

Bible Study Center Seminar

Topic: “Parables of the Bible”

This is a 2-part seminar dealing with the study and unraveling of the parables recorded for us in the Bible. Jesus often used parables to explain complicated or difficult to understand spiritual truths to those who heard him speak and teach. He used situations and scenarios which were common to the people in his day to help them to understand important lessons. Sometimes these stories were used to bring people to self-conviction, realizing on their own what they needed to change in their lives. Jesus isn't the only one to use parables; there are a few in the Old Testament as well.

As we will see, studying parables isn't just a matter of reading then immediately understanding. Sometimes we will need to look at historical or cultural context, as well as other places in the scriptures where similar topics are discussed. Careful study of these beautiful stories can help deepen our faith and understanding of God's will for our lives.

Each session of the seminar is designed to span 2 hours, from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM and will break down into an initial 10-minute introduction/review, followed by a 40-minute lecture, with a 20 minute snack/visitation break, followed by another 40-50 minute lecture. If there is time, we will have a question and answer portion after the final lecture is complete.

The flow of topics covered in the seminar are as follows:

Session 1A = What is a Parable?

Session 1B = How to study a Parable

Session 2A = Applying what we have learned

Session 2B = Conclusion

Parables of the Bible

Introduction:

Throughout the Bible God speaks to us in many and various ways (Hebrews 1:1-2). Throughout the many years he has used men to proclaim his will to all. Sometimes he spoke to man in direct commands, telling him what to do and what not to do. Other times he gave principles which man can use to guide him. He sometimes used figurative language, and often (especially in the New Testament) through PARABLES.

In the Old Testament prophets sometimes used this form of teaching (Hosea 12:10, Psalm 78:2). It was used to get people to think and realize about the point of their message. We can only find a handful of parables (around seven) in the Old Testament compared with the New Testament, but the lessons contained inside of them are great.

In the New Testament we see Jesus, the master teacher who spent his life on earth telling mankind what he needed to do to get himself right with God. Most of the time Jesus spoke in plain terms about the truths of the Gospel (e.g. “love your enemies”), sometimes he spoke in principles (e.g. the Golden Rule), but on several occasions he gave teachings in the form of parables (Matthew 13:34-35). There are around 26 such stories in the New Testament (depending on how you count them).

In order to understand God’s will it is important to carefully study parables. Because they are written in figurative language we must be cautious and research carefully. In order to fully understand parables we must study them carefully and thoroughly. Remember that the words of Christ in the New Testament make up the standard of judgment to which our lives will be compared on that LAST DAY (Jn. 12:48-50).

I. The Nature of Parables

What is a parable? The word “parable” comes from the Greek word παραβολή (PARABOLE). This means “*Placing beside for comparison.*” Simply put a parable is a story about ordinary life which has a hidden meaning. It is a simple story designed to teach a lesson through comparison and used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. When you hear the story you can relate it to your own life. It is like an illustration for the points in a sermon. It conveys its message of truth through analogy, comparison or contrast.

Parables are great because they tell a story that is easy to remember. How many stories you can remember in the Bible? It is not like a bunch of principles we try to memorize and often will soon forget.

II. The Purpose of Parables

Why parables?

Why did anyone teach in parables? Sometimes teachers used parables because they are often easier to remember than principles and rules. It helped people to relate spiritual teachings to their lives. Parables also helped people to better understand who God is and to help them think more about their relationship with Him. Finally, they gave the teacher a way to self-convict and show exactly what kind of behavior and living he was trying to teach his listeners. When someone discovers something for themselves it is much easier for them to be willing to change.

Jesus likely chose to teach in story form because stories engaged the mind and emotions of listeners. Since Jesus is the teacher who used the most parables, let's look at him and what he says in **Matthew 13:10-17**. Here Jesus' disciples ask him about why he uses parables and he explains it to them. Read through it and take note of verses 11 and 13.

VERSE 11

He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them..."

VERSE 13

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

What does it mean when it says "*Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*" Is Jesus saying that they are literally blind and deaf? Jesus continues and quotes Isaiah's writings from Isaiah 6:9-10. The beginning of verse 15 gives us the answer to our question:

VERSE 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.'

This verse shows us that it has to do with the HEART of the people and their willingness to accept the teachings Jesus would bring. Because of their

unwillingness, it is as if they are deaf and blind, as the words don't settle in their hearts and cause real change in their lives.

So what about us? This is a lesson for us as well. When we study God's word we need to have a humble heart ready to accept what we discover and to **apply it to our lives**. (Matthew 7:21-23, James 1:22, 1 John 2:3). Bible study isn't just meant to increase our knowledge and make us into a theologian, but it's meant to change our lives to align more and more with God's will.

III. Study the CONTEXT of parables

We often hear that the **context** of a parable will help us to better understand it's meaning. But what is "context"? Context means looking at how a verse fits in with the verses before and after it (this is what we call "near" context).

First you must look at the parable itself and find which verse marks the beginning then which verse marks the end. Use Bible references to discover if there are any parallel passages where the same parable is taught in a different places within the Bible (your Bible may have it written under the heading or in a footnote).

Next take a look at the verses that come before and after the parable to learn more about the background. Ask these questions:

- Who is the speaker?
- Who are they speaking to?
- What is going on in the background?
- Is this parable being used to reinforce a teaching?

The next step is to read through the parable several times, in different translations if you can. Take note of words or concepts that you don't understand. Then try and summarize the parable in your own words.

There is also **Bible-wide context** and **cultural** and **historical context**, but we will talk about those later.

