



- Parables -

The stories Jesus told

*The stories Jesus told are perplexing and profound;
they reveal and they conceal; they subvert and invite.*

They are memorable, engaging and disturbing.

Introduction

'Loving a good story' seems to be universal and timeless. So perhaps it's not so surprising then that God chose 'story' as the way in which he reveals himself to us. Most of the Bible is narrative, and the four gospels tell *the story of Jesus of Nazareth*. And then *within* the gospel narratives there are the *stories Jesus told*.

Jesus was a Storyteller - in fact approximately one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. And even though Jesus was not the first person to teach by parable and story, there's no evidence of anyone prior to Jesus using parables as creatively and effectively as he did. Eugene Peterson said that,

A good story-teller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters.

We probably all know from personal experience that stories engage us in a way that abstract information does not. Most of Jesus' stories allude to abstract themes like the Kingdom of God, the nature of Christian discipleship, and the character of God, yet Jesus' stories enable us to **visualise** what God 'is like' or what the Kingdom of God 'is like' or what love actually *looks*

like in practice (in the actions of the good Samaritan, for example). And at time in history, where many of us will be sharing 'Lockdown 2020 stories for years to come, it seems like an appropriate time to reflect on the role of stories in our lives, and *Jesus'* stories in particular.

This resource is designed to help us navigate our summer series exploring the stories Jesus told. Some of us will be very familiar with these stories, and others of us may be new to Jesus' parables. Some of us may have favourite stories that bring reassurance and comfort, whilst there are other parables we find confusing and uncomfortable and seek to avoid! We hope that a **fresh look** at the parables will facilitate a **fresh appreciation** and **fruitful discipleship**, as we seek to follow Jesus faithfully in unsettling times. The stories and parables we'll be reflecting on together over the summer are:

- **The wise and foolish builders** Matt 7: 24 - 29
- **The workers in the vineyard** Matt 20: 1 – 16
- **The parable of the sower** Luke 8: 1 – 15
- **The parable of the party** Luke 14: 1 - 23
- **The unforgiving servant** Matt 18: 21 - 35
- **The good Samaritan** Luke 10: 25 - 37
- **The prodigal son** Luke 15: 11 - 32

- **The story of Lazarus** Luke 16: 19 - 31
- **The good shepherd** John 10: 1 - 18
- **The friend at night** Luke 11: 5 – 8

What are parables?

The English word *parable* refers to a short narrative with two levels of meaning, but the Greek and Hebrew words for “parable” are much broader.

The Greek word *parabole* can be used of a proverb (Luke 4: 23), a riddle (Mark 3: 23), a comparison (Mt 13: 33), a contrast (Luke 18: 1 – 8) and simple stories (Luke 13: 6 – 9). This range of meaning derives from the Hebrew word *masal*, which can be used as a taunt or a prophetic oracle, but ultimately *masal* is any ‘dark’ saying intended to stimulate thought.

Four forms of parables are often distinguished:

- Similitude
- An example story
- An extended metaphor
- An allegory

Similitude

An extended simile (an explicit comparison using ‘like’ or ‘as’)

The parable of the leaven (Mt 13: 31 – 32) is a similitude.

An example story

An example story presents a positive or negative character (or both) who serves as an example to be imitated or whose traits and actions are to be avoided. Either explicitly or implicitly the example story says, "Go and do (or don't do) likewise" (Luke 10: 37) – also *the good Samaritan, the rich fool, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the tax collector*.

An extended metaphor

An extended metaphor depicts fictional event(s) narrated in past time to express a moral or spiritual truth – like the parable of the banquet (Luke 14: 15 – 24).

An allegory

An allegory is a series of related metaphors - the parable of the sower would be an example of an allegory.

Parables are best defined as stories with two levels of meaning; **the story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood.**

Jesus' parables

The Greek word for *parabole* occurs fifty times in the New Testament. Parables appear in all of the four Gospels. An exact

number of cannot be given since there is no agreement amongst scholars as to which sayings of Jesus should be classified as parable. There are up to sixty-five parables if one includes sayings like, the person with a beam in his or her eye (Mt 7: 3 – 5).

