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LIVING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

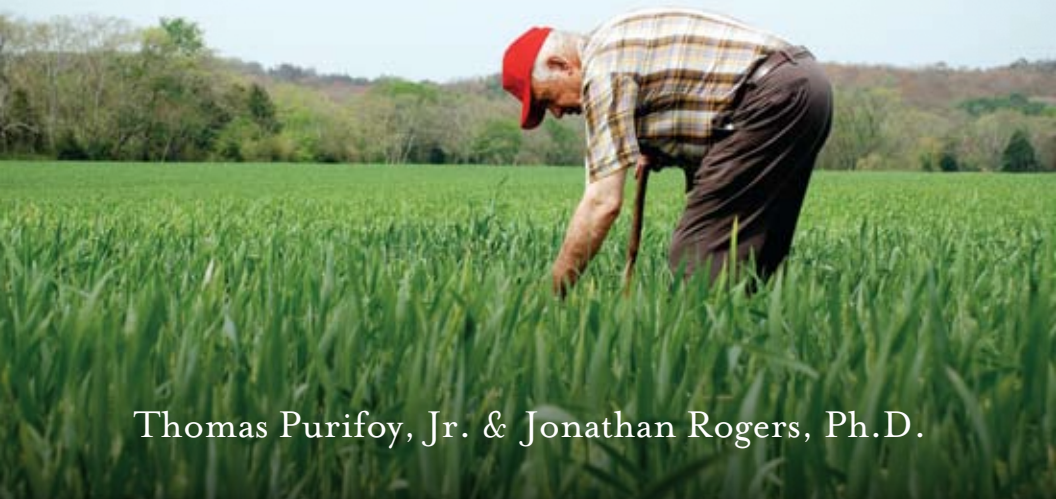
V O L U M E I

Parables Overview

Understanding the Parable

D O W N L O A D

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Thomas Purifoy, Jr. & Jonathan Rogers, Ph.D.

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*“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like,
or what parable shall we use to describe it?”*

MARK 4 : 3 0



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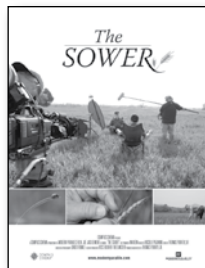


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TEACHER'S GUIDE

Teacher's Overview

UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLES

What Parables Are Not

Parables are not simply moral stories that teach an easy-to-understand, universal lesson. Jesus Himself, when asked why He taught in parables, explained that, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'" (Matt 13:13) In other words, He taught in parables *so that His hearers wouldn't understand* what He was saying without first understanding "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 13:11)

One of the points we can draw from this is that the parables were not meant to stand on their own as nice little stories. In fact, many of them aren't nice at all: a king destroys an entire city for speaking out against him; a manager cheats his master out of money and is praised for it; a fig tree is cursed for not bearing fruit. When taken at face value, the parables can be confusing and hard to understand. In light of that, parables are not moral stories that stand on their own to teach a universal lesson.

What Parables Are

Jesus had very specific purposes for teaching in parables. Matthew tells us that in at least one instance He spoke to the crowd *only* in parables, and said nothing without a parable. (Matt 13:34) Why is this? To Jesus, parables are comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms that teach His followers different aspects of the Kingdom of God. The parables are the keys to understanding what Jesus wanted His followers to know about His Kingdom. As He says in Mark, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?" (Mk 4:30)

The parables cannot be separated from Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. They cannot be understood properly if they stand on their own. Rather, they must always be used as lenses through which to view different aspects of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Himself often started His parables with, "The Kingdom of God is like..." The reason Jesus spoke in parables was that He knew they were the best method for teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

Jesus did not invent the parable form. It was common among Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day to use parables to explain the Law of God. They were not however, the first to use the form. One of the most famous Old Testament parables is Nathan's story to King David about a rich man, a poor man, and a lamb. God used this parable to convict David of his sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. (2 Sam 12:1-14).

The Hebrews adopted the parable form because of its power to communicate the truth quickly and effectively. It's not hard to understand why: parables work in the familiar world of the everyday, taking abstract concepts such as loving God and loving one's neighbor, then putting flesh on them. This recognition that there must be a relationship between

theology and the real, feet-on-the-ground facts of life is an important aspect of true, Biblical religion.

