

# THE MORAL OF THE STORY

PARABLES OF JESUS

DO NOT MERELY LISTEN TO THE  
WORD, AND SO DECEIVE YOURSELVES.  
DO WHAT IT SAYS. - JAMES 1:22



**Ladies Bible Class**  
Thursdays, 10am

*"A master was once unmoved by the complaints of his disciples that, though they listened with pleasure to his parables and stories, they were also frustrated for they longed for something deeper. To all their objections he would simply reply: 'You have yet to understand, my friends, that the shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story.'" -Anthony de Mello*

## What are the Parables?

Jesus' parables are short stories about everyday life that simultaneously convey a deeper spiritual truth. Because parables are designed to impart a moral or theological lesson, they are similar to other literary genres like allegories and fables that use captivating stories to convey important moral truths.

A quick look at the original meaning of the word parable helps us understand its intended purpose. "Parable" is a transliteration of the original Greek word *parabolé*, which refers to one thing being cast alongside another.

When Jesus tells his parable, he's using something *familiar* to teach us something about the *mysterious* Kingdom of Heaven. Sometimes, Jesus makes this side-by-side comparison explicit by saying "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and then telling a parable (e.g. **Matthew 13:24**).

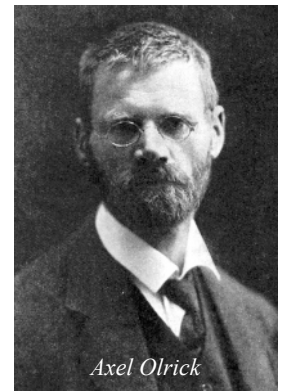
There's no clear-cut number or list of Jesus' parables because there's some gray area on what should count. Although the most common definition of a parable is a short story with a spiritual meaning, *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* notes that "parable" can also refer to Jesus' brief illustrations, aphorisms, and proverbs.

## Jesus, The Master Story-Teller

Jesus was a master story-teller, and his parables were remarkably effective. One reason for that is he made regular use of some of the most compelling story-telling techniques that we have.

For more on that, we turn to Danish Scholar Axel Olrick, a leading expert in the history of folklore and oral narratives. He studied hundreds of thousands of oral stories passed down in different cultures, and based off his extensive research, he published a list of "laws" that the most compelling oral stories (like Jesus' parables) tended to follow.

These rules highlight some of the most common ways of making oral stories memorable, compelling, and easy to follow. As you read through this list (see the next page), you can probably make connections to some of Jesus' parables.



## Axel Olrick's Epic Laws of Folk Narrative

1. **Law of Opening and Closing**—The story eases into the action and comes to a calm conclusion.
2. **Law of Repetition**—Repetition is the primary form of emphasis in oral stories, especially *three times*.
3. **Law of Threes**—Three is the most common number in hundreds of thousands of oral traditions.
4. **Law of Two to a Scene**—A maximum of two people are “on stage” at a time. If there are more than two, only two are speaking.
5. **Law of Contrast**—The two key characters are often polar opposites, or the minor characters are a clear contrast to the main character.
6. **Law of Twins**—Two smaller characters tend to play the same role (but two major characters fall under the Law of Contrast)
7. **Law of Initial and Final Position**—The first person introduced seems like the most important, but the last person garners the most sympathy and wins the crucial battle.
8. **Law of the Single Strand**—The story is simple and moves linearly from beginning to end; there's no circling back for extra details or flashbacks.
9. **Patterning**—Situations that repeat throughout the story will be as similar as possible.
10. **Tableaux Scenes**—Stories evoke a strong visual image.
11. **Concentration on the Leading Character** — The stories focus our attention on one key person.

Jesus incorporated many of these features into his parables in order to maximize their effectiveness and create a lasting impression on his audience. But why did Jesus speak in parables in the first place?

## Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables? (Matthew 13:10-17)

In **Matthew 13:10**, Jesus' disciples come to him and ask “*Why do you speak to the people in parables?*” Jesus' answer hinges on two key truths about parables:

1. First, they are simple and relatable.
2. Second, they require careful thought and reflection in order to understand their deeper meaning.

