



The Parables of Jesus
Introduction to Parables
Matthew 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-15

In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus published his book, “De revolutionibus orbium coelestium” (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres). In this groundbreaking treatise, Copernicus described a heliocentric cosmology (an assertion that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe or cosmos). Before the publication of this book, it was generally accepted that the earth was the center of the universe (geocentric) and the other objects orbited around it. Needless to say, Copernicus’ book caused quite a stir and is now a landmark in the history of science. In fact, his assertions changed scientific thought so intensely that the metaphor “a Copernican Revolution” was born. It can also be used as a simile recounting a change of thought or a paradigm shift; “When she realized that the Old Testament was about Jesus Christ, it was, for her, like a Copernican Revolution.”

The subject of Copernicus may seem to be far from the subject at hand and yet it relates in a few ways that will offer a good introduction to this study, “The Parables of Jesus.” Similes and metaphors are commonly used to describe life or specific situations. And simply put, that’s exactly what a parable is. It is an extended simile. The English word, “parable,” comes from a combination of the Greek preposition “para” and the verb, “ballo.” “Para” means “beside or alongside” and “ballo” means “to cast or to throw.” Therefore, when Jesus uses a parable, He is communicating a spiritual truth by “throwing down alongside” a picture from everyday life that illustrates the truth He is giving. This example offers a

living picture of the truth Christ is giving to those who would have ears to hear and eyes to see (Matthew 13:16).

The parables of Jesus draw the reader in and force the reader to become part of the story; choosing up sides as it were and relating to one of the characters in it. And quite often, one finds that the person they most relate to is not the one they wish, but they are more like David when Nathan says, “You are the man.” Nathan had told David a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man, with all that he had, took the poor man’s one little ewe lamb to prepare it for a guest. David became very angry at this rich man for taking from the poor man and said, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” And then came Nathan’s rebuke; “You are the man!” What a thing it is to be confronted with your own sin! This is what the parables often do. The Parables tell the story of reality; they tell God’s perspective on reality. And this leads to another relation with Copernicus.

The Parables are often read with a very narrow focus. The main point or lesson of the parable is often stated in a way such as, “what does one learn about how a believer is to live by this parable?” Often, we struggle with getting beyond a moralistic reading and understanding of the parables. Certainly we learn about kingdom living. In a sense, all the parables could be called kingdom parables because if they aren’t about the kingdom itself, they are about living in the midst of that kingdom. But they are much more than that; they, just like the rest of Scripture, are about Christ. The

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King has come and He comes to inaugurate His kingdom. He is not just teaching His followers how to live in the kingdom but He is teaching His followers about the reality of the kingdom, that is to say, He is teaching them (and us) about the way things actually *are*; and not just *about* the kingdom; but in so doing, actually *inaugurating the kingdom itself*. Their very purpose is to divide, to split, to make a distinction between two groups of people. After all, the Messiah is bringing judgment on the one hand and grace on the other.

Perhaps a Copernican revolution is in store for you as you study these wonderful parables of Jesus. It is my prayer that you might, not only learn how He would have you live as a member of the kingdom of God, but more importantly, how you might view Him as the King who is inaugurating His kingdom and what He actually did at His coming.

Jesus Himself gives us the purpose of the parables and it is intimately related to His coming as King in judgment and in grace. Matthew 13:10-16 says, *“Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ And he answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.’ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your*

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eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” Jesus is explicit that the reason he speaks in parables is because He is distinguishing between those to whom the secrets have been given and those to whom they have not.

Jesus did not always speak in parables; for much of his ministry, he spoke plainly and clearly for all to hear; for all to understand; for all to respond. And yet, at this specific stage of His ministry, he began speaking in parables for the purpose of withholding information from those whose hearts had grown dull and revealing information about His kingdom to those whose hearts have been opened. One must understand the parables within the context of Jesus’ ministry. The religious leaders of the day had made themselves the arbiters of truth, the arbiters of right and wrong, they said they were upholding the righteousness of God, upholding the purity of their religion, and Jesus comes turning things on its head; He comes proclaiming that the very ones who thought they were friends of God are His opponents, and those whom they thought were His opponents, become His friends. Jesus says, “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Luke 5:32). Jesus is indeed, the friend of sinners.

