

# What About Parables?

*Matthew 13:3*

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*3 Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: " Behold, a sower went out to sow..."*

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## **I. There are eight parables of the kingdom in Mt. 13:**

1. **The Parable of the Sower** (Mt. 13:3-9,18-23) - **Classes of hearers**
  2. The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Mt. 13:24-30, 37-43) - **Mixing bad with good**
  3. **The Parable of the Mustard Seed** (Mt. 13:31-32) – **Perfectly good seed – improperly tended - Abnormal growth**
  4. **The Parable of the Leaven** (Mt. 13:33 ) – a little mixed in until Truth is all corrupted
  5. **The Parable of the Hidden Treasure** (Mt. 13:44) - Israel's present state – the **Messiah hidden in the midst of a corrupt national body** and the **Gospel hidden in the Gospel of a corrupt world**
  6. **The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price** (Mt. 13:45) – **Same as above**
  7. **The Parable of the Dragnet** (Mt. 13:47) - **Universal effect of preaching** – the visible Kingdom **contains both redeemed and unredeemed** - the sphere of those who claim to be believers, is **full of both good and bad** and will be **sorted in the judgment**.
  8. **The Parable of the Householder** (Mt. 13:52) – Regarded **the mixture of old and new truths**. The disciples were **not to spurn the old for the sake of the new**. Rather the new insights they gleaned from Jesus' parables were to be **understood in light of the old truths, and vice versa**.
- Parables are found in various parts of the Bible, although the vast majority are found in the New Testament.
    - **In the Old Testament**, passages such as:
      - **Nathan confronting David in 2 Samuel 12:1–7**

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*Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. <sup>2</sup> The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. <sup>3</sup> But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup> And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."*

*<sup>5</sup> So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! <sup>6</sup> And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul.'*

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- **Isaiah 5:1–7**

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*Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard:*

*My Well-beloved has a vineyard  
On a very fruitful hill.*

- <sup>2</sup> He dug it up and cleared out its stones,  
And planted it with the choicest vine.  
He built a tower in its midst,  
And also made a winepress in it;*

*So He expected it to bring forth good grapes,  
But it brought forth wild grapes.*

<sup>3</sup> *“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,  
Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.*

<sup>4</sup> *What more could have been done to My vineyard  
That I have not done in it?  
Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes,  
Did it bring forth wild grapes?*

<sup>5</sup> *And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard:  
I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned;  
And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.*

<sup>6</sup> *I will lay it waste;  
It shall not be pruned or dug,  
But there shall come up briars and thorns.  
I will also command the clouds  
That they rain no rain on it.”*

<sup>7</sup> *For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,  
And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant.  
He looked for justice, but behold, oppression;  
For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.*

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- But **these are few in number**.
- **By contrast**, a total of **41 parables are found in the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels alone** (A Synoptic Gospel includes Matthew, Mark and Luke).
- **Some** are found in only one of the Gospels; **some** are found in two; and **seven of them are found in all three Synoptics**.
- There is **a difference of opinion** among scholars concerning the presence of parabolic material in John’s Gospel.
- Donald Guthrie says there are

*“...many sayings in John which are parabolic in style although not in form.”*

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- C. H. Dodd, **likewise**, mentions texts in John which are somewhat parabolic in form.

## II. *What Is a Parable?*

- A parable is a type of literature (or “*oral literature*”) in the general category of “*figures of comparison*.”
  - It consists of **a story that has elements of reality the hearer or reader may easily understand**.
  - **Sometimes** the story is quite simple and true to life.
  - **At other times**, parables may include
- “...a most surprising point in them; something takes place that is certainly not impossible, but is at least amazing.”*
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- Still, a parable is **always understandable as far as its story is concerned**.
  - The elements in the story are **easily recognizable, as is the plot**.
  - But **the actual meaning of a parable**, however, **may be a different matter**.
  - While **many parables are rather clear** in their meaning and give the interpreter little difficulty, **some are not as clear** as they seem at first.
  - As Thomas Long points out, **parables can be a bit tricky for the interpreter, so they need to be handled carefully**.
  - But the more we get to know the parables, **the less confident we become of our understanding of them**.
  - As soon as we reach out to grasp a parable’s seemingly obvious truth, **a trapdoor opens and we fall through to a deeper and unexpected level of understanding**.

