

Keys to Interpreting the Parables



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Part 1: What's the Big Idea?

Maybe the best known parable of Jesus in the New Testament is the parable we often call the prodigal son. Many of you will be familiar with it, but it's the longest of Jesus' parables. And in case there are a few details that might have slipped your mind, let me take the time in this first video to refresh your memory as to what it says. I'll be reading from Luke 15 and starting with verse 11.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them."

"Not long after that the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen and of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father."

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

"The son said to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the oldest son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

A story like this, I believe, like most of the biblical stories, needs to be read with some thought. It’s a little passionate at the appropriate places with emphasis, speeding up, slowing down, as I suspect Jesus, like any good public speaker in the ancient world and in today’s world, would do.

Did you hear anything you had forgotten? It’s a parable rich with detail. *What does it mean?* That’s the simplest question of all that we want to be asking in this series about Jesus’ parables in general. When I ask an audience that question, I sometimes get one-word answers by way of first replies. It’s about love, forgiveness, welcome, or hospitality. If I ask people to turn those single words into a complete thought, they might say something like, “It’s about the amazing nature of God’s love.” Or, “It’s about God wanting people to come back to Him, no matter how far they’ve strayed.” Or maybe even that “as long as the breath of life is in someone, there’s still a chance to become right with God.” And I think all of those are valid insights.

They also all tend to focus on verses 11–24. Jesus could have made

those points—that cluster of lessons—without having an older brother. Without having a second, slightly shorter main episode to the story. Verses 25 to 32 complicate the plot. I would have preferred for Jesus to end at verse 24, but I’m an older brother. My parents had two sons. In some respects, my younger brother was a prodigal, though not anything like what’s described here.

If I’m ruthlessly honest, there are times when I begrudged the biblical teaching that God loves all people equally. I was a compliant child, mostly. I can relate to the older brother. And surely the point of this second episode is that we’re not to be like this older brother.

How does that all fit together? Haddon Robinson, a wonderful man of God, former Denver Seminary president, wrote the single-most influential English language textbook on preaching in the last forty years, simply called *Biblical Preaching*. And he challenged preachers and teachers and interpreters to try to identify a single central proposition, which he simply called the big idea. So you could ask the question, What’s the big idea of any self-contained unit within Scripture?

So what’s the big idea of the parable that we often call the prodigal? Should it be renamed, as some have, the parable of the older brother? Has that traditional name—that’s not actually in the text of Scripture—skewed our interpretation of it in some way?

And what of the father, the one character who interacts with both sons? Should it be, as a famous German theologian during and after World War II, Helmut Thielicke—one of the good guys, part of the confessing church in Germany during that era—entitled a short, little book on this passage: *Parable of the Waiting Father*. Is there a way to incorporate all three main characters and what we learn from each of them? And what do we do with all of the rich detail in the passage? Property requested and given, in what culturally would have been an audacious request comparable to saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead so that we could have the inheritance right now.”

It probably doesn’t surprise us in light of his subsequent actions that the younger brother is extreme in his behavior and squanders his wealth in wild living. And, unless we remind ourselves that pigs were the most unclean of all animals and certainly not to be eaten and, therefore, even more degrading than having to eat pig

meat would be having to eat the food of pigs, which even that he isn't allowed to do, we miss the absolute degradation of verses 15 and 16.

Here is a man who has gone to a far country. Jesus is telling this story to people in Israel. That guarantees that the far country would not be Israel and therefore would be a gentile country. And here's a man who has reached such rock bottom that he wants to eat the unclean food of unclean animals belonging to an unclean farmer in an unclean country. And while some in Jesus' audience would have been horrified, I suspect others would have been chuckling, "Yup, got what he deserved." Kind of dark humor.

And then what are we supposed to do with all of the rich detail surrounding the celebration when he comes back home? "Put the best robe on him" (verse 22) "and a ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it." Those details must stand for something—or is that just the way a rich family had an extravagant party?

How do we make sense of some of the older brother's claims? He accuses his younger brother of squandering his property with prostitutes. In a world before email, in a world where there wouldn't have been any reason for these two brothers to communicate, even by old-fashioned letters, and probably no one coming and going between them to give any information about what was happening, can the brother possibly know this—or is he imagining the worst?

And how realistic is this behavior of the father? He seems remarkably tender toward both his sons when cultural expectations would have been that he behaved much more harshly.

I take the time with this single parable in this opening segment simply to raise an important cluster of questions that to varying degrees will be important in interpreting all of the parables of Jesus. In our next segment, we want to look at different ways, main approaches that people have taken down through the centuries, still looking at this parable to illustrate it as we then begin to try to move in a direction of a responsible approach to interpreting the parables.

