

# "The Parables Jesus Told"

## Introduction

When Jesus wanted to get a spiritual truth across to ordinary men and women, He used the vehicle of the parable. So it logically follows that in order to fully grasp the truth, we must first grasp the parable. Any Bible student of today can greatly clarify his understanding of Jesus' teachings by examining the nature and language of the parable, as well as the reasons for which He chose to employ it.

As the original Greek word says, a parable is a comparison. It is something drawn alongside something else or, more specifically, a homely and familiar situation drawn alongside a truth of profound importance. The familiar lights up the profound; the profound is remembered through the familiar. Another simple but sound definition of the parable is that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, a story true to this house of earth, but with a window open to the sky. Certainly any one of the stories Jesus told would magnificently illustrate this definition.

A parable is not an allegory, in which words are used figuratively. Neither is it a proverb (a statement of fact with no tale at all) or a fable (fantasy in which fairies flutter and animals talk). A parable is a work of great artistry, and Jesus surpassed all other artists in the use of this medium. He told His parables in terms of things that never change, in the barest fundamentals of living. He told them briefly and was able to speak volumes in a few verses. So effectively were Jesus' word pictures painted that they not only capture attention but hold it, as would a great work of art.

Why did He use parables? Jesus must have perceived that their intrinsic quality of simplicity would keep His Good News safe and fresh through the ages. The simplicity of the parables did, indeed, ensure their being remembered, evidenced by the fact that they have endured over nearly two thousand years. And, there is no debating that simplicity is a factor in their apparent "agelessness", their relevance and appeal to men in widely varying situations and in all periods of history.

It appears that Jesus was seeking, through parables, to both project and protect His word. Although they served to illustrate His Gospel, making it popular rather than academic, they also protected it from overexposure and disinterest. Plain speech would have provoked more ridicule from His enemies and less thought from His friends. With parables, He could rouse His followers to search for more meaning, while taking His opponent by surprise. The cloak of mystery that the parables provided was also useful in discouraging that segment of His immediate audience which was seeking a political leader and an earthly kingdom.

Finally, the parables were used by Jesus only because men remember stories more easily than bare facts or arguments, and not only to protect His message from overexposure, disinterest, ridicule, and misinterpretation, but because they reach men's consciences and challenge their lives. They were part of the Master's strategy for getting under men's defenses, for winning men's hearts by catching their resistant and self-satisfied minds off guard.

In the course of His ministry, Jesus told more than forty parables. Those selected for inclusion here are among the best loved for their perennial beauty and value. They are as pertinent to the people of twenty first-century

America as they once were to those who first heard them in Galilee.

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All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable (Matt. 13:34).

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## The Prodigal Son

*And He said, 'A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that fall, to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him, But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.''' And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and*

*has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"* (Luke 15:11-32)

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Of all the parables, this comes closest to giving us a glimpse of the hallowed face of God. It illustrates that God's love is beyond justice, beyond reason, that He ever hungers for the return of a sinner. The righteous are His already; they have His love. But they are not to be self-righteous, nor jealous of their position in His eyes. They are to love with His own love, to yearn as He does for the return of their wandering brothers. "*The Perfect Father*" might be a more descriptive title for this gem of a parable.

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### The Pharisee And The Publican

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

*"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."* (Luke 18:9-14)

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Humility is the lesson of this familiar parable. The standing Pharisee's pride in his goodness blocked out God. He was so busy congratulating himself for not being like other men, it never occurred to him he was not much like God either. In contrast, the kneeling publican recognized the vast gulf between God and himself and, consequently, "*went down to his house justified.*" It is not human nature to be humble. Yet it is plain that Jesus wants those who love Him to defy their own pride, to go against human nature with the help of grace.

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### The Good Samaritan

Jesus replied and said, "*A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "*The one who showed mercy toward him.*" And Jesus said to him, "*Go and do the same.*" (Luke 10:30-37)*

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This popular parable emphasizes the meaning of neighborliness and the importance of true Christian compassion. Responding to a lawyer who asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*", Jesus makes it clear that any human being in need is our neighbor. By casting one of the Samaritans (men much despised by the Jews) in the role of the compassionate neighbor, Jesus challenges His audience. He seems to be saying: If a Samaritan, whom you

consider an outcast, will rescue a Jew in trouble, what a reflection it is on you and your religion if, in indifference, you pass by those in need.

