

THE PARABLES OF JESUS:
PRINCIPLES FOR DECIDING
WHAT DID HE SAY / MEAN?

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The cost of letting others make decisions for one is the loss, by atrophy & policy, of the freedom to make decisions for oneself. If we are to stand fast in freedom (Gal.5.1), as God desires & commands, we must exercise our powers of **discernment** (1Jn.4.1), such as those powers severally are.

Those powers, in each human being, include **principles** (habituated ideas) of decision-making. Here, vis-a-vis Jesus' parables, are mine:

1 The **canonical** principle is that the Christian Bible (LXX-NT, with help from the Hebrew Bible) is the foundational literature for devotion, reflection, speculation, & guidance. The Rev. of Jn. is in "canon" (the early church's limit) even though it almost didn't make it, & the Gospel of Thomas is out even if I conclude (as I do) that at a few points its wording is closer to Jesus.

The point is increasingly important. We canonicalists say "No!" to those who cry "Revelation didn't stop with the Bible!" Say we, revelation did, inspiration didn't.

Of course discoveries come from many other sources, such as other religions & "women's experience." But no matter how high our appreciations of nonbiblical sources (& mine are very high) & sensitivities to nonbiblical claims, we canonicalists limit the word "revelation" to what is bespoken in the canon. That is what I mean in calling it the foundational literature. (Down with the Enlightenment mentality.)

2 The **historical** principle means that I'm eager for all illumination come & coming from nonbiblical epigraphic (written) & anepigraphic (unwritten, artifact) material, & advances in the science/art of historiography (as aided by psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, statistics, computer simulations). Revelation/inspiration/discovery are, because we human beings are, anchored in history, & not to be interpreted ahistorically (ie, neglecting historical-environmental factors). (Down with the fundamentalist mentality.)

3 The **literary genre** principle states that the interpretation of anything spoken or written should include due consideration for its genre (type or category of composition). Amos Wilder, a master of literature & in my opinion as fine a writer as his more famous brother Thornton, was the fountainhead scholar for the modern use of this principle vis-a-vis the parables.

4 The **personal** principle can be simply put in the form of a question: How probable is it that this person (in the case of the parables, Jesus) said/meant so-&-so? Subjective judgment? Not entirely: there's such a thing as informed intuition, learned imagination. We know more about Jesus--& thus what he might have said/meant--than radical scholars, such as some in the Jesus Seminar, will agree to. Then, for Christians, there is communion with the living Lord in the Spirit (1Cor.2.6-16 [14: "spiritually discerned"]).

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

SETTING FORTH THE HISTORY AND PRINCIPLES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

I.—Founding of the Kingdom by Ingathering of Individuals.

Lost sheep	Luke 15. 3 .	Love seeking and saving
Lost coin	Luke 15. 8 .	Love seeking and finding
Lost son	Luke 15.11 .	Love waiting and receiving
Great supper	Luke 14.16-21	Universality of invitation

II.—Reception of the Kingdom by Various Classes.

The Sower	Luke 8. 5 .	Results depend on condition of hearers
Father and sons	Matt. 21.28 .	Results shown by obedience, not by profession
Wicked tenants	Matt. 21.33 .	"He came to His own, and His own received Him not"
Rich fool	Luke 12.16 .	Riches an obstacle to righteousness
Hidden treasure	Matt. 13.44 .	The kingdom rated at its true value
Pearl of Great Price	Matt. 13.45 .	"Seek first the kingdom of God."

III.—Growth of the Kingdom.

Mustard seed	Matt. 13.31 .	Beginning small and secret
Leaven	Matt. 13.33 .	Growth by contact
Growing seed	Mark 4.26 .	Growth in regular stages
Tares	Matt. 13.24 .	Good and evil grow together
Dragnet	Matt. 13.47 .	Visible church remains mixed

IV.—The Citizens of the Kingdom—Their Duties and Privileges.

Tower, and warring king	Luke 14.28 .	Count the cost
Two debtors	Luke 7.41 .	Much forgiven, loving much
Unmerciful servant	Matt. 18.23 .	Forgive fellow-sinners
Good Samaritan	Luke 10.30 .	"Bless them that curse you"
Talents	Matt. 25.14 .	Wise use of opportunities
Pounds	Luke 19.12 .	Rewards of faithfulness and unfaithfulness
Laborers in the vineyard	Matt. 20. 1 .	Master only apportions reward
Master and servant	Luke 17. 7 .	Service justifies no claim
Barren figtree	Luke 13. 6 .	Duty of faithfulness; long-suffering of God
Unjust steward	Luke 16. 1 .	Use earthly means for heavenly ends
Importunate friend	Luke 11. 5 .	"Pray without ceasing"
Unjust judge	Luke 18. 2 .	"Continuing instant in prayer"
Pharisee and tax collector	Luke 18.10 .	Pray with humility
Servants watching	Luke 12.35 .	Duty of expecting the Lord's return
Householder watching	Mark 13.34 .	Duty of expecting the Lord's return
Ten maidens	Matt. 25. 1 .	Duty of expecting the Lord's return

V.—Consummation of the Kingdom—Judgment.

Two builders	Matt. 7.24 .	One storm—different fates
Rich man and Lazarus	Luke 16.19 .	Reverse conditions in world to come
Tyrannical steward	Luke 12.45 .	Retribution on unfaithfulness
Dragnet	Matt. 13.47 .	Ultimate separation of good and evil
Marriage of king's son	Matt. 22. 2 .	Exclusion of certain offenders

NOTES on the (above) principles:

1 As for **genre**, Jesus scholars agree that his parables are the bedrock (Jeremias) of the tradition & are distinctive (Perrin) of Jesus. What remains is to define, set the contents & limits of, this genre. There's widespread of approval of C.H.Dodd's definition (THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM, Nisbet/35/36, p.16): "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." Also, Robt. W. Funk's definitive strikes me as excellent (PJ: JESUS SEMINAR, p.87): "the parable as metaphor confronts listeners with the reality of another world....an unexpected turn that looks through this commonplace existence to a new view of reality and actually presents that new reality...as a potential to be grasped in the present" (author unidentified); it "draws the listener into" itself "and induces the listener to make a judgment upon the situation set out in the parable and to apply that judgment to the matter at hand"; & "its meaning...cannot be exhausted by any one interpretation of it," its meaning "limited only by the general constraints of the meaning it had in its original historical and social context as determined by historical criticism."

2 Those two definitions show why most modern scholars* see no parables in the Gospel of John, full though it is with imaginal expressions many of which were considered parables when "parable" had a less narrow definition, such as "extended metaphor" (as in my #1240, where I list 19 candidates in Jn., three with especially good credentials: 10.1-9, 11-18; 15). I hold that the Fourth Gospel, Jn., is Jesus the resurrected Lord speaking in a mode other than that he used before his death.

3 As for the **personal** principle, I lay this out in #2683 ("Would you recognize a parable as from Jesus?") &, extensively, in #70 ("Jesus' Consciousness").

* Including Sidney A. Weston, whose chart appear herewith (from HELPS TO THE STUDY OF THE RSV, Mass. Bible Soc./56). His last column is good but too limiting.