

# Understanding Parables

The Gospels of the New Testament are made up of a variety of literary forms. Miracle stories, conflict stories, pronouncement stories, sayings, and fulfillment citations are just a few examples. However, among all of the literary forms of the New Testament gospels, parables are the most familiar and often the least understood. In this essay, we will investigate the gospel parable as a literary form and comment on the art of interpreting parables as a proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Understanding the characteristics of a particular literary form is important for right interpretation of a text. We cannot ask a text or any kind of media to answer questions that the author never intended to answer. For example, if we are reading an editorial in a newspaper, we should not expect to get unbiased, documentable evidence explaining both sides of the issue in question, but we can expect to read a rhetorically convincing, perhaps inflammatory, argument in support of a particular position. Likewise, if we are viewing a vampire movie, we should not expect to greet the vampire after the show, but we can expect to be entertained and even have an opportunity to reflect theologically or philosophically about fundamental questions like the nature of the afterlife or the problem of evil.

When we are working with modern literary forms, we engage in this process of interpretation automatically and without much conscious reflection, because the forms are so familiar to us. However, the process of interpretation becomes much more complicated when we are dealing with ancient texts. Sometimes we think we understand an ancient literary form, because we liken it to a modern form, and end up forcing mistaken assumptions on the text. The parables of the New Testament are no exception.

## Parables Defined

What is a parable? The Greek word *parabolē* means “a placing of one thing beside another.” A synonym of *parabolē* is *paroimia*, which means “a saying that deviates from the usual way of speaking.” Both words belong to the general classification of proverbs or riddles. A quick survey of the New Testament Gospels’ use of word *parabolē* will reveal that it is often used to introduce a specific parable: for example, “He spoke to them another parable” (Matthew 13:33) or “Hear then the parable of the sower” (13:18).

The Greek word *parabolē* is also used by the narrator of the Gospels in summary statements that describe the nature of Jesus’ teaching. Here are two examples: “And when [Jesus] was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. He answered them, ‘The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables’” (Mark 4:10–11) and “With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to [the crowd], but to his own disciples he explained everything in private” (4:33–34). Implied in these statements is the notion that Jesus’ parables are didactic, and therefore revelatory, but they also have a certain level of opaqueness, because on some level they are riddles. Thus in the hearing of the parables, some people become “insiders” and others become “outsiders” to the community of believers.

Thanks to the work of form critics in the first half of the previous century, we have a number of contemporary definitions of parables that give us insight into how they make meaning. These biblical scholars took on the task of collecting and categorizing parables in order to learn what they could about the “setting in life” (*Sitz im Leben*) of the early Church in the period between the death and Resurrection of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. Although this effort was mostly unsuccessful, form critics made important contributions to the field of biblical studies by developing descriptive definitions of the major literary forms of the Gospels, including the parable. This definition by the New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd, is perhaps the most enduring:



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. (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 16)

Subsequently, other biblical scholars, employing various methodologies, have developed a wide range of definitions that shed light on the form and function of the Gospel parable. Here is a sampling:

[Parables] function not as discussion-openers but as conversation-stoppers. Instead of engaging opponents in dialogue in order to lead them to a reasoned point of view, Jesus, through his parables, throws such light on what his adversaries are about that they are forced to see their attitudes as essentially foolish. (Andrew Parker, *Painfully Clear*, 65)

The parables require, even compel, interpretation, and their meaning derives from the fusion of the parabolic narrative and the belief system of the interpreter. Hence the parables are ever new, adapting easily to the concerns of each new age, even each new interpreter. (Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 40)

With Jesus, the device of parabolic utterance is used not to explain things to people's satisfaction but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all their previous explanations and understandings. (Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 6)

Although these definitions are distinct in their tone and methodological approach, they have one common theme—parables have an enigmatic character to them. They are, on the one hand, simple stories that incorporate common, everyday imagery. They are not symbol stories and they do not contain coded language. On the other hand, their message is somewhat elusive. They draw you into the familiar and then, when you have settled into your complacency, they invite you, sometimes not so subtly, to think about something in entirely new ways.

## The Art of Interpreting Parables

Parables are not as easy to interpret as one might expect. First, the reader needs to recognize that the parable is a fictive narrative. In the case of the Gospels, a parable is a true-to-life story told by Jesus for a particular purpose. It does not recount an actual historical event. This is evident even in the fact that the characters of a parable are anonymous or unnamed. They could represent any man or any woman. Second, however brief or long it is, a parable is a narrative. It has a plot with a beginning, middle, and end, and the message of the parable is most likely to be found in the climax of the story. Third, parables involve a comparison. Some concept or idea in the context of Jesus' teaching is being compared to something in the parable.

