

# Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 6, Exegeting Jesus' Parables

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Okay, we're looking at the Synoptic Gospels course here. So far, we've looked at the historical Jesus, Jewish background, introduction to exegesis and narratives, authorship and data synoptics, and we're about here to start on section five, the parables, or as I call it here, Exegeting Jesus' Parables.

Started with some definitions relevant to parables. There's some confusion that can arise about exactly what a parable is. Since the definition used in English literature is not quite the same as the range of usage of the word parable in the Greek New Testament.

On top of that, New Testament parable studies have been messed up for about a century because commentators unwisely followed Julicher's claim that parables were quite different from allegories and always only made a single point.

So, let's have a look. If you look in a standard English dictionary, the dictionary definition would be something like this: A parable is a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle. That's not a bad definition. Of course, a parable doesn't have to be fictitious, but we have no way 2,000 years later to tell whether any or all of Jesus' parables are fictitious.

That a parable is a fictitious story, however, casts no shadow on the biblical teaching of inerrancy. The literary definition of a parable is a parable is an extended simile, whereas an allegory is an extended metaphor. This definition gets us into technical questions of what a simile is and how it differs from a metaphor.

On top of that, it makes a distinction that Jesus and the New Testament writers do not make. The word parable, as used in the New Testament, includes allegories and a number of other figurative genres. For your information, we give the following definitions of simile, metaphor, etc.

A simile is an explicit comparison employing words like as or like. For example, God is like a king. A metaphor is an implicit comparison not employing words as or like.

For example, God is a king. A parable is a simile expanded into a story showing how some item, person, etc., is like the story or like some element in the story.

An allegory is a story picturing concepts and such by means of persons or elements in the story named for each concept. So, *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan is probably the most famous of the English allegories in which the chief character is called

Pilgrim. Progress, we don't normally catch today because it's changed meaning, but progress is a journey.

So, it's Pilgrim's Pilgrimage or Pilgrim's Journey to Heaven, etc. You run into all of these characters with different kinds of names, and they represent different kinds of problems and encouragements that Pilgrim faces in his journey and that Christians will face in their spiritual journey as well. New Testament usage of the word parable.

A rather broad genre of illustration includes parables in its narrow definition, allegory, similitude, and sample parable as well as proverb and paradox. We've already defined parable and allegory as used in the sentence in the second definition there, literary definition. What do the other terms here mean? The similitude is something that's longer than a single simile but not really long enough to be a story.

Think of the parable that Jesus gives the woman who puts leaven in dough until it's all leavened. Not much action there, okay? Her kneading the dough might take some time, etc., but it's not an action-filled story if you like. It's almost just a sentence.

Or the parable of the mustard seed, just as the seed grows until it becomes big enough for birds to rest in the branches. A sample parable. We mentioned just briefly earlier when we discussed the characteristics of Luke, a story that illustrates some spiritual truth by giving a sample of it rather than by giving an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, as parables more commonly do.

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils is an earthly story about planting seeds with a heavenly meaning and about the varied reception of the gospel. A sample parable, by contrast, is a Good Samaritan, which gives a sample of what it means to be a neighbor. We want to think a little bit now about how parables function.

We can say lots of things, but we're going to construct it here in terms of two things. First of all, parables are stories. They're designed artistically by the creator of the parable to be interesting and use a number of the standard devices of storytelling.

For instance, Amos Wilder, in an article in *Semeia*, pictures parables as stories in the sense that they're brief. The longest parables in the New Testament are probably something like The Prodigal Son or something like that. It's 20 verses or something like that, so it takes up a page of the Bible.

A short story typically takes at least half a dozen pages, so it can be very brief. Unified doesn't go shooting out all over the place and doesn't usually have several plots or anything of that sort—limited number of actors.

Wilder mentions the rule of two, chiefly two principal actors. Not all parables satisfy two principal actors, but an awful lot of them would. Some of them think of the parable of the prodigal son, for instance.

