

Parables in Matthew



Small Group Resource
Sept / Oct 2026

Parables in General



BIG Idea!

Stories for a reason

Parables are one of the tools Jesus used to explain the Kingdom of God. They are not always straight forward. Jesus used parables for a particular purpose to a particular audience in a particular context. He would often use a parable to get a response from his hearers, knowing that they would have “got” the imagery he was using.

Some have suggested that Jesus was trying to be subversive and clever to hide the true meaning of the stories to make people hunt out the real meaning. Augustine suggested that the parables only had an allegorical meaning. Eg) if we looked at the good samaritan story he suggested that the; The man beaten up was referring to the fact that Adam was fallen from grace; That the mention of Jerusalem meant the heavenly city of peace; and that Jericho was the moon shining on Adam’s mortality and the Thieves were talking about the devil and so on. There is danger in looking at parables in this way because no where in scripture does Jesus refer to these things even when he explains them.

Jesus used these stories not to have hidden meaning but so the hearers would be challenged by the status quo and that they would further understand the point he was trying to get across. NT Wright says they were “ ... not simply illustrations that is preachers tricks to decorate an abstract thought...but designed to tease (and) clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God’s kingdom...

We also need to be aware that the vast majority of the parables were to explain or illuminate the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of heaven” and that they were a vehicle that Jesus used to elicit a reaction from the hearers to his invitation and radical and revolutionary call to discipleship.

Parables are not all the same and not all imagery in Jesus teachings are parables. Many sayings are similes or metaphor eg) you are the salt of the earth is not a parable but is a metaphor.

Some parables were like true stories with a beginning middle and end with a clear plot. eg) Lost sheep, prodigal son... Others were illustrations used from everyday life to make a point. eg) The Leaven meal.

Parables are not a direct teaching or in fact even allegories although they look like it at times.

This leaves us with the question of how do we interpret the parables for us in 21st century provincial New Zealand or where ever you are living at this time.

The things to note when reading parables:

1. **The Audience;** was it the pharisees (who were a constant audience) or was it the disciples or the crowds. At times we are not told directly who the audience was but by reading carefully we can often work out by the point of the story or the points of interest that Jesus may have used to connect with his hearers.
2. **The Context:** The context where Jesus uses these stories is crucial. Knowing not only who but the situation that is going on around him is very important to help us understand fully the main point of the parable. The stories would have had a very familiar sound to them to those listening.
3. **The points of interest:** What were those things that the hearers would immediately have seen and taken notice of, or been challenged by
4. **The twist in the tail:** There was often a twist or unexpected turn of events or a pointed question at the end of the story. This was often challenging the status quo or the stance of the religious leaders of the day.
5. **Understand what it meant to them before relating to us today:** We can not make a parable say something to us that is no where near what Jesus had intended his 1st century listeners to hear.
6. **Translate in our Context:** We then can transfer that concept into a context that makes sense to us today. Retelling the story in a modern day context might be helpful here.
7. **Remember that the “kingdom of God “** was the over arching theme of the majority of the parables and to know the teaching of the Kingdom of God through out scripture including the gospels and Sermon on the Mount is essential in making a good sense of the parables.

So enjoy reading the following parables and consider the discipleship challenge and invitation Jesus is calling, not only his original hearers but, us all as we outwork the Kingdom of God in our world today.



1

2

3

I HOPE THIS HAS BEEN HELPFUL IN YOU READING THE PARABLES AND GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THEM.



Further Reading:

1. How to read the Bible for all it’s worth.

By Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Chapter 8)

2. Bible Project on Parables.

Look up on the Bible Project website (video / audio)

3. Simply Jesus: a new vision of who he was, what he did and why he Matters.

NT Wright (pp87-88)

4. Rediscovering the Parables

Joachim Jeremias

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BIG Idea! The Grace of God

Humility is the key to understanding the upside down Kingdom of God. Not a kingdom of power, might, violence or military force but a kingdom of compassion, humility and love. God's grace is irrespective of status, power, finances or position and is based solely on the generosity of God giving us what we do not and can not deserve or earn. This often means that those who think that they deserve more because of their hard work, social standing or even in a church, are at times the very ones who do not appear to understand and miss the point of the whole deal. This grace is not given in measures of who deserves it more or who has been at it the longest but is all, for all. It can not be bartered or stored up. It can not be measured or nor is it sort of thing one person can have a lot and someone else only a little.

Or as Paul put it in **Ephesians 2**

8For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9not by works, so that no one can boast.

And **Romans 3** ... *this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and (all) are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Therefore there are none who are more important or who are more special in God's eyes. We are all called by his name and enter the family of God on equal footing to receive the inheritance of life in him; freedom from the power of sin and death. He is the one who holds up his end of the bargain even when we do not hold up ours. This story tells us more about the covenantal grace, generously given by God rather than rules to follow to be accepted in God's Kingdom. It echoes the story of a Father running to embrace his wayward son with arms spread wide. Displaying love, forgiveness and grace so freely to the one who least deserved it.