Part 2: Four Approaches to Interpreting the Parables

We left off at the end of our first video segment asking a whole

barrage of questions about interpreting the parable of the prodigal son. In this segment, I want to give you a whirlwind tour—a grossly oversimplified one—of four main approaches. And there are certainly other approaches that people have taken throughout church history.

One of the factors that influenced the interpretation of narrative portions of the Bible much more broadly in the early centuries was the fact that the Jewish backgrounds of, obviously, what Christians call the Old Testament, but even something like the parables of Jesus, were pretty quickly lost sight of. By the middle of the second century, the Christian church was overwhelmingly gentile in makeup. And its centers of power were outside of Israel and even removed from centers of, at least, large Jewish and/or Jewish Christian population.

And the Greek and Roman world had come to love to allegorize narratives; to take stories rich in detail and find spiritual or symbolic significance in as many details as possible. I've projected a diagram that is overly simplified as well, but it suggests what many Christians even to this day have believed and have practiced with interpreting the parables: that one finds multiple points of contact with the individual story itself. (Hence the places where the dotted lines touch the horizontal line that I've labeled the storyline.) And then looked for a corresponding symbolic and/or spiritual counterpart where those dashed lines touch the top horizontal line called the spiritual symbolism.

The parable of the prodigal son is as susceptible as any story for this kind of an approach because it's so long and rich in detail. I asked in the last segment, "What does one do with such details about the celebration when the prodigal returns, such as putting a robe on him, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, killing the fattened calf?" And the early church assumed that each of these details stood for something spiritual in nature—because of teaching, perhaps, in the Old Testament on clothing someone with a robe—about their new life: a robe of immortality, baptismal garments. Something having to do with a new Christian life was seen at this juncture.

A ring sealed to this day seals a marriage. In the ancient world, people often thought of baptism as the seal of the Christian life. And writers speculated that the ring stood for baptism. Isaiah talks about shoes shod for the preparation of the gospel of peace. So it was a natural inference to assume that the sandals stood for

an evangelistic mandate for this son now that he had returned. And of course, once you introduce baptism, how can you have a feast without seeing the Eucharist, the Lord separate?

But is that what Jesus had in mind? Many of those details are not what would have first come to mind to a poor first-century audience somewhere in Israel. That approach, however, persisted and probably has been the single-most adopted approach throughout church history. Although there were some all-star objectors to it: names you've probably heard of like Thomas Aquinas, to a certain degree even in the early church, John Chrysostom. At the time of the Reformation, John Calvin was a loud opponent—and others. But it wasn't until 1899, the last year of that century, 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 and, just about every one, in detail. And he pointed out how rampant all this allegation was without any necessary consensus as to what all the details of the parable stood for. And he pointed out that it was deeply ingrained in the ancient culture. Because before the Roman Empire occupied Israel and much of the Mediterranean world, the Greek Empire had been there as well. Influential and pervasive was the teaching of Aristotle, that great Greek philosopher, that good stories make a single point.

And Jülicher, on page after page after page, drove home how perfectly appropriate it seemed to be to focus on a single point of contact, as I've tried to suggest in this second diagram between the story itself and its symbolic meaning. But what was that single point of contact? For a short parable, it's perhaps not difficult. In the parable of the mustard seed: Great beginnings . . . great endings, I should say, from small beginnings. But what about the prodigal son? Do I focus on, as the parable of the mustard seed said, the waiting father? Do I focus on the prodigal? Do I focus on the older brother?

So throughout much of the twentieth century, in a development that I probably haven't come up with the best diagram for, people tried to smooth the rough edges off of Jülicher. So I've drawn some curve shapes rather than the sharp corners of the previous diagram. They still wanted to follow the basic principle that parables were not allegories. They made a single point of comparison but allowed for some exceptions; allowed perhaps for a story as detailed as the prodigal son to have another point.

Recognize that there are two parables in the gospels, but only two out of the roughly forty that are usually considered as parables in which Jesus himself gives a detailed allegorical explanation: the parable of the sower, where each of the four soils stands for something, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13, where a farmer sows seed and an enemy sows weeds. There are servants; there's a harvest. And Jesus gives in that chapter a point-by-point explanation.

But interpreters also observed that those are the exceptions and not the rule. So they didn't abandon Jülicher's main contribution to scholarship until we approached the last third of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. And maybe this is my strangest diagram of all, but while still wanting to preserve that there was a center, a unifying character or point. So I've drawn what moderately resemble perhaps sine curves, mirror images of each other. There's one place where the distance between the storyline and the symbolic world is the shortest. That might be the father who—I don't know that there's been hardly anyone in the history of interpreting the parables that hasn't seen the father in some sense representing God. But then they realized that there were often one, two, maybe three other places in a parable where a character or a detail so transparently stood for something at the spiritual level and that if an allegory simply means a story with one or more points of symbolic import, then the parables really were allegories.

