

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 11, John and the Parables

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson presenting New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 11, on John and the Parables.

All right, let's open with prayer and then what I hope to do is finish up our discussion of the individual Gospels. We'll look at John very quickly.

Again, all I hope to do is just highlight some of the things that are distinctive about it in comparison to the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And then I want to talk a little bit about one of the distinctive forms of Jesus' teaching is the parables. I want to just discuss a little bit about how we read and interpret parabolic literature.

How do we understand and read Jesus' parables? What literary genre or literary type were they? And how does that affect the way we read them? And again, Friday we'll, hopefully by Friday, we'll finish up kind of putting all the Gospels together. What do we learn about Jesus? What do the Gospels stress about who Jesus is and how we should respond to him and react to the person of Jesus Christ? So, let's begin with prayer, and then we'll look at the Gospel of John, the fourth Gospel.

Father, we ask for insight and wisdom as we very briefly and very quickly ponder portions of the New Testament. Lord, I pray that we'll be better equipped to reread it with a more profound understanding. We'll be better equipped to respond to your son Jesus Christ in obedience to the way that Scripture calls forth from us its readers. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

All right, the fourth Gospel, also known as the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple. And again, I'm sure this is exactly what he looked like, but no, some of you may recognize this as an icon of the presumed author of the fourth Gospel. Now, the first question, we'll talk about that phrase, the author or the disciple, the beloved disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved in just a moment.

But the starting point is to note, and we'll return to later on and ask why this is the case, but just first of all to note the distinct differences, although they're not to be exaggerated, over-exaggerated, and over-estimated, but you can't help but notice the distinct differences between John, the fourth Gospel, and the first three, the so-called synoptic Gospels, because they are to be seen together, they have a literary relationship. But John appears to be very different. In fact, so different was he that early Christians often referred to John's Gospel as the more spiritual Gospel or the more theological of the four Gospels.

And you can see there's a sense where that might be true. I wouldn't want to say that Matthew, Mark, and Luke aren't theological, but when you read them, it's, you know, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's almost as if you feel like you're more grounded in history. When you get to John, it does appear that there's more mystery surrounding what's going on, and it's not as straightforward as what you find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Again, that doesn't mean Matthew, Mark, and Luke aren't theological. They are, but you just get a distinct sense that you're reading something very different when you read John. One thing you notice, for example, although there is some overlap, for the most part, most of the material you find in John does not occur in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Moreover, the vocabulary is very different as well. But when John has Jesus talking or speaking or preaching, he has him talking in a way that you don't find in the Synoptic Gospels. So, we'll ask, maybe at least explore just very briefly, why might John be so different from the other three Gospels? Who was the author? Again, like the other three Gospels, the fourth Gospel is strictly anonymous.

That is, nowhere in the Gospels does the author tell us who he is. The only hint you get is this reference to the disciple whom Jesus loved or the beloved disciple, or beloved disciple, hence my title, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple*. Again, all that I want to say is, the fourth Gospel, there's been a lot more debate as to who actually wrote it.

Again, the tradition has attached the name John to the fourth Gospel, although the problem is, that some of the earlier church fathers who wrote about the authorship of John, the authorship of the fourth Gospel, they mentioned there seems to be a reference to more than one John. So, we can't be sure. There seems to be a John the Elder.

There's a reference, clearly John the Apostle. And so, there's a little bit of debate as to who exactly wrote John, although traditionally there has been good reason for taking John, Jesus' Apostle, as that has been the traditional view of the authorship of the fourth Gospel, hence the Gospel according to John in our modern-day English translations. But again, that title according to John would have been attached very early to the Gospels, but originally the author did not write that in the first page of his Gospel.

But church history throughout very early on attributed this Gospel to John, and commonly it was attributed to John, Jesus Apostle, whom we read about in the Gospels. Now what is the purpose for writing this book? Unlike the other Gospels, John actually comes out and tells us, towards the very end of his Gospel, in chapter 20 and verses 30 and 31, that John comes right out and tells you why he wrote.

Although even this is a little broad, there may be more specific purposes within this or specific ways he accomplishes his purpose.

But starting, this is chapter 20 verse 30, towards the very end of his Gospel, the author says, now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. Again, that clearly shows you how the Gospel writers wrote. They had access to a lot of information on what Jesus said and did, but they didn't include it all, and John tells us that.