Jesus, as the teacher *par excellence*, used a teaching method with which His first-century listeners were familiar. It was also one which perfectly emphasized the primary lesson He wanted to teach: the Kingdom of God is the spiritual world pressing into and transforming the natural world of the here and now. To Jesus, the Kingdom of God was about how His redemptive action was going to affect the daily, individual lives of His followers both in the present and the future.

Yet Jesus understood that spiritual things are often difficult to grasp on their own. What does it really mean to receive God's grace? How does repentance work? What is love? By using the parables as comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms, He was creating a series of doors through which His listeners could step and actually enter into new understanding about His Kingdom. As one writer has aptly put it, the parables are nothing less than "spiritual discoveries."¹

Jesus understood that there is a direct relationship between the natural and spiritual realms. After all, He created the natural realm and all that is in it. It is no coincidence that so many aspects of the world we live in (sheep, marriage, seeds) mirror aspects of the spiritual realm (believers, the relationship between Christ and the Church, spiritual growth). Jesus knew that He could go to this ready-made set of images and use them to guide His listeners through profound and potentially complex teachings about God and humanity's relationship to Him.

But what did He want people to understand? We mentioned before that Jesus on more than one occasion explained to His disciples that, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they

might turn and be forgiven!” (Mark 4:10-12) Why did Jesus want the truth veiled from many of His hearers? And what was the “secret” He was referring to?

Jesus’ first-century audience already had strong opinions about the Kingdom of God. They expected a powerful Messiah to come and wipe out the Romans and setup a visible kingdom. But that was not God’s plan. Instead, He sent a suffering servant to establish a spiritual kingdom that would grow to fill “the entire earth” (Dan 2:35), a kingdom that certainly would have natural manifestations – but not like those assumed by Jesus’ audience.

Hence, unless one understood that Jesus and His unique ministry were what the parables were talking about, then one could not understand the parables. The secret that had been revealed to the disciples was Jesus Himself and His unexpected method of redemption. As God prophesied in Isaiah (and was quoted by Paul in Romans), “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” (Romans 9:33/Isaiah 8:14) Because many of the people rejected Jesus as the Son of God, they were ever seeing, but never understanding.

The possibility of having the truth in front of us yet not grasping it is a natural result of being blinded by our sin. This is yet another reason that Jesus taught in parables: they are the perfect method for sneaking past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God. By creating a world that a listener willingly enters into (remember David hearing Nathan’s story and getting angry at what the characters were doing), we also willingly enter into the stories and check our preconceived notions at the door. Of course, once inside the world, we (like David) find ourselves interested in and often convicted by the actions of the fictional characters.

In sum, Jesus taught in parables because they:

- 1 Were familiar to His audience,
- 2 Could communicate the truth quickly and effectively,
- 3 Used the relationship between the natural and spiritual realms to make complex ideas easier to understand,
- 4 Veiled the truth from those who did not recognize His unique ministry, and,
- 5 Created a fictional world that slipped past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God.

How Parables Work

At face value, a parable is just a story. In Jesus' hands, it could be quite short or more fully developed. Either way, Jesus used parables to explain the Kingdom of God as the Jewish rabbis did to explain the Torah: they were stories He could deliver in at most a few minutes time which instantly gave shape to what He wanted His listeners to understand.

Jesus' parables are filled with characters and elements familiar to the first-century Middle-Easterner: the rich master, the powerful king, the clever manager, the wayward son, the self-righteous Pharisee. Although we are two thousand years away from Jesus' culture, there is still a universal sense to many of His personalities; times have changed but people have not. In filling His parables with characters not so far removed from His listeners, Jesus knew it would be that much easier for them to step into His fictional worlds.

But if Jesus' characters were familiar to His audience, their actions were certainly not. Sons who prematurely asked for their inheritance, landowners who paid all their workers the same regardless of their work, kings who forgave enormous debts: all these actions and others seemed strange and unexpected to Jesus' listeners.

Jesus, of course, knew exactly what He was doing. By creating a world that appeared on its surface just like the natural realm, yet operated according to a different set of rules, He was showing in minute detail exactly how the Kingdom of God operates. It is as if He were saying, 'It is true that fathers do not forgive prodigal sons in the normal world, but in the spiritual world I am ushering in, their model in heaven most certainly does.'