- Just as we are ready to play our interpretive hand, **the parable deals us a new and surprising card**, often making us unsure that we even know what game we are playing.
- In our quest to better understand how to deal with parables, contrasting them with other seemingly similar literary forms **may be helpful**.
- R. C. Trench, in his older but classic work, **points out some helpful things in this regard:**

**A. Parables are different from fables, such as Aesop's.**

- **There are indeed two fables in the Old Testament:**
  - Judges 9:8–15 – Jotham's Fable, spoken to Abimelech the Apostate King

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<sup>8</sup> *"The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them.  
And they said to the olive tree,  
'Reign over us!'*

<sup>9</sup> *But the olive tree said to them,  
'Should I cease giving my oil,  
With which they honor God and men,  
And go to sway over trees?'*

<sup>10</sup> *"Then the trees said to the fig tree,  
'You come and reign over us!'*

<sup>11</sup> *But the fig tree said to them,  
'Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit,*

*And go to sway over trees?'*

<sup>12</sup> *"Then the trees said to the vine,  
'You come and reign over us!'*

<sup>13</sup> *But the vine said to them,  
'Should I cease my new wine,  
Which cheers both God and men,  
And go to sway over trees?'*

<sup>14</sup> *"Then all the trees said to the bramble,  
'You come and reign over us!'*

<sup>15</sup> *And the bramble said to the trees,  
'If in truth you anoint me as king over you,  
Then come and take shelter in my shade;  
But if not, let fire come out of the bramble  
And devour the cedars of Lebanon!'*

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- 2 Kings 14:9

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<sup>9</sup> *And Jehoash king of Israel sent to Amaziah king of Judah, saying, "The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, 'Give your daughter to my son as wife'; and a wild beast that was in Lebanon passed by and trampled the thistle.*

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- Jehoash uses a Fable **to seek to give a warning** that judgment is coming - the thistle (Amaziah), an irritating and worthless plant, sought to become the equal of the majestic cedar (Jehoash), but a wild animal crushed the thistle.
- **Jehoash counseled Amaziah** that he was overestimating his power and prominence and should not to go war with Israel lest he be crushed (v. 10).
- The fable **reaches only the level of morality that the world understands** and that it fails to reach the higher spiritual level.
  - In our world – **fables are now being taken to be veritably true!**
  - But before now, Fables, for the most part, **were rightly seldom true to life**, for they often express their truths through the personification of animals or plants.

## B. Parables are different from myths.

- Trench notes that the myth

*“...presents itself not merely as the vehicle of the truth, but as being itself the truth; while in the parable we see the perfect distinctness between form and essence, shell and kernel.”*

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## C. Parables are different from proverbs, though there is but one

- Hebrew word for both (mashal), and the words **are sometimes used interchangeably in the New Testament.**
- For example, in **Matthew 15:14–15 a proverb is given but is often called a parable.**

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14 *“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.  
15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.”*

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- **Both proverbs and parables are comparative statements**, and in many instances, the brief proverb **could be expanded into a parable.**
- In general, however, **proverbs are shorter and more direct**, while parables often take the form of a **developed story, including the presence of an identifiable plot.**

## D. Parables are different from allegories, but the difference is more in form than in essence.

- The allegory has many points of comparison, whereas **the parable ordinarily has only one such point.**
  - Further, an allegory **may be somewhat fanciful**, with people being represented by nonhuman things.
  - Trench also points out that **the allegory interprets itself**, while **the parable requires interpretation from with without.**

## E. Parables are powerful communicators.

- They **involve the hearer or reader in the process of making value judgments, sometimes about doctrinal concerns and at other times about behavioral matters.**
  - Ryken says in this regard:
  - In one sense the parables are a very sophisticated literary form—they **work by indication instead of direct statement.**
  - They **force people to make a judgment on some commonplace situation and then to transfer that judgment to a spiritual plane.**

## F. There is no “rule” about the length of a parable.

- Some of Jesus’ parables are **relatively long.**
  - The parable of the **prodigal son is 22 verses** in length, for example. • Many others are from 6 to 10 verses.
  - Yet, some are **only a verse or two**, as we see in Luke 13:19, 21.

## G. The purpose of the parables Jesus told seems to be twofold.

- Usually **He sought to make spiritual truths clearer.**
  - **Analogy (employed in parables)** is an excellent means of teaching concepts.
- **The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–36) and the three parables of something lost and found (Luke 15)** are good examples of parables Jesus used **to make truth more understandable.**
- **At other times, parables are evidently told to leave the hearers with a certain amount of confusion.**
  - This is seen in **Luke 8:9–10 as a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9.**

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<sup>9</sup> Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?”

<sup>10</sup> And He said, “**To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that**

**'Seeing they may not see,  
And hearing they may not understand.'**

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- If this concept seems troublesome, Jesus' prayer in **Luke 10:21–22** can also be noted.