He said, there were many other signs Jesus did that I have not included in this book. Why? Well, maybe he ran out of space, but maybe he's being selective. He's selecting those things that communicate what he wants to say about Jesus.

And then he goes on and says, but these things, the things that are written, these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name. So, John tells us that all these stories have been included to convince the readers that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and upon believing in him, that they'll have eternal life. They'll have life by believing in the name of Jesus.

And in fact, the word eternal life is a very common one, as we'll see in a moment in John. So, I would summarize, perhaps the purpose for John's writing then is he wants to not only engender faith, but to strengthen faith in his readers to get them to convince them that Jesus is indeed the Messiah whom he said he was, and therefore to strengthen their faith in him so that they may inherit the eternal life that Jesus offered for his people. It's possible as well that there may be an evangelistic purpose in John as well, that he may have been providing material for his Christians in their apologetic and perhaps their evangelistic efforts with Jews, and non-Christian Jews.

That's also possible. One of the emphases throughout John is the fact that Jesus triumphed, he overcame. Remember verses like, I have overcome the world, which again suggests perhaps that John was written to strengthen, to get the readers to hang on to their faith in Jesus Christ so that they'll inherit the eternal life that Jesus promises.

Now what I want to do, again, is I just want to very quickly move through John and give you a taste of how it's distinctive and different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the first place, the first starting point is with John chapter 1 and the first 18 verses. The first 18 verses, in a sense, provide a prologue.

In fact, they may even have been written after the rest of the gospel was put together. The author uses it to kind of provide an introduction to how he wants you to read the rest of his gospel. So, John 1 and the first 18 verses, this kind of prologue, begins with an introduction of this, the word begins, in the beginning, which

interestingly, that phraseology recalls Genesis chapter 1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now you have, in the beginning was the Word, and the word clearly refers to Jesus Christ. And we'll talk about that language of word, but it goes on and says, in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. It talks about how the word was rejected largely, but this word, the Word also becomes flesh.

It becomes a human being in chapter 1 verse 14, John's version of the Christmas story. This Word that was with God and was God now becomes flesh and dwells among his people. So that's kind of the introduction to John's gospel.

Now what's important about this prologue is this. First of all, Jesus is called or labeled the word, and we'll talk more about that, but the idea behind the word or the logos is the primary emphasis is on Jesus as the one who reveals God. So, the Word or logos suggests, in fact, that was a word, as we'll see, probably came out of the Old Testament.

The Word logos or Word referred to God's speech or God's speaking, but there were other possible associations, but the word clearly refers to Jesus Christ, and John clearly identifies this word with God himself. John, as we'll see later, John most clearly out of the four gospels identifies Jesus Christ, the Word, with God himself, and he does that right in the beginning. So, Jesus is the word, the speech, the discourse of God, and this Word is identified with God in verse 14 and becomes flesh.

In other words, becomes a human being. Now what is significant about that, the second point is this word who was God and now who becomes flesh, a human being, therefore is suitable to reveal God or is the one who reveals God. And again, perhaps that's why John chooses the word logos or Word because he wants to emphasize that Jesus is God's self-revelation.

Jesus is the very disclosure of who God is. So, in chapter 1, at the very last verse of this prologue, chapter 1, verse 18, it says, no one has ever seen the Father, God the Father. That comes out of the Old Testament.

You find that in several places. No one has seen the Father, but John says, except the one and only begotten, this word, who makes him known. So, it's as if John is saying, who better to make God known than the one who is both God, the logos, who is God, but who has now become a human being in verse 14.

So, because he's both God and man at the same time, Jesus is able to reveal, fully disclose, and reveal who God is. It's almost as if John is saying, if you want to know what God looks like, you look at Jesus Christ because Jesus is the Word, because he is

God, he is now equipped to reveal who God is. And so, the invisible God, again, no one has seen God, Old Testament.

The invisible God has now been made visible in the person of Jesus Christ who became flesh, who was God himself, but now has become flesh in chapter 1, verse 14. Therefore, in chapter 1, this prologue in the first 18 verses, in this section, Jesus in a sense functions as the bridge between God and humanity. Again, that is the one who is both God, in the beginning, was the word, the word was with God, the word was God, but now this word in verse 14 has become flesh.

Therefore, the word Jesus Christ bridges the gap between God and humanity. The only one that could do that is the one who is both God and humanity at the same time, this word who has now become flesh. So that's how, in a sense, John wants us to read the rest of the gospel.