Now even to say that risks misinterpretations. So some interpreters, such as Klyne Snodgrass—whose book on the parables is probably the most magnificent accomplishment of the post-Jülicher era of scholarship on the parables, called *Stories with Intent* (it was just done about ten years ago)—prefers the term analogy to allegory, which is fine with me. Our approaches are very much in sync most of the time.

But the point is you can't be as reductionistic as Jülicher was. If you read through the parable of the prodigal son . . . maybe here's a thought or reading experiment for you: Read it three times. Once from the perspective of each of the three main characters, putting yourself in their position. What is it you learn? What is it you think Jesus is saying to you if you read the story from the viewpoint of the prodigal? And surely the answer is that, well, to quote the character who played Corrie Ten Boom in the movie *The Hiding Place*, "There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

But now put yourself in the position of the older brother. And if you're spiritually attuned at all, you should undoubtedly come away with the sense that those who are God's people, or at least who think they are God's people, should not begrudge His generosity to the wayward. Is there a way to unite those two parts to the parable? Surely it is by reading it a third time from the perspective of the father and seeing his lavish and unprecedented magnanimous love—God's amazing grace and love for both kinds of wayward sons.

There are undoubtedly ways to encapsulate or to capture those three prongs of the story in a simpler statement. But let's not, in so doing, lose sight of all three of those points. Even if the shortest direction, the shortest distance between the story and the symbol, is with the father and God. There are at least two other points of comparison where I've drawn the diagram with slightly longer dashed lines in between the silly little squiggles. The prodigal that that younger brother stands for is anyone who has fallen far from God. The older brother: for anyone smug in his self-satisfaction. And if we were to have started this reading from the beginning of chapter 15, we would see that Luke tells us that the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. They're the prodigals of their world. And the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the scribes, are the older brothers of their world. It's not just enough to focus on one point of comparison.

Part 3: Diagramming the Parables

We left off in our last segment, after a whirlwind tour of approaches to interpreting the parables, with the observation that at least with the parable of the prodigal son, with clearly three main characters, the story begins: There was a man who had two sons. At first, it doesn't look like the older son is going to play any role. But Jesus knows where He's going. And in the second part of this story, he very much comes to the fore. We made the observation that it is difficult, if not impossible, to restrict the message of the parable to a single point focusing just on one of these three characters.

But the prodigal son, we mentioned in our first video segment, is the longest and most detailed of all of the parables. Maybe it is an exception as some have suggested throughout church history. Can we generalize? Can we apply these observations about focusing on three different characters to any of the rest of Jesus' parables? Or another way of asking the question is, Are any of the other

parables structured similarly to the prodigal?

I happen to like diagrams. I hope they help rather than hinder in our study. How would we diagram the structure of the main characters or details or elements within the various parables of Jesus? What we've seen with the prodigal son was what we might call a triadic or three-pronged, three-pointed passage. We can diagram it with a simple triangle with a master figure, and a pair of contrasting subordinates. If we phrase it that way, rather than immediately putting father, younger brother, and older brother into the picture, then we can start to generalize. And in fact, if you were to start with the beginning of Matthew and go to the end of Luke, since it is the first three gospels where all of Jesus' parables are found, you would find roughly 60 percent, not quite two-thirds of Jesus' fictional narratives structured this way. Sometimes the master is a king; sometimes he's a father; sometimes he's a shepherd; sometimes he's a land owner or a farmer. And then there are a pair or pairs of contrasting subordinates: Good son, bad son; sheep that are safe, and one that's lost; good tenants, wicked tenants. Often with a surprise as to who turns out to be the good model. Nobody expected the prodigal to be the exemplary character by the end of the story that we've been thinking about in Luke 15, or that the older brother would turn out to not look so good after all.

Not all of the parables that have contrasting subordinates have a twist or reversal somewhere within the plot. But more than half of them do. We have to be attentive to that. Sometimes the structure of the parable doesn't look this simple at first until we recognize that there are multiple characters or details that provide the good example—maybe five wise and five foolish bridesmaids, for a total of ten subordinates. But the point of that story in Matthew 25:1–13 does not depend on whether there are five in each category or four in each category, or if there's just one wise and one foolish young woman. Ten bridesmaids would have been the number for a well-to-do family putting on a pretty lavish wedding and wedding celebration, which reminds us also that, more often than not, the details of the parables are realistic or at least intelligible to an early first-century Jewish, often Galilean, peasant audience. The moment we start putting in interpretations that Christians came up with in later years, even centuries, that no one could have thought of in AD 28 in Capernaum, then we begin to allegorize and misinterpret in inappropriate ways.

