

Jesus' Messianic Teaching

Walter B. Russell

Introduction

Because ideas matter, what people say about ideas really matters. This is especially true of Jesus the Messiah. His ideas matter more than any others ever spoken. In fact, of such great significance are His ideas, that four of His followers attempted to record them, and, apparently, never even thought that such repetition could exhaust the profundity and significance of Jesus' words and deeds. Therefore, as we continue to survey briefly the four gospels, we need to give some focus to Jesus' sermons and teachings. Since Jesus Himself commissioned His disciples to teach all the peoples of the world to "observe all that I commanded you" (Mt 28:20a), then the actual content of such teaching is of foremost importance.

I. Jesus' Sermons and Interviews

A. There is a relative dearth of full sermons by Jesus in the gospels.

1. **Matthew** has the fullest number in his gospel with five sermons, as one would expect with the great interest of the Jews in the teaching of their rabbis.

a. Mt 5-7—The Sermon on the Mount

b. Mt 10—The Commissioning of the Twelve

c. Mt 13—The Kingdom Parables

d. Mt 23—Seven Woes to the Pharisees and Scribes

e. Mt 24-25—The Olivet Discourse (about the end of the age)

2. **Mark** only records one sermon (Mk 13—The Olivet Discourse).

3. **Luke** actually records no full sermons, but he has much of Jesus' teaching, especially the parables.

4. **John** also records a large number of "sermons" (12), some of which flow out of interviews between Jesus and other people (e.g., Nicodemus in John 3, the Samaritan woman in John 4, etc.).

B. Despite the relative shortage of sermons, the gospels are filled with Jesus' teaching in many other forms.

1. There is a very high percentage of Jesus' speaking in each of the four gospels:

Matthew (60%), Mark (42%), Luke (50%), and John (50%).

2. Much of Jesus' teaching in the gospels comes in more personal communication settings, especially the interviews and dialogues between Jesus and seekers.

C. There is value, however, in spending some time observing the structure of some of Jesus' best known sermons.

II. The Sermon on The Mount as an Example (Matthew 5-7)

A. **The Setting of this sermon** in Matthew 4:23-5:2 is significant because it is at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee as great multitudes are responding to Him on a widespread geographical basis: from all Syria, Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan (Mt 4:24-25).

B. **Jesus' Purpose** in this sermon was to clarify at the beginning of His ministry for His followers what "genuine righteousness" really is and the kind of people they should be as a result of this righteousness.

Used with permission.

Reprinted from *Intertestamental and New Testament Periods from a Missiological Perspective*, by Walter B. Russell (study resources prepared for classes in biblical studies as taught by Walter Russell, Ph.D., at Talbot Seminary, Biola University), Chapter 10.

C. **The Structure of the sermon** is relatively straightforward and moves in a very logical order.¹

1. **5:3-16 The subjects of Messiah's Kingdom.**

a. **5:3-12** The character and portion of the subjects in the Kingdom of God.

b. **5:13-16** Their calling in the world to be salt and light.

2. **5:17-7:12 The explanation of genuine righteousness in Messiah's Kingdom.**

a. **5:17-48** The *principle* of genuine righteousness and the Mosaic Law is applied in six areas.

The principle stated: Fulfillment of the Mosaic Law is in Messiah Jesus and His disciples should evidence a greater righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees! (5:17-20)

- 1) **5:21-26** Regarding murder and murderous attitudes
- 2) **5:27-30** Regarding adultery and adulterous attitudes
- 3) **5:31-32** Regarding divorce (= the conservative view of Shammai)
- 4) **5:33-37** Regarding oaths and virtuous statements
- 5) **5:38-42** Regarding retaliation and non-retaliation
- 6) **5:43-48** Regarding loving and not hating your enemies

b. **6:1-18** The *practice* of genuine righteousness is applied in three areas.

The main point: Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be noticed by them. (6:1)

- 1) **6:2-4** In the practice of giving
- 2) **6:5-15** In the practice of praying
- 3) **6:16-18** In the practice of fasting

c. **6:19-7:12** The *perspective* of genuine righteousness is applied in four areas.

- 1) **6:19-34** Regarding wealth
 - 2) **7:1-5** Regarding judging others
 - 3) **7:6** Regarding enemies
 - 4) **7:7-11** Regarding asking God for good things
- Summary:* Treat people as you want them to treat you. (7:12)

3. **7:13-27 Conclusion: The two options before you regarding genuine righteousness**

a. **7:13-14** You have to choose between two roads and two gates.

b. **7:15-23** You can be one of two types of trees producing good or bad fruit.

c. **7:24-27** You can build on one of two types of foundations.