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<sup>21</sup> *In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, **that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes.** Even so, Father, **for so it seemed good in Your sight.**"* <sup>22</sup> *All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."*

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- If the concept is troubling – take refuge in verse 22

### **III. Interpreting Parables**

- Before discussing the methodology of preaching on parables, **we must first look at how they should be interpreted.**

- Trench stated:

*Each one of the parables is like a casket to the archaeologist, itself of exquisite workmanship, but in which jewels richer than itself are laid up; like fruit, which, however lovely to look upon, is yet more delectable in its inner sweetness....*

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- In the interpretation of the parable, **the question [is], how much is significant?**
  - Trench believed that some of **the major details in a parable are important for the interpreter to understand and interpret in order to arrive at the meaning of the entire parable.**
  - More recent scholarship, however, tends to assert **that only one major detail is really important** because a parable **has only one central meaning.**
  - That **makes good Biblical sense!**
- Both J. Robertson McQuilkin and A. Berkeley Mickelsen, in their respective books on hermeneutics, **list the steps the interpreter should take to get a grasp on the meaning of a parable.**

#### **A. These steps might be summarized as follows:**

1. When possible, **determine the precise setting** which led to the telling of the parable. **Why was this parable told?**
  2. **Identify the central meaning** of the parable:
    1. Does the precise setting **make the meaning clear?**
    2. Does **the teller explain the parable's meaning?** Is there a **stated application?** (As in the parable of the sowers)
    3. Is there a **surprising element** in the parable? How **does this affect its meaning?**
    4. Can this **central meaning stand on its own** when the secondary details of the parable are removed?
  3. Note the parts of the story **that are important to stress the central meaning.**
    - Nonessential parts of the story **do not contribute** to the central meaning.
    - They **can be eliminated or skipped over.**
    - The essential parts can **"fill out"** the thrust of the parable **without being regarded as allegory.**
  4. **Compare** the parable passage **with parallel texts, if any.**
  5. Fit the central meaning of the parable **into the other teachings of Scripture, beginning with** the speaker's teachings.
  6. **Do not** use parables **to formulate doctrine but to clarify** the doctrine **of more literal passages.**
- In reference to Jesus' parables, Mickelsen states that

“...the parables serve to illustrate and unfold various aspects of the reign of God.”

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#### IV. Summarizing - 10 Facts About Parables

1. Greek: parabole, a comparison
  - **Mark 4:30**

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<sup>30</sup> Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?” <sup>30</sup> Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?” <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”

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- figure - **Hebrews 9:9**

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<sup>9</sup> It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—

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- Hebrews 11:19

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<sup>19</sup> concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

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- proverb - **Luke 4:23**

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<sup>23</sup> He said to them, “You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.’ ”

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- and an illustration (Mt. 13:3 , 10 , 13 , 18 , 24 , 31-36 , 53 15:15 ; 21:33 , 45 ; 22:1 ; 24:32 ; etc.).
  - Parables are **extended similes**.
2. They illustrate truth and make it clear by comparison with something that is already familiar.
  3. They impart instruction and rebuke without causing offense
    - 2Sam. 12 – Nathan’s confrontation of David
  4. They create interest and hunger for further information –
    - Matthew 13:10–17

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<sup>10</sup> And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,  
And seeing you will see and not perceive;

<sup>15</sup> 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.’

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; <sup>17</sup> for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

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- 2Sam. 12 – Once again – his confrontation of David...
5. The stories are **always true and the points illustrated must not be considered false and absurd.**

6. The historical background and the circumstances and occasion when uttered **must be understood**.
7. Their words and details **must be defined literally, not spiritually**. (references to Israel in the parables should be understood as Israel...)
8. The similarity between the point illustrated and the illustration **must be noted. And kept clear! – we don't to make our own point or to enlarge on the parable...**)
9. The point illustrated **is always stated with the parable or is clear by the occasion uttered**.
10. The principles of interpretation **are given by Jesus Himself**. Any interpretation at variance with these principles or with the purpose of the parable **is unscriptural. We DON'T INTERPTET**

**V. Seven reasons for using parables:**

- Matthew 13:11

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*11 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.*

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1. To reveal truth in **a form intended to create more interest** (Mt. 13:10-11, 16)
2. **To make known new truths** to interested hearers (Mt. 13:11-12, 16-17)
3. To make known mysteries **by comparison** with things already known (Mt. 13:11)
4. **To conceal truth** from disinterested hearers and rebels at heart (Mt. 13:11-15)
5. **To add truth** to those who love it and want more of it (Mt. 13:12)
6. **To take truth away from** those who hate and do not want it (Mt. 13:12)
7. **To fulfill prophecy** (Mt. 13:14-17, 35)