

To Speak in Parables

Proclamation of the Gospel in the Parables of Jesus

Background Information on Parables

What is a parable?

- ◇ Parable: from the Greek word *parabole* which translates the Hebrew *mashal* which means “to be similar, to be comparable.” A parable is an extended metaphor, or simile, frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used in Biblical times for didactic purposes. (Not to be confused with an allegory.) *from the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.*
 - ◇ At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. C.H. Dodd *Parables of the Kingdom*
 - ◇ With Jesus, the device of parabolic utterance is used not to explain things to people's satisfaction but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all their previous explanations and understandings. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*
 - ◇ Parables function as *metaphors* challenging or inviting the audience into a new or deeper *experience* of God's *dominion*, a dominion identified with those who are the last, lost, least, little, or dead.
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Why did Jesus use parables?

Matthew 13:34-35 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. {35} This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." (quoting Psalm 78:2)

Mark 4.10-13 ¹⁰When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹²in order that (*hina*)
 'they may indeed look, but not perceive,
 and may indeed listen, but not understand;
 so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

¹³And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?"

Mark 4:33-34 With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to the people, as they were able to hear it; {34} he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Mark 12.12 ¹²When they [chief priests, scribes, elders] realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd.

Suggested Books for Further Study:

- ◇ *The Parables of the Kingdom | The Parables of Grace | The Parables of Judgment* by Robert Farrar Capon - I highly recommend this series of books. Engagingly written, well-informed, and with a pastoral interest. (\$21 for the set.)
- ◇ *Hear Then the Parable* by Bernard Brandon Scott - Introductory material is somewhat technical, but his exposition is fascinating and provocative. (~\$15) A shorter and less technical version of this book is now available as *Re-Imagining the World*.
- ◇ *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* by David Buttrick - An informed study with an interest in how a parable may be applied to preaching.
- ◇ *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* By David B. Gowler - An excellent survey of the issues involved in parable research and interpretation.
- ◇ *The Parables of Jesus : A Commentary* by Arland J. Hultgren—The most recent and comprehensive (~\$25)

THE PARABLES OF JESUS - LUKAN ORDER

PARABLE	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	THOMAS*
House built on rock/sand	7.24-27		6.47-49		
Two Sons	21.28-32		7.29-30		
Sower and seed	13.1-23	4.1-20	8.4-15		82.3-13
Good Samaritan			10.29-37		
Importunate Friend			11.5-8		
Rich Fool			12.16-21		92.3-10
The Doorkeeper		13.33-37	12.35-38		
Thief	24.43-44		12.39-40		85.7-10; 98.6-10
Good and Wicked Servants	24.45-51		12.41-46		
Way to Judgment	5.25-26		12.58-59		
Barren Fig Tree	21.18-19	11.12-14	13.1-9		
Mustard seed	13.31-32	4.30-32	13.18-19		84.26-33
Leaven	13.33		13.20-21		97.2-6
Proper Guests			14.12-14		
Great Supper	22.1-10		14.15-24		92.10-35
Tower Builder			14.28-30		
Campaign Planner			14.31-32		
Salt	5.13	9.49-50	14.34-35		
Wedding Guest			14.7-11		
Prodigal Son			15.11-32		
Lost Sheep	18.10-14		15.3-7		98.22-27
Lost Coin			15.8-10		
Unjust Steward			16.1-9		
Rich Man and Lazarus			16.19-31		
Flood	24.37-42	13.35	17.26-36		
Servant's Reward			17.7-10		
Unjust Judge			18.1-8		
Pharisee and Publican			18.9-14		
Pounds	25.14-30	13.34	19.11-27		
Wicked Husbandmen	21.33-46	12.1-12	20.9-19		93.1-18
Budding Fig Tree	24.32	13.28	21.29-30		
Tares	13.24-30, 36-43				
Hidden treasure	13.44				98.31-99.3
Pearl	13.45-46				94.14-18
Net	13.47-50				81.28-82.3
Unforgiving Servant	18.23-35				
Laborers in Vineyard	20.1-16				
Wedding Garment	22.11-14				
Ten Bridesmaids	25.1-13				
Seed growing secretly		4.26-29			85.15-19
ENACTED (?) PARABLES					
Ten Lepers			17.11-19		
Washing Disciples' Feet				13.1-20	

