

# Studying the Parables

## Parables and their Purpose

**Definition and Illustration.** Many people say that parables are ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning’. This is a partial truth. The Greek word for parable is *parabole*, which primarily means ‘a placing of one thing by the side of another in order to allow a comparison’. Therefore a familiar thing from earth is placed beside what is heavenly or spiritual so that the understanding of the one will give understanding of the other. It uses things *seen* to explain things that are *unseen*.

**Revelation and Condemnation.** Approximately one third of the recorded teaching of the Lord Jesus was in the form of parables. Why did He speak in this way? **Firstly**, it was a fulfilment of Scripture: *Matthew 13.34-35: Without a parable spake he not unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.* (cf. Psalm 78.2). **Secondly**, it was a revelation of ‘secret’ things. These were the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13.11), i.e. new truth concerning the Kingdom, that it would now be postponed (in order to incorporate the church age) after the rejection of the King and His plain teaching.

**Thirdly**, Christ only resorted to teaching in parables **after** the nation of Israel rejected Him as King. They ‘were therefore a kind of punishment for those who resisted His testimony, concealing truth from the unbelieving many while revealing it to the privileged few’ (David Newell). *Matthew 13.10-13: At this the disciples approached him and asked, "Why do you talk to them in parables?" "Because you have been given the privilege of understanding the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven," replied Jesus, "but they have not. For when a man has something, more is given to him till he has plenty. But if he has nothing even his nothing will be taken away from him. This is why I speak to them in these parables; because they go through life with their eyes open, but see nothing, and with their ears open, but understand nothing of what they hear.* We should remember that ‘the parable is ever the open door to the mystery. If men will consider the picture, and enquire, He will always answer.’ Do we find Scripture difficult to understand? There must be diligence in study!

## Parables and their Place

It is sometimes difficult to ascertain exactly what is a parable and what is merely an illustration, example, simile, metaphor or allegory! However, the following table lists the 24 parables which are directly referred to in Scripture as *parabole* (occurring 50 times in the NT). What about the Good Samaritan or Rich Man and Lazarus?

Number	Name	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Unique?
1	The Sower	13.3-23	4.3-20	8.4-15	
2	The Mustard Seed	13.31-32	4.30-32	13.19	
3	The Leaven	13.33		13.20-21	
4	The Tares of the Field	13.24-30, 36-43			✓
5	The Treasure Hid in a Field	13.44			✓
6	The Merchant Man	13.45-46			✓
7	The Dragnet	13.47-50			✓
8	The Householder	13.52			✓
9	Defilement of a Man	15.10-20	7.14-23		
10	The Wicked Husbandmen	21.33-46	12.1-12	20.9-19	
11	Marriage of the King's Son	22.1-14			✓
12	The Fig Tree	24.32-33	13.28-29	21.29-31	
13	Divided House & Kingdom		3.22-27		✓
14	The Physician			4.23	✓
15	New Garment & New Wine	9.16-17	2.21-22	5.36-39	
16	Blind Leading the Blind			6.39	✓
17	A Certain Rich Man			12.16-21	✓
18	The Faithful Servants			12.35-40	✓
19	The Fruitless Fig Tree			13.6-9	✓
20	The Wedding Feast			14.7-14	✓
21	The Lost Sheep, Coin & Son	18.11-14 (Sheep)		15.3-32	
22	The Persistent Widow			18.1-8	✓

23	The Pharisee & Publican			18.9-14	✓
24	The Ten Pounds			19.11-27	✓
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>

Note. The Gospel of Luke has far more recorded parables (see longer list) than any other gospel. This is because Luke emphasises the Lord Jesus as **Prophet** (cf. Luke 1.76, 4.18). As such He **speaks for God to the people**. The Lord Jesus is also emphasised as Priest, Servant and King in the other gospels. The Gospel of Matthew primarily records parables of a prophetic nature as he is emphasising the King and His coming kingdom.