Your two principal actors are the father and the son, but then there's the other brother, etc. So, there's a little bit more going on there. They are typically characterized by direct discourse.

To make the story vivid, you have the different characters speaking instead of the narrator describing what they said or something of that sort. A serial development. It goes from the beginning to the end without taking a few side tracks here and there to explain other things going on.

And that's probably partially just a result of their being brief and unified, not having multiple plots. There's also what's called a rule of three, and that is that typically, parables don't go beyond three items for certain things in order not to complicate things too much. So, for instance, in the parable of the pounds, the ruler who's going to a far country to receive a kingdom return gives a pound of silver to each of his servants.

So, there are ten of them, but you don't get a working out of the ten when you get back. You get a working out of three of them. One guy made five pounds with him, one made two pounds with him, and one hid the stuff in the ground.

So, the rule of three is a rather common feature to make the thing memorable and not get too complicated. Repetition. Often verbal repetition or thematic repetition in the thing.

Again, to help make it easier to remember. This is characteristic not only of parables but also of other types of storytelling techniques like fairy tales or something. There are three brothers and one brother goes and does this and this and this and this, and finally, this disaster happens.

And then there's a second brother, and he goes this and this and this and this, and you get a lot of the same words that were used in the previous one, etc. Binary opposition. Black versus white.

These are not discussions of some difficult psychological problem where you've got all these grays and nuances and things of that sort. But very typically, very good, very bad. Not always.

Again, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a little bit nuanced in that you have nine coins non-lost and one coin lost in the lost coin. In the sheep, you have one sheep

lost and 99 sheep not lost. In the Prodigal Son, you kind of wonder whether both sons aren't lost to some extent and such.

But typically, there is very strong opposition, a very strong distinction between the various characters or events or things of that sort. There's an end stress that you often have the final resolution of things that shows up quite suddenly at the end of the story. Often, there's a resolution by reversal.

This shows up pretty strongly in connection with the parable Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man is now begging, and the poor beggar is now feasting, if you like—that sort of thing.

And they're usually two levels. They're usually this earthly story, heavenly-meaning thing. Which, as I said, the only real exceptions to those are these six parables of Luke, which are sample parables.

So, parables are stories. And so, they've got the tight structure to them and these distinctive things that make it easy to see what's going on in that sense. Parables are analogies.

The best work on this I've seen is a book by John Sider called *Interpreting the Parables*, published by Zondervan back in 1995. He says, basically, that a parable makes an analogy between the earthly story and its various features with the heavenly meaning and its various features. And in the terminology that's used in literary studies for verbal analogies, if you like this, parables are the tenor, and that is the heavenly meaning if you like.

The vehicle, the means by which that tenor is conveyed, and that's the earthly story. And for those of you who get tangled up with complicated terminology, a vehicle, we think of as an automobile or a bicycle or a motorcycle, carries the passenger. So here, the earthly story carries the heavenly meaning, if you like.

Or if you're into paint, the vehicle is the oil or latex base that carries the color and sticks it to the wall. So, a vehicle, the story, the tenor, what the meaning of the story is, and then one or more points of resemblance, which are the analogies that you can make between the earthly story and the heavenly meaning. Almost all of Jesus' parables are what we call analogies of equation.

That is, this is to this equals this is to this if you like. Let's take a look at some of those. I started with an example from Shakespeare in *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1, Line 37.

Lear is complaining: As flies are to wanton boys, so are we to the gods. So that's the vehicle if you like. Well, that's actually both of them.

That's the two analogies. Here are wanton boys, which in early English means boys that are mischievous or something of that sort. And the way they treat flies is analogous to the way the gods treat humans.

And he actually explains it in the last half of the line. They kill us for their sport. These boys kill the flies for fun.

The gods kill humans for fun. Well, you can see it's not a Christian worldview that Shakespeare is presenting as Lear's view on the matter anyway. So, the tenor, the relation of gods to humans, the vehicle, the way boys treat flies if you like.

