

THE GREATEST STORIES EVER TOLD

An Introduction to the Parables

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Introduction:

- I. “Take any English word, even the most commonplace, and try repeating it twenty times in a row – umbrella, let us say, umbrella, umbrella, umbrella – and by the time we have finished, umbrella will not be a word anymore. It will be a noise only, an absurdity, stripped of all meaning. And when we take even the greatest and most meaningful of words that the Christian faith has and repeat them over and over again for some two thousand years, much the same thing happens... Sometimes the concepts of Christianity seem to be worn out and, as a result, we have a hard time paying attention to them. Familiarity may not breed contempt as much as it breeds inattention.” (Frederick Buechner, quoted in Johnston 21)
- II. What Buechner says about words might also be applied to certain types of literature. I would suggest that in some respects, modern Christians have a hard time paying attention to the parables of Jesus. Our familiarity with the parables has bred inattention. After hearing them preached and taught and dissected for over two millennia, our ears may have become dull of hearing. We may have become desensitized to their message, and lax in our application of them.
- III. It’s a serious problem, but not a new one. On the very day Jesus began using parables, he urged his audience to pay attention: “He who has ears, let him hear.”
 - A. According to all three Synoptic writers, Jesus concluded the Parable of the Sower with that declaration (Mt. 13.8; Mk. 4.9; Lk. 8.8). Jesus wanted them to pay attention to these innocuous-sounding stories. They weren’t what they appeared to be.
- IV. For this reason, teaching and preaching the parables is a lot easier said than done. Thomas O. Long has said, “Preaching a parable is a novice preacher’s dream but often an experienced preacher’s nightmare.” (Quoted in Blomberg, *Preaching* 13)
- V. As preachers, there’s a certain irony about us being daring enough to teach and preach from the parables. When Jesus told his audience to pay attention to these instructive stories, he wasn’t addressing preachers, he was addressing disciples. All of us were disciples before we were preachers, so we must first approach the parables with the humility and hunger of disciples. Then and only then are we qualified to approach them as teachers and preachers.
- VI. This study is an overview of these remarkable stories. We’ll consider the following topics:
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Body:**I. Linguistic Data on the Parables**

- A. The English word *parable* transliterates the corresponding Greek word *parabolē* (παραβολή). It occurs 50x in the NT in 48 verses. (See Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 13546)
1. In the Synoptics Gospels (48x):
 - a. Matthew (17x): 13.3, 10, 13, 18, 24, 31, 33, 34 (2x), 35, 36, 53; 15.15; 21.33, 45; 22.1; 24.32
 - b. Mark (13x): 3.23; 4.2, 10, 11, 13 (2x), 30, 33, 34; 7.17; 12.1, 12; 13.28
 - c. Luke (18x): 4.23; 5.36; 6.39; 8.4, 9, 10, 11; 12.16, 41; 13.6; 14.7; 15.3; 18.1, 9; 19.11; 20.9, 19; 21.29
 2. Outside the Synoptics (2x): Heb. 9.9 (“a symbol”) and 11.19 (“a type”).
 3. Mounce offers five definitions: (1) a placing one thing by the side of another; a comparing; a parallel case cited in illustration; a comparison, simile, similitude; (2) a parable, a short relation under which something else is figured, or in which that which is fictitious is employed to represent that which is real; (3) a type, pattern, emblem; (4) a sentiment, grave and significant precept, maxim; (5) an obscure and enigmatical saying, anything expressed in remote and ambiguous terms (ACC20 MGD, s.v. “παραβολή,” paragraph 11121)
 4. Thus, its range of meaning may include:
 - a. Parabolic stories of varying lengths and styles (Mt. 13.3, 10, 13; etc.)
 - b. Parabolic sayings (Lk. 5.36-38)
 - c. Similes or similitudes (Mt. 13.33)
 - d. Riddles (Mk. 3.23)
 - e. Proverbs (Lk. 4.23)
 - f. Types (Heb. 11.19)
 - g. Symbols (Heb. 9.9)
- B. In the Septuagint (LXX), *parabolē* is regularly used to translate the Hebrew noun *māshāl* (מְשָׁלֵךְ), which has a similar semantic range as *parabolē*. The verb form *māshal* (מְשַׁלֵּךְ) should also be considered. (See Snodgrass Kindle Loc. 13595, 13608, 13640)
1. The noun *māshāl* (מְשָׁלֵךְ) occurs 39x in 39 verses.
 - a. See Nu. 23.7, 18, 24.3, 15, 20, 21, 23; Dt. 28.37; 1 Sa 10.12; 24.14; 1 Ki. 5.12; 9.7; Is. 14.4; Jer. 24.9; Ezk. 12.22, 23; 14.8; 17.2; 18.2, 3; 21.5; 24.3; Mic. 2.4; Hab. 2.6; Ps. 44.15; 49.5; 69.12; 78.2; Jb. 13.12; 27.1; 29.1; Pr. 1.1, 6; 10.1; 25.1; 26.7, 9; Ec. 12.9; 2 Ch. 7.20.
 - b. It’s variously translated as “discourse”, “proverb”, “taunt”, “parable”, “byword”.
 2. The verb form *māshal* (מְשַׁלֵּךְ) occurs 18x in 17 verses.
 - a. See Nu 21.27; Is. 14.10; 46.5; Ezk. 12.23; 16.44 (2x); 17.2; 18.2, 3; 20.49; 24.3; Jl. 2.17; Ps. 28.1; 49.12, 20; 143.7; Jb. 17.6; 30.19.
 - b. It’s variously translated as “use/quote proverbs”, “become like”, “speak a parable”, “be a byword”.
 3. Examples of both the noun and verb include:

- a. “He took up his *discourse* and said...” (Nu. 23.7a)
- b. “...you will take up this *taunt* against the king of Babylon, and say...” (Is. 14.4)
- c. “To whom would you liken Me / And make Me equal and *compare* Me, / That we would be alike?” (Isa. 46.5)
- d. “I will make them a terror and an evil for all the kingdoms of the earth, as a reproach and a *proverb*, a taunt and a curse in all places where I will scatter them.” (Jer. 24.9)
- e. “Son of man, propound a riddle and *speak a parable* to the house of Israel...” (Ezk. 17.2)
- f. “You make us a *byword* among the nations, / A laughingstock among the peoples.” (Ps. 44.14)
- g. “The *proverbs* of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel” (Pr. 1.1)

4. Observations:

- a. Looking at its usage pattern and distribution, the *mšl* word group appears to have been used predominantly in the later strands of OT literature, flourishing from the time of Solomon onward. This is consistent with its usage in reference to wisdom sayings.
- b. Two usage patterns in particular are noteworthy.
 - 1) The noun usage in Numbers is unusual given the age of the story. It might be that the final form of the book comes from a later time in Israelite history or may simply mean that the word is a very old word that wasn't used extensively during the earlier periods. Its connection with Balaam's oracles may suggest that they should be viewed as enigmatic discourses, i.e., prophecies or oracles that would have had mysterious or deliberately vague elements.
 - 2) The noun and verb usage in Ezekiel is especially interesting.
 - a) Ezekiel uses the noun and verb a total of 16 times, far more than any other OT text.
 - b) The prophet is accused of speaking in parables (20.49). This follows his use of an enigmatic declaration (v. 45-48). The criticism of him isn't just that he's hard to understand, but more of an expression of disdain for his prophecies.
 - c) However, the criticism has some basis in truth because Ezekiel is instructed by God to speak in riddles and proverbs (17.2; 24.3).
 - d) To a degree, this prefigures Jesus' use of parables, as well as the response by his hearers.

C. I would suggest that while *māshāl* and *parabolē* have similar and overlapping semantic domains, they also have different points of emphasis in actual usage.

1. In the OT, *māshāl* may refer to a longer discourse (as in Nu. 23.7, 18; 24.3, 15, 20, 21, 23, etc.), although it normally refers to an aphorism or short proverbial statement, as with the sayings of Solomon (Pr. 1.1; etc.).
2. By contrast, while *parabolē* in the NT may refer to an aphorism or proverb, it normally refers to a parabolic narrative as in the various parable stories told by Jesus in the gospels.

3. Finally, Young makes a point about the terminology that's worth considering. "The genre of story parables, however, seems to be independent of the terms selected to designate them. Jesus and the rabbis of old created these illustrations, and their stories became known as parables. Jewish teachers seem to have developed the classic form of the parable from their religious heritage and cultural experience. The method of teaching developed first, then the term parable (*mashal* or *parabolē*) was used to describe the story illustrations that resulted." (Young, 4)

II. Literary Aspects of the Parables

A. As seen above, the underlying meaning of *parabolē* was a comparison of some sort. One thing was compared with another by looking at them side-by-side. In the parables features of the story are compared to various aspects of the reign of God. Hence, parables are by nature metaphoric. Parables come in all shapes and sizes – anything from an aphorism to a discourse. Some expositors use the term in its broadest sense to include parabolic stories, proverbs, riddles, similes, etc. (e.g., Fee & Stuart 151-152) Others limit their studies to the more traditional set of stories and similitudes, which is the viewpoint of this paper. (See Appendix A)

