

Understanding
the
40 Parables of
Jesus Christ



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UNDERSTANDING THE 40 PARABLES OF JESUS CHRIST

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By K.E. Cornerstone from Messiah-of-God.com™

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PREFACE

Understanding the 40 Parables of Jesus Christ takes the approach of understanding Jesus' parables by examining the genre, scriptural context, and historical culture.

The goal of this approach is to "reveal" theology from the Bible, as opposed to trying to find verses to support a belief. This is the difference between letting the Bible tell us what is true, versus us trying to find evidence for what we want to believe. When we allow the Bible to teach us what to believe, we can better set aside our own biases and become more receptive to God's truths.

This book lists all the parables of Jesus Christ, including supplemental information necessary for understanding them. Each parable has a summary of what is being said, along with the meaning Jesus Christ is teaching.

Parables are a particular genre of literature that are characterized by typically having only one meaning. This means that each parable taught by Jesus only has one main point, which he often states after telling the story. Jesus also sometimes uses parables to emphasize a point he has already made.

The meaning can also be derived from the context of the parable. In a few cases, Jesus does use the same parable in different contexts to make a different point, but that is only because the context has changed.

This book is designed to be read page-by-page; however, due to the fact that the topics that Jesus teaches often interconnect, chapter numbers are listed whenever a parable or subject is mentioned that is discussed in a different chapter.

INTRODUCTION: WHY JESUS SPEAKS IN PARABLES

Scripture: Matthew 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12

In the four gospels, much of Jesus' teachings are in the form of parables (short stories that illustrated an aspect of: God, his kingdom, the end times, and other such topics). In the gospel of Matthew and Mark, Jesus explains to his disciples why he speaks in parables.

"The disciples came, and said to him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' He answered them, 'To you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them.'" (Matthew 13:10-11; also Mark 4:11)

Essentially Jesus is stating that he speaks in figures of speech so that only those who interpret them metaphorically and spiritually will understand. Those who in interpret his parables literally become confused.

However, Jesus also says, "For whoever has, to him will be given, and he will have abundance, but whoever doesn't have, from him will be taken away even that which he has." (Matthew 13:12)

And in the gospel according to Mark, Jesus says, "Take heed what you hear. With whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you, and more will be given to you who hear. For whoever has, to him will more be given, and he who has not, from him will be taken away even that which he has." (Mark 4:24-25)

This last statement about "For whoever has, to him will more be given, and he who has not, from him will be taken away even that which he has" is actually a main point of several of Jesus parables. Jesus makes this same statement in:

- Luke 8:18 and Mark 4:25 - Lamp Under a Basket [Chapter 1]
- Luke 12:48 - Faithful and Wise Servant [Chapter 11]
- Matthew 25:29 and Luke 19:26 - Talents and Pounds [Ch. 12A]

In each of these parables, the thing to be "had" is essentially the same thing.

Jesus' Parable of the Lamp Under a Basket

In Mark 4:25 and Luke 8:18, Jesus has just told the Parable of the Lamp Under a Basket. In this parable, the thing to be "had" (that can be given or taken away) is summarized in Jesus' concluding statement:

"Be careful therefore how you hear. For whoever has, to him will be given; and whoever doesn't have, from him will be taken away even that which he thinks he has." (Luke 8:18)

In this context, it is "understanding" and "knowledge" of the kingdom of God that is to be had, because we are urged to pay attention to how we listen.

Jesus' Parable of the Faithful and Wise Servant

In Luke 12:41-48, Jesus tells the Parable of the Faithful and Wise Servant. He concludes by saying, "To whoever much is given, of him will much be required; and to whom they deposit much, of him will they ask more." (Luke 12:48)

In this context, Jesus is speaking of the servant who was at work and doing what the master wanted while he was away. "Blessed is that servant whom his lord will find doing so when he comes." (Luke 12:43)

And then Jesus says, "That servant, who knew his lord's will, and didn't prepare, nor do what he wanted, will be beaten with many stripes." (Luke 12:47) Therefore, in this context, the thing that is given is an understanding of what was wanted by the master (again, knowledge and understanding of: God, his kingdom, what is expected, etc.).