We need to understand whenever we, from now on, when we encounter Jesus in the gospels, we'll understand him as the very revelation of God, the very disclosure and speech of God, yet at the same time, the one who as a human being fully discloses and reveals God to his people and bridges that gap between God and humanity. Also, within the first 18 verses, you find that the possible responses to Jesus are set out already. It says, God, Jesus, the Word became flesh, he came into the world, but his own rejected him.

But then it goes on and says, but those who believe in him, God calls them his children. Those who believe in him have the right to be called sons or children of God. So even the different responses to Jesus that we'll read in the rest of the gospels are already marked out in the prologue.

So, the prologue tells us almost everything we need to know about reading the rest of the gospel, especially regarding who Jesus is and how he's going to function as the one who reveals God, the one who is God, who becomes a human being, who discloses in visible form who God is, and who requires a response of faith and obedience. Now, there are a number of key passages that I want, again, just to give you a hint of what is in John that's distinct. Again, I don't intend to talk in a lot of detail about these passages.

The first one, the first key text that most of you probably recognize is chapter 3. Chapter 3 is a story of where a man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, comes to Jesus at night and questions him and asks him about what Jesus is teaching and what is required for entrance into God's kingdom. So, this ends up being a rather lengthy teaching of Jesus in response to Nicodemus' question. And, of course, you recognize this passage.

This is the one where the famous John 3:16 is found, for God so loved the world he gave his son. That is spoken in response to Nicodemus' question about who Jesus is and what he's doing. So, recognize chapter 3. Again, you'll find this in none of the other gospels, but Jesus confronts or is confronted by a Pharisee at night and enters into a conversation with him, a man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Chapter 4. Chapter 4 is a story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at a well, or rather Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well. And most of you know the story well. Basically, the Samaritan woman ends up responding in faith to Jesus.

But hopefully, you get the picture that not only in that day would it have been perhaps inappropriate for Jesus to meet alone with a woman in a setting like this, but the fact that she was a Samaritan as well. And what was Jesus doing in Samaria in the first place? Any Jew knew that you avoided that place. So, chapter 4, the Samaritan woman at the well.

In your notes, I'll skip the next section, chapter 6, and go right to chapters 14 through 17. Chapters 14 through 17 are a rather lengthy discourse of Jesus. Again, that you don't find in any of the other gospels.

This is Jesus' final instructions, kind of his final last, his last words on his last night with his disciples before Jesus was crucified and put to death not much later than this. So, chapters 14 through 17 is a rather long discourse or section of Jesus teaching his disciples, often called the upper room discourse, where Jesus met in an upper room to celebrate the Passover with his disciples, and then he takes that opportunity to teach them at length. Finally, chapter 21.

In a sense, we just read chapter 20 and verses 30 through 31 where John tells us why he's writing, I've written these things so that you may know and believe that Jesus is the Christ and upon believing you may have life in his name. Now that would be an appropriate place to end the gospel but there's another chapter. And in chapter 21 there's a number of things going on.

This records the resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples. But there's a very interesting story in this section where Peter is reinstated. Jesus appears to Peter and if you remember the story well, what does Jesus ask Peter? He asks him this three times.

Yeah, Jesus asks Peter, do you love me? And all three times Peter responds, yes, I do. But what is interesting is why wasn't once enough? Why do you think Jesus asked Peter if he loved him three times? Because he betrayed him three times. So, I think the reason he asks if he loves him three times, even though Peter responds correctly all three times, the reason Jesus asked him three times is that's how many times Peter denied Jesus.

So, chapter 21 can be seen as a kind of Peter being, after denying Jesus, now Peter is reinstated by confessing his love for Jesus three times, corresponding to the fact that he had denied him three times earlier. Again, chapter 21 has no parallel in the other synoptic Gospels and the other three Gospels. Another unique feature of John, again that you don't find in the other Gospels, is what are called the I Am sayings.

Where Jesus makes several statements, I Am, and then the predicate of I Am is usually some kind of a metaphor. I am the door, I am the sheep, I'm sorry, I'm the good shepherd, I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life. Jesus speaks metaphorically and equates himself with certain images.

Now what is significant about that is again, these images come out of the Old Testament and were frequently applied to God himself. So, in one respect, these I Am statements are a statement of Jesus' deity. The characteristic features of God in the Old Testament are now applied to Jesus Christ by saying, I am the shepherd.

