

PARABLES

A. Introduction

1. Jesus' use of parables

About one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. The Greek word *parabolē* occurs 50 times in the NT. And with the exception of Heb 9:9 and 11:19, all occur in the Synoptic Gospels.

The Gospel of John doesn't have story parables, but has some sayings that fit the broader category of *māshal* (see below), such as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-18) and the True Vine (Jn 15:1-8). John uses the term, *paroimia*, four times and is similar to *parabolē*

2. Parable as *parabolē* (Greek) and *māshal* (Hebrew)

a. Terms

The term *parabolē* (Gk) and *māshal* (Heb) had a wide range of meanings in antiquity.

Māshal (מָשָׁל; pl. *meshalim*) derives from the Hebrew root m-sh-l, meaning "to be like" (BDB, 695). The verb occurs infrequently in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Psa 143:7). The noun form is more common (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:12; in the title to Proverbs). *Māshal* refers to spectrum of genres, including proverbs, similes, allegories, riddles, taunts, words of the wise, oracles, and other figurative sayings.¹

Parabolē (παράβολή) literally means "to set beside" or "to throw beside," and so it has a comparative function. *Parabolē* was used to translate *māshal* in the LXX, but is best understood as a sub-type of *māshal*.

b. Hebrew Bible

In the OT, there are at least seven parables, including the story of the eagles and the vine (Ezek 17:2-10) and Nathan's parable to David about the poor man and his lamb (2 Sam 12:1-10).

c. New Testament

In the NT, there are 30 sayings that are explicitly labeled *parabolē*, including:

(1) **Proverb.** E.g., "Physician, heal yourself" (Lk. 4:32).

(2) **Wisdom saying.** E.g., "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (Mk 7:15).

¹ So Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 8-19, esp. 13.

(3) Comparison. E.g., The lesson drawn from the fig tree: “As soon as its branch become tender and puts forth its leave, you know that summer is near”; so when certain things happen you will know that the coming of the Son of man is near (Mk 13:28).

(4) Symbol or figure of speech. E.g., Heb 11:9 “He [Abraham] considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone [Isaac] from the dead—and figuratively (*parabolē*) speaking, he did receive him back.”

(5) Parables — that is similes, narratives, and exemplary stories, the three types which are discussed below.

The exact number of parables is disputed, because scholars cannot agree on which forms can be classified as parables. There are about 35 parables, if one uses a restrictive definition and about 65 if one uses a broader definition.

d. Rabbinic parables

There are also a large number of rabbinic parables. Although there is only one parable in the Mishnah (*m. Sukk.* 2.9; Danby 175), Johnson has collected 324 parables from the *Tannaim*.² Snodgrass states that about 2,000 rabbinic parables have been collected.³ Here is an example of a rabbinic parable about the destruction of the Temple:⁴

Elements	Midrash on Lam. 4:11
Illustrand (point illustrated)	“And He hath kindled a fire in Zion, which had devoured the foundations thereof” (Lam. 4:11). It is written, “A song of Asaph, O God, the heathens are come into thine inheritance” (Ps. 79:1). A song! It should have said, “A weeping.” R. Eleazar said:
Introductory formula	It is like [<i>mashal le</i>] ...
Parable proper	... a king who made a bridal-chamber for his son. He fixed the house, plastered, cemented and decorated it. One time his son angered him, and the king destroyed the bridal-chamber. The pedagogue sat down and began to sing. [A person] said to him, “The king has destroyed his house, and you sit and sing!” He said to him, “for this reason I sing: because he poured out his anger upon his son’s bridal-chamber, and not upon his son.”
Application	Similarly [<i>kakk</i>], the people said to Asaph, “the Holy One, blessed be He, has destroyed His temple, and you sit and sing!” He said to them, “For this reason I sing: because the Holy One, blessed be He, poured out His anger upon trees and stones, and not upon Israel.”
Scriptural quotation	That is what is written. “And He hath kindled a fire in Zion, which hath devoured the foundations thereof.”

B. History of the Interpretation of Parables

1. Parables before Jülicher: Allegorical interpretation

² Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 17.

³ K.R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Eds. Green and McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 593.