Yet Jesus did not stop there. In His reach for comparisons, He took everyday events in the natural realm and imbued them with new significance. The Kingdom is like the spread of yeast, the growth of seed, or the capture of fish. In all these instances, He used figures that would have been extremely familiar to His audience, then asked them to think again about what the Kingdom of God is like.

Jesus Himself set the stage for understanding the comparisons when He explained the parable of The Sower and showed how it corresponded exactly to the types of hearers of His message. But even then He knew that his listeners would be slow to understand and complained to His disciples: "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13)

He asks a good question. After all, understanding a parable isn't simply understanding a comparison. Although the allegory, simile, or metaphor is the beginning of understanding, many people simply stop there and don't move forward. In Jesus' words, they do not have "ears to hear." The comparison that seems obvious is less about figuring out the pieces of the puzzle and more about judging how we stack up according to the standards of the Kingdom of God. In most instances, we fall far short of the standard established by Jesus.

This is the real thrust of the parables. If they are being read and understood as Jesus intended, then they are a way of experiencing the truth at a visceral, gut level by means of the story. Again, let us consider David who, after

hearing Nathan's fictional parable, "burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.' Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'... Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.'" (2Sam 12:5-7,13)

The spiritual psychology of good parables is powerful. If we can truly enter into the story, then a strong emotional connection with the characters and events ensues, somehow binding us by our honest judgments and feelings to that fictional world. Then, because the world of the parable is directly connected to our own world, we are helplessly forced to carry our judgments into this *real* world. Often this transference of judgment from the fictional world to the real is what truly begins to teach us.

That is the power of parables. To those of us who have been brought up using more systematic, doctrinal thinking, this power may appear wild and uncertain: what if someone doesn't get the right interpretation? Shouldn't we tell them what it means so they'll know what to think?

There are at least two problems with the view that exalts doctrinal statements above parables. First, the Bible is filled with doctrine, Jesus often spoke in doctrine, and there are plenty of doctrinal checks to keep us in the right spot. Yet that "right spot" can be much more problematic than the seeming uncertainty of the parables. It often is an unmoving, static position where we think right thoughts *but don't do right actions*. We affirm the truth of a doctrine without living it out. It is that very problem (a problem Jesus often pointed out amongst the Pharisees) that the parables seek to rectify. By reducing parables to a simple statement, we essentially lobotomize Jesus' teaching and make it powerless.

Second, the whole point of the parables is that they are to *show* how doctrine works itself out in the real world.

The doctrines of the Kingdom of God have real, everyday application to the lives of believers everywhere. Yes, we can affirm that we are to love others like we love ourselves, but in the face of Luke 10 (the parable of the Good Samaritan) what does that really look like in our daily lives? The brilliance of Jesus' parables is that they do not allow us to sit in a nice doctrinal position and judge the world; rather, they force us into the world to make judgments about our own personal character and actions. For most of us, it is an unsettling experience.

Interpreting the Parables

Although the parables are simple stories, they are also over 2000 years old. They were told by a first-century Jewish rabbi to a first-century Jewish audience. They were spoken in Aramaic and recorded in Greek. It is thus an enormous testimony to Jesus' genius that they have such resonance with us today.

But work must be done to understand just exactly what Jesus was talking about. For instance, most people today are not familiar with the history of the Samaritans. Just reading the text wouldn't let people know that Samaritans were hated half-breeds who were considered arch-enemies of the Jews. Knowing that one cultural fact puts the parable of the so-called "Good Samaritan" in a new light, especially when one considers that it was spoken to an audience of Jews, and more particularly to an expert in the Jewish law.

There are certain questions that should be asked when looking at the parables. They are, in something of a logical order:

1. What do the original words mean? Most teachers today recognize that word studies of the original text (in this case Greek, along with assumptions about Aramaic) go a long way to telling us what the author was intending. Translation always involves some level of interpretation. It is therefore necessary to go back to the original languages to understand exactly what was being said.

2. What would the original culture have known that isn't explained? Jesus lived and taught in a first-century Middle Eastern peasant culture that, like all cultures, held countless assumptions that weren't talked about but just understood (for instance, what was worn at a wedding banquet or how crops were sown). Three sources for understanding the original culture have been recommended by Dr. Craig Blomberg, an expert on the parables: 1) traditional cultural practices of the Middle East 2) ancient historical information of the time, and 3) similar symbolism in parables of other early rabbis.