Well, in the Old Testament, God was the shepherd of Israel, or I am the light, which clearly was a prerogative of God himself, etc., etc. So, here's, for example, these are the I Am statements. In chapter 6, verse 35, Jesus says, I am the bread of life.

In chapter 8, I am the light of the world. Chapter 10, I am the door. I am the true door and no one enters except through me.

Another one, I am the Good Shepherd, chapter 10. Again, I'm just following the order of the text of John. I am the good shepherd.

And hopefully, you understand now these would be taken metaphorically. Jesus obviously could not literally be all these at the same time. I am the resurrection and the life.

And finally, I am the light of the world. I am the way, the truth, and the life. So, one of the characteristic features then of John is these I Am statements.

And again, they all identify an important feature of who Jesus is and his mission. And most of them probably go back to the Old Testament, where features referring to God, now Jesus claims for himself. So be able to identify the I Am statements.

I'm not really interested that you get the exact verse where they occur, but certainly be able to know, be able to identify these six I Am statements found throughout John's gospel. Oh, there's one more. I'm sorry.

I knew there were seven. And that may be intentional. I don't know that there are seven.

So, I am the true vine. Again, in the Old Testament, God was the vine, and Israel also was the vine. But again, this is language that applied to God and to Israel.

And now Jesus claims it for himself. So different I Am statements, which again, are not found in the gospels. Now, when we ask, when he asked, what is unique about John's gospel? In addition, I just looked at several texts and material that you find in John's gospel that aren't in the synoptics, but what is unique about John's teaching? How does John portray Jesus in a way that's different from, or at least that emphasizes something to a greater degree that you did not find in the other gospels? The first one is, John is unique in the stress that he places on the deity of Christ.

We have already seen that in chapter 1. Without over-exaggerating the difference, in other words, it would be wrong to say that the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, did not think Jesus was God or did not portray him that way. That would be incorrect. But certainly, John overtly and clearly identifies Jesus as God.

A stress on Jesus' deity. Again, in chapter 1, verse 1, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Later on, Jesus will be accused of blasphemy because he equates himself with God.

So, a couple of times Jesus will say something and the Pharisees pick up stones to kill him because he's blaspheming. He's equating himself with God. Later on, one of Jesus' disciples, Thomas, the one who doubts, when he finally understands, he addresses Jesus as my Lord and my God.

And even beyond that, there are also places that are clear that John wants you to understand that Jesus is the very revelation of God. He is God himself without calling him that. For example, back to John's version of the Christmas story, chapter 1, verse 14, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.

Now, what a lot of people might miss, two words in that verse, dwell and glory, occur together elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to God dwelling in his Tabernacle or in his temple. And now those two words get applied to Jesus, as if John again is saying, in the person of Jesus, God is present. God's presence in the Tabernacle is now present with his people, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So even that is a strong statement of Jesus' deity, the fact that he is God, even though the author doesn't call him God in that verse. But clearly, John emphasizes Jesus as God, Jesus' deity, and sometimes this is why John is seen as the more theological gospel or spiritual gospel. Again, it would be wrong to say the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, weren't interested in Jesus as God.

They were, but John makes a point of drawing attention to that and emphasizing that. We've already talked about the word, or logos, as a title that John uses for Jesus, especially in chapter 1. He refers to Jesus several times as the logos, the word in the beginning was the word, the word was with God, the word was God, the word became flesh, etc. Now, again, John may have used that word because it's had a number of resonances.

That is, he may have used it because people from different backgrounds would have understood it. For example, I've already said that the word logos in the Greek translation of the Old Testament was used in God's speech. Logos, or Word, could simply be used for God's speech and God's revelation of himself.

So, therefore, a fitting title for Jesus Christ. So, in the Hebrew world, when people heard of the word, they would have thought of God's speech and God speaking to them, the discourse, the very speech and discourse of God. On the other hand, in the Greco-Roman world, the word logos was also used.

It's hard to tell how much of this the author may have had in mind, but for example, remember way back at the beginning of the semester, we talked about different Greco-Roman religions, and one of them was Stoicism. Stoicism was the belief that basically everything was determined, nature and the physical world were all there was, and the key to life was to remain content and just accept the way things were, not to be susceptible to extreme emotions and responses, and just to be content. Part of their thinking too, part of the Stoic thinking was they believed that the physical world was animated by logos.