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### The Parable Of The Seed

*And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows, how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)*

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In this beautiful word picture, Jesus teaches us about the growth and development of His kingdom. He uses seeds of the world to illustrate how seeds of the word, His Word grow to incredible proportions because of the secret force wrapped up within them. No outside energy could have any effect were it not that in the seed itself is a potential vitality waiting to be awakened. Every seed contains the blueprint for the plant it will become when mature. In like manner is the power, the truth, the essence of life wrapped in every word Jesus spoke.

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### The Hidden Treasure And The Pearl Of Great Value

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it." (Matt. 13:44-46)*

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The kingdom of heaven is pictured as a treasure in these two parables. The first parable tells us that some stumble onto the treasure by chance. The second says some are prepared by training to find it and will actively seek it. Both stories agree that, when His kingdom is found, there is but one entrance, one key, sacrifice. Finder's Keepers only if the finder abandons all else. This means recognizing that the vital, transforming experience of Christ is worth more than anything else in the world. Further, it means relinquishing to Him ownership and control of our lives.

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### The Laborers In The Vineyard

*"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*

*"And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.' And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought*

*that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' Thus the last shall be the first, and the first last" ( Matt. 20: 1-16).*

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There are many startling truths to be learned from this parable. When the landowner pays first the men who came last, giving them the same wage as to those who had worked all day, there does seem to be ground for grievance. But Jesus does not say the kingdom of industry is like this; He says the kingdom of heaven is like this. Pride has no room in heaven. And no mere man can judge what lies behind the late answer of another soul. God's rewards are bestowed for handicaps overcome as well as for goals achieved.

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### **The Two Foundations**

*"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall." (Matt. 7:24-27)*

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This story could very well have been suggested to Jesus by His own experience as a carpenter. He certainly tells it vividly, as though it were reflecting His special interest in building. The parable's message is clear and bold. Those who build their lives on His teachings will have security and stability; those who reject Him will meet with disaster. The laying of the foundation is what takes time, and there are no short cuts. The foundation for our spiritual home must be patiently hewn from the bedrock of virtue, humility, perseverance, and love of Christ.

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### **The Friend At Midnight**

*And He said to them, "Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he shall answer and say, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened." (Luke 11:5- 10)*

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Jesus devoted this parable to showing the value of persistent prayer. It is significant that it does not begin by saying, "*The kingdom of heaven is like . . .*," as do many other parables. Clearly, God is not being characterized as a reluctant Person who is unwilling to listen, but who will respond if we keep on annoying

Him. Rather, in a style of argument familiar to Jesus' contemporaries, it teaches: If a rude person for a bad reason will respond to one who is a nuisance, how much more will God for a good reason respond to one who is a son?

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### The Rich Fool

And He told them a parable, saying, *"The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'"* But God said to him, *'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'* So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12: 16-21)

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This parable seems a development from the famous verse which precedes it: *"Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."* Jesus never condemns money for itself, but regards it as tending to hinder the spiritual growth of the individual, unless dedicated, when it may become useful through its influence and power in promoting the kingdom of heaven. God is the owner; man is the steward. And a man's true wealth is that which is still possessed when all that death can take is taken.

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### The Lost Sheep And The Lost Coin

And He told them this parable, saying, *"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

*"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over )one sinner who repents."* (Luke 15:3 10

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Through these two parables, Jesus paints a picture of One who is actively, tirelessly, searching to add to His own kingdom. Both stories spotlight people who felt a desperate sense of incompleteness in their loss and great joy in the finding. Although all men belong to God, His chief interest is not in groups, but in the individual person. He needs us and wants us, every one. This was a new and startling idea to the men of Jesus time. It brought comfort to the fearful, hope to the discouraged. It is no less meaningful to men of today.