3. What does the structure of the story tell us? One of the interesting attributes of the parables is that they often follow a particular structure in the way the story is laid out. These can be parallel stanzas, sentences, or ideas. They can be repetitions or contrasts. Or they can be combinations of all of the above. For instance, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the structure of action with the first three characters who approach the man (the robbers, the priest, and the Levite) is COME/DO/GO; the Samaritan, however, demonstrates a COME/DO/DO pattern. By observing these internal literary structures (something found throughout the Old and New Testaments), a reader can better recognize what Jesus is trying to communicate.²

4. What does Jesus or the gospel writer say about the parable; what other events or parables are around it; and to whom was Jesus talking? All these are known as *context*. For instance, when Luke introduces the parable of The Widow & Judge he tells us that "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." (Luke 18:1) In chapter 15, Luke intentionally groups together three parables concerning lost things (i.e., the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons). And in chapter 16, Luke points out that Jesus told the parable of Lazarus and the rich man to the "Pharisees, who loved money." In these

instances, the context helps guide us to Jesus' primary point of comparison for the parable.

Once these areas have been explored, everything should be pulled together to provide a proper framework with which to interpret and engage the parable. In each instance, a parable has a primary teaching that Jesus is trying to communicate. But since the parable is modeled on real life (which is complex and can be seen from multiple perspectives) there are many theological themes that undergird and support the primary teaching. In fact, when looked at more closely, it is all these theological themes *working together* that create the primary teaching.

One author has referred to this combination of themes as the "theological cluster."³ The cluster of different themes in a single parable work together to push the listener to respond in a particular way. For instance, in Nathan's parable to David, Nathan's primary teaching was that David had taken advantage of his position and sinned greatly. In light of that, David makes a single response: "I am a sinner." Yet there are numerous theological themes in the parable that push David to that point: stealing is wrong, abuse of position is sinful, coveting is wrong, familial love is sacred, etc. In no particular place does the parable state that David is sinful, nor does it talk about adultery or murder. Yet the comparison between the two worlds works powerfully, and once the link has been made (Nathan's "You are the man!") then all the pieces fall into place and conviction occurs.

All this happens subconsciously. Jesus' listeners wouldn't have had to do any kind of scholarly thinking. Because the parables just made sense to them as stories. Even those who disagreed with Jesus often knew He was talking about them in His parables; they just thought He was wrong!

As we stated earlier, the goal of *Modern Parables* is to recreate the immediacy of the gut-level reaction of the first-century

audience hearing Jesus' parables. The viewer of the films will gain a natural understanding of the issues involved in the original parable. And those issues are always related to the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God was the central message in Jesus' teaching. It began His preaching ministry (Mark 1:15) and was the subject of the last question His disciples asked Him before His ascension (Acts 1:6). The parables were one of His primary methods of explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God: "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?" (Mk 4:30)

Although a third of Jesus' sayings consisted of parables,⁴ He nowhere defined what He meant by the term "Kingdom of God." Rather, He knew His audience already had an opinion as to what "the Kingdom of God" meant from generations of use and prophetic expectation. The Old Testament paints a picture of the Jews identifying God's theocratic reign over Israel as "the Kingdom" with God as the sole king, dispensing His laws, His justice, and His blessings on both individuals and the nation. With the fall of the Northern and Southern kingdoms in the 8th and 6th centuries B.C. respectively, the remnant of the people gravitated toward the prophetic hope of a future Messianic kingdom that would restore the fortunes of Israel under a new, Davidic king. By the time of the first-century A.D., there were many opinions as to what this kingdom would look like, when it would come, and what this Messiah would do.

Needless to say, Jesus did not live up to any of those expectations. His humble demeanor and His unexpected message made no sense in light of the grandiose hopes the people had for their Messianic king and his conquering kingdom. Even the disciples struggled with what they expected Jesus to be in comparison with what He actually was. It is sometimes

difficult for us to comprehend just how extraordinarily “not right” Jesus’ ministry seemed to the people of His day.

