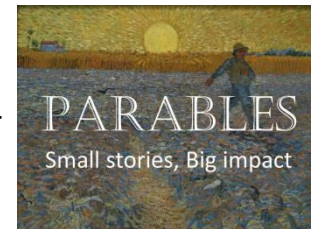


PARABLES of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Lamp under a bowl	5:14-15	4:21-22	8:16; 11:33
Wise and foolish builders	7:24-27		6:47-49
New cloth on an old garment	9:16	2:21	5:36
New wine in old wineskins	9:17	2:22	5:37-38
Sower and soils	13:3-8	4:3-8	8:5-8
Mustard seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
Weeds	13:24-30		
Leaven / Yeast	13:33		13:20-21
Hidden treasure	13:44		
Pearl of great value	13:45-46		
Drag-net	13:47-50		
Lost sheep	18:12-13		15:4-6
Two debtors (unforgiving servant)	18:23-34		
Workers in the vineyard	20:1-16		
Two sons	21:28-31		
Wicked tenants	21:33-41	12:1-9	20:9-16
Wedding Banquet	22:2-14		
Faithful steward	24:45-51		12:42-48
Fig-tree as herald of summer	24:32-33	13:28-29	21:29-32
Ten 'bridesmaids'	25:1-13		
Talents (Matthew) Pounds (Luke)	25:14-30		19:12-27
Sheep and goats	25:31-36		
Growing seed		4:26-29	
Moneylender			7:41-43
Good Samaritan			10:30-37
Friend in need			11:5-8
Rich fool			12:16-21
Watchful servants		13:35-37	12:35-40
Fig-tree without figs			13:6-9
Places of honour at the wedding-feast			14:7-14
Great banquet and the reluctant guests			14:16-24
Counting the cost			14:28-33
Lost Coin			15:8-10
The prodigal son			15:11-32
Dishonest/Shrewd manager			16:1-8
Rich man and Lazarus			16:19-31
The master and his servant			17:7-10
Persistent widow & unrighteous judge			18:2-5
The Pharisee and the tax collector			18:10-14

PARABLES: Small Stories, Big Impact



There are few parts of the Bible as familiar to Bible readers as the parables of Jesus. We see and hear their lingering influence even in our broader culture when people refer to helpful neighbours as “Good Samaritans” or label a wayward youth as a “Prodigal”.

We speak of “burying our talents” or “counting the cost”, all of which find their origin in the parables of Jesus; small stories with a big impact.

Jesus had both a powerful message and an amazing ability to communicate it in a way that was *interesting* and *impactful*. The parabolic form¹ was not unique to Jesus for the Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ day used parables too, some of them strikingly similar to those of Jesus. Yet, what made Jesus’ teaching distinctive was the centrality of parables (Mark 4²). He didn’t merely use parables as side-bar illustrations. They were the *central* means by which he taught and ushered people into a whole new world: the kingdom of God which he said was breaking into our world through his ministry (Luke 11²⁰) and into which he called others to follow (Mark 1¹⁵).

What would the world look like with God in charge? Jesus’ numerous parables about the Kingdom of God (and the God of the Kingdom) invited people into discovering this new world order. Through story he took them on a cross-cultural journey that began with people and stories drawn from the everyday world. But his stories soon caught his listeners up into a very different and often unexpected place. More than simply “earthly stories with a heavenly message”, A.M. Hunter described a parable as “one of those stories in the Bible which sounds at first like a pleasant yarn, but keeps something up its sleeve which suddenly pops up and leaves you flat.”

