

Lecture 9: Parables: True to Life, Told in the Storm, and Struck for a Verdict

Dr. James Rosscup · The Master's Seminary · 94 minutes

Special hermeneutics begins with the parables, and Dr. Rosscup treats them as the crafted, kingdom-centered stories they are: true to life, told in the storm of real conflict, and aimed at a verdict. He distinguishes parable from allegory, shows how the problem in the context is the key hung at the front door, walks the eight parables of Matthew 13 as one answer to one crisis, and dismantles the church fathers' allegory of the Good Samaritan. Listen for the rule: find the problem, find the point, and let them fit like hand in glove.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Cast alongside: what a parable is

The word itself means to cast one thing alongside another for comparison: the sowing of seed, known to every Palestinian farmer, laid beside the sowing of the word in the soil of human hearts. Rosscup's definition stacks five marks: a story, true to life, adapted and crafted by the speaker, conveying a representation from one realm to another, and centered, in every one of Jesus's thirty to forty parables, on the kingdom, the very kingdom the prophets promised and John and Jesus heralded as at hand.

02

A brilliant scholar's one wrong move

A. M. Hunter of Aberdeen had an uncanny knack for the kernel of each parable, and Rosscup commends him warmly. But Hunter belonged to the realized eschatology school, which relocated the great crisis of the parables, the separation of wheat and tares, good fish and bad, back into the first advent rather than the second coming. The points were right; the placement was wrong: even excellent scholarship must be weighed.

03

Parable against allegory

Three differences. A parable is true to life; an allegory may be deliberately fantastic, as Ezekiel's two great eagles carrying treetop branches across hundreds of miles, explained in the passage as the kings of Babylon and Egypt. In a parable not every detail carries meaning, like the backdrop dressing a shop window's one dress, while in an allegory every detail means something and says so: the breastplate consists of righteousness, the vine and branches name their own referents. And a parable's interpretation stands apart from the story, before it or after it, while an allegory carries its interpretation inside itself.

04

Do not make it walk on all fours

Of Matthew 13's eight parables, Jesus explains exactly two, the soils and the wheat and tares, detail by detail. For the rest, the interpreter must find the central point and hold his imagination on a leash, refusing to assign meanings to details the story never loads. The old warning stands: do not make a parable walk on all fours.

05

The craft of the storyteller

The parables use the rules of powerful popular storytelling. Repetition and buildup: one sheep of a hundred, one coin of ten, one son of two; traveler after traveler passing the wounded man. Contrast of virtue and vice: wise and foolish virgins. A small cast, two to five characters, from the two groups of virgins to the five hirings in the vineyard. And end stress: the bomb dropped at the close, the bridegroom arriving, the door barred, the father pleading with the elder brother.

06

Told in the storm

The parables were not composed at a desk; they were provoked spontaneously in living encounter, the cut and thrust of conflict, what one fine study calls the eye of the storm. Luke 15's three lost things answer the grumbling of Pharisees scandalized that Jesus receives sinners; the stories strike for a verdict, calling hearers to embrace sinners in love without compromise. Preaching aims at the same thing: a verdict on the message, not the messenger.

07

Why parables? Concealing and revealing

Asked in Matthew 13 why he now spoke in parables, Jesus gave a cluster of reasons: to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy of two kinds of hearers, to conceal kingdom truth from the closed, and to reveal it to the open, the pattern of 1 Corinthians 2 where the natural man cannot discern what the spiritual man receives. Truth is imparted to open hearts. And the parables seize attention: Scripture, rightly met, is never boring; only its readers are.

08

The problem is the key at the front door

The first principle for interpreting any parable: determine the specific problem or occasion in the context that made this story necessary. Rosscup learned it under J. Dwight Pentecost at Dallas and then proved it himself, working through every parable to peg its problem. Sometimes the key hangs before the story, as when Luke notes the crowd supposed the kingdom would appear immediately; sometimes after, as when Jesus explains privately; always, the context holds it.