B. Literary definitions

1. Literary definitions of parables are as many and varied as the authors who write about them. While most of them are reasonable efforts to define a unique literary genre, they still reflect the author's theological biases. I prefer the definitions by Blomberg and Snodgrass.
2. Examples:
 - a. "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." (*I'm not sure who came up with that one, and it may not be the best, but the royalties alone are mind-boggling.*)
 - b. "An illustration, a comparison, or an analogy, usually in story form, using common events of everyday life to reveal a moral or a spiritual truth." (Stein, 16)
 - c. "First and foremost, both the parables of Jesus and the parables of the rabbis must be studied as Jewish haggadah. Haggadah, or storytelling with a message, has its own dynamic within the parameters of religious and ethical teaching. Often designed to be entertaining or even captivating, the haggadah proclaims a powerful message that usually demands a decision. A good story can drive home the point better than a sermon. Often an earthy illustration says so much more than a lofty homily. But haggadah is more than entertaining stories because it serves a higher purpose, centering on God's way among people whom he loves. After all, the focus of haggadah is to understand the divine nature." (Young, 7-8)
 - d. "This meant that the parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings but earthy stories with heavy meanings, weighted down by an awareness of the workings of exploitation in the world of their hearers. The focus of the parables was not on a vision of the glory of the reign of God, but on the gory details of how oppression served the interests of a ruling class. Instead of reiterating the promise of God's intervention in human affairs, they explored how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty created by exploitation and oppression. The parable was a form of social analysis every bit as much as it was a form of theological reflection." (Herzog Kindle Loc., 127-132)
 - e. "A parable is an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade." (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 506)
 - f. "A parable is a brief metaphorical narrative." (Blomberg, *Jesus*, 299)

C. Classification of the parables

1. As with definitions of the parables, the classification schemes are as many and as varied as the authors who create them. Like the definitions, each reflects the biases of its authors. The most common organizational schemes are based upon the form of the parables, the topical content of the parables, and the structure of the parables.
2. Examples:
 - a. Bruce organized the parables around the three roles of Jesus: as a Master or Rabbi; as an Evangelist; and as a Prophet. (Bruce, vii-x)
 - 1) Theoretic parables: the sower; the tares and the dragnet; the mustard seed and the leaven; the blade, the ear, and the full corn; the selfish neighbor and the unjust judge; and the parable of extra service.
 - 2) Parables of grace: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son; the children of the bride-chamber; the lowest seats at feasts, and the Pharisee and the publican; the great supper; the good Samaritan; the unjust steward; the rich man and Lazarus, and the unmerciful servant.
 - 3) Parables of judgment: the children in the marketplace; the barren fig tree; the two sons; the wicked husbandmen; the wedding feast and the wedding robe; the unfaithful upper servant; and the ten virgins.
 - b. Jeremias organized them around ten themes: (Jeremias 6)
 - 1) Now is the day of salvation: various parabolic sayings
 - 2) God's mercy for sinners: the lost sheep and lost coin; the two debtors; the sick; the Pharisee and tax collector; two sons.
 - 3) The great assurance: the mustard seed; the leaven; the sower; the patient husbandman; the unjust judge; the man asking for help by night.
 - 4) In sight of disaster: the children in the marketplace; the rich fool; the salt that has become useless.
 - 5) It may be too late: the fig tree; the ten maidens; the great supper.
 - 6) The challenge of the hour: the debtor; the unjust steward; the rich man and Lazarus; the servant's reward; the two houses; the ploughman looking ahead; the tower builder and the king; the return of the unclean spirit.
 - 7) Realized discipleship: the treasure in the field and the great pearl; the good Samaritan; the last judgment; the unmerciful servant.
 - 8) The *Via Dolorosa* and exaltation of the Son of Man: no place to lay his head; the cup he must drink and baptism he must undergo; the grain of wheat dying.
 - 9) The consummation: the tares among the wheat; the seine-net.
 - 10) Parabolic actions: various actions of Jesus that embodied the principles of his parabolic teaching.
 - c. Stein has four categories: (Stein 6-7)
 - 1) The kingdom of God as a present reality: the great supper; the wedding feast and fasting; the patch, new wine and old wineskins; the mustard seed and leaven; the weather signs; the divided house.
 - 2) The kingdom of God as demand – the call to decision: the hidden treasure and pearl; the unjust steward; the tower and war.
 - 3) The God of the parables: the gracious father; the gracious employer.

- 4) The Final judgment: the sheep and goats; the great net; the wheat and tares.
- d. Snodgrass organizes them according to how the parable's metaphors work (I won't explain his categories): (Snodgrass Appendix 5 Kindle Loc., 13705-13722)
- 1) Similitudes: the Sower (fourfold similitude); the Growing Seed; the Mustard Seed; the Leaven; the Treasure in the Field; the Pearl of Great Price; the Two Builders (antithetical double similitude); the Net; the Faithful and Unfaithful Steward (antithetical double similitude, close to being a mixed type with its introductory question); the Children in the Market Place; the Good and Worthless Trees; the Budding Fig Tree.
 - 2) Implied Similitudes: the Man Going on a Journey; the Sheep and the Goats (vv. 32-33 only).
 - 3) Interrogative parables: the Lost Sheep (both versions); the Lost Coin; the Tower Builder; the Warring King; the Sheep in the Pit; the Friend at Midnight.
 - 4) Double indirect narrative parables: the Unforgiving Servant (two-stage double indirect narrative); the Prodigal Son (two-stage double indirect narrative); the Wheat and the Weeds; the Barren Fig Tree; the Feast; the Banquet (two-stage double indirect narrative); the Workers in the Vineyard; the Unjust Judge; the Ten Virgins; the Talents; the Pounds (double indirect narrative parable with two interwoven plots).
 - 5) Juridical parables: the Two Debtors; the Two Sons; the Wicked Tenants (in Matthew; in Mark and Luke the juridical character is implicit).
 - 6) Single indirect narrative parables: the Good Samaritan; the Rich Fool; the Unjust Steward; the Rich Man and Lazarus (two-stage single indirect narrative parable); the Pharisee and the Toll Collector.
 - 7) "How much more" parables: the Friend at Midnight; the Lost Sheep; the Lost Coin; the Unjust Steward; the Unjust Judge.
- e. Blomberg arranges them by the number of main characters or groups in the story, which dictates the number of points each parable makes: (Blomberg *Interpreting* 8-9)
- 1) Simple three-point parables: the prodigal son; the lost sheep and lost coin; the two debtors; the two sons; the faithful and unfaithful servants; the ten virgins; the wheat and tares; the dragnet; the rich man and Lazarus; the children in the marketplace.
 - 2) Complex three-point parables: the talents; the laborers in the vineyard; the sower; the good Samaritan; the great supper the unforgiving servant; the unjust steward; the wicked tenants.
 - 3) Two-point parables: the Pharisee and tax collector; the two builders; the unprofitable servant; the seed growing secretly; the rich fool; the barren fig tree; the unjust judge; the friend at midnight; the householder and the thief.
 - 4) One-point parables: the hidden treasure and pearl of great price; the tower builder and warring king; the mustard seed and leaven.

D. Non-Synoptic parables

1. Jesus didn't invent parables. Parables existed long before he began his ministry. In many ways, these other parable sources provide some degree of illumination and background for the parables of Jesus. (Snodgrass, 1123-1655)
2. OT parables: (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 1140-1241; cf. Blomberg *Interpreting 2nd Ed.*, 56-57)

- a. A handful of OT texts may be understood as parables. The primary differences are that OT parables are often cast in the form of poetry, and many examples are more like fables. Ezekiel has the greatest concentration of parable-like stories.
- b. Examples may include: (cf. Birger Gerhardsson and T. W. Manson, cited in Snodgrass Kindle Loc. 1189-91, notes 17-18)
 - 1) Jg. 9.7-15 (the trees and the bramble)
 - 2) 2 Sa. 12.1-4 (the ewe lamb)
 - 3) 2 Sa. 14.1-11 (the widow and the avengers)
 - 4) 1 Ki. 20.35-40 (the fake injury)
 - 5) 2 Ki. 14.9 (the thorn bush and cedar)
 - 6) Pr. 9.1-6, 13-18 (the feasts of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly)
 - 7) Is. 5.1-7 (the song of the vineyard)
 - 8) Is. 28.23-29 (the farmer's wisdom)
 - 9) Jer. 23.1-4 (the scattered sheep)
 - 10) Ezk. 17.3-10 (the eagle and the cedar)
 - 11) Ezk. 15.1-8 (the wood of the vine)
 - 12) Ezk. 16.1-58 (the faithless bride)
 - 13) Ezk. 19.2-9 (the lioness and her cubs)
 - 14) Ezk. 19.10-14 (the transplanted vine)
 - 15) Ezk. 21.1-5 (the sword of YHWH)
 - 16) Ezk. 23.1-29 (the harlot sisters)
 - 17) Ezk. 24.3-14 (the cauldron)
 - 18) Ezk. 34 (the failed shepherds)
 - 19) Ezk. 37 (the valley of dry bones)

3. Parabolic material in the Gospel of John:

- a. The parables appear exclusively in the Synoptics. John's gospel has none.
- b. "In the technical sense there are no parables in John. There are *meshalim* such as the Door to the Sheepfold or the Good Shepherd, but nothing like the Synoptic similitudes, double or single indirect narratives, juridical parables, or interrogative parables. John does not use the word *parabolē*, but he does use *paroimia*, often translated as "proverb" or "dark saying," in 10:6 and 16:25 (twice) and 29." (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 826-831)
- c. However, it's conceivable that perhaps the Shepherd imagery of Jn. 10, and the vine imagery of Jn. 15 were derived from some of Jesus' parabolic teaching. Lohfink suggests (regarding Jn. 15.1-8): "What we have here is an artful mixture of parabolic speech and instruction, though not the kind of instructive speech in which a series of comparisons and metaphors is scattered throughout. Instead, this instruction conceals a complete, succinct parable within it. That is to say, if we chop off all the instructional elements and preface the remaining text with the introduction to one of the familiar Synoptic parables, then without any particular manipulation we will have the following text, meaningful in itself: 'It is with the reign of God as with a vine. Every one of its branches that does not bear fruit will

be cut off, and every branch that yields fruit will be pruned so that it may bear yet more fruit. Branches that do not remain on the vine will be cast aside and wither. They will be collected, thrown on the fire, and burned.”” (Lohfink Kindle Loc., 520-527)

