

The Parables of Jesus – Introduction (Week 1)

Last fall, Pastor Steve did an excellent class on how to study the Bible. In that class, he laid an incredibly important foundation that we will stand on again in this class, as we do whenever we study the Word.

God desires to reveal himself to mankind. He desires to be known. Passage after passage, verse after verse—it's all oriented toward the great I Am, Yahweh, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, sharing explicitly and directly as well as through His providence over Israel, the Church, and the whole world who He is, what His character and nature is, and what His plan for us is.

Why do we tell anybody anything? We want them to know it. That is the nature of communication. And so, God tells us in His Word who He is because He wants us to know it.

And as Bill Morrison will show us over the next several Wednesday nights, in addition to who God is, He wants us to know something else. His self-revelation is anchored and wrapped around a key message and theme.

He wants to be known, and He wants His purposes to be known.

Hosea 6:6

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, **the knowledge of God** rather than burnt offerings.

Jeremiah 31:33-34

³³For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' **for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest**, declares the Lord.

Eph 1:16-17

¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him**,

The Bible is filled with story after story of who God is. Long passages in which He makes Himself, His character, His plans, His power, His love, His mercy, His grace, His immutability, His faithfulness, His trustworthiness, His glory known. He communicated these things. In words. That were recorded. **Because He wants who He is, what He loves, and what He is doing to be known.**

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). "Grasping God's Word." Wednesday night discipleship course.

2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.

3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.

4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.

Imagine if the Lord had said all these things but not preserved them for the generations to come. Imagine if it had all been lost to time and from memory! Instead, He preserved His self-revelation, in the written word, so that “the sacred writings [may] make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God... ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete....” (2 Tim 3:15–17). For, “this is eternal life, that they know [Yahweh]” (John 17:3)

Question:

If the Lord of all, who created mankind, gave us speech, and designed us to communicate according to human language...if that Lord wanted us to know something, how would He most likely share it?

The cornerstone of Pastor Steve’s lessons on how to study the Bible was this:¹

The Bible is of course written and communicated through human language. That’s something we take for granted but think on this a little more with me. God as Creator is the author of language and communication.

Humans made in the image of God have the ability to communicate with God and other people through language. When God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden, He was immediately understood by them. Language is the primary way God has chosen to communicate truth about Himself to men.

So, this means that we need to take language and the interpretation of language seriously if we truly wish to know God through His Word. It isn’t something to be taken for granted.

As will pertain to understanding Jesus’ parables, Pastor Steve made several key points about Biblical interpretation/study:¹

The Author controls the meaning, not the reader. Our job is to discover the intended meaning, and not to create our own meaning.

Genre in biblical hermeneutics is critically important because it guides how a passage should be read and interpreted. Different genres, such as historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, gospel, or apocalyptic literature, each have their own rules for interpretation. Recognizing the genre helps avoid misreading the text, such as taking poetic or symbolic language literally or misunderstanding the purpose of a narrative.

The reason he made these points was because if we truly want to understand what God preserved His self-revelation in order for us to understand, we need to use the rules of the various genres of human communication (under the grammatical-historical approach) to

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). “Grasping God’s Word.” Wednesday night discipleship course.

2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.

3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.

4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.

understand the story God is telling us as he reveals His purpose and redemptive plan (Redemptive-Historical framework).

For reference:¹

Grammatical-Historical: This approach interprets the Bible according to the plain, ordinary meaning of the text, considering grammar, syntax, and historical context. It seeks to understand the original intent of the author for the original audience.

Redemptive-Historical: The Bible is a unified story of God's redemptive plan through history, especially centered on Jesus Christ. It interprets individual texts in light of the whole biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

And so keeping this in mind (God, wanting to reveal himself to us, uses human language according to the rules or realities of human language), we're going to look at the parables of Jesus.

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). "Grasping God's Word." Wednesday night discipleship course.
2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.
3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.
4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.

Why did Jesus use parables?

Matthew 13:10-17

Matthew 13:34-35

Consider: Is there any reason to believe that those purposes and effects were limited to the listeners of his day rather than also including readers today?

What is a parable and how is it used?

Parable: a literary device—specifically an extended simile. (“Such and such is like such and so.”)

Use: The meaning of the word gives a hint. *Parabolē* from Gk. *para* (at/by (the side of), beside, near, with,) and *ballō* (throw).² That is, a parable is something thrown alongside the message.³ In the Bible, the term *parable* is most often given to a short story (such as “The Pearl of Great Price”), but sometimes it is even shorter. It can also refer to a proverb (“If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” -Matt. 15:14) or a similitude (“People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars” – Luke 6:44).³

Key 1:⁴ A parable’s details must be treated differently than a narrative’s details.