09

Matthew 13: eight answers to one crisis

The wider context is Matthew 12, where rejection explodes in the unpardonable sin, raising the question how there can ever be a kingdom. That very day Jesus answers with eight parables: soils, where the fourth soil guarantees fruit despite three failures; wheat and tares and the good and bad fish, promising the separation at the end of the age; mustard seed and leaven, the outward growth from tiny to great and the inward permeation to the whole; treasure and pearl, the kingdom's surpassing worth; and the householder scribe, bringing out things old and new. By the chapter's end, gloom has become confident hope: the enterprise will succeed.

10

The Good Samaritan in its own right

The occasion is a lawyer's two questions in Galilee, distinct from the similar exchange at Jerusalem in Matthew 22, two events, not one garbled account. Asked who is my neighbor, Jesus tells of the road that drops steeply from Jerusalem toward Jericho through robber country, the priest and Levite who pass by, and the Samaritan who stops. His answer reverses the question: your neighbor is anyone to whom you can be a neighbor. It is your move. Even the oil and wine are true to life: oil to soothe, wine to cleanse, exactly as ancient sources prescribe.

11

The allegory that buried the Samaritan

The church fathers read the parable as a code: the wounded man humanity, the robbers the devil, the priest the law, the Levite the prophets, the Samaritan Christ, the oil and wine grace, the donkey Christ's body, the inn the church, the innkeeper the apostle Paul. Ingenious, and unfounded at every point: the passage itself commands go and do likewise, making the hearer, not christology, the story's target. The literal sense makes beautiful sense; no other sense is needed.

12

Guarding the gospel in the parable

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Snatched alone, the parable could be twisted into salvation by works. The analogy of the faith guards it: justification is by faith, a free gift, and the fruitful love the parable pictures is manifestation, not merit, the pathway of the righteous in Psalm 1 and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, where those practicing the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom. Scripture as a whole informs each passage's intent.

13

Finding the main point

Three signals mark the central idea: a prompting question in the context; a direct conclusion appended, as after the rich fool, so is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God; or an answer to a request, as the friend at midnight follows Lord, teach us to pray. There the rare word for the sleeper's motive, weighed by the journal literature and the great commentaries, points to his care for his blameless name, and the argument lands: if such a man rises to give, how much more will the God whose character is perfectly good answer those who ask.

14

Rome was not built in a day

Rosscup closes pastorally: diligence, prayer in the spirit of Psalm 119, open my eyes to behold wondrous things, purity of life, and patience. Interpreters improve by trying again and again, never arrive, and stay honest: better to say I will look it up than to fudge an answer and give a bum steer.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Matthew 13 · Matthew 25 · Luke 15 · Luke 10 · Matthew 20 · Ezekiel 17 · John 15 · Ephesians 6 · Luke 19 · Matthew 12 · Luke 12 · Luke 11 · Matthew 22 · Galatians 5 · Psalm 1 · Isaiah 6 · 1 Corinthians 2 · Psalm 119

KEY TERMS

Parable

A story cast alongside a truth for comparison: true to life, crafted by the speaker, conveying a representation, and always centered on the kingdom.

Allegory

An extended figure that may be deliberately fantastic, in which every detail carries meaning and the interpretation is built into the telling itself.

Walking on all fours

The error of forcing meaning onto every detail of a parable; most details are backdrop for the one point.

End stress

The storyteller's craft of dropping the decisive weight at the close: the bridegroom's arrival, the barred door, the father and the elder brother.

Realized eschatology

The school that relocated the parables' great crisis to the first advent; its scholars often found the right kernel at the wrong time.

The key at the front door

The problem or occasion in the context that made the parable necessary; find it, and the main point must fit it like hand in glove.

Manifestation, not merit

The analogy of faith's guard on the Good Samaritan: the fruitful love pictured is the pathway of the saved, never the purchase of salvation.

