

INTERPRETING PARABLES:
Do you get the point?

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE PARABLES

Jesus presented His message about the kingdom of God and authenticated His message with miracles. But we read how most of his listeners rejected his both his message and his miracles.

Controversy over his teaching led to open opposition and rejection by the Jewish religious teachers (Matthew 12). From this point on, Jesus will be dealing deals with the Jewish people as a nation set on a course of rejection.

The decision of the religious leaders and the prospect of Jesus' rejection has left the disciples with some questions:

- What will happen to the kingdom?
- Has the kingdom been canceled?
- How will God deal with believers until His kingdom is established?

Jesus will answer these questions as he teaches about the kingdom through His *parables*.

II. PARABLES IN THE WORLD OF JESUS

A. Not unique in the teaching of Jesus

B. Rabbinic Parables

1. The parable of two foundations
2. The parable of two cups
3. The parable of two trees

C. Quote from David Bivin, *Rabbinic Parables*

Jesus himself was a Jew and a rabbi who spoke Hebrew, used familiar rabbinic methods of teaching and drew upon Jewish Scriptures and oral rabbinic traditions.

III. HERMENEUTICS OF PARABLES

A. What is a parable?

The word “parable” (*parabollo*), means “to compare,” and denotes placing one thing beside another to make a comparison.

More precisely, parables are “true to life stories intended to teach some spiritual truth by analogy.”

The Gospels contain approximately 70 of these “true to life” stories which Jesus used to teach truth.

B. The Problem with Parables

Gordon Fee has commented that “parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to [the book] of Revelation.”

Augustine’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan reflects this approach.

The traveler:
The thieves:
The Priest and Levite:
The Samaritan:
The Inn:
The inn keeper:

Jesus Himself made several points of comparison in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9; 18-23) and the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-40).

A Balanced Approach:

Recognize the multiple points of analogy where there is solid evidence, but to avoid speculation otherwise.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) suggests multiple points of comparison.

Yet these secondary lessons are all found under the umbrella of the major truth that “God loves and seeks lost sinners.”

C. The Purpose of Parables

1. Reveal and Conceal Truth

In Matthew 13:10-17 Jesus reveals that parables reveal truth to the responsive and conceal truth from those rejecting Him.

Quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10, Jesus declares that people who reject Him will “be ever hearing, but never understand.”

2. Warn of Consequences of Rejecting Him

The parables also serve to call people to a decision regarding Jesus.

See Matt. 21:33-41

3. Perpetuate Jesus' teaching

Finally, parables served to perpetuate Jesus' teaching. These simple stories captured the listener's interest and imagination.

D. Interpretation of Parables

1. Recover the Historical Setting

We first need to discover who Jesus was addressing: disciples, enemies or both?

2. Discover the Problem of the Parable

The parables of Jesus were intended to address certain problems or answer certain questions. If you don't know the problem Jesus is addressing, you won't recognize the point of the parable.

You can usually find the problem being addressed as you survey the historical context. Ask yourself, “Why did Jesus speak this parable?” “What was the question or problem that needed to be addressed?” See Luke 15.

3. Understand the Cultural Background

Parables teach truth by transference. Interpreting the parable depends on understanding the illustration.

For city dwellers like myself, the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30) raises the question, "What are tares?"

4. Determine the Central Truth

Parables are generally intended to teach one central truth.

By understanding the correspondence between the known and the unknown, readers can determine and highlight the parable's central truth.

The parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32). What about the birds in the mustard tree?

5. Recognize the Kingdom Message of Many Parables

Following Grame Goldsworthy, I define the kingdom of heaven as "God's people in God's place under God's rule."

The Kingdom of Heaven/God is a present spiritual reality which will one day be culminated in physical form.

The "mysteries" of the kingdom refer to the present form of the kingdom which had not been revealed in previous prophecies, but were *now* being revealed by Jesus.

6. Applying the Parables

The parables are not just to be studied and interpreted. They are to be acted upon and personally applied.

(1) Is there a truth to learn?

(2) Is there an attitude to develop?

The parables of Jesus touch on characteristics like anxiety (Mk. 4:26-29), joy (Matt. 13:44), diligence (Matt. 25:14-30), compassion (Lk. 7:41-42), one's attitude toward the lost (Lk. 15).

(3) Is there something I should do?

Jesus applied the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-25) to the disciples.

As the unforgiving servant was judged, “so shall my heavenly father do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from the heart” (v. 35).

See also the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37). Jesus drove the lesson home with these words, “Go and do likewise” (Lk. 10:37).