As our Mediator, Jesus executes the offices of prophet, priest, and king. In the parables, His office and role of a **prophet** is emphasized. The Lord’s prophets would not only tell what would happen, but in fact bring about what would happen by the word spoken. The same is true of Jesus. He not only speaks of what will happen but is bringing about what He speaks. Again, Jesus is inaugurating His kingdom. It is not present in its consummated state but it is present. This is the “already/not yet.”

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This is that mystery that was “kept secret for long ages” (Romans 16:25) now being revealed by Jesus as the Prophet. The mystery is not that the Old Testament prophets didn’t prophecy concerning the events that are taking place, but that it hadn’t been fully revealed how God would bring it about. The mystery that is revealed is that now in Jesus Christ, “Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). This is now one new nation in Christ Jesus. This is central to the “mystery” and it is also central to the understanding of the rejection of it by the Jewish religious leaders of the day. They not only expected a different kind of Messiah, they also expected a different kind of kingdom. They didn’t like the King or the kingdom. And the parables are a sort of judgment (or blessing) brought by Christ to the people.

The Old Testament prophets proclaimed and warned over and over again. They prophesied curses, they prophesied blessing. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, that prophet with one foot in the Old and one foot in the New, came in the same way announcing, “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He was the one of whom Isaiah spoke who would be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” John the Baptist was announcing, proclaiming, the coming of the King. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Why is that important and why do people often emphasize that point? He was the last prophet that came to warn, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). After John’s task was complete, the Messiah would come dispensing judgment and grace. The King would come in His Kingdom.

At Christ’s coming, He inaugurated

His kingdom. It is present now. Blessed believer, you now dwell in the Kingdom of Christ. Again, not in its consummated form, but it is present. In order to properly understand the parables, one must properly understand that truth. For many, when they hear of kingdom parables (and again, they all are “kingdom” parables in a very real sense), because of an already established framework in their mind, the reality and application of the parables are pushed forward to some time still out in the future. Or, without this proper framework and understanding, one is left to spiritualize or moralize the parables and miss the point Jesus is making. In Matthew 13:35 says, “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.’” Here is Jesus’ point: He is revealing that which has been hidden. He is revealing a reality. In the parables, He is describing the way things *are*. For many, this will change the way one reads the parables; and for the better. Prayerfully, this study will be somewhat of a “Copernican Revolution” for some - giving insight and depth to the reading of the Scripture.

There are many ways one could divide the parables for study. For the purposes of this study, they have been divided into five sub-categories all under the main heading, “Kingdom Parables.” The first group, which will be the subject of the next few weeks consist of parables regarding, “The Stone the Builders Rejected.” The second grouping are those specifically related to the truth that “Jesus Came to Save Sinners.” The third are general kingdom parables showing forth “The Reality of the Kingdom.” The fourth are those parables emphasizing

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“The Reality of Judgment.” And finally, the fifth and final category studied here are parables emphasizing “Life in the Kingdom.”

May God bless you as you study the parables of Jesus....

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Week 1 – An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus (Review)

Day 1: An Overview of the Parables

1. What is a parable?
2. Fully one-third of Jesus' words in the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) occur in parables. Keeping that in mind, why is it important for us to study and understand Christ's parables?
3. At this stage of Jesus' ministry, He almost exclusively uses parables in his teaching. Why is this the case?
4. Jesus' speaking in parables is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy. Find and read the whole chapter of the Old Testament prophesy. Make note of any verses that stand out to you (there are some truly amazing verses throughout the chapter).

Day 2: The Purpose of the Parables

Read Matthew 13:10-17, Mark 4:10-12, Luke 8:9-15

1. The intent of the parables is to upset, disorient and divide those to whom Jesus was speaking. How is this different from the way you have previously viewed the purpose of the parables?
2. Most Jewish parables at that time were shared so that the listeners could draw out some moral message on how they should live. How are Christ's parables different?
3. Many pastors today use Jesus' parabolic teaching as support for them to be more narrative and allegorical in their sermons. How is this an inaccurate view of the purpose of Jesus' speaking in parables?

Day 3: The Subject of the Parables

Read these single verses: Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 18:23, 20:1, 22:2, 25:1 (don't worry, we'll read the full parables throughout the study!)

1. The overall subject of the parables is Christ's kingdom and the inauguration of that kingdom. Is this different from how you have viewed the subject of the parables in the past? If so, how?