Point of resemblance, they kill us for their sport, said explicitly. So, point of resemblance, if you try to construct the point so that it works for both sides in analogy, it's in respect of how these people are mistreated, if you like. So, the gods mistreat humans, the boys mistreat the flies, etc.

And then he shows how that can be diagrammed, and that's not easy to work out verbally, so I'll just leave it with that. An example from Jesus' parables, The Wheat and the Weeds, is Matthew 13. In the story, a man sows a good seed in his field.

His enemy sows weeds on top of them. When what happened was discovered, the man's slaves wanted to remedy the situation right away by pulling up the weeds. But the owner has them wait until the harvest.

So that's the story, that's the vehicle. What's the tenor? Well, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of heaven is like this. So, Jesus' subject is the kingdom of heaven.

And he's telling us about certain features of its, I would say, future history from the time that Jesus wrote. There's going to be an analogy between this man sowing good seed and the enemy sowing bad seed, and the discovery and desire to rip it up, and the owner having to postpone it until the harvest, etc. So, the vehicle is the story above.

Jesus is telling about the kingdom of heaven, a heavenly subject, by means of an earthly agricultural story of an enemy's attempt to spite his neighbor by ruining his crop with weeds. Points of resemblance: this one has a number of them, huh? Not just one. We've got to stop and think what they might be.

Well, the owner is to the enemy as God is to Satan. Or you can make an analogy between what the owner does and just as the owner sows good seed in his field, so God puts sons of the kingdom in the world. Another point of resemblance is that just as the enemy puts weed seeds in the field, so Satan puts his people into the same world situation.

You can actually make a bunch of those sorts of things, but you're probably going to wind up with four or five significant points of resemblance that are going on here. So that basically is the picture we have there. That's how a parable functions as an analogy.

I'm going to give you a quick walkthrough of the parables in the synoptics, and I'll also throw John in here as well so you can get a feel for that. They're structured in terms of their content if you like. So, we'll start out first of all with Christological parables.

There are a number of those. The strong man was defeated in Matthew 12, Mark 3, and Luke 11. And you've got the analogy there: just as a strong man can only be defeated by a stronger man, so Satan can only be defeated by someone stronger than him: implication, Jesus.

Okay, so what's going on here in this demon exorcism, if you like, is that? Or the rejected stone in Matthew 21:14-22.

There, Jesus is really just commenting on an Old Testament passage out of the Psalms, Psalm 118, which I believe is. The stone to build is rejected. The same has become the chief cornerstone.

And he leaves it to his audience to figure out what the analogy is. But Jesus, if you like, is this rejected stone. Whether it's rejected because it's the wrong shape, it's not the shape they expect, or something of that sort would be speculation.

That's my guess what it is. The builders represent the powers that be in the Jewish state at this particular time. And yet, this stone turns out to be the chief stone in the architect's plan.

It's the chief cornerstone or the capstone. Various ways have been suggested to handle that sort of thing. So, it's a Christological parable. Or the door of the sheep in John 10.

Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. He's the way into the sheepfold or such. The good shepherd is also in the same passage.

Jesus, the vinedresser, excuse me, the father of the vinedresser in John 15, verses 1 and 2. Those would all be examples of Christological parables. They're mainly about who Jesus is, if you like. There are the parables of lost and found.

And that's the lost sheep found in Matthew 18, but also in Luke 15. Then, in Luke 15, there is the lost coin and the lost son. And they're all doing the same sort of thing.

The Pharisees are complaining that Jesus is concerned about all of these wicked people and prostitutes and tax collectors and things of that sort. And Jesus basically says, well, if you owned 100 sheep, wouldn't you be concerned if one got lost? And wouldn't you, when you found it, wouldn't you want your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you? So God is seeking the lost, and when he finds it, he'd like you to rejoice with him instead of complaining about it. And then the lost coin does the same sort of thing.

