

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 11 - John and Parables

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

So today, we're going to tackle two of the most fascinating puzzles in the New Testament. First up, why is one of the four Gospels just so different from the others? And second, how are we actually supposed to read Jesus' famous parables? Alright, let's jump right in. Right off the bat, we're staring at a real literary mystery.

You've got Matthew, Mark, and Luke, what we call the Synoptic Gospels. They share a ton of material; they have a similar point of view. And then there's John.

And John, well, John is a total outlier. And you know, this isn't a new discovery. People have noticed this for centuries.

The early Christians even called John the more spiritual gospel. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke feel like they're giving you a historical play-by-play, reading John feels different. It's like you're stepping into a world that's way more symbolic, way more mysterious.

So the real question is, what makes it so different? To figure that out, let's start our investigation into what makes this fourth gospel so unique. We're going to see what makes it tick. And the very first piece of evidence, I mean the most crucial clue, is its foundational concept.

This is an idea that sets the stage for everything else that's about to happen. See, John doesn't start with a nativity scene or a birth story. Nope.

It opens with this huge, cosmic, poetic statement. It introduces Jesus not as a baby in a manger, but as the Word, or in the original Greek, the Logos. And this right here is the key to unlocking the entire book.

So what in the world does Logos mean? Well, it's an incredibly powerful word. For the author of John, Jesus is the Logos. He's the very speech of God, the ultimate reveal of who God is.

It's like the author is saying, hey, you want to know what God is really like? Look at Jesus. It was this revolutionary idea, taking a huge, abstract, divine concept, and literally giving it a human face. Now, what's absolutely brilliant here is how strategic this choice of the word Logos was.

If you were a Jewish reader, it would immediately make you think of God's creative power, his speech in the Old Testament. But if you were from the Greco-Roman world, Logos was a term you already knew. It was the philosophical idea of the divine reason that holds the universe together.

The author picked one perfect word that would hit home with two completely different audiences. And it's not just the Logos thing. John has all these other unique theological fingerprints all over it.

There's a much more direct, overt emphasis on Jesus being divine than you find in the other Gospels. The author almost always uses the term eternal life instead of the kingdom of God. And he loves using these stark black-and-white contrasts: light versus darkness, light versus death, what's from above versus what's from below.

And here's another thing that really sets John apart. Unlike the other Gospels, the author flat-out tells us why he wrote the book. He's not just trying to record history.

He's intentionally picking and choosing his stories to build a case, to convince the reader that Jesus is the Messiah, and to strengthen their faith. Okay, now let's get to one of John's most famous literary moves. Seriously, if you were looking for the smoking gun that proves how unique John's portrait of Jesus is, this is it.

There are seven of them. Seven huge, iconic, I am statements. And what Jesus does here is take these powerful descriptions that were used for God in the Old Testament and apply them directly to himself.

It's an incredibly bold claim to divinity. And it's something you only find in the Gospel of John. He kicks it off with this claim to be our ultimate spiritual nourishment.

I am the bread of life. Then the claim to be the source of all truth. I am the light of the world.

He claims to be the one and only point of access. I am the door. A claim to be the ultimate protector and guide.

I am the good shepherd. The incredible claim to have power over life and death itself. I am the resurrection and the life.

A claim to be the very embodiment of reality and purpose. I am the way, the truth, and the life. And finally, the claim to be the source of all spiritual life.

I am the true vine. These seven declarations are the absolute core of John's message. It's a picture of Jesus that you just won't find anywhere else.

All right. So we've seen how John's totally unique literary style reveals this profound theological vision. And that same principle- that how something is written really shapes its meaning- brings us to our second mystery: cracking the code of Jesus's parables.

People have been debating this for 2000 years. Are they just simple little moral stories? Or are they these complex allegories where every single detail, down to the last word, has some hidden spiritual meaning? How are you supposed to read these things? Well, the way people have approached this has changed. A lot.

For centuries, you had interpreters like St. Augustine, who treated them like incredibly detailed allegories. Then a scholar in the 19th century named Adolf Jülicher came along and said, whoa, no, you've got it all wrong. Each parable has just one main point.

But today, the pendulum has kind of swung back to a more balanced middle-ground view. And the modern view is perfectly illustrated here. We basically see parables now as short allegorical stories, but with one huge catch.

Not every single detail is symbolic. Take the parable of the prodigal son. The main characters- the father, the older son, the younger son- absolutely carry allegorical meaning.

But the smaller details, the fattened calf, the robe, the ring, they're just parts of the story, setting the scene. And this insight is key because it frees us up to hear the story's main, often shocking message without getting lost on a wild goose chase for hidden meanings in every single word. So when you put it all together, from the unique theology of John's gospel to the narrative artistry of the parables, you see that how something is written is just as important as what is written.

And it really makes you wonder, doesn't it? If understanding the literary form can unlock so much meaning here, what other ancient texts out there might we be reading with the completely wrong lens?