2. While their overall subject is Christ's kingdom, each parable also has a simple narrative subject that is easily understood by the original audience. Is it important for us to know who that original audience was and what their understanding of the narrative was? Why or why not?
3. What challenges face us when trying to discern the meaning of parables spoken so long ago? What advantages do we have over those of the original hearers?

Day 4: The Authority of the Parables

Read Hebrews 1:1-4, 1 Peter 1:10-12, 2 Peter 1:16-21

1. As our Redeemer, Christ executes the offices of Prophet, Priest and King. The parables are given their authority because they were spoken by Christ, particularly in his role as Prophet. What is His role as Prophet and how is that role performed in the parables?
2. What is the difference between the Old Testament prophets' ministry, including John the Baptist, and Jesus' prophetic ministry?

Read Acts 15:14-17, Ephesians 3:1-6, Colossians 1:24-29

3. As the Prophet, Jesus has revealed that which once was "hidden for ages and generations." What is that mystery that Jesus revealed?

Day 5: The Power of the Parables

Read Matthew 13:10-17 again

1. Combining the purpose, subject, and authority of the parables, Jesus is inaugurating His kingdom by dividing and making a distinction between two groups of people. In fact, just like the Old Testament prophets, the parables are being effective as He is speaking. In general, who are these two groups of people and what is happening to them as they listen to the parables?

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-15

2. What is the intent of this parable? How did God use this parable in David's life?
3. Do Jesus' parables do the same thing to His audience that Nathan's parable did to David? Explain.
4. When hearing or reading a parable, we have a tendency to identify ourselves as one of the characters in the parables, but oftentimes, as David did, we don't see ourselves appropriately within the parable. Why do you think we do that?

Extra: (you get bonus points for answering these!)

1. What role do the parables play in the overarching story of redemptive history and the gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. All of the parables are given in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Why do you think the Gospel of John doesn't contain any?
3. These parables were spoken by Jesus to a specific group of people 2000 years ago. Do those parables still divide and inaugurate the kingdom today? Explain.

Week 2 – The Parable of the Two Sons (Preview)

Day 1: The Setting

Read Matthew 21:1-32

1. Think of what was happening in the city. Imagine the events and the “buzz” about Jesus that was spreading. What things stand out to you?

2. Matthew is typically more topical than chronological in his account of events, so it is difficult to determine the exact day that Jesus taught this parable. However, we know that it occurred during Holy Week, and it was likely early in the week, possibly the Monday or Tuesday before the crucifixion. What significance does this add to the parable?

3. Where was this parable spoken? Does this point to any of Christ's roles of Prophet, Priest or King? Which role(s) and why?

4. Think about what Jesus was about to do and the things He was about to go through. How does that influence our reading and understanding of this parable?

Day 2: The Audience

Read Matthew 21:1-32 again

1. Who is Jesus' audience for this parable? Describe each different group of people.

2. For what reason did each group of people follow him? For what were they looking?

Read Matthew 5:20, 9:10-13, Mark 8:11-13, Philippians 3:4-6

3. Understanding who the Pharisees, chief priests, elders, and scribes (and their opposites: the tax collectors and prostitutes) were and what they believed is important to understanding many of the parables. Find other scripture that describes these groups and explain who they were and what they believed.

Day 3: The Parable

Read Matthew 21:28-32

1. Summarize the parable.
2. Describe the first son. Why do you think he changed his mind? Who does Jesus identify as the first son?
3. Describe the second son. Why do you think he changed his mind? Who does Jesus identify as the second son?
4. Describe the father. What did he ask of his sons?

Day 4: The Meaning

Read Matthew 21:28-32, Romans 3:21-31

1. What is your initial take on the meaning of this parable?
2. Suppose you were looking for a “moral-of-the-story” for this parable. What would it be? How is this different from your answer to question 1?
3. Based off of this parable, who will ultimately enter the kingdom?

Day 5: The Division

Read Matthew 7:21-23, 21:28-32

1. Understanding that the parables were spoken to divide, what divisions does this parable make? To what groups of people in Jesus' original audience does this apply?
2. Both groups are sinful, but their sin plays out in different ways. Describe those different ways. Why does Jesus seem to prefer one type of sinner over the other? Does it really have anything to do with the type of sin?
3. Think about your life, your attitudes, your judgments, your actions, your beliefs. How are you like each of these groups? Do you lean towards one group more than the other? Why?