

# Parables in the Gospels

Jesus' *parables* have often been called "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." Jesus used simple stories to teach spiritual truths. Each parable teaches one main truth.

Matthew 13, which contains a collection of seven parables, also contains the most complete discussion of the purpose of parables. Jesus' parables had a two-fold effect. Jesus used parables to reveal and illustrate the truth to those who listened to him and believed him, but he also used parables to take away his teaching from those who stubbornly rejected his plain teaching even though its meaning was clear to them (Matthew 13:10-15).

<sup>10</sup>The disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

<sup>11</sup>He answered them, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but it has not been given to them.<sup>g</sup> <sup>12</sup>For whoever has will be given even more, and he will have an abundance. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables, because even though they see, they do not see; and even though they hear, they do not hear or understand. <sup>14</sup>In them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled which says, You will hear clearly, but you will never understand. You will see clearly, but you will never perceive. <sup>15</sup>Because this people's heart has grown callous, their ears are hard of hearing. They have closed their eyes. Otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, turn, and I would heal them.<sup>h</sup>

The boundary line between parables and other forms of comparative illustrations is not a sharp one. A parable in the full sense of the term is a detailed story (usually based on imaginary or literary characters) which Jesus uses to illustrate a spiritual truth. However, the Hebrew and Greek words for "parable" sometimes refer to simpler comparisons which do not include a full story. A number of the sayings in the collection of "parables" in Matthew 13 are less detailed than the stories which we would call parables. A number of such sayings which are included in the list below are marked with an \*. Whether or not to mark a story with an asterisk is often rather arbitrary.

Some would classify Jesus' I AM comparisons in John and a few comparisons in John as "parables."

In some cases it is not certain whether Jesus' story is based on fictional characters or real people. Such cases are marked with *italics*. Parables which occur in only one gospel are in red/purple.

For the reasons cited above, various lists of parables differ widely in the number of "parables" which they include. The list in the *Lutheran Study Bible*, p 1609, lists 55 parables. The list below has only 41.

PARABLES	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE
The Salt of the Earth*	Matthew 5:13	Mark 9:50	
Lamp Under a Bowl*	Matthew 5:14-16	Mark 4:21-22	Luke 8:16, 11:33
Wise and Foolish Builders*	Matthew 7:24-27		Luke 6:47-49
New Cloth on an Old Garment*	Matthew 9:16	Mark 2:21	Luke 5:36
New Wine in Old Wineskins*	Matthew 9:17	Mark 2:22	Luke 5:37-39
The Two Debtors*			Luke 7:40-43
The Sower	Matthew 13:1-23	Mark 4:1-20	Luke 8:4-15
<i>The Good Samaritan</i>			Luke 10:25-37
The Persistent Friend at Midnight			Luke 11:5-13
Seed Growing on its Own		Mark 4:26-29	
The Rich Fool			Luke 12:13-21
The Watchful Servants		Mark 13:35-37	Luke 12:35-40
An Unfruitful Fig Tree			Luke 13:6-9
The Weeds in the Field	Matt 13:24-30, 36-4		
Mustard Seed*	Matthew 13:31-32	Mark 4:26-30	Luke 13:18-19
Yeast*	Matthew 13:33		Luke 13:20-21
The Hidden Treasure	Matthew 13:44		
The Valuable Pearl	Matthew 13:45-46		
Casting the Dragnet into the Sea	Matthew 13:47-50		
Homeowner's Treasures Old and New	Matthew 13:52		
The Lost Sheep	Matthew 18:12-14		Luke 15:3-7
The Unforgiving Servant	Matthew 18:23-35		
The Vineyard Workers	Matthew 20:1-16		
Lowest Seat at the Table*			Luke 14:7-14
The Great Banquet			Luke 14:16-24
Cost of Discipleship*			Luke 14:28-33
The Lost Coin			Luke 15:8-10
The Prodigal Son			Luke 15:11-32
The Shrewd Manager			Luke 16:1-13
<i>The Rich Man and Lazarus</i>			Luke 16:19-31
The Master and His Servant*			Luke 17:7-10
The Persistent Widow			Luke 18:1-8
Two Sons	Matthew 21:28-32		
The Vineyard Owner and His Tenants	Matthew 21:33-44	Mark 12:1-11	Luke 20:9-18
The Wedding Banquet	Matthew 22:1-14		
The Fig Tree*	Matthew 24:32-35	Mark 13:28-31	Luke 21:29-33
Faithful and Wise Servant	Matthew 24:45-51		Luke 12:42-48
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector			Luke 18:9-14

Ten Virgins	Matthew 25:1-13		
The Talents (or Minas) rather different	Matthew 25:14-30		(Luke 19:11-27)
The Sheep and the Goats*	Matthew 25:31-46		

The list above includes parables only from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Most charts of parables list no parables in John's Gospel. Some commentators call some of Jesus' I AM statements, especially the story of the Good Shepherd, parables.

This is an example of a problem in which a word in one language, the English word *parable*, does not quite match a word in another language, the Greek word *parabole*.

Regardless of how we classify them, it is clear that one of Jesus' favorite teaching techniques was using comparisons from daily life to illustrate spiritual lessons.