It's been said that Jesus' parables are both works of art and the weapons he used in the conflict with his opponents! They were the teaching method he chose most frequently to explain:

- **The Kingdom of God**
- **The character of God**
- **The nature of Christian discipleship**

Characteristics of Jesus' parables

- The parables tend to be brief and symmetrical
- They often use two or three literary 'movements'
- They omit unnecessary descriptions and frequently leave motives unexplained
- They are usually taken from **everyday life** (but are not necessarily realistic)

- The employ hyperbole (exaggeration) and elements of improbability create a pseudo-realistic feel **designed to shock!**
- Parables are designed to **elicit thought** – twenty-two parables start with a question “What do you think...?”
- The parables often require the hearer to **pass judgment** on the events in the story, and then require a similar judgement about religious or ethical matters
- The parables often require a **reversal** in the hearer’s thinking (a change of heart and changed actions)
- The crucial matter or the ‘point’ of the story comes **at the end** of the parable
- Most of the parables have theocentric (God-centred) implications (except for the parable of the wicked tenants which has Christ-centred implications) and they focus on **God’s character, God’s Kingdom and the nature of discipleship** (an invitation to change behaviour).

The purpose of the Parables

- Revealing & concealing -

Parables are stories that point to something else – they are not merely stories to enjoy. **They hold up one reality to serve as a**

mirror of another reality – the Kingdom of God. It's been said that the stories Jesus told are avenues to understanding, or handles by which one can grasp the Kingdom.

Jesus told parables to confront people with the character of God's kingdom and to invite them to participate in it and to live in accordance with it.

But as much as parables are designed to *reveal* both God and his kingdom, they are also used to *conceal* truth from those with 'hard hearts' and conflicting agendas. So, for example, there were times when Jesus seemed to *obscure* the message of the Kingdom. In Mark 4: 10 – 12 for example, Jesus seems to say that he has revealed the secret of the Kingdom only to his disciples,

"To those outside all things are in parables in order that seeing they may see and not see, and hearing that they may hear and not understand, lest they turn and it be forgiven them" (the latter part of the saying is from Isaiah 6: 9-10).

It sounds harsh but what Jesus was probably saying was that he used 'concealed teaching' as a kind of *filter*. Jesus was well aware that of the thousands of people who came to see and hear him – with mixed motives and for different reasons –

there were only *some* who were genuinely open. In other words,

*His parables were a **filter** that identified those true disciples. Those who came to Jesus looking for just a political leader, a nationalist revolutionary or a spell-binding miracle-worker went away disillusioned. They found to their disappointment a teller of stories. But those who were drawn to him by some deeper magnetism stayed.... They were being inwardly called to follow him. Though they were perplexed at first, just like all the others, they were also intrigued, longing to understand what he was really getting at, sensing that somewhere buried in the tantalizing obscurity of the parables lay the clue to that kingdom of God for which their hearts longed.*

Roy Clements, *A Sting In The Tale*

In Mark 4: 10 – 12 the writer shows what typically happened in Jesus' ministry: Jesus taught the crowds, but his teaching called for *response*. Where people responded, additional teaching was given. The pattern was of public teaching followed by further private teaching to a circle of disciples. The strong words Jesus used in Mark 4, were not an indication that God didn't want to forgive people, but rather a blunt statement expressing the inevitable: *people would hear, but not respond.*

The hardness of heart and lack of receptivity that Isaiah encountered in his day, were mirrored in the ministry of Jesus (hence Jesus uses Isaiah's words in Mark 4). The question was, when the crowds heard Jesus' words, would they lead to a sincere and meaningful **response**? For those who *did* respond to Jesus' *public* ministry, additional 'private' teaching was given to the growing circle of people who identified as Jesus' ***disciples***.

Guidelines for interpreting the parables

- **A helpful way to determine the function of a parable is to ask what question it seeks to answer?**

Sometimes the question is **explicit**, as in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) which addresses the question "who is my neighbour?" At other times the question is **implicit**, as in the parable of the warring king and the tower builder, which addresses the question "Is it easy to be a disciple?"

