



PARABLES OF JESUS

Bible Study



PARABLES OF JESUS

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Rose Visual Bible Studies

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He never taught without using parables.

Mark 4:34

Parables of Jesus

Here is a quick quiz for you: *How many parables of Jesus are recorded in the New Testament? Your choices: (a) 33, (b) 37, (c) 39, (d) 59, (e) 71, or (f) 79.*

If you chose any of these answers, you're probably correct, since there is no single, unifying description of exactly what a parable is. With so many definitions in play, teachers have applied a wide range of meanings, from the simple to the complex. For instance,

- “A pithy saying” or “extended story” that “teaches a spiritual lesson by illustrating the point with images from everyday life”¹
- “An expanded analogy”²
- “Proverb,” “picturesque and suggestive speech,” “figurative discourse,” “allegory,” and “wayside saying.”³

Well, you get the idea. And while it may be true that we don't know exactly *what* a parable is, and we can't say for sure *how many* parables Jesus taught, here is what we do know:

1. The original Greek word implies a comparison. The word used in the New Testament is *parabole*, which is comprised of two words: *para*, meaning “beside,” and *ballo*, “to cast.” Thus, a parable is a comparison

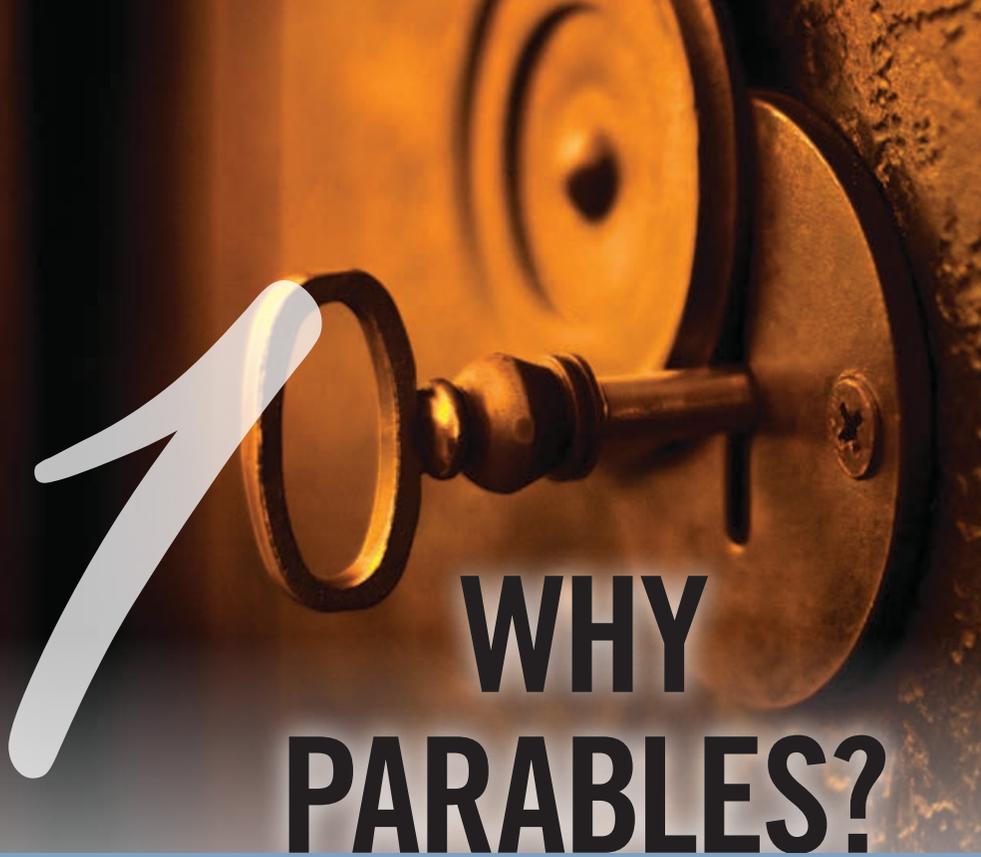
between two things by *casting* (setting) one thing *beside* another. This is most likely why Jesus often began a parable with a comparison statement such as “The Kingdom of Heaven *is like* ...”

