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THE GRACE BIBLE

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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The Greatest Stories Ever Told

“Have you understood all these parables?” Jesus asked.
“Yes,” they replied. (Matthew 13:51)

Imagine you have a friend who is religious in the worst sense of the word. They are narrow-minded, judgmental, and as self-righteous as a fault-finding Pharisee. You long to tell them about God’s love and compassion, but they’re not ready to hear it. Legalistic preaching has taught them to fear a God who records their sins and waits to condemn them.

This was the world Jesus stepped into.

The crowds who followed him were the most religious people on earth. Bound by rules and traditions, they did not blink when their leaders took money from widows or stoned adulterers in the streets.

How could Jesus reach hearts so hardened by religion?
Answer: He told parables.

The parables of Jesus may be the most influential stories ever told. These simple stories have crossed cultures and centuries, captivating kings and commoners alike. They have shaped laws, arts, and ethics. Their influence is so widespread that we often quote them without realizing it. “Kill the fatted calf.” “The last shall be first.” “Many are called, but few are chosen.” “Bury your talent.” “Separate the wheat from the chaff.” Painters, poets, and composers have reimagined their scenes.

Lawmakers have written their principles into legislation (e.g., Good Samaritan laws).

Charities have built missions on their compassion.

Every Sunday, pastors draw on the parables for lessons and spiritual insights, and they are often the first Bible stories taught to children.

If all the stories ever told were ranked according to their impact, the parables of Jesus would tower over the rest like the Himalayas among the hills.

What is a parable?

A parable is a comparison. The Greek word *parabolē* means “placing one thing beside another.” When Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field that a man found,” he was making a parabolic comparison. He was using an earthly illustration to unveil a spiritual reality.

A parable, however, is more than a metaphor. A parable moves. It’s a story with characters, a plot, and a point. It’s something you could film as a short movie.

When Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches,” he was painting a word picture (John 15:5). On its own, it’s not a parable, which is why many books on the parables leave it out. But read the surrounding verses and you’ll find a story involving a protagonist (the vinedresser), a plot (a vineyard is tended), and a point (“Abide in me and you will bear much fruit”). The Vine and the Branches ticks all the boxes for a parable.

Jesus was a master storyteller. When speaking to crowds, he was more likely to share a story than deliver a sermon. “He did not speak to them without a parable” (Matt. 13:34). About forty of his parables are recorded in the Bible—the exact number is a little higher or lower depending on what you count as a story. Jesus likely told many more parables that were never written down (John 21:25).

Jesus adapted his parables for different audiences and occasions. According to Matthew, the parables of the Sower and the Wise and Foolish Builders were told during the Sermon on the Mount. Luke, however, places these parables in the Sermon on the Plain.

The Parable of the Great Banquet was first shared at a private meal with Pharisees early in Jesus’ ministry. Later, it became the Parable of the Wedding Feast, which Jesus told to the chief priests and elders just a few days before his death.

One version of the Lost Sheep was addressed to the disciples; another to the Pharisees. In his final week, Jesus told two parables about money. Or maybe it was two versions of essentially the same parable. In Jericho, he told the Parable of the Minas, and a few days later in Jerusalem, he shared the similar Parable of the Talents.

As every preacher knows, good stories are worth repeating.

Why did Jesus tell parables?

When Jesus spoke about his Father or the kingdom, he reached for parables. “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?” (Mark 4:30).

The disciples asked, “Why do you speak to the crowds in parables?” Jesus replied that many people were not ready to receive what he wanted to tell them. He could have spoken plainly about the kingdom of God, but they would not believe or remember what he said. Tell them a good story, however, and they would remember it for life (see Matt. 13:10–13).

Stories stick.

In his wisdom, Jesus told stories that could both reveal and conceal truth. To those not ready to receive the good news, his parables sounded like simple tales about farming, fishing, and feasting. But to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, they unveiled deep spiritual truths.

The same story could be received in two ways: Unbelievers heard folk tales, while seekers and believers heard about the character of God and his kingdom.

Jesus spoke in parables because stories disarm us. Facts and arguments may leave us unmoved, but who can resist a story about a starving prodigal, an unforgiving servant, or a poorly dressed wedding guest?

Stories slip past our defenses and pierce the heart.

The parables of Jesus are famously short—some are just a few verses long—yet each one packs a punch. We remember the good Samaritan and the shrewd manager because of the unexpected things they do. *Why did they do that?*

With that question ringing in our minds, Jesus has us right where he wants us—ready and eager to receive insight. Yet most of his parables come with no explanation. Jesus leaves it to us to ponder the story and draw our own conclusions.

And this is where the trouble starts.