⁴ The five-part structure is adopted by Scott from Robert Johnston’s analysis. See Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 16-17.

The history of the interpretation of parables can be divided into two eras—before and after Adolf Jülicher, who wrote a two-volume work, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesus* [*The Parables of Jesus*] (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988-89) that has dominated the study of parables ever since.

a. Allegorization

Prior to Jülicher the parables of Jesus were almost always allegorized. An allegory is a series of metaphors linked together within a story or where certain points within a story stand for something else in reality.

That is, people (e.g., Church Fathers) read into the parables elements of the church’s theology or experience that had nothing to do with Jesus’ intended meaning. Here are some of the best known examples:

(1) Augustine’s (354-430) interpretation of the *Good Samaritan* (Lk 10:30-37) in which each element of the parable was given a certain theological significance.

Augustine’s Allegorization of the <i>Good Samaritan</i> (Lk 10:30-37) (<i>Quaest. Evan.</i> 2.19)	
The man =	Adam
Jerusalem =	The heavenly city
Jericho =	The moon, which stands for human mortality
The robbers =	The devil and his angels, who strip the man of his immortality
The priest and Levite =	The priesthood of the OT
The Samaritan =	Christ
Binding of wounds =	The restraint of sin
The oil and wine =	The comfort of hope
The animal =	The incarnation
The inn =	The church
The next day =	The resurrection of Christ
The innkeeper =	The apostle Paul
The two denarii =	The two commandments of love

(2) Origen’s (died ca. 251) interpretation of the *Good Samaritan* (Lk 10:30-35).

Origen’s Allegorization of the <i>Good Samaritan</i> (Lk 10:30-37)	
The man =	Adam
Jerusalem =	Heaven
Jericho =	The world
The robbers =	The devil and his henchmen
The Priest =	The law
The Levite =	The Prophets

The Samaritan =	Jesus Christ
The animal =	The body of Christ
The inn =	The church
The two denarii =	Knowledge of the Father and Son
Return of Samaritan =	The second coming of Christ

(3) Gregory the Great's (540-604) interpretation of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk 13:6-9):

Gregory's Allegorization of the <i>Barren Fig Tree</i> (Lk 13:6-9) (<i>Hom.</i> 31)	
Three times the owner came looking for fruit =	(1) God's coming before the Law was given (2) His coming at the time the Law was written, (3) His coming in grace and mercy in Christ.
The vinedresser =	Those who rule the church
The digging and dung =	The rebuking of unfruitful people and remembering sins

By the end of the nineteenth century, allegorization was the dominant way in which parables were interpreted.

b. The problem of allegorization

The problem with allegorization is that reader can make the parable say almost anything they want.

For example, "in the Middle Ages, Catholic theologians interpreted the parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43) as a justification for burning heretics. We have here an example of *eisegesis*, the error of reading *into*, rather than lifting the proper meaning *out of* [*exegesis*], the text, as responsible exegesis does."⁵

To remedy the problem of allegorization, scholars argued that parables needed to be interpreted according to two rules: (1) Parables have only *one point of comparison* and (2) Parables must be interpreted in accord with Jesus' original intention (reconstructed) as far as that can be determined.

2. Jülicher (1857-1938): One Point

Jülicher's two-volume work was the beginning of the end of allegorization. Jülicher denied that Jesus used allegory. Rather, whenever we find parables in the Gospels that have been allegorized, the Evangelists are to blame.

The Parable of the Sower by Jesus - Mk 4:1-9 (Throckmorton #93)

↳ The Allegorical Interpretation by Evangelist - Mk 4:13-20 (Throckmorton #93)

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants by Jesus – Lk 20:9-16 (Throckmorton #204)

↳ The Allegorical Interpretation by Evangelist – Lk 20:17-19 (Throckmorton #204)

⁵ Boucher, *The Parables*, 64.

Jülicher viewed the parables as straightforward comparisons that did not require interpretation. Most importantly, Jülicher argued two points:⁶

- (1) Parables have *only one point of comparison*—between the image and the idea being expressed. For Jülicher, Jesus' parables were *extended similes* (easy to understand), whereas later church allegories were *extended metaphors* (difficult to understand and must be decoded).
- (2) Parables were intended to be *general religious and moral maxims*.