Let's look at the Parable of the Yeast: [Jesus] spoke to them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened" (Matthew 13:33). The narrator of the Gospel identifies this story as a parable. The woman is unnamed. She could have been any first-century woman of Palestine, but she is not the subject of the story, nor is she the object of comparison. Instead, the Kingdom of Heaven, the manifest Reign of God, is being compared to yeast or leaven for bread. The Greek word is *zumē*, which carries the connotation of fermentation or something that boils or bubbles up, like a sourdough starter. Starter is made from raw bread that is kept back from a previous batch of bread. It is mixed with water, flour, and a



little sugar and then allowed to ferment in preparation for the making of the next batch of bread. It is made up of living organisms so, if you do not care for it properly, you can kill it. At the same time, in the Jewish purity system, this yeast is considered to be a corrupting agent. It is unclean because it makes flour do something that is not in its nature to do: it makes flour bubble up and grow far beyond its original size.

The imagery for this parable comes from common life. Virtually every culture has bread as one of its staples and until recent times making bread was almost exclusively the responsibility of the women of the household. Therefore the first-century hearers would have easily related to this story. What would have “arrested” its hearers is the enormous amount of flour involved. Although it can be difficult to recover information about the modern equivalents of ancient weights and measures, many biblical scholars estimate that three measures of flour is generally estimated to be a half-bushel or thirty pounds. That amount would have made enough bread to feed a huge crowd.

Summing up our interpretation of this Parable of the Yeast, we note that the main character of the story is the yeast. The plot proceeds in three stages: first, there is yeast; second, the woman takes it and kneads it into an enormous amount of flour; finally, the entire amount of bread begins to ferment and bubble. First-century hearers were accustomed to the amazing sight of rising bread, but they probably wondered how such a small amount of leaven could create such a significant result. Yet, such is the Kingdom of Heaven, the manifest Reign of God. One final point to consider is that God’s manifest Reign is described in terms of women’s work. In a highly patriarchal culture like the first-century Mediterranean world, this comparison of the Kingdom of Heaven to fruits of women’s work most likely would have raised a few eyebrows!

Another consideration for the interpretation of parables is that, prior to their placement in the Gospels, they would have been passed on orally within the community and preserved in what biblical scholars call oral tradition. Only when they were incorporated into the written Gospels were they given a setting and conclusion. Thus biblical scholars describe parables as not being context specific—that is, theoretically, you could take a parable from one literary setting, insert it into another, and for all intents and purposes give it a new meaning.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is a good example of a parable that is not context specific. In Matthew, chapter 18, Jesus has already told the disciples that they ought not be the cause of sin for the “little ones” of the community. He introduces the parable with another admonition to the disciples: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” (verse 10). He concludes the parable with the affirmation that God wills for none of his little ones to be lost (see verse 14). Thus the literary context of the story tells the reader that the Parable of the Lost Sheep is directed toward the disciples who represent the leaders of the Christian faith community. They cannot ignore or look down upon the little ones of the community lest they defy God’s will; rather, they must be like the shepherd who is crazy enough to leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after the one lost sheep and who rejoices if he finds it, never minding the ninety-nine that he left vulnerable to attack. It should be noted that the overall theme of Matthew, chapter 18, is church as a community of reconciliation.

Compare the message of Matthew’s Parable of the Lost Sheep to another very similar parable in Luke’s Gospel. In the introduction to Luke’s Parable of the Lost Sheep, we learn that tax collectors and sinners are coming to meet Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes, the so-called spiritual leaders of the Jewish People, are watching and complaining among themselves about Jesus’ behavior (see Luke 15:1–2). Here Jesus addresses the parable not to the disciples but to the Pharisees and scribes, saying, “What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?” (verse 4). You can imagine the Pharisees and scribes looking at one another incredulously and saying, “Only a fool would do that because he is certain to lose the other ninety-nine!”



But Jesus continues, reinforcing his message of compassion for the repentant sinners and criticism against those who have no concern for them. Jesus likens himself to the crazy shepherd. The lost-and-now-found sheep is the repentant sinner. And the ninety-nine in the desert? These are the Pharisees and scribes, the self-righteous ones who think they have no need of repentance. Though they obey all the rules about avoiding ritually unclean people, Heaven will not ring out with joy like it does for the repentant sinner. In Luke's Gospel this parable is one of a triad of parables that demonstrates God's love for the sinner who finds his or her way back to God. The other two are the Parable of the Lost Coin (see 15:8–10) and the Parable of the Lost Son (see 15:11–32).

We can sum up this section on the art of interpreting parables with two final points. First, it is important that we understand the social and cultural significance of the parable's imagery before attempting to interpret a parable. Without knowledge of the social and cultural background of the story, we are likely to miss what it is that should be "arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness" (Dodd, *Parables*, 16). Second, we must pay attention to the literary context of the written parable. Often in the opening and closing of the parable, we will find the keys to unlocking its meaning.

## Parables as Prophetic Utterances

In addition to their didactic function, parables can serve as prophetic utterances. Luke's Parable of the Lost Son is one such parable, because it offers words of consolation for the repentant and words of condemnation against those who oppose God's will. Another parable that has prophetic overtones is the Parable of the Tenants (see Mark 12:1–12, Matthew 21:33–46, Luke 20:9–19). Jesus is speaking to the chief priests, scribes, and elders. He alludes to an Old Testament prophetic parable that portrays God as the vineyard owner and Israel and Judah as the unproductive vines in the vineyard that are about to be destroyed because of their refusal to yield good fruit (see Isaiah 5:1–7).