Jesus' Parable of the Talents and Pounds

In Matthew 25:29 and Luke 19:26, Jesus has just told the Parable of the Talents and Pounds. He concludes these parables in the same way as the others, by saying, "For to everyone who has will be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who has not, even that which he has will be taken away." (Matthew 25:29; also Luke 19:26)

Like in the Parable of the Faithful and Wise Servant, the servants who are rewarded are the ones who are at work for their master while he is away. They are the ones who know what the master wants and therefore do what is expected.

Why Does Jesus Speak in Parables?

Jesus directly tells us why he speaks in parables, "To you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them." (Matthew 13:11)

Those who misunderstand who Jesus is, and therefore misunderstand that his parables are not literal, sometimes became confused about what Jesus teaches.

Also, from these parables we examined, we can see that Jesus makes this statement about "For to everyone who has will be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who has not, even that which he has will be taken away" to mean that he speaks in parables to reveal "knowledge" and "understanding" of God and his kingdom (the secrets of the kingdom).

Jesus teaches in the "talents/pounds parable" and the "faithful and wise servant parable," that those who have understanding of what is expected of the master, and act on those expectations by working for the master while he is away, are the ones who are rewarded by the master when he returns.

What is Expected of Jesus Until He Returns?

Jesus tells us in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things which I commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus also tells us what is expected of us in Matthew 22:37-39, "Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

And James tells us that loving God and people includes serving

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people: "And if a brother or sister is naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you tells them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled;' and yet you didn't give them the things the body needs, what good is it? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead in itself." (James 2:15-17)

Jesus' work is for us to be a witness of his resurrection and salvation to all who repent of their sins and believe, as well as loving God and people through our actions. As these parables teach us, those who do his work while he is away will be rewarded accordingly.

However, those who do not work will receive consequence by receiving eternal death instead of eternal life. "Then the lord of that servant will come in a day when he isn't expecting him, and in an hour that he doesn't know, and will cut him apart, and place his portion with the unfaithful. That servant, who knew his lord's will, and didn't prepare, nor do what he wanted, will be beaten with many stripes." (Luke 12:46-47)

The bad slave is put with the unfaithful due to his actions. This fact is true because we show with our actions what we truly believe. "They profess that they know God, but by their works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work." (Titus 1:16)

This teaching of Jesus can be difficult to accept unless we understand both the loving AND righteous nature of God. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who disobeys the Son won't see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." (John 3:36)

PART I:

PARABLES OF JESUS CHRIST IN MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE

1: PARABLE OF THE LAMP UNDER A BASKET

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-25; Luke 8:16-18; Luke 11:33-34

In the parable of the lamp under a basket, Jesus notes that no one lights a lamp in order to hide it. On the contrary, those who light a lamp set it on a table to fill the whole room with light. This short parable is used by Jesus to illustrate three different points in different contexts.

Context and Meaning in Matthew 5

In the context found in Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus says "Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) Jesus' Point: Allow the goodness within you to produce good works, so that God is glorified.

Context and Meaning in Mark 4 and Luke 8

In the context found in Mark 4:21-25 and Luke 8:16-18, Jesus makes the point that anything hidden or secret will be exposed. While God already knows our inner thoughts, one day everything hidden from the world will be made known when we are judged for what we have done and said.

Also in this context, Jesus says "Be careful therefore how you hear. For whoever has, to him will be given; and whoever doesn't have, from him will be taken away even that which he thinks he has." (Luke 8:18) As stated in the introduction, this comment is referring to revelation and knowledge. Those who listen and therefore have understanding, will be given more knowledge. Those who do not have understanding, because they do not listen well, even what they seem to have (in terms of understanding) will be taken away.

This fact is illustrated regularly with almost any subject. The only real difference between the wise and foolish is that a smart person listens and learns, whereas a foolish person does not. Jesus' Point: All things hidden and secret will be made known openly.

Context and Meaning in Luke 11

In the context found in Luke 11:33-34, Jesus says, "The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is evil, your body also is full of darkness." (Luke 11:34) In this situation, Jesus uses the parable of the lamp under a basket to explain that it matters what our eyes view. Jesus' Point: What we allow our eyes to see affects the goodness (or evil) within us.

Chapter 1 Questions

Personal: Is God glorified by my actions? How can I glorify God today?

Consider: What are some examples of what we "see" affecting the goodness or evil within us?