Though a parable is often in the form of a story, it is distinct from a historical narrative. While one can ask of a narrative such questions as, “Why did Laban deceive Jacob into marrying Leah?” or “Why was Jonah willing to flee from God in order to stay away from Nineveh, and why did he spend three days in the belly of a great fish?” one cannot ask of the parable of the Prodigal Son, “Why did the father see his younger son from a far distance, and how did the older brother respond to his father?” The answer to these questions is “because Jesus wanted him to be spotted from a long way off and the older brother didn’t respond in any way because Jesus didn’t make him.”

Because the story is thrown alongside the teaching to illustrate the particular point the teacher was making. This is another way of saying, “Context is King.”¹

Key 2: Parables teach a primary point.

Parables are like fables in that they are stories intended to convey a primary point. Fables typically use elements that are less-true-to-life (geese laying golden eggs and turtles racing rabbits), whereas parables tend to use elements that are much more common and relatable to the intended audience. But in both cases, they are stories that compare two dissimilar things (the story and a spiritual reality) to teach a primary point.

Parables are distinct from allegories. Allegories place a high importance on many small objects and details, using many features to, all together, teach a detailed reality or more complex set of

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). “Grasping God’s Word.” Wednesday night discipleship course.

2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.

3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.

4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.

truths. Examples from “secular” literature include *Animal Farm*, *Moby Dick*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Pilgrims Progress*.

Conservative Bible scholars today broadly consider the use of allegory in scripture to be rather limited but to include the story of Sarah and Hagar (Paul says this was an *allēgōrēō* in Galatians 4:24), Ezekiel’s “eagles and the vine” (Ezek. 17) and “Oholah and Oholibah” (Ezek. 23), and by some definitions Hosea 1-3.

Would the meaning of the parable [of the Good Samaritan] change if the inn-keeper had been given three denarii rather than two? No doubt if he had, the allegorical method of interpretation would have seen in this a clear reference to the Trinity, but the meaning of the parable would not have changed. These details were added to the parable in order to provide local color and interest, but they do not carry with them a corresponding reality. These additional details do not make a parable into an allegory.⁴

While Christian teachers of the past have found significance and meaning in many of the details (see Augustine’s interpretation of the Good Samaritan), this approach has a few major drawbacks.⁴

1. The listeners of the day (pharisees, teachers, and disciples) would not have understood the parables in this way, and the parables were given *to them*. Christ is using human language to communicate to humans.
2. The limiting principle in this method of interpretation is the imagination of the interpreter.
3. This isn’t how comparisons (similes and metaphors) work.

If someone were to ask the question, “What is God like?” I might reply, “God is like a loving Father who ...” In so doing I would have a basic point of comparison in mind. If someone, however, then asked, “Well then who is God’s wife?” this would illegitimately press the point of comparison further than was intended.⁴

4. It creates significant (unintended) difficulty when a character in a given parable is commended even as they are also portrayed as acting unethically (the shrewd steward) or selfishly (the wise maidens/virgins). There are also examples of parables that, when their details are pressed too hard, seem to oppose other clear, didactic, propositional scriptural teaching.

With parables, most of the details “simply are parts needed to make the story lifelike and to add local color,” drawing the listeners in with interest.³

Key 3: There were two sets of original authors and audiences.⁴

Jesus’ parables actually have two authors and two directly intended audiences. The first author/audience combination is easiest to identify:

Jesus and his hearers.

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). “Grasping God’s Word.” Wednesday night discipleship course.

2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.

3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.

4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.

What about the second?

It is important to remember that the Gospels were written with each evangelist's own immediate purpose for their own intended audience. This is why the parables included in one Gospel are not always included in the others, why sometimes the order of the included parables doesn't match, and why the lessons conveyed by one gospel writer don't always seem to neatly align with those conveyed by another. (For example: Luke, writing to Theophilus, seems to emphasize an aspect of the Parable of the Sower, Seed, and Soils that applies explicitly to professing believers whereas Mark doesn't make that same point in recounting Jesus' message to the large crowds.)

The Way Forward

Over the next few months, we are going to study Jesus' parables together. We are going to look at the original context (both as Christ delivered it to his listeners and as the evangelists delivered it to their readers), seeking to understand their meaning.

As we do, we will keep these things in mind:³

1. Note the parable's natural meaning.
2. Seek to determine what prompted the parable to be given.
3. Ascertain the main truth being illustrated. (Sometimes it's explained directly in the text.)
4. Validate the main truth with direct teaching from scripture. ("The analogy of scripture"¹)
5. Note the actual or intended response of the hearers.

And then, we will spend some time together seeing how God, by his Spirit, desires to use them to help make us complete, lacking in nothing. (2 Tim 3:17)

1. Marshall, Steve (2025). "Grasping God's Word." Wednesday night discipleship course.

2. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). In *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* University of Chicago Press.

3. Zuck, R. B. (1991). *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (C. Bubeck Sr., Ed.). David C. Cook.

4. Stein, R. H. (1994). *A basic guide to interpreting the Bible: playing by the rules*. Baker Books.