

UNDERSTANDING JESUS' PARABLES

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by Kyle G. Jones



The complexity of Jesus' parables makes them a challenge to understand. Other obstacles compound that complexity. In order to better grasp the parables, let's look at three of those obstacles.

Aftermarket Titles

Titles can be useful when discussing parables. As we refer to them when talking about the Bible or theology, titles can function as a sort of shorthand. However, the traditional titles given to the parables also do us a disservice. Instead of opening our minds to understanding Jesus' words, they restrict our understanding by directing our focus to a singular aspect of the parable before we've even read it.

"The Parable of the Sower" is a chief example. This parable stands out because each Gospel that records it (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) also reports Jesus' explanation of it. In his explanation, Jesus says little about the sower. So to call it "The Parable of the Sower" sends us in the wrong direction. Sometimes this parable is referred to as "The Parable of the Four Soils." But even that title falls short, because it focuses on the soil, whereas Jesus emphasizes the seed, which represents God's Word.

Jesus never titled the parables. They were added later. They are not divinely inspired Scripture. Therefore, we can freely disregard them. This allows us to come to the parables of Jesus with minds as open as possible, and (hopefully) with fewer assumptions as to their meaning and purpose.

Surrounding Context

One way to combat misrepresentative titles is to recognize the context in which Jesus tells them. He didn't deliver them randomly. Rather, Jesus told them to suit the occasion.

For instance, Jesus told the story of "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector" "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). The context, however, doesn't put the actions of the Pharisee and tax collector at the heart of the story. The key question is where righteousness and unrighteousness come from.

The parable of "The Good Samaritan" comes in the context of a salvation question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Whereas this parable is often used to talk about morality or ethics, the context places the emphasis on salvation, not human behavior.

Jesus told three well-known parables in succession, “The Lost Sheep,” “The Lost Coin,” and “The Prodigal Son.” All three end with a feast that celebrates the recovery of the lost and the resurrection of the dead. He told them because “the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2). This context pulls our attention away from the lost-now-found and the dead-now-alive and relocates it to the celebrations. The sheep, coin, and younger son did not deserve these celebrations, but the shepherd, woman, and father threw them anyway.

The context of a parable helps us to understand what Jesus was teaching his original audience. It breaks down the presuppositions we bring. And, it helps us to avoid making the parable about the wrong thing.

Center and Purpose

Not only should we take the aftermarket titles with a grain of salt and recognize the context of Jesus’ parables. We should also understand their center and purpose.

To mine parables for moral content is a bad habit. Robert Farrar Capon wrote against this in *Between Noon and Three: Romance, Law & the Outrage of Grace*.

“Parables are told only because they are true, not because the actions of the characters in them can be recommended for imitation. Good Samaritans are regularly sued. Fathers who give parties for wayward sons are rightly rebuked, Employers who pay equal wages for unequal work have labor-relations problems. And any Shepherd who makes a practice of leaving ninety-nine sheep to chase after a lost one quickly goes out of the sheep-ranching business.

The parables are true only because they are like what God is like, not because they are models for us to copy. It is simply a fact that the one thing we dare not under any circumstances imitate is the only thing that can save us. The parables are, one and all, about the foolishness by which Grace raises the dead. They apply to no sensible process at all — only to the divine insanity that brings everything out of nothing.”

Jesus did *not* tell parables to teach us moral lessons to imitate. He told them so that we might understand the mystery of God’s kingdom (Luke 8:10). That mystery is Jesus himself, specifically Jesus for us. The gospel is Christ crucified on behalf of sinners.

When anything other than the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners becomes the center of the parables, we exchange the gospel for the law. We trade a message of what God has done for us for a message of what we must do for God. When we remove the gospel of Jesus-for-us from the center of the parables we create a vacuum--and we frequently fill that void with ourselves and our works.

We do this even with the briefest of parables. Consider two of Jesus’ shortest parables: “The Hidden Treasure” and “The Pearl of Great Value.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matt 13:44–46).

When Jesus and the gospel no longer occupy the center and purpose of these parables, we fashion ourselves the actors in them. We are the man in the field or the searching merchant. We then relegate

Jesus to the passive role. We make him the hidden treasure or the pearl of great value. This understanding puts the onus on us. It says, “You must find Jesus. To buy him, you must give everything you have.”

The reality is the exact opposite. We are the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. Jesus is the man in the field and the searching merchant. He gives everything, including his life, so that he can redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. That is the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ parables present complex and nuanced teaching. Our assumptions and preconceptions, evidenced by the titles given to parables, hinder our understanding. Those presumptions give way to disregarding the contexts of the parables, and lead us to misunderstand their purpose. Then, we tend to put ourselves at the center of them instead of the gospel of Christ crucified for us.

Jesus tells parables to disclose himself and the gospel to us. They reveal how God and his gracious nature operate. They preach to us that the Son of God became human to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He lived a righteous life and died on the cross in our stead. All this he did to merit forgiveness and life for us.

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