

The Parables

Why Parables?

The Parables

Class 1: **What is a Parable?**

Class 2: **Why Parables?**

Class 3-n: **Jesus' Parables**

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Summary

A functional definition

(built from Jesus' parables)

Narrative
(story)

Tropical
(double-meaning)

Rhetorical
(persuasive/call-to-action)

Spiritual
(illustrate spiritual truths)

Groupings

(built from Jesus' parables)

Similitudes

Parables

Exemplary Stories

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Similitudes

The similitude is the most concise type of parable. It briefly narrates a typical or recurrent event from real life.

Key Features: Similitude

Narrative: Typical, recurrent, familiar (often present tense)

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved by recounting what is widely recognized to be true

Trope: Dissimilar comparison (metaphor/simile)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Parables

Parables are often (though not always) longer and more detailed than similitudes, using a one-off fictitious event as their narrative

Key Features: Parable

Narrative: One-off event, fictitious (though not fanciful), “once upon a time”, often longer than similitude, past tense

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved through simple, vivid, engaging story

Trope: Dissimilar comparison (metaphor/simile)

What is a Parable?

Literary Form: Exemplary Story

The exemplary story, like the similitude and parable, presents an implied comparison between an event (either real or imagined that is similarly true-to-life) and a spiritual truth; using the event as a specific example of that spiritual truth.

Key Features: Exemplary Story

Narrative: One-off event, fictitious (though not fanciful), “once upon a time”, often longer like the parable, past tense

Rhetoric: Persuasiveness achieved through true-to-life application of a spiritual truth (i.e. I could do likewise..)

Trope: Similar comparison (synecdoche)

What is a Parable?

Immediate historical/cultural context: Summary

Education in Greek language and thought would not have been systematic among the Jews of Judea in the early first century, but at the very least, Greek was the language of trade, commerce and administration, thus having a place in the common everyday speech of all social classes of the Jews.

Jesus spent much of his ministry in Galilee which, even in the post-exilic period, is referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles" by the prophet Isaiah – Jews were a minority, and the region was bilingual (Aramaic & Greek) in Jesus' day.

What is a Parable?

Immediate historical/cultural context: Summary

Jesus' parables have their basis in the parables ("mashal") of the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament, that is not in question.

However, Jesus' use of parables was culturally relevant not only in Judea, but throughout the Mediterranean world; though not as much due to widespread familiarity with the parables ("mashal") of the Old Testament, but likely moreso due to the Hellenistic influence of his time (Greco-Roman fables/parables (themselves finding their origins in "mashal", but reaching a far wider audience through the Greco-Roman/Hellenistic expansion)).

The Greco-Roman cultural context of parables in Jesus' day was that of the Greek "gymnasia" – meaning they were primarily used in teaching children/the uneducated.

What is a Parable?

Ancient/Old Testament context: Summary

2 Sam 12:1-4 (The poor man's ewe lamb)

2 Sam 14:5-13 (The widow's quarrelling sons)

1 Kgs 20:39-42 (The soldier's charge)

Is 5:1-7 (God's vineyard)

Is 28:23-29 (The plowman)

Ezek 17:1-24 (The eagles and the vine)

Ezek 19:1-14 (The lioness of Judah)

Ezek 20:45-49 (The consuming wildfire)

Ezek 24:3-14 (The boiling pot)

Non-fiction narratives: Jer 13:1-11 (The linen belt), Jer 18:1-10 (The potter), Hosea (Hosea's broken and redeemed family)

The Parables

Class 1: **What is a Parable?**

Class 2: **Why Parables?**

Class 3-n: **Jesus' Parables**

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

(Mark 4:10–12 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’””

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

(Matthew 13:10–13 ESV)

“Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

(Luke 8:9–10 ESV)

“And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’”

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

(Mark 4:10–12 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, **“To you has been given** the secret of the kingdom of God, **but for those outside** everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’””

(Mark 4:13 ESV)

“And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

- Why would the Lord use parables with the purpose of excluding some from repentance? Who are "those outside" being excluded? Isn't that against the will of God that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9)? Is the exclusion arbitrary, or is there some reason that isn't mentioned here?
- If the disciples had truly received the secret of the kingdom of God, why would they need an explanation for the parable of the sower from the Lord (Mark 4:13)?
- Where am I in this division (excluded or given the secret), or was this division only relevant to the time of Jesus' ministry?

Why Parables?

Jesus' answer

(Mark 4:10–12 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the **secret** of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’””

Why Parables?

The secret of the kingdom of God

(2 Thessalonians 2:7–12 ESV)

“For the **mystery** of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, **because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.**”

Why Parables?

The secret of the kingdom of God

(1 Corinthians 2:7 ESV)

“But we impart a **secret** and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.”

