

# The Parables of Jesus Christ

## 1. Introduction to the Parables of Jesus Christ

The parables of Jesus are one of his most often used teaching methods. In fact, in the entire Bible there are only four instances of parables outside the teaching of Christ. In the Old Testament, there are two examples of parables, both in 2 Samuel: the parable of the ewe-lamb told by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-9, and the parable of the woman of Tekoah in 2 Samuel 14:1-13. In the New Testament the Greek word for parable is found outside the teachings of Christ only in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19. In Hebrews, the word for parable is translated *figurative (ly)* in the NKJV and *illustration* and *symbolic* in the NIV.

## Definitions

Parables are generally included in those symbolic uses of language that extend a metaphor to its many parts. These include parables, allegories, and fables. The parable, however, is more condensed than the allegory; for in a parable a single principle comes to bear, and a single moral becomes apparent. In contrast to the fable which bestows human abilities to animals and objects, the parable is true to life in all of its corresponding parts. The story of a parable may be fictitious, but its elements are true to life.

It is interesting that the historical roots of the the word *parable* are very similar to those of the word *devil*. In ancient Greek, the word for parable is *paraballein*, which meant *to compare* but came from the root words *para* + *ballein*, *to throw more at*. Devil, on the other hand, came from the ancient *diaballein*, *to slander*, from the root words *dia* + *ballein*, *to throw across*. Therefore, *parballein* became *parable*, and *diaballein* became *diabolos* in Greek, *diabolus* in Latin, *dEofol* in Old English, *devel* in Middle English, and *devil* in modern English.

Apparently, while the Devil was throwing slander, Christ was throwing spiritual truths by comparisons to common and everyday understandings. One, the Devil, was a deceiver; the other, the Christ, was a revealer of truth and light.

W. E. Vine summarizes the New Testament meaning and use of the word *parable*:

1. *parabole* NT:3850 lit. denotes "a placing beside" (akin to *paraballo*, "to throw" or "lay beside, to compare"). It signifies "a placing of one thing beside another" with a view to comparison (some consider that the thought of comparison is not necessarily contained in the word). . . . It is the lesson that is of value; the hearer must catch the analogy if he is to be instructed (this is true also of a proverb). Such a narrative or saying, dealing with earthly things with a spiritual meaning, is distinct from a fable, which attributes to things what does not belong to them in nature. . . .

Two dangers are to be avoided in seeking to interpret the "parables" in Scripture, that of ignoring the important features and that of trying to make all the details mean something. . . . (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright © 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers.)

Peter forever separated the meaning of parables from fables in 2 Peter 1:16-17: "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty." NKJV.

## The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God

The parables in Matthews' gospel refer to the *kingdom of heaven*, and the parables in Luke and the other gospel writers refer to the *kingdom of God*. A close review of the scriptures illustrates that these phrases refer to the very same kingdom. In Matt 4:17, Matthew wrote of Jesus after he was baptized, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" Mark records this same event in Mark 1:14-15, using the *kingdom of God*, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Matthew and Luke use the two different phrases in recording the beatitudes. Matthew quoted Jesus in Matt 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke used the *kingdom of God* phrase in Luke 6:20, "Blessed are you who are

poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." In the account of the parable of the mustard seed, Matthew used the *kingdom of heaven* and Mark used *the kingdom of God*. In Matt 13:31-32, Matthew recorded Christ as saying, "He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field." But Mark recorded in Mark 4:30-32, "Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground."

Since both phrases clearly refer to the same kingdom, why did the gospel writers make the difference? Since Matthew wrote his gospel to the Jews, he may have chosen to use the phrase *kingdom of heaven* in order to reach the Jews in a non-prejudicial way. The Jews were reluctant to use the name of God out of reverence. The Jews also expected the Messiah to reestablish David's kingdom and saw the kingdom of God as the continuance of the Old Testament, earthly, Jewish kingdom. Certainly, a gospel writer would want to avoid this misconception. There is no reason to think that the phrases refer to two different kingdoms or concepts of the Kingdom.

Matthews' use of the *kingdom of heaven* as the same as *the kingdom of God* is completely inconsistent with any notion of a future, earthly kingdom yet to come as the millennialists teach. The kingdom was not of this world then and is not of this world now. Jesus said in John 18:36, "Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.'"

### **The Meaning and Use of Parables in Christ's Teaching—Matt 13:10-17; 34-36**

Matt 13:10-17: 10 *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"*

11 *He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables:*

*'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'*

14 *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*

*'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'*

16 *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."*

The disciples asked the question directly, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" The key to the Lord's answers follows the statement: "This is why I speak to them in parables." Some hear the words of the Lord, but they do not hear and do not understand. Isaiah, quoted here to make the Lord's point, said that their hearts were calloused, their ears, deaf, and their eyes, closed. On the other hand, the true disciples see, hear, and understand. That the prophets and righteous men wanted to hear and see is reiterated by Peter in 1 Peter 1:10-11:

10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

In Matt 13:34-36: 34 *Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. 35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:*

*"I will open my mouth in parables,*

*I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."*

36 *Then he left the crowd and went into the house.*

## **Outline of the Lessons on the Parables of Jesus**

1. Introduction to the Parables of Jesus
2. The Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23)
3. The Parable of the Weeds in the Field and Others in Matthew 13 (Matt 13:24-33, 36-52)
4. The Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:21-35)
5. Two Parables for the Pharisees: The Two Sons (Mt 21:28-32) and The Wicked Vinedressers (Mt 21:33-46)
6. The Wedding Feast (Mt 22:1-14) and the Wise And Foolish Virgins (Mt 25:1-13)
7. The Talents (Mt 25:14-30)
8. The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)
9. The Rich Fool (Lk 12:13-21) and the Rich Man And Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)
10. The Friend At Midnight (Lk 11:1-13)
11. Taking The Lowest Place (Lk 14:7-11) and the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15-24)
12. The Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1-7), The Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10), and The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)
13. The Persistent Widow (Lk 18:1-8) and The Separation of Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)