DIGGING Deeper! Context:

In Israelite literature the Israel was often referred to as a vineyard and Isaiah 5 likens God to vineyard owner. This story would have been very appropriate for the people of the day. Waiting in the market square to get work for the day when the crop was ready for harvest and the workers would work a long day to earn a good days pay. Those not chosen would spend the day at the market place hoping someone would employ them. However this parable does not follow the usual social and economic patterns that everyone would expect.

1. This owner cares for the down and outs. 2. Each worker gets the same pay not matter how many hours they worked and are paid first not last as would normally happen. 3. Also the worker who complains about the situation is called "friend". This is the same term Jesus used of a man not dressed in wedding clothes yet wants to come to the wedding Matt 22:12 and of Judas when he betrayed Jesus. It is a term that is an ironical term used when someone is in the wrong. Here the owner shows the contract that was signed by those workers at the beginning of the day.

I do not think that it is a commentary on social justice or employment law but rather an insight into how Jesus sees the kingdom working and what is really important.. God does not enter into a contract where we have to do our work to receive a benefit but enters into a covenant where he chooses to give us everything in the full once we choose to believe. The generosity of the salvation of God is for all people at any time the moment you believe and invite God to be your King.

1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

Ask God to help you see all as he sees them no matter what socio economic or position they might have or not have.

3

MISSION POINT

Are there people, or types of people, that we struggle to care for? Imagine them receiving the fullness of God's generosity?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.



Today's Reading: Matthew 20: 1-16

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Try to imagine being the disciples hearing this parable. Why might they be challenged by this?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

Why might the Jews have found this parable to be a difficult thing to hear.

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What does God's grace mean to you?
3. Who was Jesus primarily talking to in this section of Matthew? You may need to track back a page or 2.
4. What does it mean "The first shall be last and the last first"? How do other Bible versions translate this phrase?
5. What does this mean for us, here and now?
6. Compare this to the story Jesus tells in Luke 5: 11-32 What similarities are there and what is the overarching message in both?

PRAY for each other that we would see how God wants us to see and communicate with others.

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BIG Idea!

The First shall be Last

In the previous chapters, Jesus established the counter-cultural values of God's Kingdom, with particular attention afforded to Israel's poor and marginalised. Now it was time to deal with Israel's rich and powerful. His intention, however, is not to spite or insult the upper echelons of Jewish society, but to break through their prideful defences by whatever means necessary. To this end, Jesus tells them the parable of the Two Sons. Building upon the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, Jesus presents the Gospel in the simplest terms possible. God is like a loving, generous father. God has many children and, broadly speaking, those children can be divided into two groups; rule-breakers and rule-keepers. The Chief Priests, Elders and Pharisees, to whom Jesus was speaking, belong to the later category, thinking that their rule-keeping will secure them a place in God's Kingdom. Jesus, rejects their presumption. God's Kingdom belongs to the humble. No amount of rule-keeping will earn a place in God's Kingdom, just as no amount of rule-breaking could permanently exclude someone from it. Anyone and everyone who asks for forgiveness, who humbles themselves before the Father, are welcomed into God's family as heirs to His Kingdom.



DIGGING Deeper!

Context

The series of events which lead up to the parable of the Two Sons serve to underscore its meaning. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem. Only, He doesn't gallop into the city riding a mighty war horse, as the messianic model required, but meanders through the city gates atop a humble donkey. This subversion of expectations continues in the Temple. Like the Macabbe's who violently 'cleansed' the Temple from gentile influence 200 years earlier, Jesus performed His own cleansing. This time, however, the messiah-apparent didn't drive out gentiles, but Jews. Clearly, the focus of Christ's ire were not people from outside of God's House, but those who claimed to serve it.

Verses 18-46 of Matthew 21 serve as a kind of commentary on Israel's religious leadership. What begins with the withering of a fig tree, calling back to Adam and Eve's attempts to hide their own iniquity at the fall, ends with dire warnings in the case of the two parables. From the Two Sons story Jesus affirms that the lowest of society will enter His Kingdom ahead of the proud and haughty (calling back to His previous statement that the "last shall be first" from chapter 20), while from the parable of the Tenants Jesus signs off with a withering rebuke "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed (Matt 21:43-44)."



1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

If God's Kingdom cannot be earned, how do I balance good behaviour with God's grace and forgiveness?

3

MISSION POINT

How can we communicate this parable's meaning to those who haven't met Jesus yet?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.

Today's Reading:

Matthew 21: 23-32



the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Imagine being raised in a shame and honor culture, only to be told by Jesus that by the values of His Kingdom, those who were regarded as shameful and lowly were far more likely to become heirs in His Kingdom, while those whom society honored for their conduct and status were risked missing out entirely.

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

How does the parable of the Two Sons relate to modern Christians? Are we in the Church more likely to behave like the first son, or the second son?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What do you think about this dynamic between rule-breakers and the rule-keepers?
3. Have you ever associated yourself with either of these attitudes?
4. What is God's solution to these errors?
5. How can we lean into the work God has already done for us, through Jesus, rather than rely on our own works?

PRAY for each other that we would receive a revelation of God's love for us and our world.