The logos was the term used for the life principle that animated all creation. And whether John is thinking that or not, as if to say, well, it's not the logos of Stoicism. Jesus Christ is the true light of the world that fills the world.

Whether he was thinking about that or not, I'm not sure, but at the same time, John has chosen a word that would have been at home in the Jewish world, but also in the Greco-Roman world as well. But again, that's a characteristic feature of John. You won't find this in the synoptics.

You don't find them calling Jesus the logos or the word, but John does. A third emphasis is that John emphasizes that what Jesus brings and offers to his followers is eternal life. Interestingly, in the synoptics, what was the main terminology that the synoptic Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke use to describe what Jesus came offering? We spent a little bit of time talking about this little phrase.

When Jesus first appears in the scene, he says, repent, because what? What is he offering the people? The kingdom of God, God's reign and rule. Now, interestingly, while John does use that phrase, kingdom of God or the kingdom, John prefers to use

the title eternal life to describe what it is Jesus is offering. Again, that probably goes back to the Old Testament life.

Eternal life was the life of the new creation, the life that God's people would enjoy in the new creation, and now Jesus offers that very life to his readers. Perhaps the way to combine them would be that what Jesus offers as eternal life is the life that people would enjoy when God establishes his reign and his rule and his kingdom. But again, interestingly, the synoptics emphasize the kingdom of God.

John emphasizes eternal life as what Jesus offered and brought. The Holy Spirit is a key theme in John's gospel, especially in one of the distinct places in John in chapters 14 through 17, remember we said Jesus, his farewell discourse, his last words to his disciples. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come kind of in Jesus' place.

In other words, upon Jesus' departure, the Holy Spirit, in a sense, would take Jesus' place. So, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit in his place, that Jesus' continuing presence with his followers would be through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would be the way that Jesus would be present with his followers after Jesus leaves them and ascends to heaven.

So, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit that Jesus would leave. You find Luke emphasizing the Holy Spirit as well, but especially John does, especially in chapters 14 through 16. Another important emphasis in John is, John sets up these opposites.

In other words, there's a dualism that runs throughout his gospel. One of the reasons for this may be John may be writing to kind of a sectarian group, that is a group where kind of the idea is things have gotten so bad that they see themselves in very black-and-white terms, we and they. Maybe John's dualism reflects, the fact that things are kind of opposites or very black and white and start differences in John's gospel.

So for example, you find the dualism between above and below. You always find John talking about that which is from above or that which is from below. Light and darkness as stark opposites, the world is characterized by darkness, and Jesus and his followers are characterized by light.

Life and death, are the obvious opposite. But again, you find this dualism, these stark opposites running throughout the gospel, which again may be due to John's readership. John's gospel may have arisen in kind of a sectarian environment where the readers would have seen themselves in these very stark contrasts with their enemies or their opponents.

And again, that may be reflected in this kind of language. So that's kind of what's different or distinct about John's gospel in comparison to the Synoptics in particular. It may be to reinforce it.

Yeah, he may have written to reinforce or at the very least reflect that kind of distinction that they're thinking. We'll return to the gospel of John when we get to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, the Johannine epistles that come later on. We'll come back and ask how they relate to the gospel of John.

So why is John so different than the other Synoptics? I mean, just think a little bit. Can anyone think of any reasons why might... Again, you read Matthew, Mark, and Luke and sometimes you have a sense of *Deja vu*. I've been here before.

I've seen this material. Some of this stuff just gets repeated throughout the three gospels. Then you get to John and it's like you're reading something else.

Even some of the vocabulary in the way Jesus taught and spoke is all of a sudden absent when you get to John. Just thinking off the top of your head, what might be some of the reasons why John differs so much from the other synoptic gospels? I mean, did he not know them, or is John kind of a renegade? He's going to go off on his own. What might be some of the reasons why John seems so distinct and different? Okay.

It was written much later. Some would date John towards the end of the first century, like 90 A.D. In other words, either the gospel of John or Revelation has the best chance of being the last book of the New Testament written. So, you're right.

Maybe being a much later book, it may be addressing a very different situation, very different audience, and set of circumstances, and that's what caused John to write something different from the other synoptic gospels. John may have assumed the other three gospels or that one had a general knowledge of the gospel, and now he's going to write something that is different. Some have even suggested, it's hard to tell, that John did know the three Synoptics and just wanted to write something very different from those three.