4. Rabbinic parables:

- a. In terms of form and subject matter, his parables show the greatest affinity with rabbinic parables. (Young, 3-38; Blomberg *Interpreting 2nd Ed.*, 40-41, 67-79; Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 1242-1338, 1518-1655)
- b. Similarities between the parables of Jesus and rabbinic parables: (Blomberg *Interpreting 2nd Ed.*, 69-75)
 - 1) The rabbinic parables almost always begin with an introductory formula that parallels those found in the Gospels.
 - 2) Often the logic of this last category of parable is “from the lesser to the greater.”
 - 3) The length and structure of the rabbinic parables also resemble those of the parables of Jesus.
 - 4) The parables of Jesus and the rabbis further share common topics and imagery.
 - 5) The rabbis interpreted their parables in a variety of ways, but almost always with some allegorical elements.
 - 6) The purposes of the rabbinic parables involve both disclosure and concealment.
- c. Differences between the parables of Jesus and rabbinic parables: (Blomberg *Interpreting 2nd Ed.*, 75-79)
 - 1) Despite a few exceptions, most of the rabbinic parables reinforced conventional wisdom or scriptural exegesis.
 - 2) The parables of Jesus further distinguish themselves by their consistent reference to the kingdom of God, personally inaugurated through the ministry of Jesus.
 - 3) The degree of explicit interpretation in the rabbinic texts regularly exceeds that of the Gospels.
- d. Examples may include:
 - 1) From Snodgrass: (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 1242-1338, 1518-1655)
 - a) *The Story of Ahiqar*
 - b) *Genesis Apocryphon* 19.14-21 – Abraham’s dream of a cedar tree and palm tree
 - c) 4Q302, frag. 2, col. 2 – boars destroying a good tree
 - d) 4Q424, frag. 3, lines 4-5 – winnowing the grain
 - e) 4QFour Kingdoms (4Q552-553) – four trees as kingdoms
 - f) *Jub.* 37.20-23 – the lion and the ox become friends
 - g) *1 En.* 101.4-9 – sailors who fear the sea
 - h) *4 Macc.* 1.28-30 – two plants
 - i) *Joseph and Aseneth* 12.8 – the little child and the father

- j) *Testament of Naphtali* 2.2-4 – the potter and the pot
 - k) *Testament of Job* 18.6-8 – the traveler and the city
 - l) *4 Ezra*
 - 1. 4.13-21 – the forest and the sea
 - 2. 4.28-32 – evil being sown and harvested
 - 3. 4.38-43 – the pregnant woman
 - 4. 7.49-61 – rare metals
 - 5. 8.1-3 – rare metals, part 2
 - m) Pseudo-Philo *Biblical Antiquities* 47.1-10 – the animals and the lion
 - n) 2 *Baruch* 22-23 – Who starts a journey?
 - o) 4 *Baruch* 7.26-27 – Baruch and Jeremiah
 - p) *t. Berakot* 1.11 – man attacked by animals
 - q) *y. Berakot* 2.7 – the king and the workers
 - r) *b. Rosh Hashanah* 17.b – the neighbors and their vow
 - s) *Mekilta BeshallaF section 4* – a man and his son
 - t) *Sifra Behuqotai* 262.9 –
- 2) From Young (Young, 3-38)
- a) The Rabbi and the Exceedingly Ugly Man
 - b) The Identical Twins
 - c) The Donkey and the Fat Man
 - d) The Middle-Aged Man with Two Mistresses
 - e) The Man with Two Wives
 - f) The Heron and the Lion
 - g) Dr. Heron's Fee
 - h) Better to Lose the Ox Than Catch the Thief

E. Introductory parable formulas:

1. Over 60 times, parables are introduced with a formula. These formulas serve as a simple means of identifying a text as a parable.
2. The five formulas are:
 - a. Use of the word “parable” in the introduction (25x):
 - 1) Matthew (7x): 13.3, 18, 24, 31, 33; 21.33; 24.32
 - 2) Mark (5x): 3.32; 4.2-3, 30; 12.1; 13.28
 - 3) Luke (13x): 5.36; 6.39; 8.4-5, 11; 12.16; 13.6; 14.7-8; 15.3-4; 18.1-2, 9-10; 19.11-12; 20.9; 21.29
 - 4) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 13.3 – “And He spoke many things to them in *parables*, saying...”
 - b) Mk. 13.28 – “Now learn the *parable* from the fig tree...”

- c) Lk. 6.39 – “And He also spoke a *parable* to them...”
 - b. Use of the word “kingdom” in the introduction (14x):
 - 1) Matthew (10x): 13.24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 18.23; 20.1; 22.2; 25.1
 - 2) Mark (2x): 4.26; 4.30-31
 - 3) Luke (2x): 13.18-19; 13.20-21
 - 4) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 13.44 – “The *kingdom of heaven* is like...”
 - b) Lk. 13.18-19 – “So He was saying, ‘What is the *kingdom of God* like...?’”
 - c. Use of a double formula with “parable” + “kingdom” in the introduction (4x):
 - 1) Matthew (3x): 13.24; 13.31; 13.33
 - 2) Mark (1x): 4.30-31
 - 3) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 13.24 – “Jesus presented another *parable* to them, saying, ‘The *kingdom of heaven* may be compared to...’”
 - b) Mk. 4.30-31 – “And He said, ‘How shall we picture the *kingdom of God*, or by what *parable* shall we present it?’”
 - d. Use of the indefinite pronoun *tis* (τις) – e.g., “A certain man”, or “any man”, or “a man” (15x):
 - 1) Matthew (1x): 18.12
 - 2) Luke (14x): 7.41; 10.30 (cf. v. 33); 12.16; 13.6; 14.16, 31; 15.3-4, 8, 11; 16.1, 19-20; 18.1-2; 19.11-12; 20.9
 - 3) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 18.12 – “What do you think? If *any man* (τινὶ ἀνθρώπῳ) has a hundred sheep...”
 - b) Lk. 15.8 – “Or *what woman* (τις γυνὴ), if she has ten silver coins...”
 - c) Lk. 15.11 – “And He said, ‘*A man* (δε ἀνθρώπος τις) had two sons...’”
 - 4) Note: the KJV renders *tis* more consistently in the parables than any other version, translating as “a certain...” at Lk. 7.41; 10.30, 33; 14.16; 15.11; 16.1, 19-20; 19.12; 20.9.
 - e. Use of a question to begin the parable – e.g., “Which one of you” or “What man is there...” (5x):
 - 1) Matthew (2x): 7.9; 12.11
 - 2) Luke (3x): 14.28; 15.4; 17.7
 - 3) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 7.9 – “Or *what man is there among you...*”
 - b) Lk. 17.7 – “*Which one of you*, having a slave...”
- F. Distribution of parables (See Appendix A)

1. The parables appear exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels. They account for as much as a third of Jesus' teachings. The charts show their distribution in the Synoptics. (Osborne, 235; Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 819-858)
2. Parables that appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Bridegroom's attendants	9.15	2.19-20	5.34-35
Patches on old garments	9.16	2.21	5.36
New wine in old wineskins	9.17	2.22	5.37-38
Sower	13.3-9	4.3-8	8.5-8
Mustard seed	13.31-32	4.30-32	13.18-19
Wicked tenants	21.33-40	12.1-9	20.9-16
Fig Tree	24.32-33	13.28-29	21.29-30

3. Parables that appear in Matthew and Luke:

Parable	Matthew	Luke
Builders	7.24-27	6.47-49
Children in marketplace	11.16-17	7.31-32
Leaven	13.33	13.20-21
Lost sheep	18.12-14	15.3-7
Wise steward	24.45-51	12.42-48

4. Parables that appear only in Matthew:

Parable	Matthew
Tares	13.24-30
Hidden treasure	13.44
Great pearl	13.45-46
Dragnet	13.47-50
Householder	13.52
Unmerciful servant	18.23-35
Day laborers	20.1-16
Two sons	21.28-30
Marriage of the king's son	22.1-14
Ten virgins	25.1-13
Talents	25.14-30

Parable	Matthew
Sheep & goats	25.31-46

5. Parables that appear only in Mark:

Parable	Mark
Seed growing secretly	4.26-29
Doorkeeper on watch	13.34-37

6. Parables that appear only in Luke:

Parable	Luke
New wine	5.39
Two debtors	7.41-42
Good Samaritan	10.30-36
Friend at midnight	11.5-8
Fish & egg	11.11-12
Rich fool	12.16-21
Watchful servants	12.35-38
Barren fig tree	13.6-9
Chief seats	14.8-11
Feast for the poor	14.12-14
Great supper	14.16-24
Tower	14.28-30
King	14.31-33
Lost coin	15.8-10
Lost son	15.11-32
Dishonest steward	16.1-8
Rich man & Lazarus	16.19-31
Master & servants	17.7-10
Persistent widow	18.2-5
Pharisee & tax collector	18.10-14
Pounds	19.12-27

III. Jesus' Use of Parables

A. Characteristics of Jesus' parables: (cf. Osborne, 239-244; Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 700-819; Lohfink Kindle Loc., 4053-4554)

1. They were short. (Appendix B)
 - a. The shortest parables (based upon the NASB95):
 - 1) Excluding introductory formulas and concluding commentary, several parables are less than a verse in length (the Leaven, the Householder, and the Fig Tree).
 - 2) Excluding introductory formulas and concluding commentary, two parables have only 18 words (the Fig Tree and the New Wine).
 - b. The longest parables:
 - 1) The longest parable is the Lost Son (525 words, 22 verses). This would fit on about 1.5 pages if typed. Ironically, it has neither an introduction nor a conclusion.
 - 2) The second- and third-longest parables are the Talents (424 words, 17 verses), and the Sheep and Goats (392 words, 16 verses). Likewise, neither of these have introductions or conclusions.
 - 3) The longest parable with introductory and/or concluding material is the Pounds (385 words, 17 verses).
 - c. The stories, characters, and actions are whittled down to the bare essentials. The characters do and say only what's needed. The stories rarely have superfluous details. Often the readers must fill in the blanks as far as actions that have been compressed or omitted.
2. They were vivid.
 - a. Jesus painted memorable word pictures in the parables. Sometimes they were comical (e.g., the unjust judge being pestered by a not-to-be-denied widow; or the guests at a dinner party climbing over each other to get a good seat). Sometimes they were touching (e.g., the lost son who returns home). Sometimes they induced anger (e.g., the unmerciful servant). Sometimes they created sympathy (e.g., the tax collector). Sometimes they created respect (e.g., the good Samaritan). Jesus created pictures impossible to forget.
 - b. Despite their brevity, Jesus occasionally embellished the narration of the story or the speech of individuals to heighten the effects of their situations or responses. In the process, he made the stories even more memorable. Note these examples from Lohfink: (Lohfink Kindle Loc., 4224-4249)
 - 1) Jesus did not say "The younger son suffered hunger in a foreign land," but "He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating" (Lk. 15.16).
 - 2) Jesus did not say "unless he has first overpowered the strong man," but "without first tying up the strong man" (Mk 3.27).
 - 3) Jesus did not say "The woman searched the whole house for her lost drachma," but "Does [she] not light a lamp [and] sweep the house so she can hear the coin rattle??" (Lk. 15.8).
 - 4) The harvesters do not say "We have worked all day," but "[We] have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt. 20.12).
 - 5) The man who has invited his acquaintances to a great banquet, after they have all made their excuses, does not say to his servant "Go into the city

and bring in the poor,” but “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Lk 14.21).