- **Take note of historical or cultural features in the parable that help to provide insight**

Most of the parables contain features that require further investigation. A lack of familiarity about the background

of the parable could lead to a fundamental misunderstanding, so the more background information you can get, the more you will get out of the parable!

- **Editor's license: notice how the parable has been crafted and shaped to fit within the purposes of each gospel writer**

Most of the parables have been arranged thematically by the gospel writers to highlight their *different emphases* regarding Jesus' message. For example, *Luke* is particularly concerned with prayer, wealth and outcasts, and therefore, clusters together parables on prayer, wealth and 'invitation to the outcast' to demonstrate the nature of God's kingdom.

Sometimes the different gospel writers use the same parable to draw out *different emphases*. For example, Luke uses the parable of the lost sheep (15: 1-7) to deal with the repentance of sinners, whilst Matthew uses the parable in the context of dealing with erring disciples. Along with demonstrating editorial discretion, this also indicates that Jesus probably told the same parable more than once, in different contexts.

- **Determine the *theological* significance of the story**
The parables express *theology* – God-ology! What does the parable teach about God and his kingdom? And how is this reflected elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus?
- **Listen to the parables in the context of Jesus' ministry**
Resist the temptation to lift the parables out of the bigger picture of Jesus' ministry as a whole - read them in the context of the unfolding narrative of Jesus' mission and ministry.
- **Don't push the parable too far!**
Don't try and read the story too literally. For example, while Matthew 18: 34 may emphasise the seriousness of God's judgment, it does not literally mean that God has tormentors!
- **Pay close attention to the end of the parable**
The end of the parable – or the conclusion – is where the parable often requires a decision or forces the hearer to change his or her way of thinking (repentance).
- **Never lose sight of the Kingdom emphasis**
The parables are not moralistic fables or universal religious truth, they are **subversive stories** through which Jesus announces the Kingdom of God.

- **Remember that ultimately Jesus' stories are invitations**

Jesus' teaching is less 'teaching' and more invitation to receive the Kingdom of God. Response to this invitation requires **faith, repentance/change of heart** and **trust**.

- **What's 'the sting in the tail'?**

By drawing his listeners in to his stories, Jesus disarmed their psychological defences so that uncomfortable truths could 'strike home in their hearts like a missile seeking it's target' (Clements). But if Jesus' stories were originally designed to make an impact on his listeners, our own familiarity with them makes it difficult to recover the original impact. **Therefore, approach the parables with the awareness that paradox and surprise were intended to *subvert* the listeners' presuppositions.** What are our presuppositions as we approach the story?

And finally... what is the challenge?

Lastly, what is the **challenge**? What does Jesus expect from *us*? The parables are not just about information but rather **transformation**. So what do Jesus' stories mean for our lives,

our families, our Home Groups, our church, our parish, our city, and our world? What's the challenge and how will we respond?

The stories Jesus told are perplexing and profound; they reveal *and* they conceal; they subvert and invite. They are memorable, engaging and disturbing.

Reflect

- Do I understand the story? Why did Jesus tell this particular story? What does it relate to? God's character? The Kingdom of God? Discipleship? Something else?
- What questions does it raise? What characters do I empathise with or relate to? How does the story move or provoke me?
- Does it still have the capacity to shock, surprise or disturb me? How does the story subvert conventional ways of thinking? Is there an invitation in the story for me to respond to?
- Do I have a sense of how it might relate to my life?

- Additional resources & further reading -

This is an excellent resource sheet by the Methodist Church – plus it's concise and to the point! Particularly good for those of you who preach:

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/6385/dd-explore-devotion-tips-for-preaching-the-parables-1012.pdf>

N T Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (Harper Collins, USA, 2018)

N T Wright, *Interpreting Scripture* (SPCK, 2020)

NT Wright, *Interpreting Jesus* (SPCK, 2020)

Eugene Peterson, *The Word Made Flesh: The language of Jesus in his stories and prayers* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010)

Watch the Bible Project's 5 minute video on Jesus' parables (a great introduction): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XX-aAg4_U2Q

Craig L Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From responsible interpretation to powerful proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 2004)