3. After Jülicher

a. Jülicher's views criticized⁷

- (1) He borrowed his view from the Greco-Roman world of rhetoric and not from the Hebrew world where allegorical parables were common.
- (2) He threw out the literary form of allegory (a legitimate form), when the problem was later church allegorization.
- (3) His description of metaphor and his argument that parables give general religious or moral maxims.
- (4) Still today, however, people often say that parables have only make one point and are suspicious of any parts of Jesus' parables that have allegorical significance.

b. Stages of parable interpretation after Jülicher

(1) C.H. Dodd and J. Jeremias

This period extends from 1935-1970. Both Dodd and Jeremias tried to understand the parables of Jesus in their historical and eschatological contexts. Both tried to remove allegorical elements (following Jülicher), which lead to reconstructing the supposedly original form of a given parable.

Dodd believed that Jesus' parables had to do with *realized eschatology* (the presence of the kingdom) and not moral maxims (as Jülicher). For example, parables about harvest had to do with Jesus' ministry here-and-now and not the end of time.

Jeremias focused on the historical and cultural background for understanding the parables and tried to ascertain the original parable of Jesus by stripping away later accretions by the early church. Jeremias' reconstructions of Jesus' original parable led to de-allegorized parables. Jesus' parables presented people with a

⁶ K. R. Snodgrass, "Parables" in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 591-92.

⁷ Snodgrass, "Parables," 592.

crisis of decision and invited them to respond to the realization of God's Kingdom now being realized in Jesus' ministry.

(2) Existential

Existential interpretation of the parables emerged in the 1960s. Some interpreters have been influenced by modern philosophic concerns, such as existentialism.⁸ Fuchs and Jüngel stripped away allegorical interpretations (like Jülicher), but then proceeded to interpret the parables existentially. The focus was on the power of Jesus' parables as "language events" which were able "to bring to expression the reality to which they point" (New Hermeneutic).⁹

In the parables, Jesus expresses his understanding of human existence and, when people respond, they can experience this existence as well. That is, parables create a world or "language event" whereby people experience the reign of God through the power of imagination. In this way, the parables are summons to authentic existence.

(3) Structuralist

From the 1970 to 1980, structuralist approaches dominated parable study. Structuralists (e.g., G. V. Jones, A. N. Wilder, and Dan Via) focused on the artistic character of the parables. They are aesthetic works, which address the present. Structuralists were not concerned for historical meaning or the author's intention, but on the aesthetics and patterns of the texts. They compared the structures of the texts... the movements, motives, functions, oppositions and resolution within the texts. For the most part, structuralist studies have been dominated by technical jargon.

Kenneth Bailey's work reflects some structuralist analysis and yet he has gone beyond by illuminating the text in light of the Palestinian worldview, which he became familiar with as a missionary in Lebanon.

(4) Literary (reader response)

Since 1980, parable study has been dominated by literary criticism. It tends to emphasize a reader-response approach in which a text's meaning is determined by *the interaction of the reader with the text*. It is highly subjective and yields a variety of meanings. The text becomes polyvalent.

E.g., the Prodigal Son can be read through the lens of Freudian psychology.

Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11-32)

The younger son	=	Id
Elder brother	=	Ego
The father	=	Superego

⁸ See the appendix for my existential interpretation of the *Parable of the Talents* (Matt 25:14-30).

⁹ K.R. Snodgrass, "Parable," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 592.

Such interpretations are *not interpretations* at all; rather, they are *re-tellings* in new contexts.

(5) Jewish Parables

An alternative trend focuses on comparing Jesus' parables with early rabbinic parables. About 2,000 rabbinic parables have been collected.¹⁰ Because the Rabbinic parables are largely allegories, there is now there is a return to seeing Jesus' parables as allegories.

David Flusser, a Jewish NT scholar, challenges the work of Jeremias and Jülicher. Flusser acknowledges that the parables have been edited by the Evangelists, but he is optimistic the parables derive from Jesus.

