

Keys to Interpreting the Parables

Dr. Craig Blomberg

Let's consider the parable of "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-31). *What does it mean?* This is the question we want to be asking in this series about Jesus' parables in general. But, before we begin, there are some questions to consider. Could a parable really be all about just one main idea? In the case of the parable of "The Prodigal Son," there is a young son (the prodigal), the older son, and the father. Does focusing on just one character ignore the contribution of the others? What about all of the rich details in the parable? How do we interpret them? Consider the young son's request for his inheritance while the father is alive, his extreme behavior, the celebration of the young son's return home, his ornamentation and feasting, or the behavior of the father displaying extravagant love. If there is just one meaning to a parable, why would Jesus have included all of this rich detail? Would it have meant something to his audience? So then, how are we to interpret Jesus' parables?

Let's consider four approaches that have been utilized throughout church history.

Interpreting the Parables: Four Approaches

Consider these important factors which have influenced the interpretation of the Biblical narrative. The Jewish backgrounds of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) were largely lost sight of in the early centuries of the church. Over time, the church became largely Gentile in its makeup and the centers of power had moved outside of Israel. Additionally, the Greek and Roman world loved to allegorize narratives. These factors led to the first method, and most longstanding method, of interpreting the parables.

The First Approach: Allegorization

This method suggests that an interpreter would find multiple points of contact within the story or parable itself. Each aspect of the story had a coresponding symbolic or spiritual counterpart. Thus, when Jesus told

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the parable of “The Prodigal Son,” he intended that all of the rich details (the inheritance, the robe, the ring, the feast, etc.) each had its own symbolic meaning. However, later interpretations often saw details in the parables that conflicted with what Jesus’ largely poor first-century audience would have known and understood. Even still, this approach was the single most adopted approach throughout church history, with some important objectors (Thomas Aquinas, John Chrysostom, John Calvin). It wasn’t until 1899 when a German scholar, by the name of Adolf Jülicher, wrote a massive work that dealt with the history of the interpretation of the parables in general. He pointed out how rampant allegorization was without any necessary consensus as to what all the details of the parables stood for. Between the anachronism and the lack of general agreement, it seems then that allegorization was not the best way to interpret Jesus’ parables. It’s important to remember that the moment we begin suggesting interpretations that Christians came up with in later years, even centuries, that no one could have invented in first-century Israel, we begin to allegorize and misinterpret the parables.

The Second Approach: Adolf Jülicher’s Single Point

This approach is founded on the idea that in the Greek and Roman world, audiences would have been familiar with the teaching of Aristotle. He taught that good stories make a single point. Thus the parables that Jesus told had a single point of contact between the story and their symbolic meaning. However, this creates difficulties for the more complex parables, like the parable of “The Prodigal Son.” Who should be the focus of this main idea or single point? The younger son? The father? The older brother? Whereas the allegorization approach made the parables more complex than they were intended to be, this approach oversimplified the more detailed parables and narratives.

The Third Approach: Smoothing Jülicher’s Edges

Throughout much of the twentieth century, interpreters tried to smooth the rough edges off of Jülicher’s single point approach to interpretation. They still wanted to follow the basic principle that parables were not allegories, thus they made a single point of comparison but allowed for some exceptions. They allowed, perhaps, for a story as detailed as “The Prodigal Son” to have another point or points.

The Fourth Approach: Unifying Theme with Multiple Perspectives

This approach recognizes that there is a center, a unifying character or point. There is one place where the distance between the storyline and the symbolic world is the shortest. In the parable of “The Prodigal Son,” that

might be the father. It also recognizes that there were often one, two, maybe three other places in a parable where a character or a detail so transparently stands for something at the spiritual level. In this way, parables are stories with one or more points of symbolic import, which can be considered allegories or analogies. This approach allows a reading of the parable from multiple perspectives with a unifying theme.

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Structures of Jesus’ Parables: Do Parables have Unifying Forms?

Now that we understand the history of interpretation of Jesus’ parables and narratives, let’s consider the common structures they follow. Jesus’ parables fall into three types of structures: *triadic*, *dyadic*, and *monadic*.

Triadic parables are three pointed passages. They are stories with a master figure and a pair of contrasting subordinates or stories with three main characters and three prongs to the passage. Approximately 70% of Jesus’ fictional narratives are structured in a triadic fashion and the parable of “The Prodigal Son” is one of them. Consider also the parables of “The Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:29-37) and “The Unforgiving Servant” (Matthew 18:23-35).

Dyadic parables are stories with a master figure and a single subordinate, such as the parable of “The Unjust Judge” (Luke 18:1-8), or are stories with a good example and a bad example, such as the parable of “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector” (Luke 18:9-14).

Monadic parables are stories with a single point, such as the parable of “The Pearl of Great Price” (Matthew 13:45-46).

How Does this Help Us Understand Jesus’ Parables?

Because there is such a limited number of structures of Jesus’ parables, because most of them recur multiple times, and because most of them are built around a very limited number of one or two or three main characters, I believe Jesus’ original audiences would have heard his stories based on their own personal experiences, sometimes identifying with a good subordinate, sometimes with a bad one, sometimes with a master figure, or sometimes with more than one of those figures. Depending on which one you identify with, you learn something a little different.

What you learn from each reading or hearing of the story as you focus on a different central detail or character has to be incorporated into any summary of what that parable teaches. Brevity is wonderful! If you can't boil it down to something simple and concise, don't sacrifice meaning for the sake of a simple point. *Make sure you have all meanings accounted for.*

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