Jesus' parables were simple enough that anyone could follow them, but deep enough that required some serious contemplation wouldn't grasp it all right away. Jesus was giving people a spiritual appetizer and then inviting them to come experience the full meal, if they were willing.



Why wouldn't Jesus tell everyone the plain, direct truth from the beginning? Wouldn't speaking plainly maximize the number of people who could hear the truth? Maybe so, but Jesus was very thoughtful and intentional about every aspect of his life, including his teaching ministry.

**One likely explanation is that this was a way for Jesus to test the hearts of his followers.** If the message was somewhat mysterious, some in the crowd would immediately turn away in frustration, but his true followers would think, pray, and keep following Jesus. The parable was designed to identify which of his followers were hungry enough for the spiritual feast that Jesus was offering.

But there's another layer to why Jesus taught in parables, above and beyond testing the sincerity of his followers. Jesus taught in parables because it was God's will that certain mysteries about life in God's Kingdom would be hidden from the crowds (**Matthew 13:11**) and only revealed to a smaller group of his followers. Jesus answers his disciples' question about his reasons for teaching in parables by quoting **Isaiah 6:9-10**, a prophecy about God's people seeing without *really seeing* and hearing without *truly understanding* it. **Jesus spoke in parables in order to fulfill Scripture and highlight the difference between hearing the message and taking it to heart.**

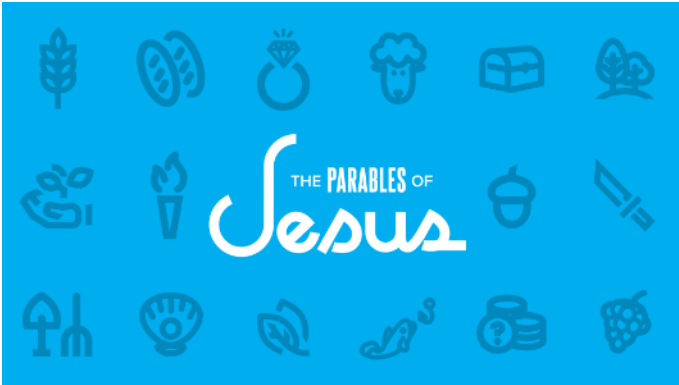
Michael Wilkins summarizes the purpose of the parables in this way:

*“With these parables he intended to test the hearts of the crowds and to force them to commit either to be with him or against him. At the same time, he used them to unveil the secrets of the kingdom to his disciples and to communicate truth to them about its operation in this world until his return in glory.”*

*-NIV Application Commentary (Matthew), p. 499*

Many in Israel heard Jesus' words without truly understanding his message. But Jesus wants us to know that *hearing* isn't enough—it has to be understood, believed, and applied if the message is to be of any value to the recipient (see **Matthew 7:24** and **James 1:22**). Perhaps that is why Jesus says the eyes that truly see and the ears that truly hear are blessed indeed (**Matthew 13:16**).





## Six Principles for Interpreting the Parables

*"Jesus was short on sermons, long on conversations; short on answers, long on questions; short on abstraction and propositions, long on stories and parables; short on telling you what to think, long on challenging you to think for yourself."*

*-Brian McClaren*

As we spend some time in the parables, our goal is to have eyes that really see the truth and ears that really hear the message of Jesus. Here are six helpful pointers on interpreting the parables, adapted from the *NIV Application Commentary (Matthew)* by Michael Wilkins.

