

# Parables in the Gospels

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Color Print entitled "Parables," by James C. Christensen

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## What is a "Parable"?

"At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 5)

## Implications of this definition:

- The meaning of most parables is *not* so obvious, or at least it shouldn't be. If we *assume* we know what Jesus is talking about, we are probably missing the main point; if we are too familiar with the story (having heard it so often before), we might not think carefully enough about its real meaning.
- Most parables contain some element that is strange or unusual. They should cause you to say, "Wait a minute! That's not how farmers do their work! That's not what kings usually do! That's not what normally happens in nature!" And this strange element should cause you to think!
- Parables do not *define* things precisely, but rather use *comparisons* to describe some aspect of how God acts or interacts with human beings. Yet to say "A is like B" does not mean that "A is identical to B in all respects"; so one should be careful not to misinterpret or misapply the parables.

## The Purpose of the Parables?

We might think that Jesus spoke in parables to make it *easier* for people to understand his message. According to the Gospels, however, he surprisingly does NOT expect everyone to understand them! This is clearly expressed in Matthew 13:10-17:

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them [the crowds] in parables?” <sup>11</sup> He answered, “*To you* it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, *but to them* it has *not* been given. <sup>12</sup> For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do *not* perceive, and hearing they do *not* listen, *nor* do they understand.’ (cf. Isa 6:9-10) <sup>14</sup> With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but *never* understand, and you will indeed look, but *never* perceive. <sup>15</sup> For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn-- and I would heal them.’ <sup>16</sup> *But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.* <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

In Matthew, at least the disciples of Jesus understand the parables; but in Mark, even they have a hard time understanding, despite receiving extra instructions in private!

- “Have you understood all this?” They [the disciples] answered, “Yes.” (Matt 13:51)
- And he said to them [the disciples], “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13)
- With many such parables he spoke the word to them [the crowds], as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (Mark 4:33-34).

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## Where Are the Gospel Parables?

From the following tables, you will note that *Mark* has only few parables and related images; *Matthew* adds quite a few more; and *Luke* has by far the most parables in the New Testament, including some of the most famous ones. In contrast, *John’s Gospel* never uses the word “parable” and has only few very images that are even similar to the parables of the Synoptic Gospels.

### Parables and Parabolic Images in the Gospel according to Mark:

Parable	Mark	Matthew	Luke
Garments & Wineskins	<b>Mk 2:21-22</b>	Mt 9:16-17	Lk 5:36-39
Strong Man	<b>Mk 3:27</b>	Mt 12:29	Lk 11:21
Sower & Seed	<b>Mk 4:3-8</b>	Mt 13:3-9	Lk 8:5-8
<i>Why Jesus Uses Parables</i>	<b>Mk 4:10-12</b>	Mt 13:10-17	Lk 8:9-10
<i>Interpretation of Sower &amp; Seed</i>	<b>Mk 4:13-20</b>	Mt 13:18-23	Lk 8:11-15
Lamp on a Stand	<b>Mk 4:21</b>	Mt 5:15	Lk 8:16; 11:33
<i>Sayings about Jesus' Parables</i>	<b>Mk 4:22-25</b>	Mt 10:26; 7:2; 13:12	Lk 8:17-18; 12:2; 6:38b
Seed Growing Secretly	<b>Mk 4:26-29</b>	cf. Mt 13:24-30	-
Mustard Seed	<b>Mk 4:30-32</b>	Mt 13:31-32	Lk 13:18-19
<i>Jesus' Use of Parables</i>	<b>Mk 4:33-34</b>	Mt 13:34-35	-
Salt	<b>Mk 9:50</b>	Mt 5:13	Lk 14:34
Wicked Tenants	<b>Mk 12:1-11</b>	Mt 21:33-44	Lk 20:9-18
Budding Fig-Tree	<b>Mk 13:28-29</b>	Mt 24:32-33	Lk 21:29-31
Doorkeeper	<b>Mk 13:33-37</b>	-	cf. Lk 12:35-38
<b><i>Total Number of Markan Parables</i></b>	<b>10</b>	<i>...all but 2</i>	<i>..all but 2</i>

