

What Do Jesus' Parables Mean?

Crucial Questions

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

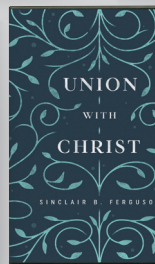
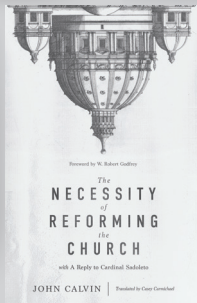
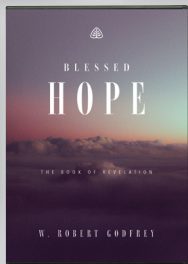
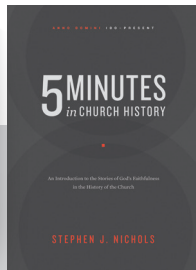
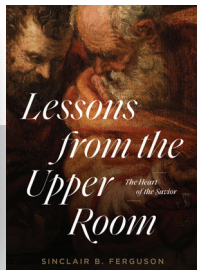
Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” David didn’t understand until Nathan clearly said, “You are the man!” (vv. 5–7).

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

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