In addition to their familiarity and powerful punch, many of Jesus’ parables also had a lingering and lasting effect. As C.H. Dodd explains,

“At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

So while Jesus’ stories may seem obvious enough at first, upon further hearing and reflection they draw us into a radically different understanding of reality. Jesus’ parables aren’t simply sermon illustrations, but lively metaphors and stories with the power and ability to radically alter how we understand reality. As one writer put it, “*Whether we get them or not, they remain first and foremost his way of getting to us.*”

¹ *parabole* means “to place alongside” for the purpose of comparison (*para*—beside; *ballo*—to throw)

A parable for reflection

There were two Bible teachers who prayed as they entered the library to work on understanding a biblical text. One was a biblical scholar and the other a common lay teacher. The biblical scholar, on route to deep seclusion in the collection of recent scholarly journals, prayed like this:

“Lord, I thank you that I am not like other interpreters – the youth ministers, authors of popular devotional literature, mass production book publishers or even this lay teacher. I study the Scriptures for hours every day – in their original...and several other languages, not to mention my work in ancient history and historiography, literary theory, social-scientific research, the most important commentaries, the most recent dissertations, and the most scholarly periodicals!”

But the lay teacher, trying to remember how to use the complicated cataloguing system to find an *understandable* commentary on a passage of Scripture, prayed thus,

“God, please help me, a mere small group leader, find something to help me understand your word.”

I tell you, this person – who desperately needed it – received help from the Lord. But could it have come from the eminent biblical scholar?

(Source = Reading Luke, p. 350)

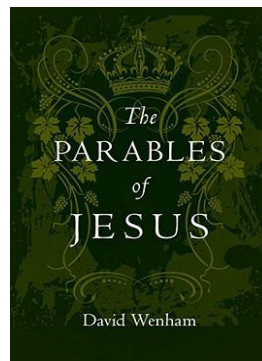
The Ultimate Guide

I share this parable not to belittle the work of scholars, but to remind us that the best guide into understanding and applying the scriptures is the Master himself. So I offer some basic guidelines on the next page for a prayerful and careful reading and interpretation of the parables since Jesus continues to teach and transform us through these small stories with a big impact.

A Cultural and Interpretive Guide

Along the way we will need some help understanding some of the cultural differences between that of Jesus’ time and our own. After all, as Dr. David Ewert noted, *“The message of the Bible is for all times, but it has come to us in ancient clothing....so, we must take careful account of the Bible’s ancient dress...[before] putting it into forms with which we are familiar.”* Many of the parables of Jesus have their setting in the fishing industry, the household, the economy, or other aspects of Palestinian life so knowing something about these will help us.

David Wenham in his book, The Parables of Jesus, is a very reliable cultural and interpretive guide.



Interpreting Parables – how to read & interpret & apply Jesus’ parables

- 1) **PRAY** – “Lord Jesus, please open up & take me more deeply into the reason You taught this parable.”
- 2) **READ the WHOLE Parable** before analyzing the details
- 3) **Literary CONTEXT** – take note of where the parable is in the flow of each Gospel in which it is recorded (what comes *before* and *after*) – e.g. Luke 14-16 all = at dinner
- 4) Take note of **how it BEGINS and ENDS** – Are there any common words, phrases, and/or themes? (e.g. “lost” in Luke 15)
- 5) Take note of the **REPETITION of words**.
- 6) Note any **SUPRISE actions or speeches**.
- 7) Note any way you are **TROUBLED or OFFENDED**
- 8) Note any way you are **LIFTED or ENCOURAGED**
- 9) Try to **hear Jesus in his CULTURAL CONTEXT**
 - Israel of the 1st Century,
 - Under Roman occupation
 - Messianic expectations (fanned into flame by John the Baptist)
 - Middle-Eastern cultural values and dynamics
 - Echoes of the Great Story (i.e. God’s salvation story from Gen. to Rev.)
- 10) Suggest the **CLUSTER OF TRUTHS Jesus is announcing or commending**
 - On the nature of the Kingdom of God & the God of the Kingdom
- 11) **APPLICATION** - How would your thinking and acting change if you embraced the “scandal” in the parable? (e.g. the example of the Good Samaritan)
- 12) **CONSULT others** (e.g. experienced believers, good commentaries)
- 13) **PRAY the parable** – as you are prompted by it and as it probes you.