The synoptic Gospels' Parable of the Tenants is an expansion of the vineyard parable from Isaiah. God is again portrayed as the vineyard owner, but this time he rents out the vineyard to some tenants. These represent the Jewish religious authorities. One after another, the vineyard owner (God) sent servants—these are the prophets and other leaders of the salvation story—to collect what was due, but they beat, abused, and even killed the servants. Finally, the vineyard owner sent his beloved son—this is Jesus—but they killed him, thinking they could steal his inheritance. Instead, the vineyard owner will kill them and give their responsibilities to someone else. The narrator of the Gospel ends by saying that the chief priests, scribes, and elders went away because "they realized that he had addressed the parable to them" (Mark 12:12).

The Parable of the Rich Fool (see Luke 12:16–21) is another example of a parable with prophetic overtones. It is presented as a follow-up to Jesus' admonition, "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions" (12:15). It is addressed to the crowd who had gathered around Jesus, and it illustrates one of Luke's major themes, namely, the danger of riches for the wellbeing of the early Christian community.

## Allegorical Interpretations of Parables

People sometimes mistakenly assume that all parables can be interpreted allegorically or that parable and allegory are interchangeable names for the same literary form. This is not the case. We already have several descriptive definitions of *parable*. Like the parable, the allegory is an extended metaphor. However, unlike the parable, the characters and events in the allegory are symbols for something other



than the literal or historical meaning of the text. Allegory comes from the Greek word *allēgorein*, which means “to speak so as to imply something other.” Allegories usually address universal values or moral stances—topics that are not as well suited to discourse or debate.

A well-known allegory from the period of the early Church is one that comes from the *Homilies* of Origen of Alexandria. By giving symbolic meanings to all of the details of the story, Origen captures the entire story of salvation in these few words:

The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord's body, the [inn], which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. . . . The manager of the [inn] is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior's second coming.” (*Homilies* 34.3, Joseph T. Lienhard, translator, 138)

Adam is the symbol of the whole human race as it journeys through life on its way to Heaven. His life is full of troubles, but he is helped along the way by Christ and the Church. Note, however, that the meaning of Origen's allegory is not necessarily tied to the meaning of the parable as the author intended it. In Luke's Gospel the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see 10:29–37) is told to demonstrate the meaning of obeying the law and being a true neighbor to the other.

We cannot conclude our discussion of allegorical interpretations of parables without a few comments about the Parable of the Sower and the Seed (see Mark 4:1–12, Matthew 13:1–13, Luke 8:4–10). It is the only Gospel parable that has been preserved with its interpretation. Some biblical scholars call it an allegorical interpretation because each element of the story is given another significance beyond its literal meaning and because it treats a universal theme, the call to discipleship. Although the parable appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels, Mark's version is the most pointed, so we will focus on that one.

In Mark 4:1–9, Jesus tells the crowd about a man who went out to plant his seed. Some of it fell on the pathway and the birds came and took it away. Other seed fell on rocky ground; it grew quickly, but when the sun beat down on it, the plants quickly withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell into thorny soil, and the thorns choked the new plants, and some seed fell into rich soil and produced fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. Although we call this the Parable of the Sower, its primary concern is the four different types of soil. The part of the story that would have been “arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness” (Dodd, *Parables*, 16) has to do with the superabundant yield that was produced by the good soil.

After a brief teaching on the purpose of parables, Jesus proceeds to provide an interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, beginning with the seeds. They represent the Word of God. Therefore the sower must be Jesus. But what about the different kinds of soil? What do they represent? New Testament scholar Mary Ann Tolbert observed that the pathway represents the characters in Mark's Gospel who are so closed down that they cannot hear the Word—the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the elders. Satan immediately comes and takes it away. Those represented by the rocky soil respond immediately to the Word that is planted in them—Peter and the disciples—but their roots are not strong, so when persecution comes they fall away.

Those represented by the thorny soil—the rich young man, the disciples who want to sit at Jesus' left and right when he comes into his Kingdom, and perhaps even Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate—hear the Word and it begins to grow, but it gets choked out by anxieties and desire for riches. Finally, those represented by the good soil—the hemorrhaging woman (see Mark 5:21–43), the leper (see 1:40–45), the



blind Bartimaeus (see 10:46–52), and the woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany (see 14:3–9)—hear the Word of God, take it to heart, and bear fruit.

Hearing Jesus' Words and acting on them is the essence of Christian discipleship. Who is the true disciple in Mark's Gospel? Not the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and not those who strive for power and riches. Neither are Peter and the disciples. No, the true disciples are the "little ones," the outcasts and marginalized of society who trust in God and respond in faith. "Let the children come to me," says Jesus, "do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14).

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