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R. C. SPROUL

What Do Jesus' Parables Mean?

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Chapter One

Introduction to Jesus' Parables

Our Lord Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher who ever walked on the face of the earth. Not only was He the very incarnation of truth—and so the content of His teaching was impeccable and of divine origin—but He was also a master pedagogue. That is, His style of teaching was extraordinary.

His contemporaries said of Him, “No one ever spoke like this man!” (John 7:46). Some even said that He spoke as One who had authority, and not like the scribes and the

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Pharisees. Jesus' teaching was not frivolous. It wasn't superficial. Everything He said had substance to it. Everything He said carried the very weight of His own authority. Jesus uniquely taught from the standpoint of the authority of God Himself. He said, "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak" (12:49).

In His unique proclamation of truth with authority, Jesus is perhaps most noted for His use of parables. Of course, Jesus did not invent the idea of the parable. The Pharisees and rabbis of that time had a tradition of using parables, but their use of parable was different. The Pharisees used parables to explain or illustrate the meaning of the Mosaic law. Jesus used them to give new revelation.

Interestingly, you won't find a parable anywhere in the New Testament outside of the Gospels. And parables are also infrequent in the Old Testament. Perhaps the most famous parable of the Old Testament is the one delivered by the prophet Nathan to David after David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1–15). Nathan told the story of a rich man who had many sheep, but he took one little lamb from a poor man, who loved this one lamb dearly. When David heard that story, he was outraged 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.” David didn’t understand until Nathan clearly said, “You are the man!” (vv. 5–7).

In this parable, Nathan came to David with judgment. He came in a moment of crisis. And this is one of the ways in which parables function so richly in the New Testament.

The very word *parable* comes from two Greek words. *Para-* is a prefix that refers to something that is alongside something else. For instance, paralegals work alongside lawyers as helpers. And *ballō* means “to throw or to hurl.” So *parable* means something that is thrown alongside of something else. In order to illustrate a truth He is teaching, Jesus throws a parable alongside of it.

It has been said of preachers that the most important part of their proclamation is illustration. We use illustrations to simplify, to clarify, to heighten people’s ability to understand what we are saying. But when Jesus uses parables to illustrate a point, there is another, somewhat mysterious, element, which sometimes gives us pause. After Jesus preached the parable of the sower, He said, “He who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9). Why would He say that? We’re almost certain that everyone who was present

had two ears. But Jesus was talking about people who have an ability to hear, to understand, and to embrace the truth.

In the Greek language, there's hearing, and then there's obeying what you hear. Obeying what you hear means really hearing it—a hyperhearing or superhearing. When Jesus says, “He who has ears, let him hear,” He understands that some people might audibly hear His teaching, but it will not pierce their understanding or their hearts. So Jesus makes a distinction between those who hear and those who don't hear.

Once when Jesus was alone with the Twelve, they asked Him about a parable. He told them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven’” (Mark 4:11–12).

Jesus explained that for those who have ears to hear, the parable provides a deeper understanding of Jesus' teaching. But for those who don't have ears to hear, the parable is actually an instrument of concealment. The parable was not given simply to make everything clear to people; it was also given to obscure meaning to those who are outside, who are not given understanding. That sounds somewhat

harsh. Jesus came not only to instruct and to help people understand the kingdom of God, He came also as a judgment on those who don't want to hear the truth.

Scripture says that Jesus came for a rising and a falling of many (Luke 2:34). Jesus said, "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Matt. 10:34–35). He's the rock of stumbling, the stone of offense, but to those who love Him, He is the aroma of salvation. To those who oppose Him, He's the grounds for their condemnation.

And we see all of this in His use of parables. He would take His disciples aside and say, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11).

We find many different themes when we read the parables. But one of the most common ones is the gospel of the kingdom of God. The term *gospel* is used in three ways in the Bible. One way is to describe a particular literary form, the Gospels, the books that tell us about Jesus, His life, and His ministry.

But the gospel that is defined and proclaimed by John the Baptist, and then by Jesus, is the good news of the kingdom of God; this is the second way that the word is used

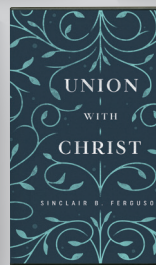
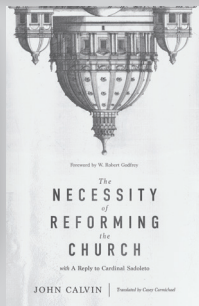
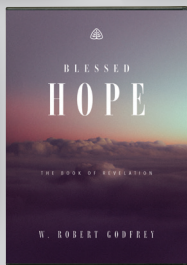
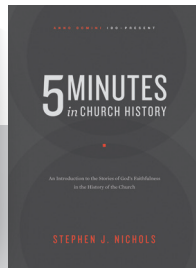
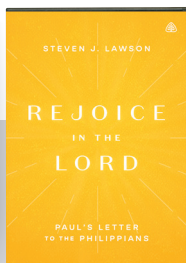
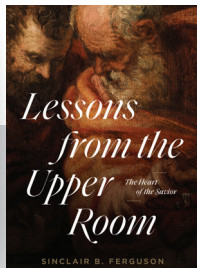
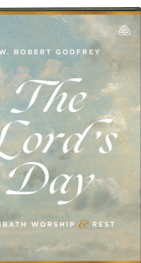
in the New Testament. The third way can be seen in Paul's Epistles. There, Paul talks about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; the content of that gospel is Jesus—His person and His work. So there is a transition in the meaning of the word *gospel* toward the proclamation of Christ and what He has done on our behalf, but that transition comes after the initial announcement of the good news, which is the announcement of the breakthrough of the kingdom of God. And so over and over again in His parables, Jesus says, “And the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is like this,” and He will throw alongside that announcement a parable, so that we might understand the mystery of this kingdom.

In the pages that follow, we are going to consider eleven of Jesus' parables. But before we do, we need to keep in mind one important guideline for interpreting parables. In the early centuries of Christianity, the church fathers often engaged in what is called the “allegorical method” of interpreting the parables. The allegorical method aims to find some hidden meaning in every element of the parable. For instance, in the allegory of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, each person whom Christian meets along the way represents a type of person we encounter in the world. The church fathers

tried to interpret the parables in this manner. But since that time, it has become almost universally accepted that a parable's meaning consists of one central, decisive point. A few parables might have two major points or possibly even three, but we do not treat them as true allegories, finding hidden significance for every single element.

And so the question we will ask as we consider these eleven parables is, what is Jesus' single, important, central point? What lessons do these parables carry for believers?

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