Craig Blomberg argues that the parables of Jesus, like the rabbinic parables, are allegories and usually have two or three points to make, depending on the main characters.

A major problem with using the rabbinic parables as comparative to Jesus' parables is the time gap. The rabbinic parables date between 200-400 years after Jesus.¹¹

C. Definitions

1. C.H. Dodd's classic definition

Most modern parable scholarship begins with Dodd's definition and then either supports or challenges it. *A 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.*¹²

a. Metaphor or simile

Dodd believed that Jesus used parables to illustrate metaphorically what the kingdom of God was like. Jesus used very concrete illustrations from nature or agrarian life to illustrate what he meant.

A parable is metaphoric or poetic language pointing beyond itself to the Kingdom (Empire) of God.

Alternatively, parables do not point beyond themselves, but help the hearer to "create a world" in their imagination (New Hermeneutic). This new imaginative world can be used by the hearer to "reframe" their own existence and see different possibilities and different interpretations for world outside the parable.

¹⁰ K.R. Snodgrass, "Parable," in the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 593.

¹¹ Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parables*, 14.

¹² For the following, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: the Historical Jesus & the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998) 120-31.

b. Drawn from nature or common life

Jesus drew parables from nature or common life — from Galilee, villages and small urban enclaves, tenants and landlords, fisherman, shepherds, and laborers. The imaginary worlds of the parables were stereotypical of that world. They involve disputes about rent, dangerous journeys, and surprise discoveries.

Commonness made the parables easily *accessible* to people of Jesus' world, but that same commonness makes the parables rather *inaccessible* to people today.

Little things like how much people got paid for a day's work or Jewish attitudes toward Samaritans or what kind of lamps people used can often obscure the meaning of the parables for today's reader.

Stephen Patterson: "the commonness of Jesus' metaphors has a further significance as well. In using typical, easily recognizable scenes as the field within which to play out the Empire of God, Jesus was suggesting that God encounters people in concrete everydayness of their lives. The transcendent is immanent. The Empire of God is — or could be — a present reality already breaking into the world as we have constructed it."¹³

Without saying it directly, the commonness of Jesus' parables suggests that a person's destiny is at stake in the ordinary economic, domestic, and social existence.

c. Arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness

The parables use common language and imagery, but their use was far from common.

Patterson: "These are strange stories, odd, even disorienting at times. And the more one ponders them, the odder they become. As Funk so deftly puts it, 'the world of the parables is like Alice's looking-glass world: all is familiar, yet all is strange, and the one illuminates the other'."¹⁴

Example of an "arresting parable": Good Samaritan

➤ Orientation: A familiar setting and common expectations

(1) **Typical scenario** – a person traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho; well known road, but had dangerous reputation for banditry.

(2) **Common expectations** – Just what a person expects; bandits strip, beat, and leave a man for dead. Nothing new. The hearers are oriented to this world. Certain expectations of the hearers are met. And they can predict the end of the story, right?

¹³ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 126.

¹⁴ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 127.

(3) **More common expectations** – Next a priest and a Levite come by and, of course, they do not stop. The hearer expects that an ordinary Israelite will come by and help the man who was robbed. That is the expectation, and the end of the story, right?

➤ Disorientation: An unfamiliar twist occurs and all bets are off.

(4) **A twist** – But... a hated Samaritan comes by? That's not how the story is supposed to go. This is disorienting. The Samaritan is not one of us. Not to be trusted. Not to be touched. What will he do? The end of the story cannot be predicted. With the arrival of the Samaritan comes anxiety and chaos for the Jewish hearer.

➤ Reorientation: A new way of thinking about reality emerges

(5) **New world** – Familiar world replaced by a new and strange one. The Samaritan, the dreaded enemy, does the unexpected twice... he helps and he helps in an extraordinary way.

That is how Jesus' parables typically work from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. Reorientation happens after the parable has had an impact on the hearer; the hearer must re-orientate to the world differently than he/she did before hearing the parable. Patterson emphasizes that parables are not example stories; rather, they are experiences.¹⁵

Crossan: Myth sets up a world; parable undermines or subverts a world.

d. Teasing the mind into active thought

Parables “leave the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

Parables call into question the basic assumption of ancient life, many of which are still part of our worldview today. They are open-ended and provoke thought.