But now using a woman, lost coin. And then the lost son and you're kind of sneaking up on the Pharisees, and all of these now bring in another character, the non-lost son. And he has the Pharisees' attitude.

And I think the attempt here is to get the Pharisees to see themselves as God sees them. Whether they do or not, how many of them do, we don't know—parables of lost and found.

Parables of forgiveness and mercy. The unmerciful servant, Matthew 18, 21 through 35. The one who has received all this mercy from his master and then doesn't have mercy on the person who owes him money.

The day laborers complain about the fact that they worked all day, but some of these worked just an hour, etc. Sort of the idea that I want grace, but I don't want anybody else to have grace, and I certainly don't want them to have more than I have, sort of thing is lurking there. The two debtors in Luke 7. Which debtor would show more love for the moneylender who forgave both their debts? Well, you think the one who had the larger debt.

And Jesus is basically saying, well, you know, you Simon, you think you've got a small debt, and you act like it. But the woman thinks she has a big debt, and she really acts like she's been forgiven a big debt. She really has been, etc.

So, the unprofitable servants in Luke 17 somehow expect to be treated as no longer servants, etc., because they've done these things. And trying to remind us that, in some sense, our relationship to God is that of slaves to a master, that that's what we owe the person. It is not perhaps appreciated much in a culture without slavery, but it does picture a real feature of the relationship of God to man.

Parables on prayer. The Son asking bread, Matthew 7, Luke 11. The friend at midnight, Luke 11. Unjust judge, Luke 18. All on, God gives us the gifts that we really need, rather than perhaps the ones we think we want. God will reward persistence in prayer.

And if this widow persisted and got what she wanted, even though the judge was unjust, how are we treating God when we give up in something? We're treating God as worse than the unjust judge if you like. Parables of transformation. The new patch on the old garment, or the new wine in the old wineskins, etc., showing that something new has come here, and the regeneration in the gospel, and that sort of thing.

Lots of parables of stewardship. The parable of the lamp and the bushel. What's a lamp for? It's to lighten the room.

You don't put a bushel over it. The crooked business manager, who, what shall we say, gives his master's debtors a break by reducing their indebtedness, etc., and we're to both resemble and be different from the crooked business manager—unfaithful upper servant, who begins to lord it over the lower servants.

Parables of talent and of pounds are very similar. Entrusted wealth to us and our responsibility to use it properly, and the dangerous temptation to play it safe, to hide it, etc., instead of actually working and risking with it. The parable of the day laborers we had had up earlier there somewhere was also a parable of forgiveness and mercy, but also of stewardship.

Parable of vineyard workers, these people who want to get the vineyard for their own and are ready to kill the heir, just as some sense the Jewish leaders wanting to run Israel their way are ready to kill the Messiah when he shows up. Parables of invitation and rejection. Children in the marketplace and some stubborn, crabby children who won't play funeral and won't play marriage, etc., and Jesus and John the Baptist are like John offering funeral and Jesus offering wedding, and the crowds are the crabby kids who won't go either way.

Parable of the two sons. The one who says he won't go work in the father's field but then repents and does, and the one who says he will but doesn't do it, contrasting the tax collectors and harlots who start out rebellious but repent, and the Pharisees and such who claim they're really doing God's will but they never do it. The great supper and the marriage of the king's son.

We're going to look at the marriage of the king's son here by and by, so I'll not say further about that. However, both of them use a theme that parallels the idea of a messianic banquet. The offer of the gospel is like an invitation to a banquet and the irrationality of some of the people invited in turning the banquet down.

Parables of the second coming. The vultures in the carcass. How do you tell where a dead body is out in the wilderness? Well, you can see the vultures circling overhead from a mile or two away.



You don't have to be near the carcass. So, when Jesus returns, you'll know it. You don't have to be standing right where he comes.