- 6) Jesus could have said “No one puts a lamp in a remote corner of the house.” Instead, he said “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket” (Mt. 5.15).
- 7) In the parable of the seed growing by itself it would have been enough to say, “The earth produces fruit all by itself,” but Jesus added “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mk. 4.28).
- 8) The parable of the quarreling children (Mt. 11.16-19) does not say “We wanted to play funeral and you wouldn’t join in,” but “We wailed, and you did not mourn [strike yourselves on the breast].”

3. They were earthly.

- a. The parables are unlike the bizarre and jarring prophecies of Ezekiel. They’re unlike the endless and obscure genealogies of Chronicles. They’re different from the coma-inducing census data of Numbers. They’re not like the bloody, detailed, ritualistic cultic material in Leviticus. They don’t resemble the complex arguments of Romans or Hebrews. They lack the worship context of the Psalms.
- b. Rather, “Jesus borrowed pictures from home life (lost coin, leaven, prodigal son), nature (mustard seed, tares), the animal world (birds of the air, wolves in sheep’s clothing), agriculture (sower, vineyard, lost sheep), commerce (talents, unjust steward, wicked tenants), royalty (royal wedding), hospitality (good Samaritan). To this extent Jesus followed in the tradition of the sages (wisdom teachers), who centered on the practical side of life.” (Osborne 239)
- c. While animals and objects make occasional appearances in the parables, the bulk of the characters are people. Even those parables that feature objects as principal subjects, they’re almost always connected in some way with people.
- d. This is not to say that the events described in the parables were historical. Nor is it to say that everything in the parables described normal situations. There were, in fact, exaggerations, surprises, and other unusual features.

4. They were heavenly

- a. Despite the anthropocentric content and imagery, the parables are theocentrically oriented. Ultimately they speak to the reign of God among men.
- b. “They are about God, God’s kingdom, and God’s expectations for humans. Many parables are ‘monarchic’; i.e., they are dominated by the figure of a father, master, or king, who is generally an archetype of God.” (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 777-778)
- c. In kingdom terms, we’re ruled by a God-king who is just, patient, loving, gracious, merciful, wrathful, generous, exacting, methodical, and surprising.

5. They were wide-ranging.

- a. The breadth of imagery in the parables is staggering.
- b. They employ a wide range of locations: farm fields, houses, seas, marketplaces, gardens, vineyards, palaces, sheep pens, roads, cities, rural areas, pig pens, and courtrooms.
- c. They employ a wide range of characters: farmers, bridegrooms, builders, children, men, women, fishermen, merchants, stewards, slaves, minimum-wage

workers, kings and princes, wealthy people, Israelites, Samaritans, priests, Levites, neighbors, hosts, guests, paupers, Pharisees, tax collectors, and swindlers.

- d. They employ a wide range of situations: planting seed, working a vineyard, hiring employees, settling accounts, playing in the streets, making bread, watching sheep, catching fish, getting married, throwing a party, awaking a neighbor at night, pleading with an obstinate judge, praying, building a house, going to war, losing things, finding things, and attending a wedding.
 - e. “I dare to say that there was no storyteller in antiquity from whom we have received so many authentic parables and whose parables offer so much rich, colorful material. This wealth of material and world-encompassing character of Jesus’ parables were not attained anywhere else in the ancient world.” (Lohfink Kindle Loc., 4116-4118)
6. They were simple.
- a. Virtually all the parables involve three or fewer main characters or main groups of characters. Many involve only one or two. Even if there are many people or things, they can be divided into two or three distinct groups.
 - b. Most of the parables have only one “scene” in them. A few have two. Even fewer may have a third scene.
 - c. In any given scene, only two people ever talk at once. Even if a group of people is present, only two speak at once.
7. They were structured.
- a. The plot is almost always simple with few extraneous details.
 - b. In many parables the number three is significant: three bad soils, three groups of messengers, three servants, three scenes, three excuses, or three actions.
 - c. Many parables feature a 3 + 1 structure.
 - 1) In the Parable of the Sower, there are three bad soils + one good soil.
 - 2) In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, three emissaries are sent + the son.
 - 3) In Luke 15, three things are lost (sheep, coin, and son) + the older brother.
 - 4) In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, there are three who are indifferent to the victim + the Samaritan.
 - 5) In the Parable of the Great Supper, three invitations (the “save the date” invitation, the “time for dinner” invitation, and the invitation to those in the streets + the invitation to those on the highways.
8. They were engaging.
- a. Jesus used the parables to draw his audience into the story unsuspectingly.
 - 1) Fred Craddock said, “Without the factor of recognition of our common lot the preacher cannot build enough bridges between text and listener; with the factor of recognition, those structures are unnecessary... The parables of Jesus were told to be overheard. ‘There was a certain man’: anonymous, past tense, somewhere else – nothing here addressed to me. Relax and enjoy the story. And then it happens; I am inside the story, and the door closes behind me... Participation means that the listener overcomes the distance, not because the speaker ‘applied everything, but because the listener

identified with the experiences and thoughts related in the message that were analogues of his own.” (Quoted in Greidanus, 175-176)

- 2) This is especially noticeable when Jesus’ audience (especially his enemies) understood he was talking about them: Mt. 21.45; Mk. 12.12; Lk. 20.19.
 - b. Jesus used contrast to create interest in his hearers. It forced his listeners to put themselves into a particular category. (Lohfink Kindle Loc., 4191-4204)
 - 1) Day-laborer – wholesale merchant (Mt.13.44-46)
 - 2) Big debtor – little debtor (Lk. 7.41-42)
 - 3) Younger son – elder son (Lk. 15.11-32)
 - 4) Judge – widow (Lk. 18.1-8)
 - 5) Rich invited guests – street people (Lk. 14.16-24)
 - 6) Good fish – useless fish (Mt. 13.47-48)
 - 7) Pharisee – tax collector (Lk. 18.10-14)
 - 8) Priest and Levite – Samaritan (Lk. 10.30-35)
 - 9) Obedient son – disobedient son (Mt. 21.28-31)
 - 10) Rich man – poor man (Lk. 16.19-31)
 - 11) Five wise bridesmaids – five foolish bridesmaids (Mt. 25.1-13)
 - 12) Wedding – funeral (Mt. 11.16-19)
 - 13) Faithful slave – wicked slave (Mt. 24.45-51)
 - 14) Increased sum of money – money buried in the earth (Mt. 25.14-30)
 - c. In some cases, Jesus created interest with an engaging question:
 - 1) Mt. 7.9 – “Or what man is there among you...”
 - 2) Lk. 17.7 – “Which one of you, having a slave...”
9. They were surprising.
- a. In some cases, a reversal of fortune occurs in the story, often at the very end. This isn’t present in every parable, but it does occur in some.
 - 1) The tax collector is righteous, not the Pharisee.
 - 2) The Samaritan is more neighborly than the priest or Levite.
 - 3) The profligate son gets the party.
 - 4) The poor and crippled sit at the feast.
 - 5) The dishonest steward is praised.
 - 6) The unfruitful fig tree gets another chance.
 - 7) After the vineyard owner sends three sets of emissaries who are beaten, shamed, or killed, the owner sends his own beloved son.
 - b. In some cases, there are surprising features.
 - 1) The amount of growth by the good seed.
 - 2) The amount of debt owed by a single servant.

- 3) The extreme punishment of a lazy worker.
 - 4) The equal pay to all workers, from the least productive to most productive.
10. They were authoritative.
- a. In the parables, Jesus spoke of his authority:
 - 1) Jesus declared that his audience's response to his words had eternal implications (Mt. 7.24-27).
 - 2) Jesus declared that he would return in glory to separate the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats (Mt. 13.40-43; 25.31-46).
 - 3) Jesus described himself as the vineyard owner's son who is rejected and killed by the tenants, which leads to their judgment (Mt. 20.33-45).
 - 4) Jesus described himself as the king's son whose wedding feast is ignored by the invitees, resulting in their destruction and further invitations given to the outcasts (Mt. 22.1-14).
 - 5) Jesus described himself as the Son of Man who would look for faith when he returned (Lk. 18.1-8).
 - b. In the parables, the authority of God the Father is plainly presented.
 - 1) His Word, like good seed, can bear fruit until the end, where it yields a great harvest (Mt. 13.1-9, 18-23; 24-30, 36-43).
 - 2) He commands his servants as he wishes (Lk. 17.7-10) and expects his children to obey (Mt. 21.28-32).
 - 3) He generously provides resources for his servants' use, but expects them to be good stewards (Mt. 25.14-30; Lk. 19.11-27).
 - 4) He has the resources to cover the most extreme of moral debts (Mt. 18.21-35; Lk. 7.36-50).
 - 5) He sent his Son as the final messenger to his people, expecting them to heed his voice, punishing them if they don't (Mt. 21.33-46; Lk. 20.9-18)

B. Why did Jesus use parables?

1. Jesus' explanation of why he used parables relates to his presentation of the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13.1-9; Mk. 4.1-8; Lk. 8.4-8).
 - a. All three accounts start by mentioning the large crowds (Mt. 13.2; Mk. 4.1; Lk. 8.4), which suggests this is a significant point. It was relatively early in his public ministry, and he was followed by enormous numbers of people almost daily. This parable, in some measure, helps explain the varying degrees of reception to his preaching.
 - b. All three accounts end with the same formula: "He who has ears, let him hear," (Mt. 13.9; Mk. 4.9; Lk. 8.8), which also suggests that this is a significant issue. The success of his teaching was dependent upon the willingness of his audiences to listen closely to his words.
2. Later in the text Jesus explains the parable (Mt. 13.18-23; Mk. 4.13-20; Lk. 8.11-15).
 - a. Luke declares at the beginning of the explanation that the seed is "the word of God" (v. 11). Mark simply says it's "the word" (v. 14), and repeats that with each kind of soil. Matthew begins his explanation with "the word of the kingdom" (v. 19), and like Mark, equates the "seed" with the "word" in describing each kind of soil.