2: PARABLE OF THE UNSHRUNKEN CLOTH ON AN OLD CLOAK

Scripture: Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36

In the context of the parable of the unshrunk cloth on an old garment, Jesus has just been asked why the disciples of others fast, while his disciples do not fast. Jesus answers them by saying, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" (Luke 5:34)

Then, to further answer the question, he gives this parable of the unshrunk cloth. This parable has the same message as the Parable of the New Wine in Old Wineskins [Ch. 3]. Just like with wineskins, clothes made of most materials will shrink over time. Therefore, putting new cloth onto old clothing will result in a worse tear since the new cloth will shrink.

Meaning of the Parable of the Unshrunk Cloth on an Old Garment/Cloak

The reason Jesus tells this parable is to further answer the question about fasting. Therefore, the meaning must be related to this question.

Jesus is making a point in regards to the significance of himself (he is the bridegroom), and he is making implications about the old and new covenants. Just like a marriage ceremony is the establishment of a new covenant between those getting married, Jesus' ministry and sacrifice is the establishment of a new covenant between God and humanity.

"But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, by so much as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises...In that he says, 'A new covenant,' he has made the first old. But that which is becoming old and grows aged is near to vanishing away." (Hebrews 8:6-13)

In this parable, Jesus is saying that his disciples aren't fasting because God is establishing a new covenant. For a more complete explanation, read the next parable of the New Wine in Old Wineskins [Ch. 3] which is part of the answer Jesus gives to this question on fasting.

3: PARABLE OF THE NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS

Scripture: Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38

The parable of the new wine in old wineskins has the same meaning as the Parable of the Unshrunk Cloth on an Old Cloak [Ch. 2]. Jesus mentions both together, as part of his answer to the question: Why do your disciples not fast when disciples of other teachers do fast?

Similar to the situation with the unshrunk cloth, wine will expand as it ferments. When fermenting wine is placed in new wineskins (made from animal skin), the wineskin expands with the wine. However, old wineskins have already been stretched. Meaning, if someone fills an old wineskin with new wine, then the old wineskin can no longer expand and it will burst.

Meaning of the New Wine in Old Wineskins

The first part of Jesus' answer is "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" (Luke 5:34) As stated before, Jesus is making a statement about himself, alluding to the fact that God is establishing a new covenant with the world, just like when a covenant is established at a wedding.

And this is God's new covenant, predicted in Jeremiah 31:31-34, "Behold, the days come, says Yahweh, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah...But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Yahweh: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people: and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know Yahweh; for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says Yahweh: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more."

Jesus says he is the bridegroom, and the wedding guests certainly do not fast while the bridegroom is still present. He further elaborates on this point by telling the parable of the new wine in old wineskins, teaching that something new is happening and it cannot be mixed with the old.

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Neither Jesus' disciples, nor those asking this question, fully understood at the time what Jesus was implying. Only he understood the significance of himself and the current times, which is why many were confused by his parables.

This is why Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29) No one was certain who Jesus Christ was at that time. Some people thought he was John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. It was only Jesus' disciples who slowly began to realize that Jesus was God's messiah.

However, now that we know who Jesus is, it is clear Jesus made a very serious statement about what God is doing in the world and he used this parable of the new wine in old wineskins to illustrate it.

Chapter 3 Questions

Consider: What is God's law? What are the differences between the Old and New Covenants? What is the biggest difference? What event began the New Covenant?

Personal: Is God's law written on my heart?

4: PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND FOUR SOILS

Scripture: Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4:3-8, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15

The parable of the sower and the four soils is a story told by Jesus to illustrate how people react to the word of God.

Summary of the Parable of the Sower and the Four Soils

To begin, Jesus tells us about a person who is sowing seed. The seed ends up falling on four types of soil:

- On the path where people walk
- On rocky ground
- On soil already filled with plants having thorns
- On good soil

These seeds all have different fates.

- The seed on the path is eaten by birds.
- That which fell on rocky ground does grow, but it grows too fast and it is scorched when the sun comes up, because the root is too shallow.
- The seed that falls on the soil with thorns also grows, but the thorns choke it and it too dies.
- Only the seed that falls on the good soil survives, and it produces grain up to a hundredfold.