Patterson: “They are seldom reducible to a single idea, a proposition, a moral. There is an open-ended quality about them.”

They carry us into the unknown, to the limits of our understanding, to the transcendent. They do not give us a new rule to live by; rather, they point us in a new direction. Parables are not stories with a moral, but the meaning of a parable is directional.

Parables are events. See the “event-ness” of Nathan's parable to David in 2 Sam 12:1-4. David is “sucked into” the parable, not realizing it is about himself. Then, after David has rendered judgment on the unmerciful scoundrel in Nathan's parable does David find out that “he is the man!”

¹⁵ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, writes, “The parable of the Samaritan is an experience, not an example” (151). Also, “a parable is not an example story. And Luke's attempt to use this one [the Good Samaritan] as an example for neighborliness, while effective in its own way, shows the strain of secondary adaptation” (149).

2. Boucher's view on parables¹⁶

a. Narrative

Every parable tells a story. So the parable belongs to story-telling or folk literature. Similarly, Brad Young compares Jesus parables to *haggadah* (Jewish stories) as opposed to *halakah* (Jewish legal teachings).¹⁷

b. Tropical lesson

Parables intend to convey a lesson. Thus parables have two levels of meaning: (1) the literal level and (2) the figurative/tropical level. The tropical meaning (pronounced *trope-ical*) is the meaning in addition to the literal conveyed indirectly or implicitly. The tropical meaning is not always clear or definite, but can be multivalent.

For example, consider the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk 4:26-29). On the literal level, it is about the ripening of a seed to harvest. However, on the tropical level, it is about the mysterious, but certain coming of the reign of God.

There are different types of tropes.

Metaphor. A word (or words) used to speak about one thing in terms associated with another. [A symbol is visual; a metaphor is linguistic.] Example: He prowled through the kitchen, foraged in the refrigerator, found some prey, and devoured his food without using his claws, “which speaks of a person as if he were a lion without ever saying he is “like” a lion.

Synecdoche. A word (or words) that substitute one (more inclusive) term for another term (less inclusive) or vice versa. Examples: He drove his wheels to the grocery store. Lend him a hand. The white house said today.

A **metonymy** seems to be a type of synecdoche. A metonymy substitutes the name of an attribute or feature for the name of the thing itself (e.g., “they counted heads”).

Parable is a tropical story. It has two levels of meaning, a literal and a tropical. It is a comparison between the literal and what is implied at the figurative level.

c. Rhetorical function

Parables are invitational. They invite the hearer to change their mind or heart, to see the world differently, even effect a conversion.

d. Religious or ethical meaning

¹⁶ Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Parables* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1981).

¹⁷ Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998) 8.

A distinctive mark of the parables is that convey a message which belong to the sphere of the religious or ethical. Boucher argues that the parables present four basic themes:¹⁸

- 1) The coming/in-breaking of KG (reign) in history through the ministry of Jesus
 - The announcement (Lk 4:18-19)
 - Parable of Growing Seed (Mk 4:26-29),
 - Parable of Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30-32; Mt 13:31-32; Lk 13:18-19)
 - Parable of Leaven (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21)
 - Parable of Sower (Mt 13:3-9, 18-23; Mk 4:3-9, 14-20; Lk 8:5-8, 11-15)
 - Parable of Weeds among the Wheat (Mt 13:24-30; 36-43)
 - Parable of Fishnet (Mt 13:47-50)
- 2) The grace/compassion of KG (reign) toward the marginalized or sinners
 - The declaration (Lk 6:36)
 - Parable of Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)
 - Parable of the Two Sons (Mt 21:28-32)
 - Parable of Two Debtors (Lk 7:41-43)
 - Parable of Pharisee and Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14)
 - Parable of Lost Sheep (Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7, 8-10)
 - Parable of Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)
 - Parable of Great Feast (Mt 22:2-10; 11-14; Lk 14:15-24)
- 3) Discipleship—the challenge to those who would enter KG (reign)
 - The challenge (Lk 9:23-24; 14:27; Mk 10:38;)
 - Parable of the Treasure (Mt 13:44)
 - Parable of the Pearl (Mt 13:45-46)
 - Parable of the Tower Builder (Lk 14:28-30, 31-32)
 - Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1-8)
 - Parable of the Master and the Servant (Lk 17:7-10)
 - Parable of Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5-8)
 - Parable of Persistent Widow (Lk 18:1-8)
 - Parable of Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:23-35)
 - Parable of Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37)
 - Parable of the Two Builders (Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:47-49)
- 4) The crisis brought by the imminence of KG (reign)
 - The warning (Mk 1:14-15; Lk 3:3-17; Lk 22:69)
 - Parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21)
 - Parable of the Ten Maidens (Mt 25:1-13)
 - Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk 13:6-9)
 - Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)
 - Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and Pounds (Lk 19:11-27)
 - Parable of the Faithful & Unfaithful Servant (Mt 24:45-51; Lk 12:42-46)
 - Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mt 21:33-43; Mk 12:1-11; Lk 20:9-18)