So, I think you're right. John probably assumes a general knowledge of the gospels, perhaps even of the synoptics, and now he's going to write something very different. The other thing too is, remember we said, along with these suggestions, what might explain a lot of the difference in language.

Remember we said we talked a while ago about the different literary types in the New Testament? There's narrative and epistle and apocalypse, the book of Revelation. One of the things we said about the narrative that's very, very different from our own day is when it came to recording the speech of someone else in the

first century, there really was no attempt or desire to preserve the exact wording of that person.

In fact, again, if Jesus largely spoke in Aramaic, we don't have the exact wording because we have Greek translations of what Jesus said in the gospels. But even more than that, what first-century writers were more interested in doing was summarizing and preserving the thrust, emphasis, and gist of what someone said, rather than preserving the exact wording. So, you often find them summarizing in their own words and vocabulary what a famous historical person said.

So is it possible that a lot of times in John's gospel we find that maybe this is John's own summary in his own style, his own vocabulary, what it was that Jesus said. One interesting thing, when you read John chapter 3, we talked about Jesus and Nicodemus. When you read John chapter 3, Jesus starts interacting with Nicodemus, but pretty soon everything Jesus just takes off in like this monologue.

And the problem is it's not clear where Jesus ends. Where does Jesus stop speaking and where does John pick up and start commenting on what Jesus said? It's not clear. And again, the reason is because, again, John is providing his own summary in his own language, his style, his own vocabulary, an accurate summary of what it was Jesus said.

And a lot of that may frequently account for, again, John's differences between the synoptics, especially the language he uses. Again, John may use language that brings out the theological ideas and themes that John wants to emphasize that Jesus taught. So, for those reasons, there may be some other reasons as well.

For those reasons, John seems to write something very different from the other three Gospels. Again, if anyone is interested in pursuing this, I recommend another book by Craig Blomberg. I recommended a book by him on the synoptic Gospels, the historical reliability of the Gospels.

He's written another book called *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*. What he tries to do is demonstrate what I've just said, is the differences between John and the Synoptics do not mean that John was playing fast and loose with the facts and was historically incorrect and unreliable, but he attempts to demonstrate that there's reason to take John's Gospels historically reliable, along with the synoptics Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So, if you want to pursue it, I've given you the information in your notes on Craig Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*.

All right, that's really all I want to say about John's Gospel. Again, I'm just trying to highlight what are some of the emphases or some of the texts and sections in John that are distinct and unique to him that you don't find in the other Synoptics, and kind of give you a sense of what John seems to emphasize throughout his Gospel.

Now, before we move on, I want to talk very briefly about the parables what they are, and how we read them, but any questions so far on John's Gospel? You'll have no trouble.

And by the way, on the exam, a lot of the questions on the exam are meant to get you to be able to compare and contrast the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What's distinct in the four Gospels? What's in their themes, the way they're structured, if we talked about that, or what's distinct about the way they portray Jesus? The only thing you need to memorize, basically, are chapters. For example, I'm thinking especially of this slide right here.

My philosophy is to use the imagery of a city. If you can find the block, you can probably find the house. So, I'm assuming if you have a Bible and you can get the chapter, you can probably find the verse.

So, what that means is I'm more interested in you getting the main chapters that things are found in. So, I'm not going to ask you what verse, what's the precise chapter and verse where this is found, but I might ask you these chapters. I might ask you to identify what's found in these chapters or I might ask you to identify what chapters these sections encompass in John.

And the same with the other Gospels. I'll mainly focus on the broader chapters and not specific verses. One of the characteristic ways that Jesus taught in the Gospels was through parables, particularly in Luke and Matthew, but also in the other Gospels.

John, particularly, is full of all kinds of symbolic imagery and figures of speech that Jesus uses, but I want to talk a little bit about the parables and how we read them. Since they're such a predominant means of Jesus' teaching what are we supposed to do with them? How should we read them? And that depends on understanding the kind of literature that Jesus is utilizing when he speaks. The first thing to say about parables is parables were not unique to Jesus.

He did not invent parables. Parables were a staple of the teaching of the rabbis. So, Jesus was following a common way of teaching that most Jewish rabbis would have followed.