The fig tree heralds summer signs preceding the end, like the new leaves and buds on the fig tree herald the coming of summer. Householder and the thief. The importance of keeping guard, if you like, or the Jesus return will catch you unaware.

The parable of the porter, the fellow who needs to be up to open the door when the master returns from the feast, et cetera. The waiting servants in Luke 12, rather similar. The wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25, where the wise virgins have extra olive oil with them just in case things take longer than expected, and the foolish virgins don't take any extra with them, and it does take longer than expected, and they aren't ready when the time comes.

Well, there's a huge list of parables of warning and judgment. John the Baptist's parable of the axe at the roots pictures a farmer about ready to cut down a tree, and he's taking a stance, and those of you who've used an axe properly at least are aware that you set the axe edge against where you want to strike initially to get your stance right, your distance right, and everything, and then you draw it back and whack it. Jesus says the axe is already set at the roots, ready for the stroke, and John the Baptist says this: you need to be ready.

John also gives us this one in Matthew 3:12 of the guy coming to winnow the grain, and his winnowing fan is in his hand, so he's about to carry out the judgment that separates the wheat from the chaff. We've got the parable of tasteless salt, parables of fire, salt, and peace, the advice of Jesus to settle out of court, the picture of the eye as the light of the body, the way that you see is when your eye is working, and so spiritually we need to be able to see spiritual things, etc. Somewhat similar, the idea of the blind leading the blind, in Mark 4 and Luke 6, if you like.

We want to make sure that whoever is leading us knows what's going on. The idea of doing your eye repair, taking the speck out if you've got the log in your eye already. The wise and foolish builders, the foolish builders, build without a proper foundation, and their work is washed away.

Wise builders build on the rock, and this comes at the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or Sermon on the Plain, and basically saying the people who take to heart what I've said and obey it, they're the wise builders, etc. The empty house in Matthew 12 and Luke 11, about when a demon has been driven out of someone, it's like, what should we say, squatters have been driven out of a house, it's empty now, you need to fix it up and guard it so it doesn't get refilled by the guys. I think it is a warning to the nation that the good things that have happened with the coming of Jesus they need to respond.

Every plant not planted by my Father will be rooted up, which is another kind of warning and judgment parable. The barren fig tree is a parable in Luke 13, and you remember it as an acted parable elsewhere, the same sort of thing. The tower builder thinks in terms of what something's going to cost, takes a resolution, and looks for whether you've got the resources in that situation as well.

The king going to war is a very similar kind of parable. Will a king with only 10,000 men will he go to war against a king with 20,000? Well, he's got to at least think it through, whether he can do an ambush or something of that sort perhaps that will turn the numbers and allow him to win anyway, and if he doesn't look any good, he better go try and make peace rather than fight the battle and get wiped out. The parable of the wicked tenant farmers who don't want to pay the rent and are going to kill the heir, if you like.

The parable of the sheep and the goats, that just a shepherd separates his sheep and his goats. So, Jesus, at his return, is going to separate those who are really his from those who are not. We have parables of the kingdom, and the Parable of the Sower, the tares, the growing seed, the mustard seed, the leaven, the treasure, the pearls, the dragnet, and then at the end of them, the old and new treasures that the householder brings out of his house.

These are telling us something about the nature of Jesus' kingdom, and I have a PowerPoint on that that goes into some detail and suggests that there appears to be a sequence in this whole thing, that we're looking at a planting, a growing, harvesting, etc., that we're looking at something about the progress of the gospel, probably typical progress of the gospel in different societies, and what sort of things happen there. I've said just a word or two about the illustrative parables of Jesus already in connection with Luke, and I'll not say anything more except list them for you again. The Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the lowest seats in the banquet, the dinner invitations, who you invite to your banquet, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and tax collector, all in Luke 10-18.

Then we've got a category we haven't said much of anything about so far, and they're acted parables, where the person, instead of saying anything, might give a hint or two. He does something, and it's something fairly unusual. So, most people think that Jesus cursing the fig tree is pretty unusual.

