

# The Christian Arsenal

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## Parables 01

### Introduction

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- 1.) Identifying Figures of Speech.** Parables are figures of speech that are used throughout the bible. In some passages of scripture figures of speech are used that can sometimes be misunderstood and misapplied. Figurative language in the Bible presents one of the more difficult challenges to the student of the scriptures. While it is important to read our bible and memorize portions, we also must have some consistent method for interpreting what we read. Cults like the Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses read the same bible that we do yet in many cases come to drastically different conclusions. **Hermeneutics** is the science and art of biblical interpretation. It is taken from the Greek word "hermeneuo" which means to bring out the meaning. The word is derived from the name of the Greek god Hermes who was the messenger of the gods. This is the Greek word that is used in Matthew 1:23 where it says "...and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted (hermeneuo), is God with us." It is important that we be able to distinguish some of the categories of figures of speech that we encounter when we read our bibles.
- 2.) What is a Parable,** A parable is a verbal picture that uses something familiar to the hearers to illustrate a spiritual truth. When we think of the use of parables our first thoughts are of those used by Jesus but there are also parables in the Old Testament.
- a.) In the Old Testament,** the Hebrew word for parable is "Mashal" which has as its root meaning, "to be like". This has a fairly broad meaning that includes figures of speech such as a proverb, simile, allegory, metaphor or a parable [1]. The parable that Nathan the prophet told King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4 was a way of using a story to communicate truth. Isaiah used the parable of Jehovah's vineyard to describe for Israel and Judah how they have rebelled against God (Isa.5: 1-7).
- b.) In the New Testament** the most frequently used word in the New Testament for "parable" comes from 2 Greek words "para" and "bolla" [2] and literally means to cast alongside. Many figures of speech would fit this description, which is why it is so hard to find two lists of the parables by the various bible commentators that are the same. The word "parabolla" is used 50 times in the New Testament and is translated as parable 46 of those times [3]. It is also translated as "figure" twice, once as "comparison", and once as "proverb". It appears 48 times in the Synoptic Gospels and twice in the book of Hebrews. The other Greek word that is translated as "parable" in our English New Testament is the word "paroimia" which means a speech or discourse. It is used 4 times in the Gospel of John and once in 2 Peter 2:22 where it's translated as "proverb". Of the 4 times it's used in the Gospel of John it's translated only once as "parable" in John 10:6 and the other 3 times as "proverb" [3].
- c.) Jesus used parables** to capture the attention of his listeners and provoke a response. Some parables were given to help make His teaching more memorable because they were essentially word pictures (Luke 7:41-42 the two debtors). But some parables were intended to veil his teaching so that only those who were really interested in his message, and were willing to take the time to ponder it would understand. When Jesus began teaching the multitudes in parables in Matthew chapter 13 his disciples were puzzled by this new way that Jesus was teaching (13:10). Jesus said that He was using parables to hide the message from those that already thought they knew everything that they needed to know about God. This was done in the same way that God told Isaiah to address the people in Isaiah chapter 6:9-10. Since the people had rejected God's clear instruction in Isaiah's time, God told them that they would hear His words but wouldn't understand them, and would see but not perceive the reality of what is taking place.

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Parables in the bible were given to people who had rejected God's clear teaching or were apathetic towards the word of God. The first time that Jesus introduced the hidden message in the Kingdom parables was right after the Jewish leaders had said that the miracles that Jesus did had been done by the power of Satan because they already had reached the conclusion that Jesus was not from God. These hidden parables were given to a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers. This is why parables are not used in the New Testament epistles. The epistles were written as instruction to believers not unbelievers.

**3.) How should we interpret Parables;** A parable is a story that may be made up of several parts but it has only one meaning. There may be several applications but again, only one meaning.

**a.** One Central Point (Not Allegories)- Unlike an allegory, every detail of a parable does not necessarily have a separate meaning. The details are only given to support the one main truth that is being taught. Some of the Church Fathers attempted to allegorize many of the passages in the bible and as a result taught things that God had never intended. Rather than reading the passages and trying to understand what the writer intended to communicate, they sometimes filled in the blank spaces with some extremely fanciful interpretations. An example of this method of interpretation was how Augustine interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan that is found in **Luke 10:25-37**. [4]

