

CORE SEMINAR
The Parables of Jesus
Course 1: Introduction to the Parables

Isaiah 6:9-10 [ESV]

*⁹ And he said, “Go, and say to this people:
“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*

WELCOME

Welcome!

Thank you all for signing up for this CORE Seminar on the Parables of Jesus. If some of you didn't realize you signed up for the Parables of Jesus – we still welcome you!

We're excited about spending the next couple of months with you as we study the teachings of Jesus. Each week we'll dive into a parable – you will have a participant guide – and at the end of each participant guide you will have the Scriptural content for next week's lesson.

Please read AND study ahead. This will make our time more interesting as we grow together and learn together.

Before we begin there are a couple of things we should go over:

- Max length of each night should be 2 hours – this includes food/ fellowship and study. If it goes over, it is ok to get up and leave.
- House Rules [opportunity to go over house rules]
- And how to take care of the kiddos.

Ok...let's get started!

INTRODUCTION WITH BACKSTORY IN ISAIAH 6

How many of you picked up on the fact that our Scripture this week [*Isaiah 6 at the top of your guide*] is not – in fact – a parable?

So, are you ok diving into a little backstory/ history of the Old Testament as a brush up?

Backstory/ History of the Old Testament

Most of us are familiar with the Old Testament story of Israel – right? How God choose a particular people, delivers a particular people and provides for a particular people. This particular people being Israel – the descendants of Abraham.

This is the story of the Old Testament where God binds Himself in love to Israel. In His love, He chooses, delivers, and provides for the people of Israel, despite their constant disobedience.

And really, this is the best definition of their relationship: it's a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance – that repeats throughout their history. Through this cycle, we see God's persistent invitation [*through His prophets*] to a relationship, offering identity, purpose, and belonging to Israel through His messengers. However, the people often reject this and insist on doing things their own way, leading to spiritual dullness.

Isaiah was one of God's prophets. He was sent to call God's people to repentance. In **Isaiah 6:9-10**, we see God's words – commissioned through Isaiah – to shut the people's eyes, stop-up their ears and harden the hearts of His people. The language we see here is very similar to Paul's in **Romans 1:28**,

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Whenever God's message is shared, it has a powerful impact on everyone who listens. No one stays the same after hearing it. If you embrace it, you grow in kindness and goodness. But if you ignore or don't care about it, your heart can become hard, and understanding the message becomes more difficult. It's like your eyes and ears becoming less receptive, and the important teachings become harder to grasp.

QUESTION: In Isaiah 6:9-10, what was God's purpose for Isaiah's ministry?

- **That the people of Israel would repent and follow God's ways**
- **That Isaiah would destroy the idols in the land**
- **That Isaiah would lead Israel to victory against its enemies**
- **That the Israelites would harden their hearts and be judged.**

Surprisingly, as Jesus' begins His ministry, He encounters a group whose eyes and ears are not receptive and their hearts are definitely dull to His teachings. This group were the religious leaders – “the experts.” They didn't expect the Messiah to come as a humble carpenter from Nazareth. They expected a powerful ruling king to overthrow the Romans. So, their misconception clouded their perception and produced skepticism. As a result, they looked for faults in Jesus and they challenged His teaching – and His teaching was filled with parables. In fact, approximately one-third of Jesus' recorded teachings consist of parables. Jesus use of parables served as an invitation to the listener to understand Him – encouraging people to see beyond their preconceived notions and think deeply about the message He conveyed.

So, when we get to **Matthew 13:10-15** **[and we will next week]** Jesus' disciples want to know why He used parables to teach. His answer is very interesting – see if you pick up on the interesting part:

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*‘You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.’*

*¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

Did you figure it out?

- Jesus is using **Isaiah 6:9-10**. We've come full circle.

So, when Jesus quotes **Isaiah in Matthew 13**, he does this intentionally.

- He intentionally uses parables to move the hearer and not count it among those with dull hearts, weak ears and closed eyes.