2. Jesus didn’t invent the parable. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus used an already-popular form of teaching when he spoke in parables. Others who taught in parables include Plato and Aristotle and the Old Testament prophets Nathan and Isaiah (2 Sam. 12:1–25; Isa. 5:1–7). Even Jewish rabbis living prior to and during the lifetime of Jesus taught using parables.

3. Jesus’s parables are often grouped into specific categories.

In this study, we’ll dig into key parables within five categories: (1) God’s nature, (2) judgment, (3) redemption, (4) right living, and (5) God’s kingdom. But note that often a parable can overlap several categories. For example, the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3–7) is categorized as a parable of redemption in session 4, but it also clearly reveals God’s nature.

To begin our study, let’s consider the question, *Why did Jesus choose parables as his primary method for communicating truth to our world?* For the answer, turn the page and dive into session 1: “Why Parables?”



WHY PARABLES?

*The Disciples
Question Jesus*

Why Parables?



One thing that is appealing about Jesus's disciples is that they tended to ask Jesus questions that we might be too afraid to ask God ourselves. In Matthew 13:1–9, Jesus tells a large crowd of people his now-famous Parable of the Farmer Scattering Seed (often called the Parable of the Sower) ... and the disciples don't get it.

Confused, the disciples ask Jesus privately, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?" (Matt. 13:10). Jesus's answer is a little surprising: "This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that says, 'When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend'" (Matt. 13:14).

Was Jesus deliberately trying to confuse his hearers and hide the truth of God from them? That would seem unexpected and confusing. In this session, then, let's take some time to explore this Matthew 13 moment a little more deeply.



Read It

Key Bible Passage

For this session, read Matthew 13:10–17.

Optional Reading

Explore Mark 4:10–12 and Luke 8:9–10 to see how the other Gospel writers described this same moment in history.

Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

MATTHEW 13:16





Know It

1. What does Jesus say are the consequences for those who listen to his teachings and for those who do not?
 - Consequences for those who listen: _____

 - Consequences for those who don't listen: _____

2. What are some reasons why people may choose not to listen?

3. If you had been present when Jesus explained his purpose for parables, what follow-up questions would you have wanted to ask?



Explore It

Key Words from Matthew 13:10–17

ENGLISH WORD (NLT)	GREEK ROOT WORD	MEANING
“permitted” (v. 11)	<i>didomi</i>	To grant, or to bestow as a gift; to give one something, to his advantage
“secrets” (v. 11)	<i>musterion</i>	Mysteries, as in “some element of God’s plan which was not revealed in the Old Testament, but which is revealed in the New” ⁴
“hear” (vv. 13–17)	<i>akouo</i>	Emphasizes the act of hearing, as well as analyzing and implementing what was heard
“understand” (vv. 13–15)	<i>sunimi</i>	To put together mentally; to comprehend and be wise, with the implication of acting well as a result
“hardened” (v. 15)	<i>pachuno</i>	To make thick; to fatten; to dull

The Shift to Parables

Up to this point in his ministry, Jesus had most often spoken plainly about his purpose and the things of heaven. His exorcisms and miracles of healing and provision were also straightforward in communicating his identity as the Jewish Messiah and Son of God. Then, rather suddenly, he switched his teaching methodology by placing heavy emphasis on ambiguous stories—parables that he never explained to his wider audiences, and only rarely to his inner circle of disciples. The shift was important enough that three of the four Gospel writers recorded the moment for history, and it was apparently dramatic enough for Christ’s disciples to notice it—and to question it: “Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?” (Matt. 13:10). Jesus answered, “*You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not*” (Matt. 13:11). This is the beginning of what is known as a “hard saying” of Jesus—something he said that is difficult to accept or seems at odds with other tenets of Scripture. In slightly varied forms, the full hard saying is recorded in Matthew 13:10–17, Mark 4:10–12, and Luke 8:9–10.



Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea (James Tissot, c. 1886–96)

Views on Jesus's Saying about Parables

Why, you may wonder, would Jesus ever want to deliberately hide truth from the thousands of people who gathered to hear him? After all, the common view is that Christ used parables to make it *easier* to understand him—not harder. Today, there are three main opinions about Matthew 13:11.