- b. If Jesus exhorts his audience to listen and explains that the different soils represent people who hear in different ways or degrees, then it follows that this parable, and indeed all of them (Mk. 4.13), are about genuinely listening to the word of God as given in the teachings of Jesus.
- c. This conclusion is reinforced by the high concentration of words for hearing within the text.
 - 1) Matthew (13.3) and Mark (4.3) both begin the parable with the interjection “Behold!” (*idou* [*ἰδού*]), which means to take note, to pay attention.
 - 2) Each writer ends the parable with the admonition to hear (Mt. 13.9; Mk. 4.9; Lk. 8.8). Mark and Luke have a narrative introduction to the saying, and their choices of verbs imply that Jesus repeatedly uttered this statement.
 - 3) Matthew adds another admonition to hear after explaining the Parables of the Tares and Wheat (13.43). He also has Jesus asking his disciples if they understood his message (13.51).
 - 4) Mark adds another admonition to hear after the saying about the lamp (4.23), which is repeated in a different form in the next verse (4.24). Finally, he summarizes the presentation of Jesus’ parables by saying, “With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it” (4.33).
 - 5) Luke, as with Mark, repeats the admonition to hear following the saying about the lamp (8.18). In the next episode of his narrative, he identifies his family as “these who hear the word of God and do it” (8.21).
 - 6) Finally, the main NT word for hearing is the verb *akouō* (ἀκούω), which occurs 428x. Over half of these uses are in the gospels (235x). Our present texts have a combined 39 references to people hearing the message:
 - a) Mt. 13 (16x): 9, 13 (2x), 14, 15 (2x), 16, 17 (3x), 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 43.
 - b) Mk. 4 (13x): 3, 9 (2x), 12 (2x), 15, 16, 18, 20, 23 (2x), 24, 33.
 - c) Lk. 8 (10x): 8 (2x), 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21.
- 3. Jesus explains his rationale for using parables when questioned by his disciples. Matthew’s account is the fullest (13.10-17), with an additional note near the end of the chapter (13.34-35). Mark (4.10-12, 24-25, 33-34) and Luke (8.9-10, 18) have the essence of Matthew’s explanation, but in shorter, slightly rearranged forms. His answer has several components: (1) His purpose for his followers; (2) his purpose for unbelievers; (3) a contrast between “whoever has... whoever has not”; (4) his connection to Isaiah’s ministry; (5) a beatitude upon his disciples; (6) his connection to Asaph’s ministry.
 - a. *For disciples* (Mt. 13.11a; cf. Mk. 4.11a; Lk. 8.10a), the parables functioned as a way of allowing them to know the mysteries of the kingdom. What had been covered was now being uncovered to those with good and honest hearts. They would understand the nature of the kingdom.
 - b. *For unbelievers* (Mt. 13.11b; cf. Mk. 4.11b; Lk. 8.10a), the same teachings functioned as a way of obscuring the mysteries of the kingdom from them. What had been covered remained covered. Mark and Luke’s statement that the rest had to receive their instruction “in parables” doesn’t mean that the parables were only directed at unbelievers. All of Jesus’ audiences received them, but only believers were equipped to properly understand them. This was at least in part due to the fact that his disciples took the time to ask Jesus what they meant (Mt. 13.11; Mk.

- 4.10; Lk. 8.9), and that Jesus took the time to explain it to them (Mt. 13.51-52; Mk. 4.34).
- c. *For believers and unbelievers* (Mt. 13.12; cf. Mk. 4.25; Lk. 8.18), the consequence of the previous statement is that those with some basic level of understanding would be able to understand more. For those without understanding, they would be even less able to understand in the future.
 - d. *For Jesus himself* (Mt. 13.14-15; cf. Mk. 4.12; Lk. 10b), he understood an affinity between his ministry and that of Isaiah. In quoting Isa. 6.9-10, he takes us to the call of Isaiah by YHWH. When Isaiah accepts his commission, he is told by YHWH to speak to people who were spiritually blind and deaf. He was to continue this until judgment came (v. 11-13). Jesus' ministry was also to the spiritually deaf and blind, and his teachings would bring about judgment upon those who refused. In this, God was acting justly (cf. 2 Th. 2.10-12).
 - 1) Isaiah's use of words for hearing and seeing, deafness and blindness are a consistent theme throughout his prophecy.
 - 2) Negatively, see: 6.10; 30.10f; 29.9f; 42.18-20; 43.8; 44.18; 48.8; 59.10; 64.4; 65.12
 - 3) Positively, see: 29.18; 30.20, 30; 32.3; 33.15; 35.5; 37.17; 38.5; 42.7; 52.15
 - e. *For his disciples* (Mt. 13.16-17; cf. Mk. 4.24), they would be blessed because they took seriously what they saw and heard. In this regard, they were able to apprehend in Christ what previous generations of prophets and righteous people had been unable to apprehend (cf. 1 Pe. 1.10-12).
 - f. *For all followers present and future* (Mt. 13.34-35), his parables laid a foundation for their instruction and spiritual heritage. Matthew cites Psa. 78.1-2, a maskil of Asaph. Psalm 78 is a salvation history psalm, and Asaph (himself a seer, 2 Ch. 29.30) says he employed "parables" and "dark sayings" to get his point across. Jesus employed the same methodology. Asaph says he was not only addressing his contemporaries, but also a wider audience. Blomberg notes that from Mt. 13.35 onward, Jesus increasingly speaks to Gentiles, which in many ways parallels what Asaph was saying and doing. (Blomberg *Matthew*, 48-50)
4. Why did Jesus use parables? In summary:
- a. To reveal the nature of the kingdom to those who were truly listening.
 - b. To obscure the nature of the kingdom to those who were indifferent.
 - c. To further increase the understanding of his followers and further decrease the understanding of his enemies.
 - d. To bring about judgment upon those who refused to hear.
 - e. To bless those who were willing to hear.
 - f. To be able to spread the gospel of the kingdom to a wider audience.

IV. Interpreting the Parables

- A. In some ways, interpreting the parables isn't too different from interpreting other biblical genre and texts. We consider context, grammar, literary forms, cultural background, historical setting, theological principles within the text, greater biblical context, etc.
- B. However, because the parables constitute a unique genre set in the specific context of Jesus' ministry within the Synoptic Gospels, we are wise to look at them in more detail. (Cf. Osborne, 251; Blomberg *Preaching*, 13-31, *Interpreting 2nd Ed.*, 196-407; Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 858-1021; plus, the extensive expositions in Young and Bailey)

C. Interpretive Guidelines:

1. Synoptic Context

- a. Where does this fit into the specific gospel account? How does it continue the narrative? How does it continue the thematic material?
- b. If there are parallel accounts in other Synoptics, what are the similarities and differences in the settings? What are the similarities and differences in the stories themselves? How do the differences affect the meaning and application? (See the excellent example in Crozier, 16-35.)
- c. Parable clusters are commonplace. That is, one writer may group together a sequence of parables centered on the same general theme.
 - 1) Examples:
 - a) Mt. 13: Parables of kingdom growth
 - b) Mt. 25: Parables about judgment
 - c) Lk. 15: Parables about lost things
 - d) Lk. 18: Parables about prayer
 - e) Lk. 14: Parables about feasting
 - f) Lk. 16: Parables about stewardship
 - 2) When clusters like this occur, note the similarities and differences between the parables. Do the similarities outweigh the differences, or vice versa? How does each parable in the cluster contribute to our understanding of the overall theme?

2. Cultural Context

- a. What unfamiliar cultural features of the story warrant further inspection? Is it describing a wedding, feast, or some other social event? Is it describing farming, fishing, vineyards, businesses, marketplaces, money handling? Is it dealing with masters and slaves, rich and poor, religious and irreligious, etc.?
- b. Are we looking at things in the same way as a first century audience?
 - 1) For example, when modern Christians see a reference to Pharisees, we automatically think of a conservative, religious, self-righteous, judgmental, bigoted legalist. That's probably not what first-century Judeans thought. They probably admired him. That kind of bias on our part affects our understanding of the parable.
 - 2) When the lawyer asks what he must do to obtain eternal life, and then turns around and evades the answer (Lk. 10.25ff), we think he's insincere. A first century audience would have held him up as a prominent man in the community, and probably sympathetically agreed with his viewpoint.
- c. Honor and shame elements
 - 1) Honor and shame had to do with how one's peers viewed you. Generally, the higher up the social ladder you were, the greater honor you were given by your peers. If you broke your word or did something scandalous or were upstaged by someone from a lower social group, your peers would look at you differently and you would suffer shame.
 - 2) Several examples of this occur in the parables.

a) In the Parable of the Two Debtors, notice how Jesus turns the tables on everyone by exalting the woman and insulting Simon (Lk. 7.36-50).

b) In the Parable of the Chief Seats (Lk. 14.7-11), some tried to increase their own social status by picking out a seat near the host, only to have it lowered by the host. (Behold, the curse of assigned seating!)

d. Note:

1) Bailey (*Poet & Peasant*, and *Through Peasant Eyes*) offers a lot of cultural insight and commentary on Luke's parables.

