

and the **Judge and Widow** (ch.18). He also warns about the dangers of riches and the need to support the poor with the parables of the **Rich Man and Lazarus** (ch.16), the **Rich but Foolish Farmer** (ch.12), and the invitation of the poor to the **Feast** (ch.14)



Above all, parables unique to Luke's Gospel demonstrate God's mercy and forgiveness, the **Prodigal Son**, the **Lost Drachma**, the **Lost Sheep** (all ch.15).

The Hidden Meaning of the Parables

Having outlined how the parables are very effective teaching aids, it is surprising then that Jesus' answer to the disciples' question about why he uses them indicates it is to **prevent** understanding, 'because it is granted to them not to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom' (Mtt.13 // Mk.4 // Lk.8). This is further explained as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 6 '**listen and listen but never understand ..**' and similar sentiments in Psalm 78.

Although Matthew's Gospel does try to see everything Jesus does in terms of OT prophecy, and thus may force connections on occasions, it is generally accepted that this and other similar sayings are original to Jesus and, in fact, helped to support a Gnostic interpretation of Jesus' actions in some communities, that is, the belief that salvation was achievable by acquiring some special knowledge.

How then to explain it? There is the possibility that something has been lost in the translation of an Aramaic phrase into English. It may be that Jesus' words were really meant to show that parables were meant to be understood by those with faith but that he **foresaw** that they would not be understood by those without faith in him. This view is strengthened by looking at the events in Matthew ch.11 and 12, immediately preceding the parable discourse, when Jesus condemns the current generation, the towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida, and the Pharisees for failing to accept him despite his miracles.

Jesus in the Gospels

9. The Parables of Jesus



Questions

For Reflection

1. Were the parables an effective way for Jesus to teach?
2. What did Jesus mean when he said about the parables 'listen but never understand, look but never perceive'?
3. What do the parables say about God's mercy?

What are Parables?

Parables are stories that are told in order to convey a particular, often difficult or unpalatable message. They are made more interesting and intriguing by the use of imagery that is known to and understood by the particular audience. They are, therefore, a very useful teaching tool because they arouse the interest of the listener and help to provoke reflection.



The Purpose of the Gospel Parables

It is very important at the outset to emphasise that the parables in the Gospels serve a dual purpose. They are there to reflect the teaching of Jesus **and** the teaching and concerns of the early church. As such, there are many instances of original parable stories being amended in order to suit the needs of the early Christian communities. It is generally accepted, for example, that explanations of the parables is not original to Jesus, but have been added: Mtt.13 // Mk.4 // Lk.8, on the parable of the Sower, and Mt.13 on the Darnel.

In particular, it is argued by some scholars that those parables that are allegories should not be identified with Jesus, and are additions made by the early church. Allegories are stories where each element of the story directly symbolises something or someone in a real life situation, and the interpretation of the story is linked to those realities.

Allegory in the Gospels Clear allegories are:

The Wicked Tenants (Mtt.21 // Mk.12 // Lk.20): which may be seen as the early community commenting on Jesus' rejection, despite his coming having been prophesied. It is a criticism of the Jewish leadership.

The Wedding Banquet (Mtt..22 with a similar but not identical story in Lk.14) In Matthew the story includes a reference to the king's messengers bringing the invitation being killed and the king in turn

destroying their 'town'. This is a clear reference to Jesus' rejection and to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Its allegorical nature can be recognised easily; the king would not have sent invitations to just one town. In addition, Matthew adds the passage about one man at the wedding not wearing the correct garment; this is the early church stressing the importance of good works to accompany conversion.



In Luke's similar account, only a general feast is described without any mention of killings or the destruction of a town. However, Luke adds his own missionary comment about going out into the open roads and hedgerows for guests—the allegory is of the town guests being convert Jews and the open road guests being gentiles.

Examples of other allegories are the **Good Shepherd** (Jn.10) and the **Vine and the Branches** (Jn.15).

Parable Themes

The parables tend to follow certain themes: the nature of the kingdom, the power of prayer, God's mercy, the need for a personal decision about Jesus, and perseverance and good deeds thereafter, judgement and the end of time.

Matthew's Gospel is structured to present Jesus telling a whole series of parables at one time (Mtt.13). These concern the nature of God's Kingdom (Mustard Seed, Yeast, Treasure, Darnel), personal decision making and perseverance (the Sower), and Judgement (the Dagnet). Matthew's other parables reinforce the need for perseverance and readiness, as in the parable of the **Wedding Attendants** (ch.25), the importance of good deeds, like forgiving others in the **Unforgiving Debtor** (ch.18), doing good works and maximising our talents, in the parable of the **Talent s**(ch.25), and not just talking about doing good, exemplified in the parable of the **Two Sons** (ch.21).

Luke's Gospel stresses the need for charity in the **Good Samaritan** (ch.10) and perseverance in prayer with the **Friend in Need** (ch.11)