1. Jesus never made this statement.

Some theologians believe the Gospel writers invented this saying of Jesus because they simply couldn't understand his teaching, or they were manufacturing a reason to explain why the Jewish religious leaders refused to believe in Jesus. Others suggest the writers made an error in grammar usage or in understanding their own Aramaic language. For these theologians, to believe otherwise seems absurd because they doubt Jesus would deliberately hide truth from anybody.

2. Jesus was describing the inevitable.

This is probably the most popular view among evangelical theologians. It says that Jesus was speaking about what God already knew would happen. Since the religious leaders had not believed in Jesus, he knew it would be impossible for them to understand his teachings. Along these lines, theologian Larry Richards suggests that the religious leaders and crowds of that time had already heard the plain truth about Jesus and refused to believe, so Christ was now leaving them to their unbelief. Richards says, "Jesus began to speak in parables only when it was too late for that first-century generation to turn and find forgiveness."⁵

3. Jesus's statement means exactly what it says.

This is a common perspective among more conservative theologians, both evangelical and mainstream. In this view, some people are enabled by God to receive "the secrets of the Kingdom." Others, by God's sovereign choice, are not. In support of this, they point to similar statements by Jesus in other contexts—for instance,

Matthew 11:25–26; Luke 10:21–22; 19:41–42; and John 12:39–40. Jesus spoke in parables, Millard Erickson explains, because his disciples “were not as spiritually incapacitated as were the other hearers.... It was a special action of God that made the difference between the disciples and the spiritually blind and deaf.”⁶

All these viewpoints have been strongly defended in academic settings. Yet as New Testament scholar Timothy Paul Jones points out, “There is a paradox here that we can’t solve: God makes people able to see the beauties of Jesus, and yet there is an authentic human response. Both are wholly true, and neither can be ignored.”⁷

Perhaps we can never fully understand the reasoning Jesus gave for teaching in parables—something that is God’s privilege anyway. However, we can focus on the fact that, thanks to the Gospel writers and the testimony of Scripture as a whole, we’ve been counted among God’s insiders to his “secrets of the Kingdom.” For whatever reason, we’ve been freely given that which the multitudes in Jesus’s time were not: unobstructed access and insight into the many parables of Christ.

There is a paradox here that we can’t solve: God makes people able to see the beauties of Jesus, and yet there is an authentic human response. Both are wholly true, and neither can be ignored.

—TIMOTHY PAUL JONES



Live It

It can be unsettling to read the hard sayings of Jesus, like this one in Matthew 13:10–17. Our first instinct is often to reject them, rationalize them, ignore them, or explain them away. It's also sometimes difficult to determine when Christ's statements are universal in nature (meaning they apply to everyone for all time) and when they were intended only for the time and place in which he spoke them. How do we handle this confusion?

As people of faith, we must be willing at times to lay aside our need to fully understand everything and accept what the Spirit of God may or may not choose to reveal to us in our daily lives. This is particularly true when we try to uncover why Jesus taught in parables.

We can see and understand (and argue about) abstract theologies only to a point, since we are capable only of seeing “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). But we don't always have to understand the “why” behind God's actions; we can choose instead to focus on our response to his actions. The fact is, Jesus taught in parables, and by God's grace we have the insider's view into these powerful stories. What a privilege!

Life Application Questions

1. Although Jesus's disciples were “permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt. 13:11), they often didn't understand what Jesus was doing or saying. In what ways can you relate?

5. Tomorrow, amid the busyness of your day, what key points do you hope to remember from today's session on Matthew 13:10–17?

Living Outside the Book

Now it's time to take your study outside of this book and into your daily life. Try this: *On one of your social media platforms, post the passage for Matthew 13:10–17 and ask, "What are your thoughts on this?"*

Observe who answers and how they respond. Don't try to argue a point of view or "correct" what you might see as someone's bad theology. And don't post your own thoughts unless someone specifically asks for them. Simply solicit opinions and be sure to graciously thank everyone for sharing their thoughts.

Afterward, take the responses to Jesus in prayer, asking him to show you what can be learned from the insights and opinions of your social media connections.