2) However, one criticism of Bailey is that he assumes generic Middle Eastern Bedouin culture is the same as ancient Israelite culture. That's not always a sound assumption, in view of the technological advances in the past 150 years throughout the Middle East, and especially in view of the Islamization of the Middle East over the centuries. (See Young, 43, n.3; Long)

3. Grammatical Context

a. Are there any words or phrases that are repeated or emphasized?

b. Are there any unusual features to the grammar or vocabulary?

4. Theological Context

a. Are there OT antecedents or echoes worth exploring? Is the parable dependent upon something from the OT?

b. Before you reach your final conclusions on the teachings of the parable, how do they relate to other portions of the Bible?

c. Jesus' parables have much affinity with rabbinic parables. If so, are there any non-biblical Jewish parables that can offer parallels or insights into the meaning of a biblical parable. (See the expositions in Young; cf. Blomberg Interpreting 2nd Ed., 69-79)

d. What theological motifs are present?

1) Elsewhere in the Bible God may be portrayed as a master, landowner, king, judge, etc. When these occur in the parable how do they represent God?

2) If we're looking at a character who represents God, what aspect of his nature or works is under consideration? His wrath? His mercy? His generosity? His love? His judgments? His resources? His authority?

3) If we're looking at characters who represent God's people, what portrayals are being considered? Slaves? Servants? Friends? Guests? Sons? Workers?

4) If we're looking at characters representing disciples, what theological traits are presented? Faithfulness? Diligence? Stewardship? Mercy? Persistence? Humility? Preparedness?

5. Literary Context

a. Literary form:

1) What kind of parable is it? Is it an allegory? A similitude? A proverb? A riddle? A saying? The kind of parable will determine to an extent how you interpret it.

2) Jesus interpreted only three of his parables: the Sower (Mt. 13.1-9, 18-23; Mk. 4.1-8, 13-20; Lk. 8.4-8, 11-15), the Tares and the Wheat (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43), and the Dragnet (Mt. 13.47-50). In all three of these Jesus interprets them as allegories, or at least as having allegorical elements.

- 3) If Jesus interpreted them allegorically, it suggests that we must at least consider them in that way.
- 4) Also be wary of commentaries that impose anachronistic literary forms upon the parables. As mentioned above (p. 5), they are metaphorical *narratives*. Bailey, for instance, suggests that some should be considered poems or ballads. He routinely lays out the text of the parables as poetry, and even argues that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is a “parabolic ballad”. (Bailey Poet & Peasant, 72-74) Methodologically, it’s unsound to force NT texts into the mold of OT prophecy. (Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, 44-75)

b. Literary structure:

- 1) Since parables are most often in narrative form, we should expect to find classic elements of plot: a setting, a sequence of events, a set of characters, a conflict, and a resolution. In parables, however, the characters are usually the most important feature.
- 2) I very much agree with Blomberg’s proposal that most parables have three main characters, and that most often one is an authority figure who is rendering judgment between two subordinates. He then proposes that a point can or should be made about each main character. (Blomberg Interpreting 2nd Ed., 191)
 - a) In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Mt. 25.31-46), the Son of Man passes judgment favorably on the sheep and unfavorably on the goats.
 - b) In the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk. 15.1-7), the shepherd judges in favor of the lost sheep by going out and looking for it. Yet that doesn’t constitute a judgment against the 99 who are safe.

c. Degree of metaphor:

- 1) Some parables are loaded with symbolism, while some are quite realistic.
- 2) Heavily symbolic parables:
 - a) The Sower (Mt. 13.1-9, 18-23)
 - b) The Tares in the Wheat (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43)
 - c) The Wicked Tenants (Mt. 21.33-40).
- 3) Realistic parables, where the story and characters are as we would expect. They don’t always have a surprise element, or if they do, it’s independent of the characters and their actions.
 - a) The Leaven (Mt. 13.33).
 - b) The Dragnet (Mt. 13.47-50).
 - c) The Two Sons (Mt. 21.28-32).
 - d) The Children in the Marketplace (Mt. 11.16-19).

6. Surprise Elements

- a. Exaggeration sometimes occurs within the parable. These are always significant.
 - 1) The contrasting debts in the Unmerciful Servant (Mt. 18.23-35).
 - 2) The generosity of the vineyard owner (Mt. 20.1-16).
 - 3) The annoying behavior of the neighbor at night (Lk. 11.5-8).

b. Reversal of fortune or expectation also occurs within the parables. Here, someone we expect to be the hero is shamed, while someone we expect to lose out suddenly receives great honor.

- 1) The hopeless widow gets a favorable ruling from a heartless judge (Lk. 18.1-8).
- 2) The tax collector is justified rather than the Pharisee (Lk. 18.9-14).
- 3) The day laborers who worked the least amount of time are paid the same as those who worked all day (Mt. 20.1-16).

7. Parable Endings

- a. While Jesus only interpreted two or three parables, he (or the Evangelists) often added comments at the end. These provide direction to the reader or hearer on how to apply the parable.
- b. Examples (citations are the end verses):
 - 1) The Unmerciful Servant (Mt. 18.35).
 - 2) The Day Laborers (Mt. 20.16).
 - 3) The Two Sons (Mt. 21.31-32).
 - 4) The Wicked Tenants (Mt. 21.40-46).
 - 5) The Marriage of the King's Son (Mt. 22.14).
 - 6) The Two Debtors (Lk. 7.44-50).
 - 7) The Good Samaritan (Lk. 10.36-37).
 - 8) The Rich Fool (Lk. 12.21, plus 22-34).

V. Theology of the Parables

A. I was surprised at how few books about the parables explicitly discuss their theology. Even the authors who did so had relatively little to say (e.g., Lohfink, Kindle Loc., 4357-4554; Young, 26-38; Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, 37-43; Osborne, 233-234). Most authors included theological discussions as part of the expositions of the parable. Blomberg had the most fully developed parable theology (Blomberg, *Interpreting 2nd ed.*, 408-446). In this section, I'll explore various aspects of the kingdom as revealed in and explained by the parables.

B. Background in the gospels:

1. Kingdom imagery in the parables shouldn't surprise us since the theme of the arrival of the messianic kingdom was central to Jesus' ministry and teaching (cf. Mt. 4.17; 5.20; Mk 14.25; Lk. 4.43; 11.20; 22.29; Jn. 18.36).
2. Furthermore, the Synoptic Gospels refer to the kingdom more than all the other portions of the NT combined. (Lohfink, Kindle Loc., 4377)

Biblical Book(s)	#Pages in NA26	<i>Basileia tou theou / Basileia tōn ouranōn</i>	Occurrences per 100 pages
Matthew	87	37	43
Mark	62	14	23
Luke	96	32	33

John	73	2	3
Acts	89	6	7
Pauline corpus	179	9	5
Catholic letters	44	0	0
Revelation	49	1	2

3. Fourteen of the parables employ a “kingdom” introductory formula:

- a. Matthew (10x): 13.24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 18.23; 20.1; 22.2; 25.1
- b. Mark (2x): 4.26; 4.30-31
- c. Luke (2x): 13.18-19; 13.20-21

C. How the parables present the kingdom:

1. From God’s perspective:

- a. God is variously presented as a powerful and wealthy king (Mt. 18.23-35; 22.1-14), a landowner (Mt. 20.1-16; 21.33-46), a wealthy master with slaves (Mt. 25.14-30), a wealthy host (Lk. 14.15-24), and a father (Lk. 15.11-32).
- b. God’s sovereignty is implied by the imagery of him as a master who commands slaves as he wishes (Lk. 17.7-10). His sovereignty permits the coexistence of both good and evil in the present world, which is awaiting his final judgment (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43).
- c. God deals with men on the basis of grace (Mt. 20.1-16). He is also the God who gives mercy to the undeserving (Lk. 18.9-14) and concern to the outcasts (He answers prayer with generosity (Lk. 11.1-9) and with justice (Lk. 18.1-8). He is ready to forgive (Lk. 15.11-32) and expects his people to forgive in like measure (Mt. 18.23-35).
- d. God expects his people to obey (Mt. 21.28-32), to be good stewards (Mt. 25.14-30; Lk. 16.-19), to bear fruit (Mt. 13.3-9, 18-23 pars.; Lk. 13.6-9), to grow according to the demands of the kingdom (Mt. 9.16-17), and to be merciful to others (Lk. 10.30-37).
- e. God will judge mankind based upon their reception or rejection of his word (Mt. 13.3-9, 18-23 pars.), upon their trust in Him (Lk. 12.16-21), upon their works or fruitfulness (Mt. 25.14-30; 31-46; Lk. 13.6-9), and ultimately upon their reception or rejection of his Son (Mt. 21.33-45).

f. Jesus in the parables:

- 1) The most significant studies of the parables clearly reflect the kind of Jesus envisioned by their authors. Herzog writes, “Interpreters vary in the degree to which their paradigms are visible. Jeremias envisions Jesus as a cross between a rabbi and a Christian theologian; Kenneth Bailey believes him to have been a poet and a peasant; John Dominic Crossan, a master of metaphor and poet of the interior apocalypse; Dan Via, a purveyor of existential philosophy through comic and tragic stories; Robert Funk, a poetic philosopher who inaugurated a new language tradition that undermined its ossified predecessor. By turns, Jesus is a poet, philosopher, ethicist, theologian, storyteller in the tradition of Franz Kafka or Jorge Luis

Borges, “Christian” rabbi, Jewish rabbi, Lutheran theologian, preacher, and Christian minister in disguise.” (Herzog Kindle Loc., 309-314)