D. Three Types of Parables according to Form

Boucher identifies (or classifies) three types/forms of parables: similitudes, parables, and exemplary stories.¹⁹

Some scholars identify a fourth category (the allegory), but Boucher argues that allegory is not a literary form, but a device of meaning; thus, all parables are allegorical either as wholes or in their parts. An allegory is an extended metaphor in a narrative form.²⁰

¹⁸ Boucher, *The Parables*, 41; chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 address each of the four types.

¹⁹ Boucher, *Parables*, 19-23.

²⁰ Boucher, *The Parables*, 30.

Boucher argues that “every similitude or parable is allegorical. That is to say, the similitude and parable are extended metaphors (not a series of metaphors).”²¹ Thus there is one metaphorical meaning extended across the whole parable.

1. Similitudes

a. Qualities

A concise recounting of what is widely accepted as true. Upon hearing it, no one is likely to deny that it is how life is.

b. Example: *The Lost Coin*

Lk 15:8-10 15:8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 15:9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 15:10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

c. How many?

There are about 12 similitudes in the NT. See chart below.

2. Narrative-parable

a. Qualities

Tells a story, not about something recurrent (like the similitude of the “growing seed”; Mk 4:26-29), but about a one time event which is fictitious. Narrated in the past tense and beings like “A certain creditor ...” (Lk 7:14), or “There was a rich man...” (Lk 16:1), or “A sower went out to sow...” (Mk 4:3), or with an explicit statement of comparison, “The Kingdom of God is like...”

b. Example: *The Two Sons*

Matt 21:28-20. 21:28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 21:29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 21:30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

c. How many?

There are about 17 narrative parables in the NT. See chart below.

3. Exemplary story

a. Qualities

²¹ Boucher, *The Parables*, 31.

The exemplary story—like the similitude and narrative parable—presents an implied comparison between events drawn from life. Whereas the similitude and narrative parable present an analogy between two different things (e.g., God’s reign and a seed), the exemplary story presents a single example which illustrates a general principle.

b. Examples: *The Good Samaritan*

Lk 10:30-35. 10:30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 10:31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 10:32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 10:33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 10:34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 10:35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 10:36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 10:37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Note how it ends: Jesus says, “Go and do likewise”... highlighting that fact that exemplary stories illustrate a general principle to be imitated.

c. How many?

Only four in the NT and all are in the Gospel of Luke:

- The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37)
- The Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21)
- The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14)

E. Classify the following

Exercise: Have students classify the following. Thirteen parables are from Thomas.²²

1. *The Master and the Servant* (Lk 17:7-10) [Similitude]

Similitudes ²³	
The Growing Seed	Mk 4:26-29
The Mustard Seed	Mk 4:30-32; Matt 13:31-32; Lk 13:18-19; Thom 20
The Two Builders	Matt 7:24-27; Lk 6:47-49
The Leaven	Matt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21; Thom 96
The Fishnet	Matt 13:47-50; Thom 8
The Lost Sheep	Matt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7; Thom 107
The Faithful or Unfaithful Servant	Matt 24:45-51; Lk 12:42-46
The Friend at Midnight	Lk 11:5-8
The Tower Builder	Lk 14:28-30

²² Scott identifies 13 parables from Thomas, but states the Ron Cameron finds 14 and Crossan, 15. Brandon Scott, *Hear then the Parable*, 33.

