

## Introduction

Jesus' ministry lasted three years and was filled with amazing teachings and events. What first comes to many people's mind when they think of Jesus are His miracles and His parables. And because they play such a large role in His ministry, we will focus on them for part of this lesson. But since His friendships and conversations were such a large part of His ministry, we will also look at those. Jesus' parables captivated people and His miracles demonstrated His power to heal people. But He was more than a miracle worker and teacher. He was a friend. He sat by a well and talked with a troubled woman. He lovingly forgave Peter for denying Him. He was a real person, and He cared about other people. He ministered through conversations and friendships as powerfully as He did through miracles and parables.

## I. Jesus' Miracles

### A. Definition of "Miracle"

Let's talk, first of all, about Jesus' miracles. We define a miracle as a work of God that transcends the ordinary powers of nature and reveals a divine truth.

1. *A Work of God.* Only God performs miracles, not people. You and I don't have the power to perform a miracle. The only human who ever performed a miracle was Jesus. Only God can perform a miracle. When Peter and John and others healed people, they proclaimed that it was God at work through them and gave the credit to Him. One of the things that set Jesus apart is the fact that His miracles were evidence that He was, in fact, God's Son.

2. *Beyond Natural Law.* A second part of the definition states that miracles transcend the ordinary powers of nature. They are supernatural events. While they violate our natural laws, they are perfectly normal occurrences to the God who created nature and its laws. They are supernatural to us, but they are perfectly natural to God. Jesus defied the laws of gravity when He walked on water. He defied the laws of time and chemistry when He turned water into wine. It takes time and a certain chemical process to

turn fruit juice into wine. Jesus transcended these natural laws by making wine from water in an instant.

*3. Performed to Reveal Truth.* The third part of the definition says a miracle was performed in order to reveal truth. By working miracles Jesus revealed that He was God's Son and that His offer to save people from sin was a legitimate offer. He showed compassion to hurting people by helping them. He could have ignored their pain or trouble, but He showed how much He cared about them. Jesus came to do far more than feed crowds and heal the sick. He came to heal a much deeper wound in the human soul.

## B. John's Record of Jesus' Miracles

*1. Miracles as Signs.* There are about thirty miracles recorded in the Gospels. Matthew contains twenty miracles; Mark records eighteen; and Luke records twenty. John records only seven miracles, but not because he didn't put as much emphasis on them as the other three writers. In fact the opposite is true. John said he wrote his gospel so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and his record is structured around those seven miracles. He even selected a particular word that means "sign" when he referred to Jesus' miracles. It was a word that means "evidence" and described what people would present in court to substantiate their claim. So John used the miracles as signs or evidence to substantiate his claim that Jesus is God's Son.

*2. Miracles and Messages.* Because John used miracles as evidence, he used Jesus' teachings to explain the miracles he included. For instance, after John recorded the miraculous feeding of five thousand people, he recorded Jesus' discourse on the bread of life (John 6). He showed us that Jesus satisfied people's physical hunger and then told them that only He could satisfy their much deeper hunger. God created us with cravings that only Jesus as the Bread of Life can assuage.

*3. Jesus' Amazing Invitation.* John recorded two crucial statements Jesus made about His miracles. The Jews were challenging His claim to be God, and He explained, "The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:24–26 NIV). Jesus said His miracles support His claim that God is His Father.

Still unconvinced, the Jews prepared to stone Him. Jesus responded, "I have shown you many [great miracles] from my Father. For which of these do you stone me?" (John 10:32 NIV).

Jesus repeated His claim that He could perform miracles because He was God's Son. After some further debate, Jesus asked, "Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said 'I am God's Son'?" (v. 36).

Then He offered this amazing challenge about belief and miracles: "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (John 10:37–38 NASB).

Jesus told them not to believe Him just because He claimed to be God unless He did what only His Father does. *But*, He said, "if I do it, even though you don't believe Me, *believe the miracles* that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I am in the Father." So Jesus said that the most undeniable evidence He could provide to support His claim to deity was His miracles.

## II. Jesus' Parables

### A. A Definition of "Parable"

A second major aspect of Jesus' ministry is His parables. A parable is an imaginary story told in a way that could have happened. That's the difference between a parable and a fable. If you read *Aesop's Fables*, you probably are not afraid you will meet a Cyclops on a lonely road. We all realize no Cyclops exists because they only appear in a fable, which is an imaginary story that could *not* have happened. A parable is an imaginary story that *could* have happened.

### B. The Power of Parables

Jesus used parables for an important reason. There was no actual good Samaritan named Fred. There was no actual prodigal son named Billy. Jesus told the good Samaritan's story as a parable because He wants all of us to see ourselves as a good Samaritan. He told the prodigal story as a parable because He wants all prodigals to realize that God stops at nothing to restore us. If He told a real story about Billy, the town prodigal, His listeners would be able to say, "Well, yeah, I remember that guy. Bad dude. Glad I'm not like him." No, Jesus constructed these stories in such a way that *we* are in them. Because there *isn't* a good Samaritan or a prodigal son, they become stories about *you* the good Samaritan and *you* the forgiven prodigal.