What's that about? Is he impatient or something? Well, no, it's an acted parable. That doesn't mean Jesus wasn't really hungry and wasn't disappointed that there were no figs on the tree, but the tree did have leaves at the time of year, so the presence of leaves should indicate that there should be some early figs on it. It didn't have it, and it's basically an acted parable of God's reaction to Israel professing to be righteous but not showing the fruits of it, if you like.

The Cleansing of the Temple is a very similar parable, and in fact, those are interwoven to some extent, that the cursing of the fig tree and how it turns out overlaps with the Cleansing of the Temple. In the Cleansing of the Temple, Jesus is expressing his anger at the misuse of the Temple, and an acted parable, I think, of God's attitude towards not only Israel's misuse of the Temple but their misuse of their privileges, if you like. And as I mentioned once, somewhere back earlier in this series, I think that picks up the Malachi idea of the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple, who can abide the day of his coming, etc.

Jesus at 12 in the Temple is probably an acted parable of some sort. He's saying something about who he is. His father, his real father, is God, and so you'd expect to see him in his father's house, etc.

Jesus' baptism is probably an acted parable as well. John, who knew Jesus as a child and certainly knew something about his character, said, I need to be baptized by you. Jesus says, let's do this to fulfill all righteousness.

One of the, I think, more imaginative reformed theologians of this last century, whose name has evaporated from my mind at the moment, basically suggests that baptism is a picture of judgment as well as of cleansing, of pouring out of wrath or being overwhelmed by God's judgment, etc. Jesus is allowing God's judgment to come upon him to fulfill all righteousness. He doesn't need to be cleansed, but God's wrath is going to be poured out on him, if you like.

Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, I think, is a kind of, again and again, enacted parable, and the remark in Mark 3:1-6 points in this direction that it's telling something about Jesus, well, telling something about what the Sabbath is about. The Sabbath is about redemption, and so healing is about redemption. The Father has been working on the Sabbath, and so am I. And the Son of Man, an allusion to the Daniel passage, I think, is Lord also of the Sabbath, even of the Sabbath.

So, he's the one who's going to legislate on all of these things. The Ancient of Days has given him the commission to have an eternal, universal kingdom. Healing with clay is a rather interesting one.

Do you remember how the guy's vision is healed by Jesus spinning and making clay and putting it on his eyes? I think it's an allusion to the making of Adam in Genesis, where the Hebrew verb there is the verb for molding clay. He shaped him, as they say, took the dust of the earth and formed Adam out of it.

And the term formed there, King James, is actually the verb for to make with clay, pottery, and that sort of thing. So, I think we're looking at that there and something about who Jesus is. Writing on the ground is not explained for us in John 7:5, 3:8, 11.

And although there's a textual question about that particular incident, I think it's a real incident that was known from oral tradition and got put in because it was too good to pass up or something. And it probably refers to a god writing with his fingers on the stone tablets. That's a guess, but a lot of these things are basically intended to make people think, just like the Proverbs are.

What's that about? Well, think about it a while and turn it around and look at it, and you'll learn something, even if you don't figure out exactly what it's about. Triumphal injury, I think, is a parable. The anointing of Jesus occurs several times in his ministry.

He's the anointed one, so these people anoint him, though they're not even thinking about that. His foot washing was something the lowest slave would typically be assigned to do. And Jesus takes the place of the lowest slave because that's what he's going to do.

He's going to take our punishment for us coming up, etc. So, those are kind of a tour of how parables work. Most of the parables, I think I tried to get all the parables in the New Testament there, in that particular list.

I think we'll stop here and come back and pick up one particular one. We'll look at the parable of the marriage banquet in Matthew 22, verses 1-14, and you'll get a chance to kind of walk through and see how parables function there in this particular case. Okay, that's right at 11, so let's jump in here. And we should get through that in the next section.