- 2) The parables point to Jesus’ unique place in the kingdom. John speaks of Jesus as the incarnate Word (1.1, 14) who is the perfect manifestation of the Father (1.14, 18; 14.8-13). The Synoptic parables present Jesus in more oblique ways:

- a) Jesus is the one upon whom men build their eternal houses (Mt. 7.24-27).
- b) Jesus is the sower of good seed in the world, as opposed to Satan who sows tares (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43).
- c) Jesus is the bridegroom who closes the door upon the unprepared (Mt. 25.1-13).
- d) Jesus is the vineyard owner’s son who is rejected and killed by the tenants, which leads to their judgment (Mt. 20.33-45).
- e) Jesus is the king’s son whose wedding feast is ignored by the invitees, resulting in their destruction and further invitations given to the outcasts (Mt. 22.1-14).
- f) Jesus is the Son of Man who returns to judge all mankind (Mt. 25.31-46) and to bring about final justice (Lk. 18.1-8)

2. From a Disciple’s perspective:

- a. The kingdom should be the highest priority in one’s life (Mt. 6.33) and is worthy any sacrifice that could be made to find it (Mt. 13.44-46). This includes a willingness to leave family to follow Jesus (Lk. 9.57-62; 14.25-35).
- b. When a person with a good heart takes in the seed of the word, he becomes a kingdom citizen (Mt. 13.3-9, 18-23 pars.). He is expected to continue to bear fruit (v. 8, 23), which includes obedience (Mt. 21.28-32), a particular kind of character (Mt. 5.3-11), mercy toward others (Mt. 18.23-35), and good deeds (Lk. 10.30-37).
- c. Kingdom citizens have a keen awareness of their unworthiness (Lk. 17.7-10), realize the greatness of their forgiveness (Lk. 7.41-47), and don’t overestimate their position (Lk. 14.7-11). They’re vigilant in prayer (Lk. 11.1-9; 18.1-8), understanding their reliance upon God’s goodness and justice. They also have a proper sense of self in relationship to others (Lk. 18.9-14).
- d. Kingdom citizens are good stewards of their possessions (Mt. 25.14-30; Lk. 16.1-9), yet they don’t trust in them (Lk. 12.16-21).
- e. Kingdom citizens live in a world surrounded by evil, yet live distinctive lives, persevering until Christ’s return (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43). They vigilantly watch for his return (Mt. 25.1-13). When Jesus returns, a disciple’s works will be judged against the standard of God’s word (Mt. 7.24-27; 25.31-46).

3. From the Unbeliever’s perspective:

- a. As in the Parable of the Sower, there are some like the roadside soil who never accept the Word in any way. There are also some like the thorny and rocky soil who receive the word but never mature and bear fruit. In this section, I treat these as unbelievers, whether in reference to those who never believed, or those who believed but fell away.

- b. Just as disciples heed the words of Christ, unbelievers disregard them (Mt. 7.24-27; 13.3-9, 18-23; pars.). Just as true disciples have the seed of God's word planted in their hearts, unbelievers are the product of Satan's efforts (Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43).
 - c. They are ungrateful (Lk. 7.41-47), unforgiving (Mt. 18.23-35), self-righteous (Lk. 18.9-14), unmerciful (Lk. 10.30-37).
 - d. In respect to their final judgment, they're unfruitful (Mt. 24.32), unprepared (Mt. 24.45-51; 25.1-13), and are lacking in good works (Mt. 25.31-46). They've excused themselves into damnation (Lk. 14.15-24). Their ultimate failure was their refusal to obey the Father (Mt. 21.28-32).
4. From Israel's perspective:
- a. Most parables are intended to be applied personally by each disciple of Jesus.
 - b. However, there are a few parables that appear to be directed at the nation of Israel, highlighting her failure to accept God's Messiah. The rejection of Jesus by the nation didn't, however, preclude individual Israelites from accepting Him. (Snodgrass Kindle Loc., 5908-7437)
 - c. Parables that may refer to Israel include:
 - 1) The Two Sons (Mt. 21.28-32).
 - 2) The Wicked Tenants (Mt. 21.33-45 pars.).
 - 3) The Marriage of the King's Son (Mt. 22.1-14).
 - 4) The Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13.6-9; cf. Mt. 21.19ff; 24.32f).
 - 5) The Great Supper (Lk. 14.15-24 pars.).

VI. Using the Parables

A. Using the Parables in Teaching & Preaching

1. The parables are an especially tempting portion of Scripture for teachers and preachers for many reasons (most of which aren't very good reasons!):
 - a. They're short.
 - b. They're picturesque.
 - c. They're in the NT.
 - d. They're in the gospels.
 - e. They're simple stories.
 - f. They're easy to apply.
 - g. There's a workbook available.

h. However, be warned: "Preaching a parable is a novice preacher's dream but often an experienced preacher's nightmare." (Thomas O. Long, quoted in Blomberg, *Preaching*, 13)
2. If the purpose of the parables was to find out who was really listening to Jesus, it demands even more so of us who would teach and preach (Jas. 3.1ff). To teach others, we must first be good listeners and good practitioners of what we teach.
3. To effectively teach or preach the parables requires that we help the audience or students think culturally, literarily, theologically, and practically:
 - a. Culturally, help them understand the cultural setting of the parables.

- b. Literarily, help them identify the main characters in the stories and how the characters relate to one another. Help them understand the surprise elements and reversals in the parables. Help them understand the structure of the stories.
- c. Theologically, help them see how God presents himself in the parables. Help them see how Jesus presents himself. Help them understand what these stories say about the reign and character of God.
- d. Practically, help them see how we live out the demands of the parables. What does it mean to “go and do the same”?

B. Using the Parables as Disciples

1. As we've seen, the parables are about listening to the words of Jesus (Mt. 13.9) and about putting those teachings into practice (Lk. 10.37).
2. As we think about applying these stories, think about how we respond to other people other things, and other circumstances:
 - a. How does this parable help me respond to God (as a master, as a Father, as a judge, as a host, etc.)? To his grace, his forgiveness, his commands, his goodness, his judgments, his gifts, his warnings, etc.?
 - b. How does this parable help me respond to Christ (as Lord, as a judge, as God's Son, as the bridegroom, etc.)?
 - c. How does this parable help me respond to my fellow man? With compassion? With love? With grace and forgiveness? With generosity? With faithfulness? With acceptance?
 - d. How does this parable help me respond to my fellow Christians? With love? With suspicion? With condemnation? With joy? With forgiveness and reconciliation? With acceptance?
 - e. How does this parable help me respond to material possessions? With good stewardship? With generosity in how I use them? With gratitude? With wisdom? With the right priorities?

Conclusion:

“HE HEARD WHAT HE WANTED TO HEAR”

Reggie Lewis (1965-1993) played six seasons for the Boston Celtics and had developed into one of their most promising younger players.

In April 1983, he collapsed during a game against the Charlotte Hornets and was diagnosed with “focal cardiomyopathy”, a disease of the heart muscle that can cause irregular heartbeat and heart failure. Lewis was told his condition was most likely career-ending. Not satisfied with that diagnosis, he later sought a second opinion from Dr. Gilbert Mudge, who diagnosed Lewis with neurocardiogenic syncope, a less serious, non-fatal condition instead. Lewis then began working out, planning to return for the 1994 season, although he hadn't been cleared to play.

On July 27, 1993, during off-season practice at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, Lewis suffered sudden cardiac death on the basketball court at the age of 27 years old. His death was attributed to hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a structural heart defect that's the most common cause of death in young athletes.

Ironically, his wife later sued his second doctor, Dr. Mudge, for malpractice. He was cleared of any wrongdoing, and he insisted he had never authorized Lewis to resume workouts.

It appears that neither Lewis nor his wife really wanted to hear the truth about his health. They heard what they wanted to hear. It had tragic consequences.

In the parables, Jesus has confronted mankind with the hard truths of the kingdom. Despite their subtlety, they tend to bulldoze our misconceptions and dishonesty. Do we really want to know the truth about the kingdom and about ourselves? Will we hear only what we want to hear? Do we hear the voice of Jesus, or something less?

May God grant us ears to hear his Son.

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Appendix A
A List of Jesus' Longer Parables

Texts include only the parable proper without contextual introductions, explanations, or applications.

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Parables in Matthew, Mark & Luke			
1. Bridegroom's attendants	9.15	2.19-20	5.34-35
2. Patches on old garments	9.16	2.21	5.36
3. New wine in old wineskins	9.17	2.22	5.37-38
4. Sower	13.3-9	4.3-8	8.5-8
5. Mustard seed	13.31-32	4.30-32	13.18-19
6. Wicked tenants	21.33-40	12.1-9	20.9-16
7. Fig Tree	24.32-33	13.28-29	21.29-30
Parables in Matthew & Luke			
8. Builders	7.24-27		6.47-49
9. Children in marketplace	11.16-17		7.31-32
10. Leaven	13.33		13.20-21
11. Lost sheep	18.12-14		15.3-7
12. Wise steward	24.45-51		12.42-48
Parables in Matthew Only			
13. Tares	13.24-30		
14. Hidden treasure	13.44		
15. Great pearl	13.45-46		
16. Dragnet	13.47-50		
17. Householder	13.52		
18. Unmerciful servant	18.23-35		
19. Day laborers	20.1-16		
20. Two sons	21.28-30		
21. Marriage of the king's son	22.1-14		
22. Ten virgins	25.1-13		
23. Talents	25.14-30		

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
24. Sheep & goats	25.31-46		
Parables in Mark Only			
25. Seed growing secretly		4.26-29	
26. Doorkeeper on watch		13.34-37	
Parables in Luke Only			
27. New wine			5.39
28. Two debtors			7.41-42
29. Good Samaritan			10.30-36
30. Friend at midnight			11.5-8
31. Fish & egg			11.11-12
32. Rich fool			12.16-21
33. Watchful servants			12.35-38
34. Barren fig tree			13.6-9
35. Chief seats			14.8-11
36. Feast for the poor			14.12-14
37. Great supper			14.16-24
38. Tower			14.28-30
39. King			14.31-33
40. Lost coin			15.8-10
41. Lost son			15.11-32
42. Dishonest steward			16.1-8
43. Rich man & Lazarus			16.19-31
44. Master & servants			17.7-10
45. Persistent widow			18.2-5
46. Pharisee & tax collector			18.10-14
47. Pounds			19.12-27

Appendix B
Parable Length (by NASB95 Wordcount)

This list includes parables in Matthew & Luke without considering parallels. It also includes the evangelists' introductions and contextual comments in addition to the parables themselves. In columns 3-5, the top number is the wordcount and the bottom number is the verse count.

