

Making Sense of the Parables

Interpreting the Parables of Jesus by Craig Blomberg¹

I. REVIEW: (*Introduction to the Parables* by Robert Stein)

Definition #2 A *parabole* is an illustration, a comparison, or an analogy, usually in story form, using common _____ of everyday life to reveal a moral or _____ truth.

Unknown Greek Dictionary

C.H. Dodd (1936) & Joachim Jeremias (1947)

Jeremias took Dodd's interpretative ideas and systematized them and created four principles for interpreting parables

The four principles for interpreting parables:

- 1) Seek the _____ main point of the parable. Do not seek _____ significance in the details of a parable unless it is absolutely necessary.
- 2) Seek to understand the _____ in which the parable was uttered.
- 3) Seek to understand how the evangelist (human author) _____ the parable.
- 4) Seek what God is _____ to us today through the parable.

Class Objective: Our objective is to understand how to interpret the parables so that we can apply the truth intended by Jesus in our lives.

II. INDIVIDUAL PARABLES

1. **Eleven parables exhibit simple three-point form.** They have three principal characters each, from whom three main lessons may be derived. In each case, the three characters include a master and two contrasting subordinates who symbolize God, his people and those who reject him. These passages are Matthew 11:16–19 and parallel; 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50; 21:28–32; 24:45–51 and parallels; 25:1–13; **Luke 7:41–43**; 15:4–7 and parallel, 8–10, 11–32; and 16:19–31. Although strictly speaking not a parable, the narrative of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31–46) may be added to these eleven.
2. **Ten of Jesus' parables exhibit a complex three-point form.** Though at first glance they seem to have additional characters or a more complicated structure than the simple three-point form, they ultimately disclose three main points based on the actions of three main characters or groups of characters. These passages are Matthew 18:23–35; 20:1–16; 22:1–14; 25:14–30; **Mark 4:3–9, 13–20** and parallels; 12:1–12 and parallels; Luke 10:25–37; 14:15–24; 16:1–13; and 19:11–27.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012), 447–449.

3. **Nine parables are two-pointed.** They have only two main characters or elements and teach only two lessons. Two of these parables offer pure contrasts. They resemble the simple three-point form with the master figure removed. These are **Matthew 7:24–27** and parallel, and Luke 18:9–14. Six of the parables depict a master and only one subordinate. They resemble the simple three-point form with the second subordinate removed. These are Mark 4:26–29; **Luke 11:5–8**; 12:16–21; 13:6–9; 17:7–10; and 18:1–8. One of the parables fits into neither of these two categories. It still contains two characters from whom two distinguishable lessons may be discerned, but it is so brief that it is tempting to try to collapse these into one central truth. This text is Matthew 24:43–44 and parallel.
4. **Six parables have only one central character and make only one main point.** These are **Matthew 13:44**, 45–46; Luke 13:18–19 and parallels, 20–21 and parallel; 14:28–30, and 30–32. Many shorter passages, usually not classified as parables, resemble these brief texts too.

III. Synthesis of Parables

1. **Jesus clearly has three main topics of interest:** the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship and the dangers of disobedience. Many insights concerning each emerge when the parables are analyzed in the fashion described previously.
2. **The central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the KINGDOM OF GOD.** It is both present and future. It includes both a reign and a realm. It involves both personal transformation and social reform. It is not to be equated either with Israel or the church, but is the dynamic power of God's personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus throughout their lives.
3. **The teaching of the parables raises the question of Jesus' identity.** Who is this one who, by his teaching, can claim to forgive sins, pronounce God's blessing on social outcasts and declare that final judgment will be based on the responses people make to him? Christological claims are concealed in the parables. They are not as direct as in some other strands of the Gospel tradition, but they are present nevertheless. The restraint of the claims reinforces the case for their authenticity.
4. **Jesus' parables include implicit claims to deity.** Jesus associates himself with authority figures in his parables that obviously stand for the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. His audiences must decide whether to accept these claims and worship him or reject them as misguided or even blasphemous. But Jesus' parables leave no neutral ground for casual interest or idle curiosity. They sharply divided their original audiences into disciples and opponents. They must continue to function in the same way today.

Looking Ahead: Simple 3-Point Parables