### Parables and their Structure

Parables are **structured** and contain at least three components: its **setting** (the historical circumstances which provoked its telling), its **story** (the actual narrative) and its **significance** (the meaning). For example, the parable of the 'divided house' (Mark 3.23-26) is **set** against the background of the scribes which accused the Lord Jesus of being demon possessed and casting out demons by the power Beelzebub (the ruler of demons or 'lord of filth'). *Mark 3.22: And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils.* Its **story** concerns a kingdom and a house divided against itself, i.e. people fighting for different causes within the same place. The simple **significance** is that the Lord Jesus could not possibly be casting out demons by Satanic means or power for then Satan would be working against himself; he would be frustrating his own purposes.

Note also the parable of the 'strong man' (Mark 3.27). The **setting** is the same as above, although here the Lord Jesus seeks to set forth that He is actually doing the opposite of what they were suggesting. He had come to destroy the work of Satan. The **story** concerns the stealing of property from a 'strong man' who is bound. The **significance** is found in the correct interpretation of the individuals concerned. Satan is the 'strong man' and the 'house' his kingdom (Colossians 1.13). His 'goods' are the people and property over which he holds dominion. Praise God, Christ is the 'stronger' man (Luke 11.22). He is the One who is able to bind Satan and 'spoil his house'. Christ is the Redeemer to whom all creation and everything in it now rightfully belongs to Him (Hebrews 2.9, Revelation 5). Satan's goods have been 'snatched away by force' (to 'spoil'), cf. Hebrews 2.14-15. It is interesting to note that at Christ's Second Advent, Satan will be literally bound and cast into the bottomless pit (Revelation 20.1-3).

### Parables and their Significance

We should always exercise care in the interpretation of parables and remember they are illustrations of divine truth. They are similar in character to the OT types, which give us priceless glimpses of the glory of Christ, but at some point will always fall short. It is not possible for any picture or individual to fully represent the Lord Jesus in all His majesty. He is the fullness, He is the 'substance' (Colossians 2.17, RV). By way of example, consider the parable of the 'Wicked Husbandmen' (Mark 12.1-12). The **setting** is the last week of the Lord's earthly ministry and the parable is addressed to the chief priests, scribes and elders (Mark 11.27, 12.1) who had questioned His authority (Mark 11.28). The parable is clearly spoken against them (Mark 12.12).

What of the **significance**? The **landlord** speaks of God, He who gave Israel its land and privileges (Isaiah 43.1). The **vineyard** represents the nation, chosen to bring Him the fruit of obedient service (Psalm 80.8-15, Isaiah 5.1-7). The **tenants** are Israel's spiritual leaders, ambitious and greedy (Mark 12.7). The **servants** are the OT prophets (Jeremiah 35.15, Matthew 23.37) and the 'wellbeloved' and only **son** is the Lord Jesus (John 3.16). The **judgment** reminds us of God's discipline of Israel both through the Romans in AD70 and in the coming day of 'Jacob's Trouble' (Jeremiah 30.7, Luke 19.41-44). The **replacement tenants** (or 'others') are likely to represent the future repentant remnant of Israel (Romans 11.26). How does this support the authority of the Lord Jesus? *Mark 12.10-11: And have ye not read this scripture; The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?* The chief priests, scribes and elders may well challenge the authority of the Lord Jesus, but His authority is that of the only begotten, 'wellbeloved' Son of God. The Lord Jesus has the ultimate authority. Not only is He God, but the rejected Son will also become the exalted stone, the 'most significant feature in God's construction site, the pinnacle of God's programme for the universe'. His resurrection and triumphant return are therefore implied. He is the Head of the church, His body and as such we bow in reverence, submission and obedience to Him.

Note. Not every detail of a parable should be pushed to the limits of interpretation. For example, the landlord finally sent his son with the faulty assumption that they would 'reverence' him (v.6). How little the landlord knew of the wickedness of their hearts. Of course, God was not taken by surprise at the wickedness of the nation of Israel in rejecting Christ (Jeremiah 17.9-10, Acts 2.23). Furthermore, in the parable, the tenants correctly identified the son and 'heir' (v.7) and deliberately killed him for their own gain. However, in reality, the Jews never recognised their Messiah (Acts 3.17, 13.27).