**The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus. Though it shows the influence of an early Christian heresy called Gnosticism, it is still very important because its versions of Jesus' sayings are independent of those recorded in the canonical Gospels.*

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This Is For The Birds! The Parable of the Mustard Seed

For Openers:

- ◇ Describe a mysterious event that has happened to you.
 - ◇ Tell about something you experienced that seemed inconsequential at the time but later turned out to be very important.
 - ◇ Recount one of the parables of Jesus that you remember.
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For Your Information:

Compare these versions of the parable of the mustard seed.

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air|heaven come and make nests in its branches."

Mark 4:30-32

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air|heaven can make nests in its shade."

Luke 13:18-19

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air|heaven made nests in its branches."

Thomas 20

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like." He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."

INFORMATION ABOUT ANCIENT GARDENING PRACTICES:

Mustard is an annual plant whose seeds are indeed among the very smallest. (People in Jesus' time did not know about the orchid whose seed is the smallest.) It was a common plant which grew and spread like a weed in the eastern world. Though it could grow to a height of six feet or more, a mature mustard plant would not normally be described as a "tree." Usually it was described as a shrub or bush. (In contrast, a cedar tree can grow to about 100 feet.)

JEWISH GARDENING PRACTICES

No kind of seed may be sown in a garden-bed, but any kind of vegetable may be sown in it. Mustard and small beans are deemed a kind of seed. *Mishnah, Kilaim 3.2*

Mustard seed and small beans, even though they be planted to be used as vegetables (*i.e.*, greens), may not be planted in a garden. *Tosephta, Kilaim 2.8*

GREEK GARDENING PRACTICES

There are three seed-times for all things grown in gardens,.. [In the winter period] is sown beet, lettuce, rocket, monk's rhubarb, mustard, coriander, dill, cress... Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants VII*

ADDITIONAL BIBLICAL BACKGROUND:

Ezekiel 17:22-23 (This passage speaks of the eventual yet ultimate restoration of Israel and has messianic overtones.)

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. {23} On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

Also read Daniel 4:10-12 and Ezekiel 31:3-6 where a similar mighty tree is described which also provides shelter for birds.

Note how Matthew talks about fields in 13:36, 44; 24:18, 40.

For Your Consideration...

- 1) Does a parable have one meaning or more than one?
 - 2) Are the parables of Jesus meant to confuse or enlighten?
 - 3) Are the parables of Jesus intended to convey information? Challenge perception? Cause transformation?
 - 4) How might a parable be heard differently by:
 - ◇ a first century peasant laborer / farmer
 - ◇ a first century member of one of the elite classes
 - ◇ a twenty-first century, middle-class, United States citizen
 - ◇ a twenty-first century peasant in a developing-world country
 - 5) What did Jesus gain by teaching in parables?
 - 6) Look at the listing of Jesus' parables. What observations do you make simply from this list?
 - 7) According to each version, where is the mustard seed planted? Why is that an important difference?
 - 8) According to each version, what does the mustard seed become? How might this be significant?
 - 9) According to each version, what good does the mustard plant provide?
 - 10) In your own words, what is the point of this parable about the Kingdom of God and a mustard seed?
 - 11) Which Gospel's version of the parable do you like best? Why?
 - 12) Does this parable simply offer information? Does it supply any motivation? Does it have any application?
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For Later:

- ◇ Look for signs of the Kingdom of God in your daily life. Any small signs? Any great signs?
- ◇ Read Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6. How does the parable of the mustard seed help you better understand these sayings about faith?