- i.** "A certain man when down from Jerusalem to Jericho" - This referred to Adam
- ii.** "Jerusalem"- This is the heavenly city of peace from whose blessedness Adam fell.
- iii.** "Jericho"- This means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies.
- iv.** "Thieves"- are the devil and his angels.
- v.** "Who stripped him"- chiefly of his immortality.
- vi.** "And beat him"- by persuading him to sin.
- vii.** "And left him half dead"- In so far as a man can know God, he lives, but when he is oppressed by sin, he is dead. Therefore he is half dead.
- viii.** "The Priest and the Levite"- who passed by represent the ministry of the Old Testament Law which could profit nothing for salvation.
- ix.** "Samaritan"- means guardian, and therefore this signifies the Lord Jesus himself.
- x.** "The binding of the wounds"- Since sin is an affliction, this is the restraint of sin.
- xi.** "Oil"- is the comfort of good hope.
- xii.** "Wine"- is the exhortation to work with a fervent spirit.
- xiii.** "The Beast"- is the incarnation. God in human flesh.
- xiv.** "Set upon the beast"- is a belief in the humanity of Jesus.
- xv.** "The inn is the church"- where travelers are refreshed on their pilgrimage.
- xvi.** "The next day"- is after the resurrection of the Lord.
- xvii.** "The two silver coins"- This represents either the two types of love, or this life and the one to come.
- xviii.** "The innkeeper"- is the apostle Paul.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to the expert of the law who asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus asked him how he interpreted the Law of Moses the expert of the law summarized the main points of the Law of Moses as being to love God and his neighbor. Jesus told the parable in response to this man trying to justify himself over the technicality of who really was his neighbor. After Jesus told the parable He asked the expert of the law "who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one

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who had mercy on him.” Jesus then told him “Go and do likewise.” Jesus confirmed that the expert of the law had understood the parable by telling him to go and do the same. Jesus’ only intention for giving this parable was to show him that he had not kept the law because your neighbor is anyone who needs your help. Parables were only intended to address **one single issue**. To try and make a parable stand on its hind legs and do tricks is always a mistake. It would have made no difference in the point that Jesus was trying to get across if the man in the parable had been traveling from Hebron to Bethlehem instead of from Jerusalem to Jericho or if there had been 2 priests and a scribe instead of a priest and a Levite. Jesus was simply contrasting the respected religious leaders with someone who was a hated outcast from Jewish society. Some of the details are only there to complete the story. Sometimes the way some of the details are contrasted helps to add emphasis to the story but all of the details are not necessarily significant in and of themselves.

- b. Context- The correct interpretation of any parable can only be understood by the immediate circumstances that prompted Jesus to give the parable in the first place. In the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan the expert in the law tried to justify himself by making Jesus qualify who his neighbor is. Every parable that Jesus gave was in response to the events that immediately preceded it. In some cases Jesus himself either interprets the parable for us or confirms that the person to whom the parable was given has interpreted it correctly. In those cases it would be a mistake to look for some other interpretation. Many misinterpretations can be cleared up by simply looking at the preceding verses to find out what happened that prompted Jesus to tell the parable in the first place.
- c. Not an actual event- The parables of Jesus were not actual events. They were stories that were made up to illustrate something he wanted to teach, or to hide what he was teaching from the uncommitted multitudes that were following Him. They were simple stories from everyday life in first century Palestine that everyone who heard him would understand. Knowing something about the culture and geography is sometimes very helpful in understanding what Jesus’ was communicating to his hearers. But to try to project the possible motives of why the priest didn’t stop to help the man who had been robbed has nothing to do with the point that Jesus was making. Some have suggested that the priest may have been concerned that if the man who needed help would have died and the priest touched him he would have defiled himself and been unable to perform Temple service for seven days (Numbers 19). This issue is not at all related to the point of the parable. Jesus was simply contrasting the response of the respected religious leaders with one of the most hated, and despised people, the Samaritans, to His Jewish audience to illustrate who our neighbor is.
- d. Not the basis of doctrine- Parables were used to illustrate a single point of doctrine but should never be used as the basis for some doctrine. Since parables can be easily misunderstood, it is better to look at the clearer passages of scripture to develop doctrine. A difficult passage of scripture can never mean something that is contrary to the clear teaching that is found in the New Testament Epistles where complex doctrinal issues are explained in detail. Someone could use the parable of the Good Samaritan to teach that we can gain eternal life by treating anyone who needs our help with love and compassion. But the overwhelming message of the scriptures, clearly teach that we can’t be saved by good works but are justified by faith in Jesus alone.