Meaning of the Parable of the Sower and the Four Soils

After Jesus tells this story, Jesus' disciples ask him why he speaks in parables. Jesus explains why, and then he explains the meaning of the parable of the sower and the four soils. The seed represents the word of God, and the four soils represent four different ways people react to God's word.

Seed on the Path

The seed sown on the path, and eaten by birds, represents anyone who hears the word of God and does not understand it. Therefore, what they have heard is snatched away from their heart by the devil.

This situation is a classic example of "For whoever has, to him will be given; and whoever doesn't have, from him will be taken away even that which he thinks he has." (Luke 8:18) Those who have understanding will understand more and more. However, those who do not understand, even what understanding they seem to have will be taken away.

Jesus begins Luke 8:18 by saying, "Be careful therefore how you hear," which means anyone can understand as long as they listen carefully.

Seed on Rocky Ground

The seed that falls on the rocky ground represents someone who hears the word of God and immediately receives it with joy. However, they have no root or foundation, so they do not last very long. Jesus says, "When oppression or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles." (Matthew 13:21)

Seed Choked by Thorns

The seed that falls on the ground with thorns is representing someone who hears God's word, but all the concerns of the world (such as the enticement of having lots of money) ends up choking the word. The word of God is not able to yield any fruit in that person's life.

Seed on Good Soil

The seed that falls on good soil represents "this is he who hears the word, and understands it, who most assuredly bears fruit." (Matthew 13:23) This situation is the perfect example of someone who "For whoever has, to him will be given." (Luke 8:18)

Thankfully, because God has given us freewill, we are able to choose which kind of soil we are. If we do not understand something,

we can pursue understanding until we do. We can research, ask questions, and learn.

As this parable of the sower and four soils illustrates, only seed that produces fruit is considered to have fallen on good soil. If the word of God does not produce fruit in our lives, then our hearts are not fertile soil for God's word. This is because our actions reveal the truth about what we truly believe.

Chapter 4 Questions

Consider: If God's word contradicts what someone currently believes, then on what foundation are they basing their beliefs?

Personal: Is my heart receptive to God's word? Does it produce fruit in my life? Would I be willing to change what I believe if I discovered that God's word says otherwise?

5: PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

The parable of the mustard seed is one of several parables that Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of God.

Contextual Misunderstandings of the Parable

In this parable of the mustard seed, Jesus make the statement that the mustard seed, "is less than all the seeds that are on the earth" (Mark 4:31), and that "yet when it is sown, grows up, and becomes greater than all the herbs" (Mark 4:32), even as big as a tree.

There are those who criticize Jesus for making such statements because if Jesus Christ is God [Ch. 42] then surely he would know that there are smaller seeds in the world (a few plant varieties have slightly smaller seeds). However, these critics fail to understand that Jesus speaks to people in terms that they can understand. Otherwise, how can communication occur if the audience does not understand?

To Jesus' audience, the smallest known seed would be a mustard seed, which can in fact grow to be a plant as large as a tree. In addition, Jesus Speaks in Figures of Speech [Ch. 41]. Saying that this mustard seed is the smallest seed or that it grows into the biggest of shrubs may be exaggeration used to emphasis a point.

Jesus exaggerated in many situations, such as when he tells the Pharisees, "You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:5) Or when Jesus speaks to Peter about forgiveness, "I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22) Jesus is making the point to forgive as many times as necessary.

Reading this parable in context, Jesus' point is not to literally tell us what the smallest seed on earth is. Instead, the reason Jesus is telling this parable is to communicate what the kingdom of God is like, by using a metaphor that his audience could relate to.

Meaning of the Parable of the Mustard Seed

The truth Jesus is communicating about the kingdom of God is that the influence it has begins like the smallest of seeds, yet it grows to be like the largest of plants. This truth can be seen on the individual, communal, and global levels.

In an individual, the reign of God grows until that person becomes completely obedient to God. In the community, the reign of God can spread from person to person as they teach each other to "Know Yahweh." (Jeremiah 31:34) In the world, the reign of God began with Jesus Christ like a tiny seed that has grown into a large group of believers obeying God. The Parable of the Yeast [Ch. 9] has essentially the same meaning as this parable of the mustard seed.

Chapter 5 Questions

Consider: Why would Jesus call the mustard seed the smallest of seeds if it is not actually the smallest?