If we look over at **Mark 4:9-12**, we see how Mark cites Jesus and Isaiah:

⁹And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." ¹⁰And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for **those outside** everything is in parables, ¹²so that

*"they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven."*

QUESTION: When Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In Mark 4:9, what do you think He meant?

- **How does this verse shed light on the purpose of parables within the teaching ministry of Jesus?**

Klyne Snodgrass comments:

The expression 'those outside' does not refer to the crowds in general – some predetermined group – but to people like Jesus' family and the religious leaders who are not ready to hear and do the will of the Father. It is the stance of willingness to hear and obey that determines whether one is outside or inside.

QUESTION: What do you think it means to have a "stance of willingness to hear AND obey?"

So, in studying this topic – and thinking about the parables let us have a **"stance of willingness to hear AND obey"** the parables of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Ok, now that was the **intro** to this lesson... we've still got a little bit of work to do.

To understand our study better, we need to start by asking **four** questions.

1. What is a parable?

2. Why did Jesus teach in parables?
3. What are the themes of parables?
4. How should we interpret parables?

Let's get on that.

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

The term "parable" originates from the Greek words "para-" meaning "alongside" and "ballō" meaning "to throw." When combined, it forms "parable," which literally means something thrown alongside something else. In the context of Jesus' teachings, parables are a distinctive feature. Jesus would use these stories alongside his regular teachings, often framed as similes, to illustrate spiritual truths. Parables are narratives and illustrations drawn from real-life experiences, serving to convey truths or exemplify principles. Examples include the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the parable of the lost sheep. Essentially, parables are stories thrown into a teaching moment as a comparison to illustrate spiritual truths.

QUESTION: Which parable of Jesus has the most meaning to you? How has God used this parable to help direct your life?

- Which parable do you wrestle with the most?

WHY DID JESUS TEACH IN PARABLES?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus extensively utilized parables as a primary method to teach about the Kingdom of God. His parables often served to challenge listeners' perspectives and invited them to reconsider reality. In **Matthew 13:10-17**, Jesus explains that He speaks in parables to both hide the secrets of the kingdom from some and reveal them to others. The purpose is not to make the parables difficult to understand intellectually, but rather to expose the moral issues at play. Christ's antagonists, like the Pharisees, often comprehend the meaning of the parables, but their refusal to trust His teaching about Himself and God's kingdom is the root of their difficulty. **Matthew Henry** notes that parables make God's truths more accessible to those willing to be taught, yet simultaneously more challenging for those willfully ignorant.

QUESTION: In the New Testament, the function of parables is _____.

- To explain the truths about the Kingdom of God.
- To hide the secrets of the kingdom from some and reveal them to others.
- To make God's truths more accessible to those willing to be taught.
- All of the Above.

WHAT ARE THE THEMES OF PARABLES?

Through this CORE Seminar, we will be unable to study all of the parables of Jesus [remember, the parables composed over 1/3 of His teaching] but what we hope to do is study a parable from each of the classifications or themes which are commonly associated with the parables.

Those themes/ classifications are:

- The Kingdom Parables
- The Sinner Parables
- The Forgiveness Parables
- The Prayer Parables
- The Stewardship Parables
- The Service Parables
- And, the Preparedness Parables.

As we go through these themes we will “sit at the feet of Jesus,” examine His parables and hope to learn aspects of the Kingdom of God.

QUESTION: In what ways does Jesus bring good news?

- **In what ways does He bring bad news?**
- **How does this contrast – good news vs. bad news - affect the church’s evangelism?**
- **Your personal evangelism?**

HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET PARABLES?

This question is important because, throughout the history of the church, different parables have been interpreted [and misinterpreted] in different ways. Some people have taken parables and found all kinds of meanings in every single detail of a parable. So, how do we understand parables? How do we keep from abusing or misinterpreting or misunderstanding these stories that Jesus tells?

Well, here’s practical advice as you read parables:

- Listen from the hearer’s perspective
- look for the main point,
- and then let the truth change your perception.