Parable	Text	Intro (# Verses)	Body (# Verses)	Commentary/ Conclusion (# Verses)	Total (# Verses)
Builders	Mt. 7.24-27	—	107 (4)	—	107 (4)
Bridegroom's attendants	Mt. 9.14-15	22 (1)	40 (1)	—	62 (2)
Patches on old garments	Mt. 9.16	—	26 (1)	—	26 (1)
New wine in old wineskins	Mt. 9.17	—	35 (1)	—	35 (1)
Children in marketplace	Mt. 11.16-19	—	46 (2)	46 (2)	92 (4)
Sower	Mt. 13.1-9, 18-23	48 (2.5)	108 (6.5)	172 (6)	328 (15)
Tares	Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43	7 (0.5)	162 (6.5)	185 (8)	354 (15)
Mustard seed	Mt. 13.31-32	7 (0.5)	57 (1.5)	—	64 (2)
Leaven	Mt. 13.33	6 (0.5)	23 (0.5)	—	29 (1)
Hidden treasure	Mt. 13.44	—	36 (1)	—	36 (1)
Great pearl	Mt. 13.45-46	—	31 (2)	—	31 (2)
Dragnet	Mt. 13.47-50	—	92 (2)	—	92 (2)
Householder	Mt. 13.51-52	16 (1.5)	30 (0.5)	—	46 (2)
Unmerciful servant	Mt. 18.21-35	44 (2)	275 (12)	22 (1)	341 (15)
Day laborers	Mt. 20.1-16	—	313 (15)	10 (1)	323 (16)

Parable	Text	Intro (# Verses)	Body (# Verses)	Commentary/ Conclusion (# Verses)	Total (# Verses)
Two sons	Mt. 21.28-32	5 (0.5)	55 (2.5)	78 (2)	138 (5)
Wicked tenants	Mt. 21.33-46	4 (0.5)	184 (7.5)	120 (6)	308 (14)
Marriage of the king's son	Mt. 22.1-14	8 (1)	264 (12)	8 (1)	280 (14)
Fig Tree	Mt. 24.32-35	8 (0.5)	18 (0.5)	48 (3)	74 (4)
Wise steward	Mt. 24.42-51	83 (3)	136 (7)	—	219 (10)
Ten virgins	Mt. 25.1-13	—	194 (12)	15 (1)	209 (13)
Talents	Mt. 25.14-30	—	424 (17)	—	424 (17)
Sheep & goats	Mt. 25.31-46	—	392 (16)	—	392 (16)
New wine	Lk. 5.39	—	18 (1)	—	18 (1)
Two debtors	Lk. 7.36-50	153 (5)	54 (3)	148 (7)	355 (10)
Good Samaritan	Lk. 10.25-37	101 (5)	159 (6)	41 (2)	301 (13)
Friend at midnight	Lk. 11.1-13	80 (4)	116 (4)	119 (5)	315 (13)
Rich fool	Lk. 12.13-21	71 (3.5)	111 (4.5)	16 (1)	198 (12)
Watchful servants	Lk. 12.35-40	9 (1)	125 (4)	19 (1)	153 (6)
Barren fig tree	Lk. 13.6-9	6 (0.5)	98 (3.5)	—	104 (4)
Chief seats	Lk. 14.7-11	29 (1)	106 (3)	16 (1)	151 (5)
Great supper	Lk. 14.15-24	35 (1.5)	215 (8.5)	—	250 (10)

Parable	Text	Intro (# Verses)	Body (# Verses)	Commentary/ Conclusion (# Verses)	Total (# Verses)
Building a tower	Lk. 14.28-30	—	63 (3)	—	63 (3)
King at war	Lk. 14.31-33	—	58 (2)	18 (1)	76 (3)
Lost sheep	Lk. 15.1-7	34 (3)	84 (3)	29 (1)	147 (7)
Lost coin	Lk. 15.8-10	—	55 (2)	23 (1)	78 (3)
Lost son	Lk. 15.11-32	—	525 (22)	—	525 (22)
Dishonest steward	Lk. 16.1-13	8 (0.5)	208 (7.5)	138 (5)	354 (13)
Rich man & Lazarus	Lk. 16.19-31	—	314 (13)	—	314 (13)
Master & servants	Lk. 17.7-10	—	77 (3)	29 (1)	106 (4)
Persistent widow	Lk. 18.1-8	23 (1)	82 (4)	60 (3)	165 (8)
Pharisee & tax collector	Lk. 18.9-14	22 (1)	91 (4)	30 (1)	143 (6)
Pounds	Lk. 19.11-27	32 (1)	353 (16)	—	385 (17)

Appendix C

The Parable of the Pediatrician and the Pornographer

In a certain city there were two men who were guilty of the same crime. Each was charged with and put on trial for vehicular manslaughter: a prominent, much-loved pediatrician and a porn-shop owner. Each ran a stoplight in early morning, hit another car and killed its driver.

Now the pediatrician was coming home late one night from a fund raiser, and was a bit drowsy, and ran a red light. He t-boned another car and killed its driver, an older woman who was driving to an all-night pharmacy to get a prescription for her ailing husband.

The pediatrician's trial was highly publicized. During the trial, the pediatrician sat calmly with a certain serenity and aloofness. He presented his own closing arguments, and said:

Ladies & gentlemen: Thank you for your patience throughout this long and tedious trial. I've spent my life in this community and tried to be a force for good. My roots in this city go back three generations. I've raised my family here. My children and grandchildren live, work and worship among you. I've treated thousands of your own children. I've never charged anyone who

couldn't afford it. I speak regularly to the young people in our town. I tell them to finish school, be active in the community, go to church. I warn them to avoid drugs and alcohol and tobacco. I don't want them living pointless, wasted lives. I don't want them ending up as prostitutes, or drug dealers, or porn peddlers! I don't want to see your children influenced by people like that! I hope that one careless moment won't erase a lifetime of good. I trust your verdict will be fair.

The next week, the same jury heard the case of the porn-shop owner. The pornographer was on his way home at 3:00 A.M., when he ran a red light, and struck a car being driven by a 15-yr-old boy. The boy had "borrowed" his older brother's car and was returning home after renting adult movies at the porn peddler's shop. He had alcohol and marijuana in his bloodstream, and a fake ID in his wallet.

During his trial, the pornographer cried the whole time. He rarely looked up, tears were constantly streaming down his face, and he frequently sobbed loudly. He repeatedly cried out, "What have I done? What have I done?" He likewise spoke at the end of his trial. He stood as far away from everyone as possible, and never looked up. He said:

I'm sorry for what I did. I know I'm going to prison where I belong. I deserve nothing and I ask for nothing. I've wasted my whole life and haven't done anything good. I sold trash to people because the money was good. But I killed a boy I sold pornography to. I'm ashamed of what I've done. I know God will judge me and I don't really expect forgiveness from him or you. I know I don't deserve it. All I can say is that someday maybe you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. I'm sorry! I'm so very sorry!

Question: had you been on that jury, what verdict would you have rendered for each man?

He who has ears to hear, let him hear the parable of the pediatrician & the pornographer.

(See the notes on the next page)

Notes:

1. My inspiration for this “parable” was from an article by James-Michael Smith on the *Methodist Examiner* website. See the bibliography for details.
2. One of the difficult challenges with parables is helping the modern reader or audience hear the parable in the same way as a first-century audience. I think it’s an especially difficult issue with Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18.9-14).
3. For modern audiences, the moment we hear the word “Pharisee,” we immediately picture an ancient, religiously conservative, self-righteous, legalistic bigot. However, I’m not convinced that Jesus’ original audience would have viewed Pharisees in the same way. From my studies, I’m convinced that a first-century audience would have viewed the Pharisee in a more favorable way, like the pediatrician in the modern parable. Both are respected figures, both point to their long history of good works, and both point to the differences between themselves and others in their respective communities.
4. I use this modern parable as a sermon introduction to Luke’s parable as a way of keeping my audience off-guard. I don’t announce the subject or text ahead of time, and I go straight into the modern parable.
5. In terms of application, I end my sermon with this: What if Jesus spoke this parable today? What if he said it in this way?
 - a. Two men led opening & closing prayers at the Sunday morning worship service at the So-And-So Church of Christ.

The opening prayer was by an elder of the church, and he said, “I thank you that we’re not like those denominations, or those liberals, or those atheists, or those tree huggers, or those Democrats. We take the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week; we use the Lord’s money only in ways that are authorized; we speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent; we don’t use pianos in worship.”

The closing prayer was led by a husband who was struggling with pornography, who stuttered and said, “God be merciful. We need help. Amen.”

- b. And suppose Jesus said that the last man was justified before the first one.
- c. Or instead of the first prayer being led by an elder, suppose the parable had a gospel preacher, or a deacon, or a Bible class teacher?
- d. Or instead of the second prayer being led a husband struggling with pornography, suppose the parable had a teenager struggling with drinking, or a man struggling with homosexual desires?
6. Please understand that Jesus wasn’t condemning the Pharisee’s good works, nor was he approving the tax collector’s sinful life. He was pointing to a fundamental awareness (or lack of awareness) that each man had about his need for God’s mercy.

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