Personal: How has the kingdom of God grown like a mustard seed in my life?

6: PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS

Scripture: Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18

The parable of the wicked tenants, also called simply the parable of the tenants, is an allegory Jesus tells the religious leaders to reveal to them the situation in Israel.

Summary of the Parable of the Tenants

Jesus tells of a man who plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, digs a wine-press, and builds a watchtower. This man then leases the vineyard to some tenants; meaning they get to use the vineyard, but they are required to give the owner a portion of their goods since they do not own it (essentially rent).

Normally this would be a win-win situation, since the tenants would not otherwise have a vineyard to produce crops and make money from. However, these tenants turn out to be evil.

After the owner has left for some time, he sends one of his servants to collect what belongs to him. However, the wicked tenants abuse this slave and send him back empty-handed. The owner then sends more servants, but the tenants mistreat them all, even killing some.

Finally, the owner sends his son, who he believes they will respect. But the tenants say to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and seize his inheritance." (Matthew 21:38) So they murder the son.

Then Jesus asks, "When therefore the lord of the vineyard will come, what will he do to those farmers?" (Matthew 21:40) The answer is that he will destroy those wicked tenants and give the vineyard to others. (Matthew 21:41; Mark 12:9; Luke 20:16)

Meaning of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants

As stated in this passage, the religious leaders realize that Jesus is talking about them. They are the wicked tenants. Therefore, these leaders become very angry and want to arrest Jesus, but they cannot because they are afraid of the large crowd who would get upset if they did.

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As for the rest of the parable, the vineyard represents Israel. The owner represents God the Father. The servants sent by the owner represent the prophets that God has sent in the past, many of whom have been mistreated and even killed by Israel and its leaders. The son represents Jesus.

When Jesus tells this parable, his main purpose is to tell the religious leaders what the reality of the situation is: God has placed them over Israel, but they (including past leaders) have been evil by mistreating his prophets.

However, Jesus is also making a statement about himself in relation to God, since he is the son of the owner of the vineyard. He is even predicting his death at the hands of the religious leaders.

Chapter 6 Questions

Personal: The Pharisees were largely responsible for the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. What would I have done if I were present at these events? Would I have defended Jesus at the risk of my own life? Would I defend Jesus now at the risk of my own life?

Consider: The Pharisees were viewed by many as the spiritual elite. What prevented them from realizing they were sinners?

7: PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

Scripture: Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-29; Luke 21:29-31

The parable of the fig tree is one of the most important parables to read in context. When people fail to read this parable with consideration to who's saying it and why, they come up with incorrect interpretations that are just not possible when you read it within the surrounding text. In context, the interpretation is clear.

Context Previous to the Parable

The actual context of this parable begins in Matthew 24:1 (Mark 13:1; Luke 21:5). Jesus mentions the destruction of the temple, which prompts his disciples to later ask, "Tell us, when will these things be? What is the sign of your coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3) Jesus then gives a long answer which continues until the end of the chapter. Within this answer is the parable of the fig tree, which is told as part of the response to his disciples' question.

To begin, Jesus tells them about the signs of the end of the age. He says there will be wars, rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes, all of which are just the "birth pangs" of the end. Jesus also speaks of persecutions that will happen before the end comes. Then, he talks about a great fleeing and suffering that will occur.

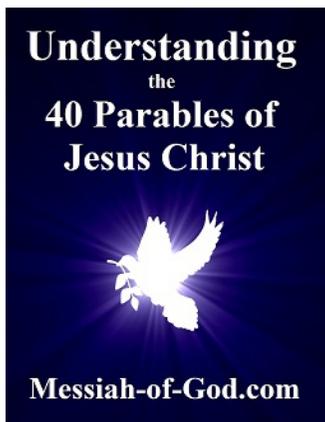
It is important to mention that Jesus isn't teaching an order of events. Rather, he is speaking about individual topics, teaching what will happen before his return.

Next, Jesus says, "But immediately after the oppression of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give her light" (Matthew 24:29) and the Son of Man will be "coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." (Matthew 24:30) Jesus then presents the parable of the fig tree, saying to learn from its lesson.

Meaning of the Parable of the Fig Tree

Jesus says, "Now from the fig tree learn her parable. When its branch has now become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that the summer is near." (Matthew 24:32)

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