²³ Boucher, *Parables*, 161-62.

The Warring King	Lk 14:31-32
The Lost Coin	Lk 15:8-10
The Master and the Servant	Lk 17:7-10
The Powerful Man	Thom 98

2. *The Feast (Lk 14:16-24)* [Narrative Parable]

Narrative Parables ²⁴	
The Sower	Mk 4:3-9, 14-20; Matt 13:3-9, 18-23; Lk 8:5-8, 11-15; Thom 9
The Wicked Tenants	Mk 12:1-11
The Weeds among the Wheat	Matt 13:24-30, 36-43; Thom 57
The Treasure	Matt 13:44; Thom 109
The Pearl	Matt 13:45-46; Thom 76
The Unforgiving Servant	Matt 18:23-35
The Workers in the Vineyard	Matt 20:1-6
The Two Sons	Matt 21:28-32
The Wicked Tenants	Matt 21:33-43; Lk 20:9-18
The Great Feast	Matt 22:2-10; Lk 14:15-24; Thom 64
The Wedding Garment	Matt 22:11-14
The Ten Maidens	Matt 25:1-13
The Talents (The Pounds)	Matt 25:14-30 (Lk 19:11-27)
The Two Debtors	Lk 7:41-43
The Barren Fig Tree	Lk 13:6-9
The Prodigal Son	Lk 15:11-32
The Dishonest Steward	Lk 16:1-8
The Persistent Widow	Lk 18:1-8
The Empty Jar	Thom 97

3. *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14)* [Exemplary]

Exemplary Stories ²⁵	
The Good Samaritan	Lk 10:29-37
The Rich Fool	Lk 12:16-21; Thom 63
The Rich Man and Lazarus	Lk 16:19-31
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	Lk 18:9-14

G. Guidelines for Interpretation²⁶

²⁴ Boucher, *Parables*, 161-62.

²⁵ Boucher, *Parables*, 161-62.

²⁶ For an elaboration of these guidelines, see Snodgrass, "Parable," 598-99.

1. Analyze the sequence, structure and wording of the parable
2. Note cultural or historical features
3. Note how the parable and its redactional shaping fit the purposes of the Gospel
4. Try to determine how the parable might have shocked the original hearers
5. Ask what the parable inviting the hearer/reader to do
6. Don't limit the parable to one theological or ethical meaning

Appendix One: The Parable of the Talents: An Existential Interpretation

Matthew 25:14-30 (Throckmorton #228) (NRSV)

25:14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 25:15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

25:16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 25:17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 25:18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

25:19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 25:20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.'

25:21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

25:22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'

25:23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

25:24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25:25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

25:26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 25:27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.'

25:28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 25:29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 25:30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

An invitation to live responsibly

The Parable of the Talents is ostensibly about the last judgment. However, from an existential point of view, the Parable is an invitation to take responsibility for oneself and, when people respond positively to the parable, they experience authentic existence.

The Parable is about taking *responsibility* for our actions and attitudes, about taking *risks* beyond our comfort zones, beyond self-imposed limitations, and beyond the security measures we use to guarantee our LITTLE WORLDS remain as they are.

What is a talent?

What is a talent? We often use “talents” to refer to one’s abilities, but here the word refers to a very large sum of money—75-96 pounds of silver. Each talent was equivalent to about 20 years of work. So the master was very generous to all the slaves—even to the one who received only one talent.

So, in the Parable, the “talent” refers to an enormous amount of money. But, as many preachers have suggested, the talent is a metaphor (helped by the play on words in the English language) for God-given talents—perhaps as a teacher, mother, doctor, or worker—to be developed in life.

One’s own ability (*dunamis*)

Let’s look at the Parable. Notice that each of the slaves received “according to his own *ability*” (*dunamis*). *Dunamis* is often translated *power* and is used synonymously with *spiritual gifts* by Paul.

