

JESUS—THE MASTER TEACHER WHO TAUGHT THROUGH PARABLES

Presented by

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Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher the world has ever known. In fact, in John 7 we find the story of the chief priest and Pharisees sending soldiers to seize Jesus in order to bring Him back to them for questioning about His actions and teachings. However, the soldiers returned empty handed, causing the chief priest to inquire, “Why have you not brought Him?” The soldiers’ response, as recorded in John 7:46, was this: “No man **ever** spoke like **this** Man!” And how right they were!

Part of Christ’s talent as a teacher was His amazing ability to take profound spiritual truths and make them understandable to all types of people. Although Jesus interacted with people in practically every social class, most of His teachings were aimed at those whom we would call “the common folk”—people like shepherds, fishermen, housewives, laborers, and so on. It is not by accident that Mark 12:37 says of Christ, “And the common people heard Him gladly.” Because many of the people who heard Jesus were poorly educated, it was necessary for Him to teach them by using words and ideas that could easily and correctly convey the spiritual concepts He knew they needed to learn to be pleasing to God. To solve the problem of how to teach important heavenly truths to people in a manner that could be easily understood, Jesus frequently used a teaching tool known as a **parable**.

It has been said that a parable is “an important story with a hidden message.” It also has been said that a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Both definitions are correct. Our English word “parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole*, which means “to throw alongside.” That same Greek word also is related to our English word “parallel,” which describes two similar things that have been laid side-by-side. The idea is that two things that are “thrown alongside” each other are easier to compare. The goal of a parable, then, is to compare one thing to another—with one of the objects being an event from everyday life, and the other being an important spiritual lesson. For example, in Luke 15:1-7 Jesus compared His relationship with His followers to the relationship that a shepherd has with his sheep. In Matthew 13:1-9 Jesus compared the person who teaches the Gospel to an individual who plants seeds. And, in Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus used such words as “salt” and “light” to describe the influence that Christians should have on those around them.

The New Testament records more than thirty parables that Jesus taught the people of His generation. Some of those parables were little more than one-line comparisons that, while brief, nevertheless packed a serious spiritual punch. Others, like the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, were longer stories containing exciting plots and fascinating people. But regardless of their length, **all** of Jesus’ parables were intended to remind us of God’s great wisdom—and of our need to obey His commands. Of course, along the way, the parables also provide **us** with some intriguing ways to teach **others** the truths found in God’s Word.

When Jesus first began His earthly ministry, His disciples did not understand why He so often used parables to teach people. In fact, Matthew 13:10-17 records a conversation between Jesus and His disciples on this very matter. When some of the disciples asked Christ, “Why do You speak to the people in parables?,” He answered them by saying, “I speak to them in parables because seeing, they do not see, and hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand. In them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says,

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
For the hearts of these people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And they have closed their eyes,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.’

“But blessed are **your** eyes because they see, and **your** ears because they hear. Assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

What we learn from this conversation between Jesus and His disciples is that the Lord sometimes taught via parables in order to **reveal** the truth to those who were willing to believe in Him, all the while **concealing** the truth from those who were not. In Luke 8:9-10 Jesus told His disciples, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” Like a two-edged sword, Christ’s parables cut two ways. They enlightened those who anxiously sought the truth, but blinded those who stubbornly refused to do so.

As we search for the central meanings of Christ’s parables, we need to remember to consider the implications that the parables would have had for people living in Christ’s day. We also need to remember to relate the parable to Christ’s proclamation of the good news about the kingdom of God—the church. Parables are much more than simple folk stories. They are expressions of Christ’s teachings about God, salvation, and the Christian Age that was dawning as a result of His ministry on Earth.

A good example of this approach would be the parables in Luke 15:3-32 that deal with “the three lost things”—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The historical context behind these parables can be found in Luke 15:1-2 where Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes, who were “the religious experts” of the day, saw such an action on Christ’s part as disgusting because, in their view, it transgressed God’s holiness. They reasoned that if Jesus truly were a righteous man, then He would not associate with such people. Rather, He would keep Himself pure, and He would separate Himself from sinners.

In response to the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus told them the parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In Luke 15:7 Christ explained that God rejoices more over the repentance of one sinner (like one of those who had been sitting with Him around the meal table) than He does over “ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” This same type of message is found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who, in Luke 18:9-14, went up to the temple to pray. In a similar manner, in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, that wayward son represented the tax collectors and sinners who finally were willing to come to God for salvation, while the older son represented the scribes and Pharisees who were too proud to extend forgiveness to those who needed it most.

One of the major themes contained in Christ’s parables is the importance of being willing to accept and follow Him unreservedly as Lord and Savior. For example, in Luke 14:15-24 in the parable of the great supper, Jesus taught with supreme clarity that the proper time for such a decision is **now**—and must not be delayed. In the parable in Luke 14:28-32 about the unfinished tower and the king going to war, Jesus demanded that His followers count the cost, and then be prepared to give up everything in order to follow Him. In the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price in Mathew 13:44-46, Jesus stated that the kingdom of heaven is of such intrinsic value that all other treasures in our lives must take second place. In short, many of Christ’s parables contained a call for people to make a radical, life-changing decision to put Him first in their lives in order to get to heaven.

Parables are indeed “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” We as Christians need to recognize that, and be alert to what Christ’s parables are trying to teach us—lest we become like some of the people of Christ’s day and, “seeing, we do not see, and hearing, we do not understand.” After all, it **is** the ultimate destiny of our soul that is at stake! That alone should make the spiritual instructions contained in the parables of paramount importance in our daily lives, don’t you think?