-style parable. It's a maxim framed as a question. Luke calls it a parable no doubt because of the way it invokes such a vivid picture that could easily be recast as narrative. But even after raising the parable count in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to two, we are still left with the fact that Jesus' best-known public discourse is simply not an example of narrative discourse.

[13.] This was undoubtedly a common saying of Jesus, because Matthew 15:14 does record a similar statement, but this time it is a comment made in private to the Twelve, and it comes at a much later point in the Galilean ministry (Matthew 15:14). Peter immediately responds, “Explain this parable to us” (v. 15), but the saying Jesus explains is an earlier statement made to the multitudes: “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (v. 11). This broad usage of the word *parable* exemplifies how the Bible's own use of the word makes Jesus’ parables very difficult to distinguish, define, and count precisely.

It is a classic *sermon,* dominated by doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). It is not a story or a string of anecdotes. The few scattered word pictures simply illustrate the sermonic material.

Elsewhere, we see Jesus preaching and exhorting the multitudes with no suggestion whatsoever that He used a narrative style. Some of the longest, most detailed records of Jesus' public sermons are found among the discourses recorded in John's gospel, and none of them includes any parables. There are no parables mentioned in the record of Jesus' teaching in the synagogues at Nazareth (Luke 4:13–27) or Capernaum (vv. 31–37). So it simply is not accurate to imply that He employed narrative preaching more than any other style, much less to say that He *always* spoke in parables.

What, then, does that statement in Mark 4:33–34 mean? "Without a parable He did not speak to them"? That's a description of Jesus' *public* teaching style *only during the final year or so of His public ministry.* It refers to that intentional change in teaching style that took place about the same time Jesus' Galilean ministry entered its final phase. As noted earlier, we'll open chapter 1 by examining the events that provoked Jesus to adopt that style. It

was a sudden and striking shift, and the parables were a response to hard-hearted, deliberate unbelief and rejection.

So it's quite true that the parables *do* help illustrate and explain truth to simple people who listen with faithful hearts. But they also conceal truth from unwilling and unbelieving auditors—by neatly wrapping the mysteries of Christ's kingdom in familiar symbols and simple stories. This is not an incidental point. By His own testimony, the main reason Jesus suddenly adopted the parabolic style had more to do with hiding the truth from hard-hearted unbelievers than explaining the truth to simple-minded disciples. It was Jesus' own declared purpose thus to “utter things kept secret”—and His parables still serve that same dual purpose today. If it seems the stories Jesus told are capable of endless interpretations and therefore devoid of any discernible objective meaning, that's because truly understanding them requires faith, diligence, careful exegesis, and a genuine desire to hear what Christ is saying.

It is important also to know that all unbelievers lack that capacity. Jesus' parables “speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of

this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:7–8). No unbeliever will ever grasp the mysteries of the kingdom by filtering these stories through the sieve of human wisdom. Scripture is clear on that. The carnal, unbelieving "'[e]ye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him.' *But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.* For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (vv. 9–10, emphasis added).

In other words, faith, prompted and enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, is the necessary prerequisite for understanding the parables. These stories *do* have objective meaning. They have a divinely intended, and therefore correct, interpretation. Jesus Himself explained some of the parables in detail, and the hermeneutic He employed gives us a model to follow as we learn from the rest of His stories. But we must come to the parables as believers, willing to hear—not skeptics with hearts hardened against the truth.