Each slave was given an enormous amount of money. The exact amount depended on the type of ability or power (*dunamis*) that God had *already given* to each of them. Responsibility (talents) is proportionate to a person’s ability and power (*dunamis*) already given.

First Contrast: Working vs. Hiding

There are several important contrasts between two types of individuals, two ways of being or existing, and the hearer is faced with the crisis of deciding which type of existence to embrace.

For the first contrast, look at verses 16-17.

25:16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 25:17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

Notice that the first two slaves “traded”—“worked” (*ergazomai*)—with the talents in the open public. And their work with the talents became an “advantage” (*kerdainō*) for them. The first two slaves took a risk. They worked with their talents, knowing that they could lose them. But, in taking risk, they gained something.

Now look at verse 18.

25:18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

We are told that the third slave “dug a hole” and “hid” the talent. The word for “hid” is *kruptō* — to hide ... to conceal to cover up to keep secret. The third slave sought to avoid the risk of trading in the market. He wanted to PRESERVE exactly what was given to him. He COVERED UP the generous gift of the master. He played it safe.

When we look at the one-talent person, we see the anxiety of person who will not step into the unknown. He or she will not risk trying to fulfill their own possibilities. He restricts his own existence. She is the victim of her own self-imposed limitations. His anxiety paralyzes his action. Beyond burying the talent, this type of person takes no action until the last minute ... until the master comes back. It is not proactive, but reactive life.

Second Contrast: Generous vs. Harsh Master

For the second contrast, look at verse 20.

25:20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.'

This slave takes the initiative and seeks the master out. He takes responsibility for what he had been given and makes something of it. “Master,” he says, “You handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” The language is the same for the second slave in verse 22. The first two slaves recognized the “generosity” (*paradidomi*; “handed over”) of the master and their responsibility for what master had entrusted them.

In contrast, look at verse 24-25.

25:24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25:25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

The one-talent man does not affirm the generosity of the master. Instead, he blames or accuses the master of being harsh and unfair—“I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” He refuses to be responsible for his own failure. When faced with the crisis of having to give an account of his life, he places blame for his failure on the master himself. The one-talent man refused to hold himself accountable and viewed himself as a victim. When he viewed himself as a victim, he acted like a victim. Helpless. Unable to act or change his situation.

Third Contrast: Risk vs. Retreat

For the third contrast, look at verses 21 and 23 together.

25:21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

25:23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

They say the same thing. For taking responsibilities and appropriate risk, the first two slaves are given more—the master praises both slaves, gives them more, and announces their joy.

Faithful slaves or people who live authentic lives, look at what is given to them ... make realistic appraisals ... and work with what they have. They don't cover up, hide from life, or shrink from risk. They used the cards they were dealt with. They don't complain. They didn't play the victim. They don't blame. They take action. Not what they wanted, but what the master wanted.

In contrast, look at verse 28. What happened to the one-talent man?

25:28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 25:29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 25:30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

He lost what he had. The one-talent man wanted to avoid risk and play it safe. But he was forced to recognize that self-protective non-action is not the way of authentic existence.

Notice the progression in the story: *From* the refusal to take a risk ... *to* blaming someone else—namely, God ... *to* the loss of opportunity.

Fourth Contrast: Joy vs. Outer Darkness

The fourth contrast is between joy and outer darkness. In the end, the two faithful slaves enter into the joy of their master. The third slave is cast into outer darkness. What is “outer darkness”?

The Parable as a whole suggests that “outer darkness” is a state of being where one refuses to take responsibility, refuses to take action, plays the victim, and blames other people or God. That is darkness. The universe is hostile. God cannot be trusted. The best way to life is by non-action, which is non-existence. Living, but not living. That is “outer darkness.”

Conclusion

In the Parable of the Talents, we are presented with a choice. We can be one of two types of individuals. We can be:

Responsible Risk Takers:

- Work with what God has given them—they don't complain or blame
- View God as generous, trustworthy, and someone to please
- Exercise and grow their abilities and talents
- Experience the joy of God

Irresponsible Fearful People:

- Avoid risky action rather than trusting God
- View God as harsh, unfair, and untrustworthy
- Let their abilities and talents atrophy and become useless
- Experience life as “outer darkness”