How do we interpret the parables?

Jesus once told a parable about a man who sowed some seed. Whether the seed bore fruit or not depended on the quality of the soil in which it landed. Good soil produced a harvest; bad soil produced nothing. Later, the disciples asked Jesus about the parable. “What does it mean?” Jesus replied, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand any parable?” (Mark 4:13). In other words, “My parables aren’t brainteasers. If you struggle with one, you’ll struggle with all of them.” He then explained the parable so they could learn how to interpret all his parables.

Jesus told parables about everyday events to ordinary people with no formal education or theological training. His stories were not cryptic riddles that could only be solved by intellectual giants or theologians. Anyone with ears to hear could grasp their meaning.

So why are so many books and sermons on the parables filled with confusion and contradiction? Why do many think Jesus preached mixed messages of grace plus works? Apparently, the Parable of the Wedding Feast proclaims grace because it says “everyone is welcome.” Yet it also seems to demand works because if you don’t show up in the right clothing, you’ll be cast out. The Great Banquet invites you to “Come as you are” (grace), but the Tower Builder and the Warring King warn, “First, count the cost” (that’s works). The Parable of the Vineyard Workers reveals God’s generosity (more grace), but the Parable of the Talents seems to say that failure to perform leads to rejection (works). The Pharisee and the Tax Collector show that God receives sinners who come with humble hearts and empty hands (grace), yet the Hidden Treasure seems to suggest the kingdom costs everything you have (works).

Even if we set aside these apparent contradictions, the parables have strange twists and endings that leave us scratching our heads. Why is the prodigal’s brother invited into one party while the foolish virgins are shut out of another? Why is a corrupt estate manager praised by his employer? Why is a slave who essentially protects his master’s wealth thrown into the outer darkness? Why is

another slave cut to pieces? And why does a “gracious” king send an army to slaughter his enemies and burn their city?

From allegorical acrobatics to minimalist moralizing

The challenge of interpreting the parables has occupied theologians and pastors for 2,000 years. Early church fathers such as Origen and Augustine believed the parables were allegories riddled with layers of meaning.

Take the story of the Good Samaritan: a traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by brigands and left for dead. According to Augustine, the traveler represents Adam, the brigands are the devil and his angels, Jerusalem is heaven, and Jericho is the waxing and waning moon. The inn symbolizes the Church, the innkeeper is the apostle Paul, and the beast of burden represents the incarnation of Christ. Phew!

Augustine was a classic allegorist who saw hidden meanings in everything. According to his fertile imagination, every detail, right down to the oil, the bandages, and the money, symbolized something else. Do these details matter? Does everything represent something? When Jesus explained the Parable of the Sower to his disciples, he focused only on a few key elements: the seed and the soil. He said nothing about plowing, rainfall, or other factors relevant to farming because those details had no bearing on the lesson he wanted to teach.

Augustine and the allegorizers go too far, say some. If we can write our own meanings onto the stories, we can make them say anything we want. And we do. For centuries, the parables of Jesus have been used to promote legalism, liberalism, existentialism, rationalism, feminism, pietism, postmodernism, universalism, and every other kind of -ism.

The remedy to this sort of abuse, said Reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther, is to read the parables at a surface level only. Resist the temptation to allegorize and don’t look for hidden meanings because there aren’t any. The Good Samaritan, said Calvin,

is about being kind to your neighbor. Nothing more. But if the parables have no deeper meaning, they cease to be parables, and Jesus is just another moralizing rabbi.

Surely, both viewpoints are in error. If Augustine and the allegorizers go too far, then Calvin and the literalists don't go anywhere at all.

Were the parables only meant for Israel?

These days, it's fashionable to interpret the parables of Jesus solely within their historical setting. That sounds reasonable, but it often leads to reading them as purely Jewish stories rather than Christian ones. "Jesus was speaking to Jews, not Christians," the argument goes. "The church didn't exist before the cross." Yet in a sense, it did—it was right there in the community of Jesus and his followers. The same disciples who heard the parables later built the church and wrote letters peppered with references to them.

When Peter wrote about "the stone which the builders rejected" becoming the chief cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:6–7), he was quoting Jesus' words from the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. When James urged his readers to "humbly accept the implanted word that can save you," he was drawing on the Parable of the Sower (Jas. 1:21). And when Paul warned of Jesus returning "like a thief in the night" (1 Th. 5:2), he was borrowing from the Parable of the Thief in the Night.

Are the parables Jewish or Christian? Like Jesus and the disciples, they are both. They are rooted in Jewish soil yet blossoming with new covenant truth. Though some were directed at Israel's leaders, every parable still speaks with wisdom and relevance today.