(1 Corinthians 4:1 ESV)

“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the **mysteries** of God.”

Why Parables?

The secret of the kingdom of God

(1 Corinthians 15:50–52 ESV)

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a **mystery**. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”

Why Parables?

The secret of the kingdom of God

(Romans 11:25 ESV)

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this **mystery**, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Mark 4:10–12 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’””

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Isaiah 6:9–10 ESV)

“And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.””

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Isaiah 6:11–13 ESV)

“Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.”

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Mark 4:10–12 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’””

Why Parables?

(Romans 9:18–24 ESV)

Hardening

“So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Romans 9:10–13 ESV)

“And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.””

Why Parables?

Hardening

Why would the Lord use parables with the purpose of excluding some from repentance? Who are "those outside" being excluded? Isn't that against the will of God that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9)? Is the exclusion arbitrary, or is there some reason that isn't mentioned here?

- "Those outside" (Mark 4:11) excluded from repentance refers specifically to the Jewish leaders that rejected Christ (Mark 4:12 → Isa. 6:9-11 - Jesus was after all sent to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mat. 3:10)). They had in fact excluded themselves by choosing again, like their ancestors, to reject God's word (Christ) (Isa. 6:9).

Why Parables?

Hardening

Why would the Lord use parables with the purpose of excluding some from repentance? Who are "those outside" being excluded? Isn't that against the will of God that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9)? Is the exclusion arbitrary, or is there some reason that isn't mentioned here?

- God's hardening is not arbitrary (Isaiah 6:9 - "Keep on...", 2 Thes. 2:7 - "because they refused to love the truth"). When we choose to reject his calls to repentance, he may establish us in our rejection further. This is not removal of agency/free will, but that he & his word may be proved right in us (be it either through our eternal destruction or redemption, between which we ultimately still have a choice (Rom 9:21-23))

Why Parables?

Hardening

Why would the Lord use parables with the purpose of excluding some from repentance? Who are "those outside" being excluded? Isn't that against the will of God that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9)? Is the exclusion arbitrary, or is there some reason that isn't mentioned here?

- God's will is indeed that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). God's practice of hardening as described/understood above doesn't negate this, rather it is an application of his omniscience, his complete knowledge of past, present and future. Our end is known by him, whatever we choose in our temporally limited existence, God uses to declare his righteousness be it through wrath or mercy, goodness or severity.

Why Parables?

Hardening

- If the disciples had truly received the secrets of the kingdom of God, why would they need an explanation for the parable of the sower from the Lord (Mark 4:13)?

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Mark 4:10–13 ESV)

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’” **And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”**

Why Parables?

Hardening

(1 Corinthians 1:21–25 ESV)

“For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Why Parables?

Hardening

If the disciples had truly received the "secret of the kingdom of God", why would they need an explanation for the parable of the sower from the Lord (Mark 4:13)?

- Being "given secret of the kingdom of God" involves more than just knowledge. It involves both spiritual truth/knowledge, but also the reception of it. It must be received faithfully (in the case of the disciples this meant leaving everything to follow Jesus but more generally - doing as he commanded) to be of any use at all.
- "Secret" (G3466), often translated "mystery," is used to describe spiritual truths/knowledge in the New Testament (things inaccessible to our natural human minds except for God's revelation of them through his word)

Why Parables?

Hardening

If the disciples had truly received the "secret of the kingdom of God", why would they need an explanation for the parable of the sower from the Lord (Mark 4:13)?

- It is therefore not expected that the disciples would instantly understand all Jesus' teaching. Of much greater importance than their intellect, was the quality of their hearts, that when they **did** understand (which was simple with the Lord's willing help), it would compel them to act - to repent and to change their behaviour.

Why Parables?

Hardening

Where am I in this division (excluded or given the secret of the Kingdom of God), or was this division only relevant to the time of Jesus' ministry?

Why Parables?

Hardening

(2 Thessalonians 2:7–12 ESV)

“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, **because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion**, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Hebrews 4:11–12 ESV)

“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, **so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience**. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Why Parables?

Hardening

Where am I in this division (excluded or given the secret of the Kingdom of God), or was this division only relevant to the time of Jesus' ministry?

- The dividing power of Jesus' parables had a specific application to the Jews (Isa. 6:9, Rom. 11:25), but it has a personal application for each of us. As we know, the pattern of Israel's disobedience is not unique to Israel (Heb 4:11). When we reject or fail to receive God's word in faith, doing as it commands us, we will also be subject to hardening (2 Thes. 2:7-12, Rom. 9:18, Mark 4:23-25).

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Mark 4:23–25 ESV)

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.””

Why Parables?

Hardening

(Romans 9:18 ESV)

“So then he has **mercy** on whomever he wills, and he **hardens** whomever he wills.”

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“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. **For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.**””