Parables in Matthew Part 2

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

The Wedding Parable

BIG Idea!

Join the Wedding Procession

Ancient Jewish weddings were made up of three distinct stages; the *arrangement*, the *betrothal* and the *arrival* of the bridegroom. This parable takes place in the waiting period between the second and third stages. Once the betrothal was finalised, the groom would begin preparations for their new life together, while his bride-to-be would remain with her parents and await his arrival. Although the bride and unmarried friends would have a loose time-frame, they would not have known the exact date of the groom's coming. What they could expect was for the groom to arrive at night, leading a procession of wedding guests. It was important, therefore, to have the bride's wedding attire on hand, as well as a supply of oil-rag torches and spare oil to keep them burning. Those who bore lit torches in the wedding procession were, in a sense, displaying their invitation. It was a public declaration, evidencing their personal anticipation and readiness for the wedding. The lack of a lit torch, therefore, or a torch which burned for only a short time, suggested a lack of foresight. A carelessness which would have reflected poorly upon an invited guest. Similar to the parable of the Wedding Feast, Jesus once again underscores the importance of joining *His* procession, by displaying that which marks us out as part of *His* wedding celebration (Matthew 22:1-14). The warning at the end of this parable reflects the exclusivity of salvation through Christ. There is only one way to the Father. One Son and one entrance into the wedding hall. Therefore, a Christian's commitment to be part of the Jesus movement should be taken seriously. Indeed, our posture should reflect the eager anticipation and readiness of friends and family as they wait for the bridal party to arrive and for the wedding feast to finally begin.

DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

In 1946 a literacy scholar named Erich Auerbach described the Biblical narrative style as "fraught with background" Unlike ancient works, such as those produced by the ancient Greeks for example, little to no effort is made on the part of Biblical authors to explain Jewish history or custom. A reality most evident in the parable of 'The Ten Virgins' Ten friends of a bride-to-be rush out to join a wedding procession. Each of these women take with them a lamp as, a wooden torch wrapped with oil-soaked rags, not a clay lamp, or lychnos, as is most commonly depicted. Parallels could be drawn between the foresight required to keep a torch burning for the length of a wedding procession and the discipline of a Jewish priest maintaining the sacred lamps in the Tabernacle (Lev 24:2-4). Jesus highlights the role that personal responsibility plays in our relationship with God. There is no distinction between wealth, gender, race or any other human category within the parable. However, Jesus does draw a distinction between the careless believer and those whose faith is shown to be genuine. Within the confines of this story, that which separates an indifferent guest from that of an authentic friend is their own practical preparedness for the imminent wedding. This is demonstrated by one's visible participation in the procession, as they follow the groom through the town, a lit torch in one hand and a jar of spare oil in the other.

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

Today's Reading:

Matthew 25: 1 - 13

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

To an ancient Jewish audience, much of this parable would have sounded like common sense. In spite of this, Jesus felt this parable needed to be communicated to ancient and modern humans alike. Why do you think that might be?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

How can we apply this parable to our own walk with Jesus? What encouragement can we take from the 'wise' group of young women?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?What sticks out to you in this passage?
2. Do you think of this story as a hopeful story, or a warning? Why?
3. Why do you think God uses marriage as a recurring metaphor within the Biblical narrative?
4. What are some practical steps you couldtake to ensure you have the appropriate 'fuel' for your journey with Jesus?
5. How do you feel about the exclusivity of salvation coming through Christ alone?

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

1 PRAYER POINT

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

2 ACTION POINT

Ask yourself; am I taking my part in the wedding celebration seriously? How would I know either way?

3 MISSION POINT

What does this parable teach us about the Gospel? Who is invited to join the celebration and what is required from those guests?

The Parable of talents

BIG Idea!

Developing our Gifts

At first glance, the parable of the Talents seems to reinforce the fears of the third servant (Matt 25:24-25). From the outset, the story identifies the third servant to be the least fiscally capable of the three, and yet the master still expects a return on his investment. When no return is forthcoming, the third servant is ominously cast into the outer darkness (Matt 25:26-28,30). Despite its harsh initial flavour, the parable of the Talents is ultimately intended to be an encouragement to its reader. Jesus is calling His followers to rest in the promise of grace, and to not second-guess God as if He were an unstable tyrant. This encouragement can be seen in the master's treatment of the two remaining servants. Although one servant earned three more talents than the other, the master rewards them both in equal measure (Matt 25:20-24). The emphasis of the parable is not the total amount of money earned, but the personal action, or inaction, of the master's servants. In this way, Jesus is highlighting the role personal agency plays in our relationship with Him. Although Christ's salvation is freely offered, there remains an expectation that we behave responsibly with how ever much, or little, God chooses to entrust to us at any one time. Care must be taken, of course, not to elevate our limited role within God's redemptive project to improper heights. It's not our performance that matters, but our motives. Do we think of God as a 'wrathful ogre', as so many secular writers have suggested? Or, are we inspired to develop our God-given gifts and passions? To serve creatively and joyfully, as a response to God's love? Even if that service is as simple as opening a long-term savings account.

DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

Christ's audience would have recognised a 'talent' to be an extremely large sum of money. Estimations differ as to how much exactly, although somewhere between 15 and 20 years of a labourer's income seems most likely. Intriguingly, our modern definition of the word 'talent' can be traced back to this parable. Although the term was, at that time, only a unit of measurement, comparisons have long been drawn between the entrustment of money and the divine entrustment of natural abilities. Of course, the target within Christ's crosshairs were, as ever, the religious elite. The irony of the parable is that Israel had indeed been entrusted with the bulk of their master's wealth and yet, far from developing these gifts, the master returns to find the wealth of Heaven in the grip of the religious, withheld from the rest of the world. The punishment of the third servant demonstrates just how seriously God takes such prideful behaviour, even in the case of only one talent. However, the ultimate hope of Christ, as yet unrevealed at this stage of the story, is to be found within the great reversal of roles. On the Cross, Jesus would be thrown into the outer darkness, in place of those who actually deserved that punishment. He would take on the role of a servant, offering Himself as a 'ransom for many' (Matt 20:28).

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

Today's Reading:

Matthew 25: 14 - 20

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

If you were a common labourer in ancient Israel, how might you have interpreted this parable?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

How do we navigate the tension between resting in the grace of God, while still serving God with all of our gifts, abilities and resources?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?What sticks out to you in this passage?
2. What do you think the servant meant when he told the master that he 'reaps' where he has not sown? (Matt 25:24)
3. Do you feel more comfortable with the concept of grace, or with the concept of personal responsibility?
4. What can this parable teach us about wealth and the stewarding of wealth?
5. What can this parable teach us about the development and use of our natural abilities and passions? ?

PRAY for each other that God would reveal the gifts that he has given to us and pray that the Holy Spirit would empower us in the use of those gifts for the benefit of others.

1 PRAYER POINT

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

2 ACTION POINT

Ask yourself what gifts, abilities and resources do I think God has given me?

3 MISSION POINT

How can I develop those things I have been entrusted with, so they can be a blessing to other people?

King Jesus

BIG Idea!

King Jesus

This has often been a text that preachers use to encourage us to treat the hungry, thirsty, stranger and imprisoned with love and care and although that is a call of God this is not the main idea of this scripture. This is more like an unashamed acknowledgement of who King Jesus from Nazareth is, in being the King who will sit on the throne of the world and judge the nations as a shepherd would separate stock at the end of a day in the pasture. King Jesus who will bring justice back to a world that has wandered far from. The original plans of a loving God who wants to be close to and work alongside his creation.

DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

So here we have the end of the final of the 5 major discourses in Matthew and following the last 3 parables about getting ready for the return of the king, King Jesus the 'son of man' coming in his glory. The announcement to all that finally justice will be coming to the world. All the nations are called together in one place for judgement to be passed down for all to see and for justice and righteousness to be shown for all to see.

Although often called the parable of the sheep and the goats it does not seem a parable in any of the ways the previous parables explain what the Kingdom of God is like however we do have a strong simile of separation of stock like a shepherd. This would have made complete sense to the listeners as at the times there would be areas where the sheep and goats would have grazed together in the same area and would need to be separated as the goats would need extra protection from the cold night air than the sheep. They would have been more alike than we would imagine in our days and the clearest way to distinguish each would be the tails up or down. However the difference of sheep and goats is not the biggest issue here.

The major take away here is that the 'son of man' will come. This is Jesus' favourite way to describe himself in Matthew. 'Son of Man' comes from Daniel 7 where in Daniel's vision the son of man comes and is given all authority and sovereignty over all the nations of the world where every race would obey him and his rule was eternal. Quite a statement to make about yourself. Jesus again explaining who he was to all who would hear. And later the son of man becomes the king in our story, who comes for the final judgement on all nations according to how the treat the least of my family. The sons and daughters who are described as the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and unclothed, the sick and imprisoned; this is how he describes his family, the people of God. The nations will be judged on how they treat the new Israel. Judgement is one of the Messiah's tasks and again explaining who he was seemed important in these final words of the discourse. This could be seen as a one off final judgement but also allows for the possibility that King Jesus being enthroned now has begun that judgement already. This is not absolutely clear but as King Jesus is already ruling the world from a heavenly throne indicates that may well be the case. What we do know is that Justice will be returned to the world and King Jesus will be the one who decides. We are to live in his ways and love the way he calls us to. Love God with everything we have and to love others as we would ourselves. A golden rule that nations could learn from and be saved.

1

PRAYER POINT

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

2

ACTION POINT

Consider what it means for you to treat God's family globally with love and respect and grace.

3

MISSION POINT

Consider what it looks like to invite others into a close relationship with this servant King Jesus.

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask how everyone is doing.

Today's Reading:

Matthew 25: 31- 46

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

The Son of man reference is from Daniel 7: 13- 14. This is what the hearers of Jesus would have imagined when he used this term about himself?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

If you were a religious leader in Jesus' day how would feel about the claims Jesus made about himself?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you in this passage?
2. Why is the sheep and goats used in this discourse?
3. Why do you think that the sheep and the goats are equally surprised at the Kings evaluation of their standing?
4. What does this passage tell us about Jesus?
5. What does it mean for Christ to so completely identify with the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner that a service done to them is registered as done directly to Him?
   How should that reshape where we look for God in our daily lives?
6. What does this parable teach us about the way we live our lives today?

PRAY a blessing over each person as they go about their week this week.