

## What is a Parable?

Approximately one third of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament consist of some forty parables and twenty parabolic statements.

A **parable** is a form of speech used to illustrate and make a point with the help of a picture. Recognizable and perhaps a story that the audience can identify with, the picture is intended to provide an understanding of abstract religious concepts. Since this form of speech translates one set of thought forms from one conceptual scheme into another, it is paramount to understand the original content / context of the picture lest the intended meaning of the parable is lost.

Example: He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." (Matt 13:33)

The parable develops out of a simile or a figurative saying (the kingdom of heaven is like leaven). The image is something understood (leaven), and it is used to clarify the unknown reality (kingdom of heaven). In the context of the immediately preceding parables (Matt 13:1-32), the meaning of the parable is rooted in the process of making bread where yeast leavens flour and makes the dough grow. In like fashion the kingdom of heaven will inexorably grow (i.e. number of Believers).

Parables are wonderfully instructive, because there is only one principle point of comparison, and they attempt to overwhelm any objection by using images that cannot be doubted.

To understand what a true parable is and its characteristics, it is worthwhile to understand other figurative speech associated with it and how they are distinguished from the pure parable. There are six other categories of figurative language that Jesus uses that have been confused with parables: 1) figurative sayings, 2) metaphors, 3) similes, 4) parabolic stories, 5) illustrative stories and 6) allegories.

A **figurative saying** is a statement that places reality and an image alongside together without a comparative adverb such as "as," so that the image (what is known) may provide clarity to the reality (what is unknown).

Example: You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. (Matt 5:13)

In the Sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes, Jesus is speaking about disciples and their role in world, and His illustration makes a point about disciples. The reality (disciples) and image (salt of the earth). As salt does not lose its character, the figurative meaning of this passage is disciples don't lose your faith in Jesus Christ.

A **metaphor** is a figurative expression in which a name or descriptive term is applied to some object to which it is not literally or properly applicable. In contrast to figurative saying, metaphor places the image in substitution of reality.

Example: Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matt 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42)

In this warning against hypocritical judging, Jesus illustrates His point with a strong hyperbole. The image (speck and its hyperbole log) and reality (personal faults). The figurative meaning: a person should not be critical of a small fault of a friend when that person has a bigger personal fault. Judgments should be made but discernment must be exercised to know what would be appreciated and beneficial (Matt 3:6).

## What is a Parable? (page 2)

A **simile** is a sentence in which the image and reality are placed beside each other with a comparative adverb (i.e. “as”).

Example: Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. (Matt 10:16)

With similes, there is one principle point of comparison. In this example, the disciples are compared as sheep, defenseless and vulnerable (if not for the shepherd). They are to be shrewd as a snake is circumspect in avoiding danger. And as innocent as doves are to be pure in thought and character.

A **parabolic story** differs from the parable in that its picture, a fictional story, is recounted as though it really happened. It is a story of what a fictional person did or would do without asking whether others would act in the same way.

Example: Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says 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 answers and says, '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. So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:5-13)

In this discussion on prayer, Jesus uses the first parabolic story (Luke 11:5-10) to encourage persistence in prayer and be steadfast in that effort. In His second parabolic story (Luke 11:11-13), Jesus reveals that God gives His children what is good for them, not what harms them. For the disciples this good gift was the Holy Spirit.

Despite being fictional, the parabolic story provides some clarity to the reality of abstract concepts (in this case, prayer and the nature of God), because its story is rooted in human behaviors that are generally known and acknowledged.

Found only in the book of Luke, the **illustrative story** is a freely invented story that provides an example for moral human behavior.

Example: Two men went into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, 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 to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10-14)

In this discussion on prayer, Jesus draws attention to the standard by which one judges righteousness: the Pharisee used others as his standard whereas the tax collector used God. The illustrated story warns those who hold a high view of themselves and that righteousness is based on the humble appeal to God's mercy.

## What is a Parable? (page 3)

An **allegory** is a freely invented story that has metaphor on top of metaphor, pictures upon pictures, such that the true meaning of the images is hidden. To understand the allegory, one must understand and translate the metaphors in sequence before the truth is known, and often this literary form is intended, not to make facts known, but to appraise known facts. Sometimes this risks the invitation for an allegorical approach of Bible interpretation that seeks to find hidden spiritual meaning instead of intended or historical ones.

The following is aptly described as an allegory but is considered a parable (Matt 22:1).

Example: Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, "Tell those who have been invited, 'Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.'" But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matt 22:1-14)

In this third parable to chief priests and elders during His last week in Jerusalem, Jesus reveals information about the kingdom of heaven. He compares it to a wedding banquet whose invited guests (in reality the nation of Israel) refuse to come and reject the invitation by mistreating and killing the king's servants (in reality Jesus and John the Baptist). Subsequently the king invites anyone (in reality the Gentiles); however, only those properly clothed can enjoy the banquet (in reality genuine Believers).

While there is scholarly disagreement as to what constitutes a true parable, the following are largely accepted as the parables of Jesus. When studying these parables, it is important to note that the same parable may be set in different contexts by different Gospels, and this may affect their interpretation.

1. The Two Houses (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49)
2. The New Cloth and New Wineskins (Matt 9:16-17)
3. The Sower (Matt 13:5-8; Mark 4:3-8; Luke 8:5-8)
4. The Weeds (Matt 13:24-30)
5. The Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:5-8)
6. The Yeast (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21)
7. The Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44)
8. Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:45-46)
9. The Fishing Net (Matt 13:47-50)
10. The Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)
11. The Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)
12. The Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32)

## What is a Parable? (page 4)

13. The Wicked Vinegrowers (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19)
14. The Wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1-14)
15. The Two Servants (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48)
16. The 10 Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)
17. The Talents (Matt 25:14-30)
18. The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29)
19. The Doorkeeper (Mark 13:34-37)
20. The Rude Children (Luke 7:31-35)
21. The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)
22. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
23. The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)
24. The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)
25. The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)
26. The Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)
27. The Unfinished Tower and the King's Rash War (Luke 14:28-33)
28. The Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7)
29. The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
30. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
31. The Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-9)
32. The Servant's Reward (Luke 17:7-10)
33. The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)
34. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)
35. The Pounds (Luke 19:11-27)

### References:

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2. Walvoord JF and Zuck RB, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Wheaton: Victor Books, (1985).