### C. When Did Jesus Tell His Parables?

Jesus started teaching in parables during the second year of His ministry when the religious leaders unequivocally rejected Him as their king. Following that event, recorded in Matthew 12, Jesus told His first parable, the story of the sower and the seeds, recorded in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. It is only one of two parables that all three Synoptic Gospels record. After Jesus told that parable, “The disciples . . . said to him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’” (Matthew 13:10). If He had been using parables previously, this would be a strange question for the disciples to ask.

### D. Why Jesus Told Parables

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. 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. 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.” (Matthew 13:11–13 ESV)

The “having,” and “not having” in Jesus’ explanation is a reference to knowledge of His teachings. Jesus used parables to reveal truth to those who wanted it and to conceal truth from those who rejected and ridiculed it. Following His own advice from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refused to cast His pearls of truth before those who would think of them as lightly as pigs would think of pearls.

Those who want to hear God’s spiritual truth, hear it. Those who don’t—just hear a good story.

### E. Understanding the Parables

Because the parables contain profound truth woven into stories, we need to know how to read them. But parables require some skill to understand their truth clearly. Three suggestions will help us understand Jesus’ parables better.

*1. First we separate the story and its message.* We have to understand the parable’s plot before we can understand its principle. We identify the people in the story and understand what they’re

doing. Only then can we ask what point Jesus is making with the story.

Jesus constructed each story so the characters and actions represent something in His listeners' lives. Until the story is clear, we can't understand how it is supposed to mirror real life. Jesus had a reason for telling each parable. It wasn't entertainment or bedtime storytelling—it was teaching. It's tragic to superficially read the story, make up our own meaning, and miss Jesus' point completely.

2. *We must put the parable into its context.* Jesus told each parable for a reason, and we find that reason in the context. In many cases, the characters in the parable mirror the characters in the context. In the prodigal son parable, for instance, if we don't match the characters in the parable with the characters in the context, the parable fails as a parable. The *story* is a winner. But its *purpose as a parable* fails without its context.

3. *We must define the scope and magnitude of the parable's point.* If we settle for a superficial understanding, we miss some of Jesus' most profound teaching. For instance, Jesus challenged us to carefully weigh the cost of being one of His disciples in Luke 14 by telling the parable of a man building a tower without counting the cost. To read that parable and conclude that Jesus was simply saying "Look before you leap" is to miss being confronted with the decision to say "yes" or "no" to His challenge to become one of His disciples. So we have to prayerfully think deeply about what Jesus was teaching in each parable.

### III. Jesus' Conversations and Relationships

#### A. Apostles, Disciples, and Friends

Jesus' miracles and the parables are things people relate to Jesus' ministry. But Jesus also ministered through relationships. He selected twelve men out of the larger body of disciples to be His apostles. The term *disciple* has a broad meaning and refers to someone's pupils or followers. All those who followed Jesus and listened to His teaching were sometimes referred to as disciples.

But Luke tells us that Jesus called His "disciples" together and selected twelve of them whom He named as "apostles." These twelve became an inner circle of closer associates within Jesus'

larger following of disciples; and Jesus spent most of His time with them. They ministered together. They ate and traveled and laughed and talked together. They were His closest companions and friends. He shared His last Passover meal with them the night before He was crucified. Even among the twelve, he had three—Peter, James, and John—with whom He had a closer relationship.

### B. Unusual Friends

Mary and Martha had a special place in Jesus' affection. He doesn't call them disciples, although they certainly were. But they were more than that. They were close, dear friends. It's interesting that two of Jesus' closest friends were women. This was not a normal relationship for a religious teacher in Jesus' culture.

### C. Conversations

Jesus also ministered through conversations. John 3 records a visit Jesus had with a religious leader named Nicodemus.

John 4 tells the story of Jesus sitting at a well in the heat of the day having a long conversation with a woman who was a Samaritan and a sinner: three reasons why Jesus shouldn't have been talking with her. He violated social norms because He was doing what He came to do. He could say, "See this woman? She's the reason I came to earth. She's the reason I came to Samaria. I came to seek and to save people just like my new friend here." As you study Jesus' life, don't skip over the wonderful conversations. They add a personal and relational dimension to Jesus that we don't want to miss.

## Conclusion

Jesus taught in parables so we can see ourselves in His profound teachings. He did miracles because He cares about our condition and can do something about it. But the brilliant teacher and powerful miracle worker also took time for friendships; and He was secure enough to engage in vulnerable conversations. We can obviously see reasons to worship Him. But it's also important to love Him and relate to Him as a caring friend.