COMPREHENSION CHECK: FOURTEEN QUESTIONS

1. What does the word behind parable mean?
 - A. A hidden saying
 - B. To cast one thing alongside another for comparison
 - C. A riddle for insiders
 - D. A short sermon
2. What theme stands at the center of every parable of Jesus?
 - A. The temple
 - B. Farming
 - C. The kingdom promised by the prophets
 - D. The law of Moses
3. What was right and wrong in A. M. Hunter's work on the parables?
 - A. Right placement, wrong kernels
 - B. He found the kernel of each parable but relocated the great crisis to the first advent
 - C. He denied the parables were stories
 - D. He allegorized every detail
4. Which difference separates parable from allegory?
 - A. Parables are shorter
 - B. Allegories appear only in the Old Testament
 - C. A parable is true to life and its interpretation stands apart; an allegory may be fantastic and interprets itself
 - D. Parables have no characters
5. How many of Matthew 13's eight parables does Jesus explain detail by detail?
 - A. All eight
 - B. None
 - C. Two: the soils and the wheat and tares
 - D. Five
6. Which storytelling device drops the decisive weight at the close?
 - A. The rule of three
 - B. Repetition
 - C. End stress
 - D. Contrast

7. What occasioned the three lost-things parables of Luke 15?
- A. A question about fasting
 - B. Pharisees grumbling that Jesus receives sinners
 - C. A dispute about taxes
 - D. The disciples' request for a sign
8. According to Matthew 13, why did Jesus speak in parables?
- A. To entertain the crowds
 - B. To simplify doctrine
 - C. To fulfill Isaiah, conceal truth from the closed, and reveal it to the open
 - D. To test the disciples' memory
9. What is the first principle for interpreting any parable?
- A. Count its characters
 - B. Determine the problem or occasion in the context that made it necessary
 - C. Identify its Old Testament source
 - D. Translate it literally
10. What crisis do the eight parables of Matthew 13 answer?
- A. A famine in Galilee
 - B. The rejection exploding in Matthew 12, and the question how the kingdom can still succeed
 - C. The disciples' rivalry
 - D. Roman taxation
11. How does Jesus reverse the lawyer's question in the Good Samaritan?
- A. He refuses to answer
 - B. He names the Samaritan a heretic
 - C. Your neighbor is anyone to whom you can be a neighbor; it is your move
 - D. He limits neighbors to Israel
12. Why is the church fathers' allegory of the Samaritan rejected?
- A. It is too short
 - B. The passage's own command, go and do likewise, makes the hearer the target; the literal sense makes beautiful sense
 - C. Samaritans cannot picture Christ
 - D. Oil and wine were unknown then
13. How does the analogy of faith guard the question about inheriting eternal life?
- A. It removes the question
 - B. It proves salvation by works
 - C. The love pictured is manifestation of the saved life, never merit that earns it
 - D. It restricts the parable to Israel
14. Which is one of the three signals of a parable's main point?
- A. An unusual word
 - B. A direct conclusion appended, as after the rich fool
 - C. A number in the story
 - D. A quotation from the Psalms

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 B · 4 C · 5 C · 6 C · 7 B · 8 C · 9 B · 10 B · 11 C · 12 B · 13 C · 14 B

TALK IT OVER

1. The parables were told in the storm, aimed at a verdict. When Scripture has confronted you with a verdict, embracing sinners, releasing wealth, readiness for the bridegroom, what did you do with the story's end stress?
2. It is your move: the Samaritan makes neighborliness my responsibility, not a boundary to define. Who, this week, is the person on your Jericho road?
3. Matthew 13 turned the disciples' gloom into confidence that the kingdom enterprise will succeed. Where does our own church need the mustard seed and the leaven, patient confidence in small beginnings?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

The prayer of Psalm 119:18 that closes the session: open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. Every parable yields to the reader who asks for sight.

GO FURTHER

The lecture's own commendations: Arland Hultgren's *The Parables of Jesus*, called the best single volume on the parables; Stanley Ellisen's *Parables in the Eye of the Storm*; Kenneth Bailey's *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*; Brad Young's *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*; and for the kingdom framework of Matthew, Alva McClain's *The Greatness of the Kingdom* and S. Lewis Johnson's classic article on the argument of Matthew.

Lecture by Dr. James Rosscup, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/hermeneutics-9