- 1. Start with the original historical context.** What was life like for the people in first-century Israel?
- 2. Consider the literary setting**—What happened just before and after the parable? Is there a theme running through that chapter or the whole Gospel that this parable is a part of? Does Jesus teach something similar somewhere else that can help us understand his message?
- 3. Try to determine the main point in the parable.** While there are many things we can learn from any particular parable, there's usually a central message Jesus is trying to convey. Don't over-interpret every minor detail, but don't gloss over the key point, either.
- 4. Identify what Jesus is teaching us about the Kingdom of God.** There's often a moral point to the parables (i.e. how we are called to live), but we shouldn't ignore the theological teaching, either (i.e. what we need to know about God and his Kingdom). **1 Timothy 4:16**—"Watch your life and doctrine closely"
- 5. Individual Application** — How does this apply to my walk with God? What type of need (especially spiritual need) prompted Jesus to tell this parable, and how does his message speak to that need for me today?
- 6. Application for the Church** — How can the body as a whole incorporate this into our worship, our ministries, our fellowship, etc.?

## Class Schedule and Outline

Each week, we will study two parables that emphasize a particular theme. I have attempted to arrange these parables in a way that covers the essential aspects of Jesus' life and teaching.

### September 8—Jesus wants us to be eager to learn.

- Parable 1: Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44-46)
- Parable 2: The Seed and Soil (Matthew 13:3-23)

### September 15—Everyone's invited to follow Jesus... but the journey requires sacrifice.

- Parable 1: Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14)
- Parable 2: Counting the Cost (Luke 14:28-33)

### September 22—Small acts of faith lead to big results in the Kingdom.

- Parable 1: Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)
- Parable 2: Persistent Widow (Luke 18:2-8)

### September 29—Israel had every chance to follow Jesus but rejected him instead.

- Parable 1: Tenants (Matthew 21:33-46)
- Parable 2: New Wine, Old Wineskins (Matthew 9:16-17)

### October 6—The Kingdom is full of unlikely heroes.

- Parable 1: Moneylender (Luke 7:36-50, esp. 41-43)
- Parable 2: Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

### October 13—Heart of a Disciple: Humility and Repentance

- Parable 1: Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14)
- Parable 2: Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

### October 20—Heart of a Disciple: Gratitude Instead of Bitterness

- Parable 1: Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-31)
- Parable 2: Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)

### October 27—Heart of a Disciple: Good Stewards

- Parable 1: The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)
- Parable 2: Talents (Matthew 15:14-30)

### November 3—Hindsight is 20/20. Don't wait until it's too late.

- Parable 1: Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
- Parable 2: Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)



## Parable 1: The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl (Matthew 13:44-46)

A man stumbles upon a priceless treasure in a field. A merchant discovers the most impressive pearl he's ever seen. Both of them immediately sell everything they have to take hold of this priceless treasure. These stories of discovery highlight the indescribable value of God's Kingdom, above and beyond anything this world has to offer.

### The Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44)

*"By selling all that he has to purchase the field, he is gaining something far more valuable than any of his possessions and far more valuable than the field itself."*

*-Michael Wilkins, NIV Application Commentary (Matthew), p. 487.*

In Jesus' time, there were no formal banks or safety deposit boxes, so when you needed to keep your valuables safe, you might dig a hole on your property and bury your treasure for safekeeping (e.g. **Matthew 25:25**).

Sometimes the owner of the house would die (or be captured) without anyone knowing about the buried treasure, so it would stay hidden until someone accidentally discovered it. While we might play by the "finders-keepers" rule, Jewish law dictated that anything pulled out of the ground belonged to the person who owned the land. When the man stumbled upon this priceless treasure, he knew he couldn't just grab it and go. He had to sell everything he had to buy the land.

I'm sure his friends and neighbors thought he was crazy—that land is way overpriced! You're wasting your

money! They had a low view of the land's value because they were unaware of the measure beneath the surface. But because the man knew about the treasure, he knew it was worth everything.

Is there anything that I could offer you that you would trade everything you owned for? What could make you cash out your entire life savings and write the biggest check of your life? Jesus wants us to think about how valuable that treasure must have been for this man to immediately sell everything to buy it. What could possibly be worth that much to us today?

If we were to ask the Apostle Paul that same question, perhaps he'd answer with his words in **Philippians 3:8**:

*"What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ."*

For Paul, everything was worthless compared to knowing Jesus. And all the valuable things of the world are garbage in comparison to having Jesus in his life. Are we able to honestly say the same thing about our lives today?

