

## ***The Gospel of Luke: Parables Jesus Told***

### **Introduction**

"And he told them many things in parables" (Matthew 13:3). Indeed Jesus did tell them many things in parables. In fact, "without a parable he told them nothing" (Matt. 13:34). The parables occupy a large place in the gospels. The count of the number of parables in the gospels varies according to how the one counting defines a parable, but New Testament scholar A.M. Hunter counted sixty different parables in the gospels.<sup>1</sup> Other Bible students find fewer parables than this, and some find more. Whatever the exact number, another groundbreaking student of the parables, C.H. Dodd, said that "the parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospels."<sup>2</sup> A significant percentage of the teachings of Jesus in the gospels consists of parables.

The intent of this study is to focus on the parables in the Gospel of Luke, giving special emphasis to those parables that appear only in the Gospel of Luke. Focusing the study in this manner will permit us to study the parables in more detail, without skipping from gospel to gospel and perhaps wresting the parable out of its context in that particular gospel. Studying Luke's parables in this manner also keeps us from slighting the parables that are in Luke's Gospel only. In the future, as studies in this Bible study series are done of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, more attention can be given to the parables that appear in those gospels.

An additional reason for focusing mainly on the parables in Luke is to give these parables a biblical context. That context is the Gospel of Luke, with Luke's own unique approach to telling the story of Jesus. An important and helpful way of studying the Bible is to focus on the message of a given book of the Bible. As is almost always the case in this series of Bible study sessions, we will use that method as we study these parables in Luke's Gospel, following the biblical order in doing so.

What is a parable, anyway? As might be expected, there are different answers to that question. A helpful one, though, is from one of the great interpreters of parables, C.H. Dodd, who wrote, "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."<sup>3</sup> A parable is more than an attractive story with a "moral," as, for example, with one of Aesop's fables. Indeed, a parable is quite different from that. A parable is intended to provoke serious thought and call for decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald M. Hunter, Interpreting the Parables (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 122.

<sup>2</sup> C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dodd, Parables, 5.

What you likely will find as you study these parables is that the meaning of each of them is not as cut-and-dried as you might have thought it was. That is the nature of parables. Parables were intended to call hearers and readers to turn the parable around and upside-down—and to turn themselves and their views around and upside-down—so as to view life in a fresh way. Jesus' identity and the kingdom of God he proclaimed were revolutionary. Jesus used parables to stimulate fresh ways of thought, decision, and action.

In earlier centuries, the dominant method of interpreting the parables was allegorical. By this method, every detail was treated as having a symbolic meaning. The danger of this approach is that the meanings assigned to the details were often far-fetched and quite unrelated to the time of Jesus and the gospels. For example, Origen, a great church leader and theologian (about AD 182-251), interpreted the victim in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to be Adam, the inn to which the Good Samaritan took the victim to be the church, and the two denarii that the Good Samaritan left with the innkeeper to be the Father and the Son.<sup>4</sup> With the allegorical method, a parable could be bent to mean almost anything, according to the whim of the interpreter. In the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived and ministered, however, parables were not treated as allegories.

A breakthrough in the interpretation of parables occurred in the nineteenth century when a Bible scholar named Adolph Jülicher stated that rather than each detail standing for a meaning, a parable has one main point. This view has continued to be refined by further study so that many interpreters would say that a parable might have more than one central point but still a limited number. Even so, this basic understanding of how to interpret parables has been helpful in guarding against simply making the parable mean whatever the interpreter wants it to mean by treating it allegorically.

Another helpful touchstone for interpreting Jesus' parables is to interpret them in light of the culture of that time—both Jesus' time and the time of the first readers of a particular gospel. Thus, by using such an approach, if a parable appears to have allegorical elements, at least the interpreter will see these elements in terms of their meaning in that time rather than erroneously importing modern parallels into the parable. Yet another interpretation key that will be used in this study is to set the parable within the context of the gospel of which it is a part.

The Gospel of Luke gives special attention to picturing Jesus breaking down the barriers that separated people and reaching out to all kinds of people. Jesus showed special concern for people whom others considered second-class for one reason or another—such as for not keeping the Jewish traditions, being poor, and being a woman. Watch for these special emphases of the Gospel of Luke as you study the parables that are unique to Luke's Gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter Rhea Jones, Studying the Parables in the New Testament (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999), 297-298.

The sessions are clustered into **two Units** of sessions. In this series we will simply study the parables unique to Luke's Gospel in the scriptural order in which they appear. The two Units are simply to provide a way for a church to choose to study only six to eight sets of parables at a time instead of all 14 sessions (three months) in a row. However, it must be noted that there is some "carryover" from parable to parable as Jesus builds constantly on his teaching. So, all of the sessions of parables should be studied.

All but the first parable to be studied are in the section of Luke known as the "travel narrative," which is in Luke 9:51—19:27. This section of Luke's Gospel is Luke's special section, containing many teachings and incidents that do not appear in the other gospels. This section tells of events and teachings as Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem and the cross. In general, Bible commentators have not found a satisfactory way to outline this section in an overarching, comprehensive way. Since there is nothing approaching consensus on how this section is organized, our imposing a scheme on this section in order to divide the study into units seems unwise, unnecessary, and arbitrary. Thus, we will simply study the parables as they appear in the biblical context.

Parables are meant to challenge our thinking about life and to lead us to think more deeply and creatively than we might otherwise have done. As you study these parables, let them challenge you to look at yourself, your perspective on life, and your commitment to Jesus in a fresh new way. In fact, if you really study these parables, they absolutely will challenge you to do just that in every session. If you think you have things all figured out, just study these parables, and you may well find how limited your insights really are.

**Note:** For many churches, Easter will occur during the time when they engage in this study of the parables in the Gospel of Luke. Since some congregations wish to study on Easter a session on the resurrection of Jesus, an Easter session is included. Churches may study or not study it according to their needs. The Scripture selected for this Easter session, Luke 24:13-35, is unique to the Gospel of Luke, as are the parables being studied.