

## PARABLES

### A. Introduction

#### 1. Jesus' use of parables

#### 2. Parable as *parabolē* (Gk) and *māshal* (Heb)

##### a. Terms

*Māshal* (מָשָׁל; pl. *meshalim*)

*Parabolē* (παραβολή)

##### b. Hebrew Bible

##### c. New Testament

**a. Proverb.** E.g., “Physician, heal yourself” (Lk. 4:32).

**b. 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).

**c. 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).

**d. 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.”

**e. Parables** — that is similes, narratives, and exemplary stories, which is what we call parables today.

##### d. Rabbinic parables

Elements	Example: Midrash on Lamentations 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

#### a. Allegorization

<b>Augustine's (354-430) Allegorization of the <i>Good Samaritan</i> (Lk 10:30-37) (<i>Quaest. Evan.</i> 2.19)</b>	
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

<b>Origen's (d. 254) Allegorization of the <i>Good Samaritan</i> (Lk 10:30-37)</b>	
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

<b>Gregory's Allegorization of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk 13:6-9) (<i>Hom.</i> 31)</b>	
The three times the owner came look 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

#### b. The problem with allegorization

## 2. Jülicher (1857-1938): One Point

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

↳ The Allegorical Interpretation - Mk 4:13-20 and parallels (Throckmorton #93)

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

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

Jülicher: Parables have *only one point of comparison*—between the image and the idea being expressed.

## 3. After Jülicher

### a. Jülicher's views criticized from several angles

### b. Stages of parable interpretation after Jülicher

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

(2) Existential

(3) Structuralist

(4) Literary

#### Freudian interpretation of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11-32)

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

(5) Jewish Parables

## C. Definitions

### 1. C.H. Dodd's classic definition

*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.*

#### a. Metaphor or simile

#### b. Drawn from nature or common life

#### c. Arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness

- Orientation
- Disorientation
- Reorientation

#### d. Teasing the mind into active thought

### 2. Boucher's view on parables<sup>1</sup>

#### a. Narrative

#### b. Tropical lesson

#### c. Rhetorical function

#### d. Religious or ethical meaning

## D. Three Types of Parables

### 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Parables* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1981).

### **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?**

## **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 21:28-30**. 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?**

## **3. Exemplary story**

### **a. Qualities**

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."

### **c. How many?**

**E. Classify the following:**

- 1. The Master and the Servant (Lk 17:7-10)**
  
- 2. The Feast (Lk 14:16-24)**
  
- 3. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14)**

**G. Guidelines for Interpretation**

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 24:18-30 (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”