Think about each of those.

Listen from the hearer's perspective

Let's start with listen from the hearer's perspective. We've got to put ourselves in the shoes of people who first heard parables in order to understand what they were hearing. Jesus obviously uses pictures and stories that are far more familiar to First Century Jews than Twenty-First Century Americans.

So, we've got to get into their shoes. What would they hear? What would stick out to them? How would they respond at different points in the story? What kind of emotions would rise up when they hear the word "Samaritan"?

So, we need to listen from the hearers' perspective, then look for the main point.

Look for the main point

There's usually one main point in any parable. Normally, a parable will have one main point – but occasionally a parable could have two, maybe three. They are tools in the hands of God's messenger's, and in Jesus' hands they are tools to say, "you need to see reality from God's point of view."¹

So, listen from the hearers' perspective, look for the main point, and then let the truth change your perception.

Let the truth change your perception

The whole point of parables is to challenge the way people think about something. Remember from our intro - Jesus used parables as an invitation to understand Him as He truly is – encouraging people to see beyond their preconceived notions and think deeply about His teachings.

MISUNDERSTANDING PARABLES

We have heard the parables taught since we have been children. When we have this perspective, there is a tendency to "get comfortable" with the teaching.

- It's like we take the parable –figure out the difficult thing and make it plain – then we grab this truth and we pull it up.

¹ Mason King. "The Sower." The Village Church. September 11, 2022

And then we carry this truth around – we carry the point of the parable around with us. Whether it’s the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan – we all feel good about our understanding and the point of these parables. And when we feel good about the point – then we can apply it to anything, anywhere and generally out of context.

And we do this – because this is what we always do! Some of us are so prone to read the text – for us and for now. We rarely think, “what did this teaching mean for the first century church or first century hearer.” And the problem with reading the text this way is that the text cannot mean for us today what it did not mean for the hearer.

So, addressing the parables means we will have to take some time.

Parables Generally Aren’t Fables or Allegory

Now, let’s look at some instances of how we may have been incorrectly taught about parables in the past. Some of us may have been taught to translate parables or confuse parables with fables or allegory. To translate parables through those lenses would be incorrect. Let’s look at some reasons why.

A fable is a short story, where the storyteller is attempting to convey some type of moral. As they tell the story, they will use animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature as characters. Fables would be an instance where animals talk – and turtles beat rabbits in races. Parables have moral intentions, but Jesus did not use talking animals or plants or inanimate objects to teach His parables. So, parables are no fables.

Others have treated Jesus’ parables as allegories. And the church – historically – has really put itself in a bind as minister’s have attempted to interpret the parables as if they were allegories. Allegories are defined as a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.² Which means that someone has gone in and given significance to every word and every detail. And if you try to find too much hidden in the incidental elements of the story, you’ll end up with all kinds of weird translations and distortions of the Word of God. A popular example of an allegory is the Pilgrim’s Progress - where every element in the story has some particular symbolic meaning and everything stands for something. Just as parables are not fables, they are not allegories either.

QUESTION: The allegorical method of interpretation _____.

- **Searches for hidden meaning in each element of a parable.**

² <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

- *Attempts to give significance to every word and every detail.*
- *Usually ends up with a weird translation and distortion of the Word of God.*
- *All of the above*

CONCLUSION

Ok – so now we have some bearing on understanding why Jesus taught using parables. As we read through these parables, we will need to pay attention to the context to determine which of the themes/ classifications that the parable fall into. This will be an important aspect as we seek to fully understand Jesus' teachings.

The parables we will be discussing this spring are:

1. The Parable of the Sower/ Soils
2. The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector/ Publican
3. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant
4. The Parable of the Prodigal Son
5. The Parable of the Talents
6. The Parable of the Ten Virgins
7. The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

I would encourage you to read ahead and study these parables in the days and weeks ahead. I am excited to see where this study leads us as a group and individually in understanding the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

PRAYER