Now, what Jesus does with them or the message that he teaches is very unique, but Jesus' parables and even the imagery found in the parables of sheep or a steward or a manager or master, that a plant, a mustard seed, that is not unique to Jesus. That was common imagery that the rabbis used in their own parables. We have English translations of some of the parables that the rabbis taught in, and again, they're very similar to Jesus' teaching, at least in form.

Again, where the distinction is, is the message that Jesus taught and what he did with the parables. But first of all, in interpreting Jesus' parables, it used to be common to treat Jesus' parables as these very detailed allegories. And by that, I mean to go through the parable in every little detail to find some spiritual allegorical meaning behind it.

So, whenever you read Jesus' parables, how do I know what Jesus is doing and how I should apply this? Well, you go through and all the details have some second level of meaning. That is, they have a deeper spiritual meaning. So, for example, here's an example from, I think this was St. Augustine, one of the early church fathers from around the 4th century.

This is a parable of a good Samaritan. You remember the story, a man goes down to Jericho, he's beaten by some robbers, he's left for dead. A priest goes by and doesn't do anything, a Levite.

Finally, a Samaritan comes by and binds his wounds, takes him to an inn, and volunteers to pay until he recovers. And here's what St. Augustine, a very early church father, said, how he interpreted it. He thought that when it says a certain man went down to Jericho, the certain man stood for Adam from the Old Testament.

Jerusalem symbolized the city of peace. So, Jerusalem didn't refer to a literal city somewhere, it referred just kind of to the city of peace, kind of a more spiritual application to it. The city of Jericho symbolized, where this man was heading, symbolized Adam's mortality.

Again, you don't have to write this down, I'm not going to ask you this on a test. I might ask you how people traditionally interpreted the parables. The thieves that beat this man up and left him for dead symbolized the angels, the devil, and his demons, his angels.

Interesting. The fact that they beat him means they persuaded him to sin. So, you can see Augustine is not interpreting this kind of on the level, literally, he's looking for the deeper spiritual meaning behind the words.

The fact they left him half dead means the man died spiritually, as Adam did when he sinned. You can see so far a lot of this has parallels with Genesis 1-3. The priest and the Levite stand for the Old Testament, the whole Old Testament.

The Samaritan stands for Christ. That's interesting. The Samaritans who, again, most first-century Jews would have seen as disgusting and untouchable and kind of not true Jews, and now maybe that was missed by St. Augustine because he identified the Samaritan as Christ, which is natural.

I mean, he's the obvious one who would emerge in the scene as the hero. The fact that he poured oil on his wounds, the oil stands for hope and the comfort that hope in Christ brings. The donkey that he put him on, you see what Augustine is doing, every little thing in the parable has some spiritual significance.

So, the donkey stands for Jesus' incarnation. That means the fact that John 1-14, the word who is God, now became flesh, his incarnation, referring to the fact that he took on human flesh, human nature, physical body. The inn refers to the church, and the inn where he took the beat-up man that Christ took him refers to the church.

I don't know which church, I guess probably a universal church. The money that he offered to pay the innkeeper to take care of this person refers to the life to come, eternal life. And the innkeeper was the Apostle Paul.

I don't know how he got that one, but you get the idea of what Augustine was doing. And this was, although he was doing this in the early centuries of the church, this is the approach that dominated the way we read parables until the 19th century. So, this dominated for centuries.

Everyone who would read the parable would do this. You look at the parable take all the details and find some correspondence spiritually to something else in the Old and New Testament. And again, every last detail.

They did this with, we talked a little bit about the parable of the prodigal son. They did the same thing. The calf that was slaughtered, the sandals put on his feet, the robe, the ring, all of that had spiritual, some allegorical spiritual meaning to it.

And again, this is the way parables were treated until the 19th century. When a German scholar named Adolf Jülicher decided that that was not a good way to read the parables, and for a variety of reasons, what he said, no, no, Augustine and the church fathers and the church history have gotten it all wrong. The parables are not detailed allegories.

The parables are stories that communicate only one main point, and one main point only. So, your job in interpreting the parable is not to read it like an allegory and figure out what everything allegorically and spiritually refers to, but your job is to figure out what the one main point this parable teaches. That is the dominant approach.