Two questions to ask

To properly interpret the parables of Jesus, we need to ask two questions. First, to whom was Jesus speaking?

When we read a parable about judgment (such as the Wicked Tenants) and see that it was directed at self-righteous types who delighted in condemning others, we can conclude that such parables

were aimed at those who judge. Likewise, when we read a parable about mercy and forgiveness (such as the Prodigal Son) and notice that it was spoken to tax collectors and sinners, we can conclude that such parables were meant for those in need of grace. Parables of judgment and grace are complementary—one is for the proud, the other is for the broken.

These distinctions are critical. Ignore the audience, and you may think a rebuke meant for others is meant for you. You'll worry, "God loves me, but sometimes he's angry with me." "God accepts me as I am, but I have to earn his salvation." "I'm saved by grace, but kept by works." You'll be confused, insecure, and lukewarm.

When Jesus told hard-hitting parables to Israel's religious leaders, they understood that he was speaking about them (Matt. 21:45). Make no mistake, these were bad men. Not only were they hindering people from entering the kingdom of God, some were plotting to kill Jesus. Harsh words for them are obviously not meant for you—unless you happen to be a self-righteous moralizer with murder on your mind. So the first way we can get this wrong is by giving the wrong message to the wrong audience. Giving judgment to sinners in need of grace is like giving them someone else's medicine. It does more harm than good.

The second question to ask is, how do Jesus' stories fit within the larger context of his message and ministry? Jesus' listeners lived under the heavy yoke of the old covenant. The message they heard every Sabbath was, "Obey the law or be cursed." But Jesus was not another rule-giver recycling old religious slogans. He was the Savior sent by God to announce the good news of the kingdom. As the herald of a new covenant, Jesus proclaimed, "Believe the good news and be saved."

The cross is the dividing point of history. Before the cross, God's people lived under the old covenant, but now we live under the new. As Jesus explained in his parables of the New Cloth and the New Wine, the two covenants have nothing in common. The key words of the old covenant are command, work, duty, obligation, strive, struggle, obey, condemnation, penalty, and punish. But the key words of the new covenant are love, faith, blessed, rest, receive, righteous,

justified, accepted, abide, abundance, fullness, fellowship, freedom, life, light, truth, power, and Jesus.

Any interpretation that turns the parables into moral lessons or law-keeping instructions can be dismissed. Jesus wasn't just another rabbi trotting out the tired "work hard, do more" mantras of the old covenant. He was the Son of God, inviting us into the freedom and fellowship of the new creation.

The parables of Jesus announced a new message for a new era. The proof is in their many twists and reversals: a rebel son is welcomed home with a party, a rich man is tormented in Hades, and outcasts are invited to a banquet. These stories were shocking and contrary to everything the rabbis and religious leaders taught. Rebellious sons were supposed to be punished, wealth was meant to signify God's favor, and outcasts weren't invited anywhere. Jesus told stories in which Samaritans and women were heroes, crooked managers were praised by their bosses, and laborers who worked only one hour got the same pay as those who worked all day.

Who'd ever heard of such things?

It was as if Jesus was saying, "Everything you thought about God is wrong."

God is not a merciless judge counting all your sins; he is a forgiving king who pays your debts and sets you free.

God is not an unapproachable sovereign; he is a generous host who welcomes all to his banqueting table.

God is not a distant deity who doesn't care; he is a compassionate father who watches for your return, runs when he sees you coming, and falls on you with hugs.

For too long, the parables of Jesus have been used to promote dead works and self-righteousness. Do more. Be nice. Try harder. And what if we don't? "God will bind you hand and foot and throw you into the outer darkness" (the Wedding Feast). "He will bring you to a wretched end" (the Wicked Tenants). "He will say, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire'" (the Sheep and the Goats).

Jesus said his yoke is light and easy, but apparently his parables are hard and heavy. Something doesn't add up. When sermons on the parables sound more like Moses than Jesus, you know something's gone wrong.

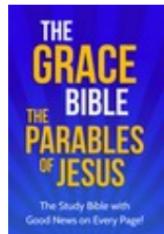
We need to take a fresh look at the parables. We don't need a parable to tell us to be good to our neighbors, but a parable may reveal that God longs to be good to us. Nor do we need a parable to tell us that God's kingdom is valuable, but a parable may reveal that *you* are precious to God and that he will gladly give up everything he has to win you.

If grace and truth came through Jesus (see John 1:17), then his parables must be full of grace and truth—and they are. The parables of Jesus are the most enduring stories ever told because they reveal what we desperately need to hear. They unveil the true nature of God and the relentless love and grace he has for all of us.

END OF SAMPLE

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