**4.) The Kingdom Parables:** In Matthew chapter 13 Jesus began teaching the multitudes through parables. This was designed to obscure the message from those who had rejected Him. Chapter 13:1 begins with the phrase “That same day” which points back to the events that had taken place earlier that day in chapter 12. On that day Jesus went through the grain fields with His disciples picking some of the grain that was growing along the edges closest to the paths that they were walking on. He wasn’t trampling some farmer’s crop,

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because that would have been unlawful any day of the week. Jesus and His disciples were picking the areas of the fields that were set aside in the Law of Moses as the gleanings for the travelers and the poor (Lev.19: 9-10). The Pharisees criticized Jesus and his disciples because, in their opinion, they were breaking the Sabbath by performing work on that day. After correcting the Pharisees misunderstanding about what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath (vs.3-8), Jesus went into their synagogue and healed a man in front of everyone to force a confrontation with these religious leaders. He used this public venue to demonstrate to everybody that he had power and authority over the Sabbath because he is the Lord of the Sabbath. Just to make sure that these Pharisees didn't miss the point that he was making, after Jesus left the synagogue, he healed everyone in the large crowd that followed him (vs.15). We also learn from the parallel passage in Luke 6:6-11 that this wasn't the first time that Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders by healing someone on the Sabbath. With this situation as the background, Jesus began teaching the crowd about the kingdom of heaven using parables.

a. The kingdom of heaven- What was the understanding of Jesus' first century audience when He used the term "Kingdom of heaven"? The Jews were anticipating the Messiah who would come and establish an earthly Kingdom and rule the nations with a rod of iron for one thousand years (Ps. 2:9, Isaiah 11:1-10, Rev.20: 1-4) and afterwards rule in an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 2:44 & 7:27). Although this phrase "kingdom of heaven" is not found in the Old Testament they certainly had to have had some understanding of the idea that Jesus was trying to communicate to them. So what did Jesus mean by the term "The Kingdom of heaven"? It is clear that Jesus is not referring to heaven itself or the coming millennial kingdom that he will establish on earth for 1000 years because sin and the opposition of Satan will not be present in either of these two places.

The Idea of a kingdom does not primarily refer to territory. A kingdom is only such when a royal authority is recognized. France was once a kingdom but is now a republic. The borders haven't changed and the descendants of the same people still live there. It is not a kingdom any more simply because the people no longer acknowledge the sovereign authority of a king. We can see by Jesus' own usage of this term in **Matthew 16:13-19** what he meant by the term "kingdom of heaven". He told Peter "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.*" A key is something that gives someone the authority to open something for the purpose of gaining access. Jesus did not give Peter the keys to the church as some Roman Catholics have suggested. Peter was not the leader of the early church or even the spokesman for the Apostles in Jerusalem, James was (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, Gal. 2:9). Neither did He give him the keys to heaven itself. These symbolic keys that Peter was given were based on his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. It was that recognition of Jesus as the Messiah that Peter verbalized, or more specifically the gospel message as it is communicated to people are the keys that Peter was given. These keys were a delegated authority. Jesus gave to Peter the privilege of opening the door of the kingdom to the Jews first (Acts 2:14-41) and then to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-48) by allowing him to be the first one to proclaim the kingdom message, or the gospel, to each of these people groups. Once those doors were opened, they remain open to this day.

Everyone who hears the gospel will respond to it in one way or another. They will either receive it or reject. Even the person who decides to consider the offer of Jesus to forgive their sins but puts off receiving the forgiveness he has been offered, has in effect rejected the authority of Jesus for the time being. There are also some people who will acknowledge the authority of Jesus who have not yet placed their complete dependence or trust in his death as the full payment for their sins. **The kingdom of heaven is the sphere of Christian profession where the sovereignty and authority of Christ is acknowledged by people in this church age.** That is this age between Christ's ascension and his return to the earth to set up His 1000 year earthly kingdom.

b. The Mystery Form of the Kingdom; Since God knew that Jesus would be rejected by his people and that the earthly kingdom would not be established right away, Jesus

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introduces the mystery form of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13:11 through the kingdom parables. The Greek word that is translated “mystery” in the King James version, or as it is translated in the NIV “secret”, means a truth that had been previously hidden but is now revealed. The present church age that we are currently a part of is made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers. This is something that was not made perfectly clear to the prophets in the Old Testament. This mystery form of the kingdom of God is clarified in the letters to the churches in the New Testament. There are several things that God had not made entirely clear through the Old Testament prophets regarding his plan for the nation of Israel and the other nations.

- Romans 11:25- “this mystery...Israel has experienced a hardening in part”
- Romans 16:25-26- “the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed”
- Ephesians 3:9- “this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God”
- Ephesians 5:32 “a profound mystery...Christ and the church”

[1] All the Parables of the Bible, Lockyer- Pg. 11

[2] The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Walvoord & Zuck- Pg.48

[3] Jesus Christ, His Parables, John Butler- Pg. 15-16

[4] All the Parables of the Bible, Lockyer- Pg. 20