Pick up, go to the library and pick up virtually any book on how to read the Bible and go to the section on parables and it will tell you that you're supposed to find what's the one main point. Parables were to teach a single main point. That came from Adolf Jülicher, a German liberal scholar, and he was reacting to the way that

Augustine and others had interpreted the parables for centuries, almost arbitrarily, to find all these allegorical details in the parables.

And he said, no, no, no, the parables only communicate one main point. That's what Jülicher said. And again, that has kind of become the consensus.

However, with a lot of things, sometimes this pendulum likes to swing to one extreme and eventually come back to the center. An approach that's beginning to emerge today is, again, the point that has emerged from this, before I get back to the pendulum, is the goal of interpreters is to find one main point that is communicated. What was the one main point Jesus was trying to communicate in the parables? Now, again, the pendulum has begun to swing to kind of find a mediating position.

And that is to realize that the parables are actually brief allegorical narratives. Fictional narratives, in fact. The parables, most of the parables, again, although they're rude in real life, they're not stories, true stories in the fact that they actually happened.

They're stories that are based on life, but just stories that Jesus uses to communicate, as the rabbis did, kind of stock common stories to communicate something about the kingdom of God. That's why Jesus uses them. But it's now recognized that parables basically are indeed allegories, but not in the way that St. Augustine and others treated them.

It's not every little detail has an allegorical meaning. But instead, it's only the major characters of the parables that have an allegorical meaning. The meaning must be consistent with Jesus' teaching in the context, not what I can gather from church tradition and the rest of the Old New Testament.

It must reflect what Jesus was teaching in the context. When I start with that context, I can find, hopefully, what was the allegorical meaning, not of every detail, but the major characters, the major events, and characters of the parables. In fact, go back and read something in Matthew, particularly in chapter 13.

Notice how Jesus interprets, thankfully, Jesus after he tells the parable. Remember the Parable of the Seeds or the Sower? A sower went out in a field and scattered seeds. Some of it fell on the hard ground and the birds came and gathered it up.

Some fell on the ground and thistles grew up and choked it out. But some fell in good soil and it bore fruit. And then Jesus interprets that parable for us, and he does so allegorically.

He takes the main parts of that parable, the sower, the seed, and also the birds that eat up the seed, and he gives them an allegorical interpretation related to the

kingdom of God. Now, let me give you an example. This is Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son, where clearly there are three main characters in this parable.

The father, the youngest prodigal son, and we looked at in the last class period when we talked about Luke, we talked about the younger son as also being a character. So, I would suspect that this parable will have three meanings, or three messages, one associated with each of these main characters. So, for example, what about the father? The father, I don't think anyone would disagree, the father clearly symbolizes God.

It's not saying that God is like this father in every respect, but he's like the father in that the father humiliates himself to accept someone who has treated him wrongly and with disrespect. In the same way, the father symbolizes, allegorically God who accepts sinners who come to him in repentance. So clearly the father is meant to stand for God in the parable of the prodigal son.

We already said that the younger son clearly symbolizes the sinner who turns to God for forgiveness. And then the older son, we said, corresponds to anyone especially in Jesus' day it was the Pharisees. Remember in Luke 15 where this parable is found, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees who are accusing him of associating with people like sinners and tax collectors.

And so, the older son, who is jealous because the father throws a party for the younger son, the older son symbolizes or represents anyone who should respond in joy when God grants forgiveness to someone who doesn't deserve it. So the fact that God grants forgiveness to sinners who repent, even though they don't deserve that forgiveness, should evoke a response of joy in God's people. And so, the older son again corresponds to the person who should respond with rejoicing when God extends forgiveness to someone who doesn't deserve it like these tax collectors and sinners and these outcasts of society.

Yet as we saw, the son's ultimate response is open-ended. The parable doesn't tell us how it ends. Now when you read the parable, there's no allegorical meaning of the servant in the parable or the pigs or the food that the son was feeding the pigs.

There's no allegorical significance to the ring on his finger, the robe, killing the fatted calf. Those are all just necessary to make the story work. And that's the way parables are.

There's a certain amount of information that just adds color to the parable just because stories need it. But you see, it's the main figures of the parables that get the allegory, the allegorical meaning. So, I challenge you, as you read Jesus' parables, to determine who the main figures are, and then in light of the context of Jesus' teaching, what most likely are they saying? What is their spiritual or allegorical

meaning or significance? All right, Friday then, we'll wrap up our discussion of the Gospels by comparing them all to each other.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson presenting New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 11, on John and the Parables.