

Seven Reasons to Study the Parables of Jesus

By Nick Roark

This semester we hope to study several of the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Here are seven reasons why we think this will be helpful for us.

1. The parables of Jesus are among the best known and most influential stories in the world.

Many of these stories are famous. Even those unfamiliar with the Bible are oftentimes familiar with these parables. Many of your classmates will have heard the phrases “good Samaritan” and “prodigal son” before. Studying these stories this semester gives us a great opportunity to invite lost friends to come hear them read, explained, and applied. As followers of Christ we should treasure these stories and seek to understand them in the power of the Spirit.

2. The parables of Jesus are often misinterpreted to be simply “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.”

Oftentimes the parables of Jesus are approached like Aesop’s Fables or just as some pithy words of religious wisdom. This kind of approach to studying and explaining the parables dishonors Christ and His Word. Jesus did tell these simple stories by using everyday language and common images that people could understand. But there is more going on here. Jesus says in Luke 8:10 that He is speaking in parables “so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.” What does this mean? Jesus isn’t *simply* trying to relate complicated religious truths using *simple* stories. As we study the parables we will see that the parables are sovereignly intended by Jesus both to *reveal* and to *conceal*. They both *disclose* and *disguise*. Jesus *hides* the secrets of the kingdom of God in *plain sight* in stories that children understand and scholars stumble over.

3. The parables of Jesus are the inspired and mighty words of the living Christ, the Son of God.

In chapters 1-2, Dr. Luke makes clear that Jesus is God in the flesh. God sent His one and only Son to be born as a man into this world. We are told in 1:35: “He shall be called holy—the Son of God.” Therefore, Luke intends for us to read these parables as the words of the mighty Son of God. When Jesus speaks, He speaks in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. 4:1, 14). Jesus is the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15) who performs signs and wonders in the midst of Israel and who is “mighty in word and deed.” (Luke 24:19) The words of Jesus are weighty. They are explosive. They are powerful. They are mighty. As we read and interpret the parables of Jesus, Luke intends for us to submit ourselves to them as the words of the resurrected and reigning Lord of the universe (cf. 24:51).

4. The parables of Jesus are intended to provoke a response to action.

The Greek term for ‘parable’ has a broad range of meaning and may refer to a variety of figures of speech, including proverbs, metaphors, and analogies. For the purposes of our study, *a parable is simply a story intended to call the reader or hearer to action. A parable is an expanded analogy or comparison used to convince or persuade.* It is striking the number of times in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus tells parables to the great crowds of people who came to hear Him. Jesus was becoming a popular preacher but He called for more than just a superficial commitment (cf. 9:57-62). Jesus tells parables, “stories which yielded their meaning only to those prepared to search for it. The parables demand thought and spiritual earnestness. They separate the sincere seeker from the casual hearer.”¹

¹ Leon Morris, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 165.

As you read through Luke, note how differently people responded to these parables. Some heard and were amazed. Others heard and were confused. Some heard and left rejoicing. Others heard and left depressed. Some heard and believed. Others heard and were so threatened that they plotted Jesus' assassination (cf. 20:19-20). Jesus tells these parables in order to provoke a response. Notice the two options given at the conclusion of Jesus' final parable in **20:9-18**: Respond in faith and Jesus becomes a cornerstone or respond in unbelief and Jesus becomes a crushing stone. There are no other options.

5. The parables of Jesus are often neglected by followers of Christ because we have become “too familiar” with them.

Familiarity often breeds contempt. Sometimes we become too familiar with passages of Scripture. What I mean is that we have heard or read certain passages so often that we stop listening to them or studying them. It's like when you tune in to your favorite TV show and realize that it's a rerun. You might continue watching the show but you don't pay as close of attention because you have already seen it before. You are familiar with it. So you sort of check out. That is how we treat the parables. When we read the parable of the prodigal son or the good Samaritan we have a tendency to check out because they are like “Bible reruns.” We already know them. At least we think we do. By God's grace this semester we need to try to read these stories afresh. As we do we will see Jesus provoking us and persuading us. His parables will shock us and engage us. They will confront us and comfort us. They will shatter us and restore us.

6. The parables of Jesus are not just a form of *information*; they are a form of *confrontation*.

Jesus taught in parables as a way of confronting false notions of His identity, half-hearted discipleship, and the religious hypocrisy that was rampant in Israel. This confrontation with the world is described by D.A. Carson who writes: “When Jesus confronts the world some kind of explosion can be expected; for Jesus and the world are very different, frankly opposite in their purpose, character, values, and aims. The world is essentially self-centered; Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). The world is in active rebellion against God; Jesus always pleases His Father (John 8:29). The world is time-bound and temporary (cf. 1 John 2:15-17); not so Jesus or His kingdom or the person who does His will. The world needs saving, and Jesus comes to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21); the world needs judging, and Jesus is the Son of man who comes when least expected and passes the entire world under review (Matt. 24:36-25:46). Jesus and the world are bound to clash with each other.”² This semester we need to humbly ask God to confront us as we study these parables together.

7. The parables of Jesus help us to better know, love, and seek our King and His Kingdom.

The Scriptures, all of the Scriptures, are about Jesus (cf. Luke 24:27). The parables in the Gospel of Luke are no exception. As we read these parables we will see that *our King is heading to the cross*. After His ministry in the surrounding regions of Samaria, Jesus begins walking to Jerusalem in 9:51. Jesus sets His face and begins heading toward Jerusalem. It takes nearly half the book before Jesus arrives in the holy city (cf. 19:45). Nearly 40% of Luke's Gospel details Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. For ten chapters we read of Jesus walking and talking. He is healing and answering questions. And what does Jesus speak throughout this journey on the road to Jerusalem? Jesus speaks in parables. On His way *to the cross*,

² D.A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978/1987), 153.

Jesus describes the *way of the cross* by using parables. What awaits Jesus in Jerusalem? Luke tells us three times:

Luke 9:22 "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Luke 9:44 "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men."

Luke 18:31-33 And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

The most scandalous reality in Luke's Gospel is not merely the parables of Jesus. It's the message and mission of Jesus. The message is that the Son of God is going to be crucified on a cross in Jerusalem for the sin of the world. The mission is that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:10). The *guiltless* King of the Jews came to suffer and die on the cross for *guilty* rebels (23:3-4). The parables help us to better understand who our King is and what it means to take up our cross and follow Him. Jesus does not call His followers to mere religious morality but rather to radical repentance. Jesus calls His followers to a faith that perseveres and to a path of discipleship that will involve suffering and bearing a cross.

As we read these parables we will see that *our King is establishing His Kingdom* (8:1). In these parables Jesus tells His disciples "secrets of the kingdom of God" (8:9-10). The kingdom that Jesus is establishing is unlike anything else in this world. In the kingdom of God, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. In the kingdom of God, the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled. In the parables of Jesus we see portraits of God's grace, we see portraits of God's love, and we see portraits of God's mercy. We see that Christ has come to establish a kingdom in this world that is not of this world.

Application: What can you do to get ready for the series?

- Read the Gospel according to Luke.
- Pray for a humble heart and for the Holy Spirit's help.
- Use the Parable Study Guide.pdf that will be posted on PCM site this week (<http://www.pray.org/college/>).

So take care how you listen this semester. Pray for ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to receive patiently and faithfully the words of Jesus. Jesus said: "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).