### The Priceless Pearl (Matthew 13:45-46)

*"Whatever cost a person expends is nothing in comparison to the benefit of belonging to it. Salvation and the righteousness of the kingdom is a greater treasure than all that the world has to offer, and it is the source of greatest joy."*

*-Michael Wilkins, NIV Application Commentary (Matthew), p. 505.*

Jesus only talked about pearls twice in his life. In **Matthew 7:6**, Jesus tells us to stop wasting our expensive pearls on pigs who would never be able to appreciate

them. They simply don't have the ability to recognize their true value. On the other hand, in **Matthew 13:45-46**, Jesus tells a parable about a trained merchant who knows exactly what he's looking for. He has the expertise to know the immense value of the pearl he's just found. And because it's so extraordinarily valuable, he sold everything he had to buy it.

Pigs treat pearls like dirt. But the discerning eye of a trained merchant can recognize their intrinsic value. Which one are you? Are you able to see and understand the immense value of a relationship with God? That's the question that Jesus invites us to consider.

### Application

Two men. Two priceless treasures. Two immediate decisions to radically upend one's life in order to take hold of the treasure. Jesus is telling us that treasure is waiting to be found for those who are willing to dig deeply. And it's a priceless treasure that far exceeds anything the world has to offer. ***But what exactly is this treasure?***

The straightforward answer is that the Kingdom of God itself is the priceless treasure. Jesus wants us to know that our life with God is more valuable than anything we could hope to possess in this life. More valuable than our career, our house, our cars 401k, even our family and our friends (cf. **Matthew 12:46-50**)

Take a moment and read through these four passages. Notice the way they each describe the Word of God and our life of faith as much more valuable than all the treasures the world:

- **Psalm 12:6**, "And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times."
- **Psalm 19:9-10**, "The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold..."
- **Psalm 119:72**, "The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold." (see also 119:127)
- **1 Peter 1:7 (NLT)**, "These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold."

Are you ready to let everything else go so you can take hold of the priceless treasure God is offering you today?



## Parable 2: The Seed and Soil (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

In some ways, this is one of the most straightforward parables Jesus tells because he takes the time to explain it, point by point, to his disciples. The seed is cast out into the plowed fields. Only some of it falls on soil that is deep, rich in nutrients, free of weeds and fertile enough to grow a bountiful harvest. All the other seed falls in places that have one sort of fatal flaw or another.

Jesus makes clear that the seed is the same in every instance—it's the soil that's different. Some of Jesus' followers had hearts that were soft and receptive. Their hearts were like the fertile soil that produced an impressive harvest in due time. But many of the people who heard Jesus preach had hearts that were hard and skeptical. Even if Jesus' message began to take root, it didn't last long enough to produce any fruit.

What about us? Every time we hear a parable or read the Word of God, the seed is cast out. The question is, what kind of soil is Jesus going to find in our hearts?

When we read this parable in conjunction with the parable of the treasure and the pearl, the common theme is an eagerness to seek out and receive the Word of God into our lives. We have to be ready to diligently search for those buried treasures, and when we find it, we have to have open hearts that are ready to receive it and apply it.

## Reflection Questions

1. If we took Jesus' teaching about the immense value of God's Kingdom to heart, what would we need to change about our daily lives?
2. How can we demonstrate to God, our family, and our community, that our relationship with God is the most important thing in our life?
3. Imagine that Jesus has just told you a priceless treasure is waiting to be discovered in the Bible. How would that new mindset change the way you read the Bible?
4. What would be the signs or symptoms of a person who hears the Word without truly understanding it?
5. Read **Philippians 3:8**. Are you able to honestly say the same thing that Paul does? What is it about knowing Christ that far exceeds everything else the world has to offer?
6. Which of the four soils Jesus described best matches the spiritual condition of our hearts?
7. What are the distractions, priorities, and obstacles that are standing in the way of the hundredfold harvest Jesus talked about?