IV. "Get to know" the Characters

Once you know the boundaries and are familiar with the parable it is time to begin taking a deeper look. The characters in the parables often represent people or things, so we need to take a look at who and what is included in the parable. Characters can be used repeatedly throughout the parables. Many times repeated details are paralleled from the Old Testament and could have a common meaning for the hearers.

For example, whenever there is a Master/Judge/King figure in the parables that often signifies God.

Sheep/servants/workers often illustrate followers of God.

There are also several common themes in parables, for example: the Kingdom of God, Mercy and Forgiveness, Judgment and Redemption.

Here are some things you can do to help you “get to know” the characters:

1. Make a list of the characters, items, and objects which are mentioned or used in the story.
2. Try to determine if the characters and objects represent anything or anyone.
 - a. Look to see if there is an explanation of these things within the context.
3. Try to determine why the speaker used this character.
 - a. Consider the contrast between characters and their status.
4. Does the speaker explain the parable?
 - a. Ask yourself why the speaker may have used this character?

V. Not every detail has significant meaning

Remember, just because a parable contains characters, objects, and figures doesn't mean every character and object has a meaning for us. Not everything in the parable may have a meaning for us to decipher. Some characters may be there to help make the parable make sense.

- The Parable of the Ten Virgins – Are exactly 50% of all people good and 50% of all people bad?
- The Parable of the Wicked Tenants – What do the fence, tower, and wine press represent?

Look carefully at the parable and carefully consider. Try not to be tempted to over-analyze.

VI. Consider Biblical Culture and History

Because parables are stories they sometimes need supporting information in order for the main idea of the parable to make sense.

Some of the images and metaphors had rich meaning to people in Bible times. These things are not as easy to recognize for those living in modern times, so studying culture and history can help us better understand the meaning of the parables.

Example: The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) makes much more sense when one understands the Jewish marriage customs present at the time of Jesus.

Using Bible maps as a reference to help understand the geography can help us better understand the story in the parable.

Example: In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it is helpful to understand the layout of the land when the parable says that the man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

In parables Bible characters may be mentioned which are from Old Testament history.

Example: In Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus we read about Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. If you have never read the Old Testament you may not know anything about him.

A good study Bible will likely have helpful notes and references to aid you in your study. If your Bible doesn't contain study notes, take some time to do some research in a Bible dictionary to find out more about customs and culture, as well as historical information which may help make the parable more understandable. Additionally, there are many online resources and applications you can use on a computer or phone which can help you research and study more thoroughly. Take advantage of the technology we have today!

VII. The ending of parables is important

The ending of the story can be often the most important part of the parable. It usually contains the warning to show what needs to be changed in our lives, or the consequences of our not changing. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30), the ending reveals what happens to the wheat and tares respectively and shows the ultimate purpose of the parable which was to indicate that there is a separation between good and bad in the final judgment or Judgment Day.

Common thoughts you can find in the endings of parables:

1. Encouragement to continue being faithful.
2. Warnings against disobedience.

VIII. Look at the main point

Our understanding of a parable and its details should all flow from the main point (or points). This is very important to remember, because the main point of the parable is the reason that this parable is being told in the first place!

Some recommended questions for finding the main point are:

1. Who are the main characters?

2. What happens at the end?
3. What is said in quotation marks?
4. Who or what is the focus of the story?
 - a. Carefully determine the lesson of the story by noting the relationship between the characters and objects of the story and then applying that relationship to the persons or things those characters represent.
5. Check your conclusions
 - a. Does your understanding agree with the points that the speaker was trying to make to their listeners before he told the story (near context).
 - b. Check your conclusion against other verses in the Bible which speak about the subject addressed by the parable you are studying (Bible-wide context).

After looking within the context of the parable you can go to look at other parables or Bible verses to see what is written about this same topic in other places. A good study Bible would have cross references, and there are many online resources which can help you find verse lists to research. Just remember that if your conclusions are correct, you shouldn't find any Bible verses contradicting what you've understood. The Bible has no contradictions, so this is a good way to make sure you've done your job well.

IX. Keep it inside the word

Finally, remember whose word we are studying. The Bible is **GOD'S MESSAGE** and we don't have the right to change anything in it (1 Peter 1:20-21)! We cannot make our own explanation and teach it as God's message to people. We must make sure that all the things we conclude are found inside the Bible and are based on facts.

NEVER change God's word for your own!

Here are some things to remember and consider:

1. Did the person who told the story give an explanation?
2. Do not base your understanding on partial evidence.
3. Make conclusion within the context of the parable.

X. Application

Now that we have taken a look at the things to remember and consider when we study parables, let's take a look at a couple parables and study through them together. Below you'll find an outline

First, let's turn to a parable in the Old Testament found in **2 Samuel 12:1-4**. This parable is sometimes called the **Parable of the Ewe Lamb**. Let's go through the steps to look at the parable and its background and context.

1. The Parable of the Ewe Lamb (Nathan's parable) (2 Samuel 12:1-4)

- a. Is the story found in any other books?

- b. What is the setting behind this story?

- c. What characters and objects are used in the story?

- d. Do these things represent anything or anyone?

- e. What is the lesson?

2. The PARABLE of the Man Planting Seeds. (Matthew 13:3-9)

- a. Is the story found in any other books?

- b. What is the setting behind this story?

- c. What characters and objects are used in the story?

- d. Do these things represent anything or anyone?

- e. What is the lesson?

XI. Conclusion

Studying anything in the Bible is a process. We must take it step by step or we may not come to the correct understanding of what he is trying to teach us. We have to remember to check the context, both near and Bible-wide. Remember to be fair to God, and never change his word because it's not what you expected! Let's all get into God's word and study it, then apply what he has told us to do! (**James 4:17**)

Thanks so much for joining us!

Don't forget to check out our classes and enroll!