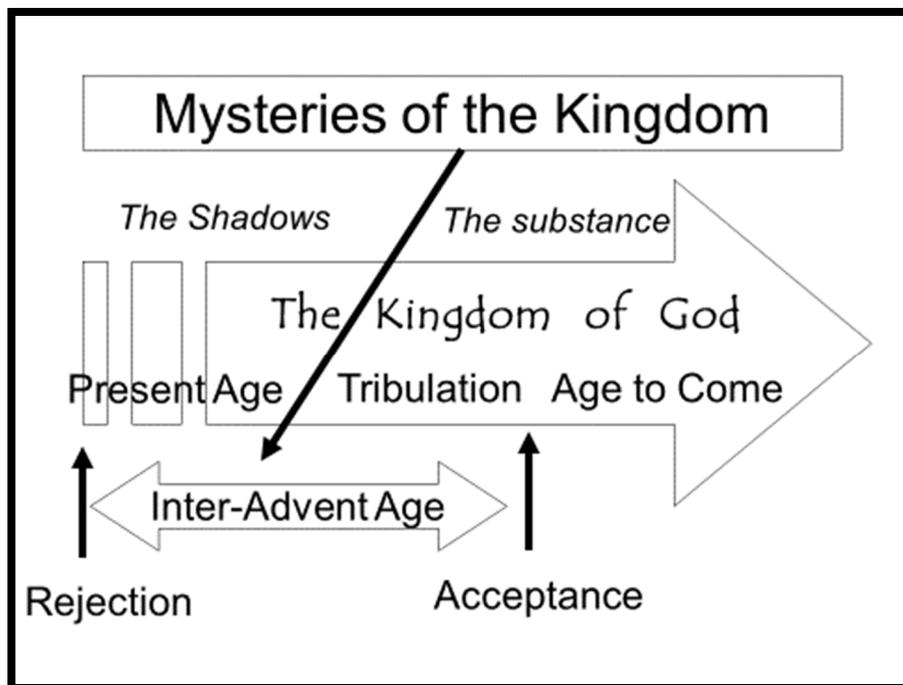
IV. EXPLANATION OF THE KINGDOM 13

With the King rejected, the disciples of Jesus had some important questions about the kingdom.

1. In light of Israel's rejection of their Messiah, what will happen to the kingdom program?
2. Has the kingdom been canceled?
3. How will God deal with believers until God's kingdom purposes prevail?

It was with a view to answer these questions that Jesus began to speak in parables.

What are the “Mysteries of the Kingdom”?



The parables reveal some of the significant features of the kingdom of God as it will be manifested in *the present age*.

A. Parable of the Sower 13:1-9

Four soils and four responses:

1. Wayside soil - nothing
2. Rocky soil - response, but no growth
3. Thorny soil - response choked out
4. Good soil - response, growth, and a good yield

Interpretation found in 13:19-23

B. Parable of the Sower Explained 13:19-23

1. Problem: Has the kingdom been canceled?
2. Parable explained 18-22
3. Lesson: There will be a proclamation of the kingdom in the present age with varying responses depending upon the preparedness of the soil. What kind of response evidences life giving faith? (v. 23).

C. Parable of the Tares

Expounded 13:24-30

Explained 13:36-43

1. Problem: How do we account for counterfeit movements and apostasy?
2. Parable: After planting good seed, the enemy planted tares. The householder allowed the counterfeits to grow until the harvest.
3. Lesson: A counterfeit kingdom will parallel the true kingdom in the present age. What counterfeits do you see today?

D. Parable to the Mustard Seed 13:31-32

1. Problem: Will Christ's seemingly insignificant kingdom of disciples survive?

2. Parable: A small seed grows to great proportions.
3. Lesson: The kingdom may have an insignificant beginning, but it will grow to great proportions.

E. Parable of the Leavening Process 13:33

1. Problem: Will the kingdom grow through outward organization or some other process.
2. Parable: The comparison is with the leavening process. A little leaven permeates the whole. Does leaven symbolize evil?
3. Lesson: The kingdom will grow by an internal dynamic of permeation (discipleship; one-on-one) rather than through an outward organization.

F. Parable of the Hid Treasure 13:44

1. Problem: Is the kingdom worth pursuing and sacrificing for?
2. Parable: A man gives all he has to acquire a treasure.
3. Lesson: The kingdom is of great value and worth pursuing.

G. Parable of the Pearl of Great Price 13:45-46

1. Problem: Is the kingdom worth pursuing to the exclusion of all else?
2. Parable: A merchant trades all his pearls for one pearl.
3. Lesson: The kingdom is of surpassing value. It's worth surpasses all else in life.

H. Parable of the Drag-net 13:47-50

1. Problem: Are the disciples to discriminate and judge those entering the kingdom?
2. Parable: Good fish and poor fish are caught in the net. Afterwards, the poor fish are thrown out.

3. Lesson: At the conclusion of the present form of the kingdom there will be a judgment to take believers into the future form of the kingdom.

I. **Parable of the Householder** 13:51-52

1. Problem: What is the responsibility of the people of the kingdom during this age?
2. Parable: A householder brings forth from his treasure chest things old and things new.
3. Lesson: Believers are responsible to study the truths concerning the kingdom--both the old aspects and those newly revealed.

Introducing...

Miss Wetherall Johnson, founder of Bible Study Fellowship International.

Bible Study Fellowship had its humble beginnings in 1952 as a Bible study group of just five women. Since then it has grown into an international organization. There are more than 100,000 members--both men and women--who are committed to regular, personal study of God's Word.

In her biography, *Created for Commitment*, she writes, "Knowing God through the Bible has become the essence of my life." May this be true of each of us as we diligently study, carefully interpret and faithfully obey God's Word.