D. **The response of the crowd** was one of amazement at Jesus' teaching, "for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt 7:28-29).

III. The Parables of Jesus and Their Interpretation

The short stories of the gospels called "parables" are really a rather diverse group of literary creations. For example, included under the rather rubbery rubric of "New Testament parables" are:

- **similitudes** (extended similes or explicit comparisons using "as" or "like"; e.g., parable of the leaven in Mt 13:31-32),
- **allegories** (a series of related metaphors which imply a comparison; e.g., parable of the sower in Mk 4:1-20),
- **example stories** (positive or negative traits exemplified in characters which are to be imitated or avoided; e.g., parable of good Samaritan in Lk 10:25-37), and
- **actual parables** (extended metaphors which imply comparisons by referring to past fictional events to express spiritual or moral truths; e.g., parable of prodigal son in Lk 15:11-32).²

Therefore, to define "parables" in the New Testament, one needs a broader definition that can encompass each of the four types of literature above:

Parables are best defined as stories with two levels of meaning; the story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood. In effect, parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.³

The beauty of parables is that they are universally interesting to people in every culture because of their story-like qualities. This is their genius. As stories, they draw listeners into their little world and kick them out on the other side with a significant point sticking in them! Actually, they are very potent in helping reshape the listeners' views of reality by introducing them to a brief, but poignant view of the Kingdom of God that may differ from their

own. However, because of the picturesque and memorable nature of the parables, the listener remembers the story and its point or points about what God's kingdom is like. In this sense, parables may lead to delayed responses by the listeners' to the challenge of the stories. Days or weeks later, the full significance of a parable may come crashing home to the one who has been pondering its view of reality. This would be especially true of those whose

hearts are receptive to the Word of God. As the Parable of the Sower and the Soils pictures, the desired response to the sown seed of the Word of God is that "they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (Mk 4:20).

There are almost fifty "parables" in the four gospels, and they are listed below:⁴

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Good and bad trees	7:16-20			
Wheat and tares	13:24-43			
Treasure in a field	13:44			
Pearl of great price	13:45-46			
Fishnet	13:47-50			
Merciless servant	18:23-35			
Laborers in the vineyard	20:1-16			
Two sons	21:28-32			
Wise and foolish maidens	25:1-13			
Sheep and goats	25:31-46			
Seed growing secretly		4:26-29		
Two debtors			7:41-50	
Good Samaritan			10:25-37	
Friend at midnight			11:5-8	
Rich fool			12:13-21	
Barren fig tree			13:6-9	
Tower builder			14:28-30	
Warring king			14:31-33	
Lost coin			15:8-10	
Prodigal son			15:11-32	
Unjust steward			16:1-8	
Rich man and Lazarus			16:19-31	
Humble servant			17:7-10	
Unjust judge			18:1-8	
Pharisee and tax collector			18:9-14	
Good shepherd				10:1-18
True vine				15:1-8
Bridegroom's guests	9:15	2:19-20	5:33-39	
Unshrunk cloth	9:16	2:21	5:36	
New wine	12:29-30	2:22	5:37-39	
Strong man bound	9:17	3:22-27	11:21-23	
Sower	13:31-32	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15	
Mustard seed	13:1-9, 18-23	4:30-32	13:18-19	
Wicked tenants	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19	
Budding fig tree	24:32-36	13:28-32	21:29-33	
Wise and foolish builders	7:24-27		6:47-49	
Father and children's requests	7:9-11		11:11-13	
Two ways/two doors	7:13-14		13:23-27	
Leaven in a lump	13:31-32		13:20-21	
Lost sheep	18:12-14		15:1-7	
Wedding banquet	22:1-14		14:15-24	
Thief in the night	24:42-44		12:39-40	
Faithful and unfaithful steward	24:45-51		12:42-46	
Talents and pounds	25:14-30		19:11-27	
Lamp and the measure		4:21-25	8:16-18	
Watchman		13:34-36	12:35-38	

A Suggested Sequence for Interpreting the Parables of Jesus

Because of the long history of the abusive interpretation of parables, it may prove helpful to spend some time pondering how to interpret these remarkable little stories. While the millennium and-a-half allegorical interpretations still live in many pulpits, they have long since been rejected by experts as the correct interpretive methodology for parables. Likewise, the popular “only one main point” interpretation of the last one hundred years has recently been dethroned as the primary interpretive strategy. Actually, the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. The onus is upon the hearer/interpreter to discover how much of an allegorical nature the parable has. The following guidelines are given to help in this quest:

1. Determine where this parable falls on the “Allegorical Continuum”:⁵

Continuous Allegory	Partially Allegorical	Main-point Allegory	Realistic Reporting
(most points have corresponding elements)	(a few main points have corresponding meanings)	(only the main thrust of the parable has a corresponding meaning)	(there are essentially no allegorical elements)
e.g., Parable of the Soils (soils, seed, ground, etc all have corresponding meanings)	e.g., Parable of Prodigal Son (father and sons are only elements that have corresponding meanings)	e.g., Parable of the Good Samaritan (the good Samaritan’s actions personify being neighborly to anyone we encounter)	No parables on this end; all parables are on the left half of continuum

2. From the parable’s setting within Jesus’ ministry and within the gospel’s structure, determine if the parable...

- answers a question (e.g., in Lk 10:29—“But wishing to justify himself, he [lawyer] said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”),
- addresses a concern (e.g., in Lk 15:1-2—in response to the criticism of Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees because of His relationships with sinners, Jesus told them the three parables of Luke 15),
- clarifies a new teaching e.g., in Mt 13—the blasphemous rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders (Mt 12:22-24) caused Jesus to respond with the series of parables about the unexpected form of the Kingdom of God),
- etc.

This determination of the parable’s context should reinforce your literary identification of the where the parable falls on the allegorical continuum above.

You should also be able to specify from the context whether the **intended** audience is disciples, multitudes, opponents, etc.

3. Be sensitive to historical and cultural features that heighten the parable’s impact on its original hearers.

For example, noting how the Jews disdained the Samaritans greatly intensifies the impact of the example of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). This may help explain why the Jewish lawyer could not bring himself to say “the Samaritan” when Jesus asked which of the three travelers proved to be a neighbor (Lk 10:36). Instead, the lawyer could only answer in a roundabout manner, “The one who showed mercy toward him” (Lk 10:37). Understanding how insulting it was to one’s

father to ask him for your inheritance early greatly heightens the emotions of the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). This also gives a remarkable insight into the humility of the father in receiving the repentant son and in the intensity of his joy upon his son’s return. This is an aspect that will need some research!

4. To determine the main point or points of the parable, focus especially on the end of the parable.

“The rule of end stress recognizes that the most important part of the parable is the conclusion where the parable often requires a decision or forces the hearer to reverse his or her way of thinking.”⁶ For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan ends with Jesus’ exhortation to the lawyer, “Go and do the same” (Lk 10:37). This surely points the interpreter toward seeing neighborliness as the main point of the parable. Likewise, the three parables of Luke 15 (the lost sheep, the

lost coin, and the lost (prodigal) son) all end with an emphasis on rejoicing when a sinner repents (Lk 15:7, 10, 32). Therefore, the main points of each of these parables must include the emphasis that God's desired response to sinners repenting is not the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees (Lk 15:1-2), but rejoicing!

5. Determine the theological significance of the parable and draw applications for your culture that parallel the impact on the original hearers in their culture.

For example, who would be the corresponding marginalized persons religiously rejected in your culture like the Samaritans were in Jewish culture who nevertheless grasped the very heart of what God wanted in neighborly relationships under the Mosaic Law and obediently personified true neighborliness?

Conclusion

We have looked rather briefly at some of Jesus' teaching as expressed in His sermons and parables. Both types of teaching focused on explaining the Kingdom of God. For example, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 explains the genuine righteousness necessary to see God's Kingdom. Jesus used as His foil, the paragons of righteousness in Jewish culture, the scribes and the Pharisees. His opening challenge to His listeners was that their righteousness had to exceed that of these revered teachers if they ever wanted to see the Kingdom of God (Mt 5:20). How this must have clanged on his hearers' ears! And how they must have listened very intently to see how such a seemingly unthinkable thing could be done!

The parables of Jesus are equally interesting, yet they express the nature of the Kingdom of God in more story-like ways, but perhaps in as penetrating a manner as Jesus' sermons. The variety among the almost fifty parables is amazing, as is their difference from Jesus' sermons. Such difference and variety speak of the richness of His kingdom in its various expressions and the richness of communication that Jesus chose to teach not only Israel, but ultimately all the peoples of the world. Attending to the richness and diversity in Jesus' teaching helps underscore the resources available in communicating about His messianic identity to vast diversity of the world's peoples. Mastering the range of Jesus' teaching is central to what His people are to do if they are to teach all that He commanded us to do.

Endnotes

- ¹ For the structure of the Sermon on the Mount, see Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980) 94-119.
- ² Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Parable," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 593.
- ³ Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Parable," 594.
- ⁴ List from Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Parable," 595.
- ⁵ This concept is from Leland Ryken, Appendix on "The Allegorical Nature of Parables," in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).
- ⁶ Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Parable," 599.