In proof of this, even John the Baptist was confused about the odd mode of His coming and sent his disciples to ask Jesus about it. Jesus told them to look at His miracles as proof that He was truly the Messiah, then said “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (Matt 11:6) In other words, ‘I realize that I’m not what you’re expecting, but don’t let your disappointment cause you to miss my salvation.’ Although the *mode* of His coming was not according to their expectations, He truly was ushering in the long-awaited Kingdom of God. As He explained: “But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” (Luke 11:20)

From its start, Jesus’ ministry was about *re-defining* how people understood the Kingdom of God. He did this through His words and His deeds. He knew that the parable form was perfectly suited to explore the truth about the Kingdom. In this sense, the Kingdom of God can be compared to a large gem with many facets. The parables are like the facets which, when the gem is turned, each reveal a new aspect of the single, complex stone. This brings us back to our original definition of what the parables were to Jesus: *comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms that teach His followers different aspects of the Kingdom of God.* By studying the parables, we come to a new understanding of how we are to live as members of that Kingdom.

What do the Parables teach us about the Kingdom?

The primary purpose of *Modern Parables* is to understand the Kingdom of God. Each pair of lessons will explore what a particular parable is saying about the Kingdom. There are three specific areas that the parables cover on a regular basis: 1) Teaching about God, 2) Teaching about God’s people, and 3) Teaching about those who are not God’s people.⁵ *Modern*

Parables will examine how each of the parables relates to these three areas.

There are also three basic assumptions that this study makes in light of the Gospel-writers' general view of the Kingdom:

1. The Kingdom of God has both present and future aspects to it. One of Jesus' favorite points of comparison was between organic plant growth and the Kingdom of God. (Matt 13:24-25, 31-32) Just as a seed looks very different from a full-grown tree, so too does Jesus' inauguration of His kingdom in the first-century A.D. look very different from its final consummation at the end of time. This unique modality (or form) is what confused the first-century Jews. From this perspective, it is perhaps easier to say that the Kingdom began its earthly manifestation in the first-century, has grown throughout the past twenty centuries (as church history visibly demonstrates), and will continue to grow until the end of time like a tree that grows to the ends of the earth.

2. The Kingdom of God is now under the reign of Jesus Christ, who currently reigns from heaven as He extends His Kingdom across the earth. Just before His ascension, Jesus explained to His disciples that kingly authority over the earth had been given to Him - "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" - and that they should in turn "go and make disciples of all nations." (Matt 28:18-19) Peter, in further explanation of this, preached to the Jews in Jerusalem that David's prophecy in Psalm 110 ("The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'") had been fulfilled in Jesus, and that He was currently "Lord and Christ." (Acts 3:13). Paul takes Jesus' current reign and extends it to the end of time when he tells the Corinthians that "Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (1 Cor 15:25) This means that Jesus' Kingdom is not a static thing, but is actively growing *while you read this*. Furthermore, it means that:

3. Members of Christ's Kingdom are expected to play active, daily roles in the expansion of his Kingdom. Entering Christ's Kingdom is not like buying a ticket to a cruise line that pleasantly carries passengers to their destination. Rather, the comparisons that Christ and epistle-writers use are *workers, servants, farmers, soldiers, and sons*; in other words, those members of society from whom much work is expected. Those members of the Kingdom are to be *bearing fruit, harvesting crops, and supervising investments*.

Ultimately, it is this practical outworking of doctrine that the parables seek to inculcate in those who have "ears to hear." When we are truly "Living the Parables" we are living in the Kingdom of God.

* * *

As a closing note, there are many excellent books that examine the Kingdom of God as a whole. For our purpose, we are only focusing on how the Kingdom relates to the parables, as well as how one lives in the Kingdom. Some recommended books on the Kingdom of God include: Herman Ridderbos' *The Coming of the Kingdom* (P&R, 1962); George Eldon Ladd's *The Presence of the Future* (Eerdmans, 1974); and Geerhardus Vos' *The Church and the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1958).

Endnotes

- 1 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1992) 355.
- 2 Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Eerdmans, 1983) 74-75. Bailey identifies 8 ways that literary structure can assist exegesis.
- 3 Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* 38.
- 4 Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Hendrickson, 1998) 7.
- 5 Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (InterVarsity Press, 1990) 293-295.
- 6 Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work* (P&R Publishing, 2001) 97.
- 7 Doriani, 98.
- 8 Doriani, 104.
- 9 Doriani, 105.
- 11 Klass Skilder, *Christ and Culture* (G. van Rongen and W. Helder, 1977) 72.
- 12 Doriani, 110.
- 13 Doriani, 114.

About the Authors

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