### Additional Parables and Images in both Matthew & Luke but not in Mark

Parable	Mark	Matthew	Luke
Two Houses, Built on Rock or Earth	-	Mt 7:24-27	<b>Lk 6:47-49</b>
Children in the Market Place	-	Mt 11:16-19	<b>Lk 7:31-35</b>
Return of the Unclean Spirit	-	Mt 12:43-45	<b>Lk 11:24-26</b>
Burglar	-	Mt 24:43-44	<b>Lk 12:39-40</b>
Servant Entrusted with Supervision	-	Mt 24:45-51	<b>Lk 12:42-46</b>
Going before the Judge	-	Mt 5:25-26	<b>Lk 12:58-59</b>
Leaven	-	Mt 13:33	<b>Lk 13:20-21</b>
Great Supper	-	Mt 22:1-10	<b>Lk 14:16-24</b>
Lost Sheep	-	Mt 18:12-13	<b>Lk 15:3-7</b>
Pounds or Talents	-	Mt 25:14-30	<b>Lk 19:12-27</b>
<b><i>Number of New Parables</i></b>	-	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

**Additional Parables and Images in Matthew's Gospel  
(but neither in Mark nor in Luke):**

<b>Parable</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Luke</b>
Wheat & Tares	-	<b>Mt 13:24-30</b>	-
<i>Interpretation of Wheat &amp; Tares</i>	-	<b>Mt 13:36-43</b>	-
Treasure	-	<b>Mt 13:44</b>	-
Pearl	-	<b>Mt 13:45-46</b>	-
Net	-	<b>Mt 13:47-48</b>	-
Unmerciful Servant	-	<b>Mt 18:23-35</b>	-
Vineyard Workers & Employer	-	<b>Mt 20:1-16</b>	-
Two Sons	-	<b>Mt 21:28-32</b>	-
Guest without a Wedding Garment	-	<b>Mt 22:11-14</b>	-
Ten Virgins	-	<b>Mt 25:1-13</b>	[cf. Lk 13:25]
Last Judgment / Sheep & Goats	-	<b>Mt 25:31-46</b>	-
<b><i>Number of New Parables in Matthew</i></b>	<b>-</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>-</b>

**Additional Parables and Images in Luke's Gospel  
(but neither in Mark nor in Matthew):**

<b>Parable</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Luke</b>
Two Debtors	-	-	<b>Lk 7:41-43</b>
Good Samaritan	-	-	<b>Lk 10:25-37</b>
Friend Asking for Help at Midnight	-	-	<b>Lk 11:5-8</b>
Rich Fool	-	-	<b>Lk 12:16-21</b>
Faithful Servants	-	-	<b>Lk 12:35-38</b>
Barren Fig-Tree	-	-	<b>Lk 13:6-9</b>
Closed Door	-	-	<b>Lk 13:24-30</b>
Choice of Places at Table	-	-	<b>Lk 14:7-11</b>
Tower-Builder & King Planning for Battle	-	-	<b>Lk 14:28-32</b>
Lost Coin	-	-	<b>Lk 15:8-10</b>
Prodigal Son	-	-	<b>Lk 15:11-32</b>
Unjust Steward	-	-	<b>Lk 16:1-8</b>
Rich Man & Lazarus	-	-	<b>Lk 16:19-31</b>

<b>Parable</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Luke</b>
Servant's Reward	-	-	<b>Lk 17:7-10</b>
Unjust Judge	-	-	<b>Lk 18:1-8</b>
Pharisee & Publican	-	-	<b>Lk 18:9-14</b>
Throne Claimant	-	-	<b>Lk 19:12, 14, 15a, 27</b>
<b><i>Number of New Parables in Luke</i></b>	-	-	<b><i>17</i></b>

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### **Parable-like Images in the Gospel according to John:**

The word “parable” is not used at all in the Fourth Gospel. However, the Johannine Jesus does use some metaphors and images that are somewhat similar to the Synoptic parables:

- **Shepherd and Sheep** (John 10:1-16)
- **Vine and Branches** (John 15:1-8)