What did Jesus' initial audiences think? How could they have

made sense of His story with or without any explanations that He gave? Sometimes what looks like a more complex diagram falls into this simple triangular model. Because there are two or three subordinates in one category, and one in another. Very much like we tell jokes. There was a pastor, a priest, and a rabbi. And they all walked into a bar. And of all those jokes, my favorite one is where the bartender looked up and said, “What is this, a joke?” But whichever order you put them in you know that the first two are going to be a setup for the third. Or maybe there are three characters in a story that are a foil or a setup for the fourth. Jesus, like storytellers throughout time, did that as well. Only He was being much more serious than we are when we tell jokes about priests and pastors and rabbis.

There is at least one passage that is triadic. It has three prongs to it, but it’s not triangular. And that’s the parable of the good Samaritan. There is an individual who is the unifying figure in the sense that he is aware of the other characters in the story, just like the father interacted with both sons in the parable of the prodigal. And that’s the man who’s left for dead by the side of the road. He knows that the priest and Levite, despite cultural expectations, turn out to be the very unhelpful example by passing him by. And that the Samaritan, a descendant of the hated enemies of the Jews going all the way back to the eighth century BC, is the last person he expects to stop and help him. But, hallelujah, he does. And he becomes a good example and the hero of the story.

So here there is again a surprise. There’s a twist as to who turns out to be the exemplary model and who doesn’t, but not at the bottom of the vertices of a triangle in our diagram. Because the unifying figure is someone who’s not in a position of power like a master or a king or a father or a shepherd. In fact, you could almost draw an upside-down triangle if you wanted for this parable because he’s very much in a position of powerlessness, possibly dying. But he does have the ability to judge who helps him. We’ll come back to the parable of the good Samaritan.

Then there are at least a couple of passages that again have three prongs. They’re triadic. But the flow chart doesn’t create a triangle. It just creates a top-down structure. A master figure of some kind with a subordinate under him, and then somebody under that subordinate. And we’ll come back and look at examples of these as well. Here I think of the parable of the unforgiving servant at the end of Matthew 18. A master, who’s also called a king, forgives a servant an extraordinary debt that goes beyond

what almost anybody in his society could have ever amassed, but much less owed, only for that servant to turn around and be very unforgiving and cruel to someone who owed him three months wages, not a sum to be trifled with. But compared to the debt the first servant was forgiven, it was indeed paltry.

Three main characters, three prongs to the passage. This one even breaks down into three scenes. The first scene is in the throne room, as it were, with the king forgiving the first servant. Then, going outside the palace, that servant being cruel to his servant; and then a reprise, a return to the original scene in the end of the parable with another time of reckoning between the king and the first servant.

Put all of the parables in this triadic category together, and you have about two-thirds, maybe 70 percent or so of the fictional short narratives, about half of which we explicitly read that the gospel writers call parables, and the others that are structured exactly like them. But the remaining, just under a third, of the parables of Jesus can be split relatively evenly first into what we might call dyadic parables. These are stories that have masters with single subordinates, servants, sons, sometimes animals. Sometimes plants. Right after the more complex parable of the sower in Mark 4 is a short little parable in which a farmer sows seed and then waits as it germinates and begins to grow, and discovers—especially in an ancient world that didn't know as much about agriculture as we do—that a lot happens on its own that the farmer has no control over. And yet at the end he's able to harvest a very satisfactory crop. He's a master, a farmer planting seeds. But it's just a single kind of seed. There's no differentiation.

Or maybe there's a contrast between a good and a bad example, but they're not subordinates because there's no master figure. A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9–14), but it's just those two characters. But there's a twist. There's a surprise. The one Jesus winds up praising is not the one you'd have expected.

And then, in the remaining half of the remaining third—I guess that comes out to about a sixth of the parables, which we might call monadic or single-pointed—there truly is just one main character. There was a man who built a tower, but he didn't count the cost. He couldn't finish it. And he was a laughingstock. Count the cost of being in God's kingdom, simple single point. Or a man going to war who didn't count the cost of the fact that his enemy

had twice the size of his army. We'll come back to all of these stories.

But interestingly, this is the sum total, as far as I can tell, of the structures of Jesus' parables. They're not forty different stories in forty different forms. There must be some significance to the fact that He uses such a few number, such a small number of plots and recurring structures. And that's where we'll pick things up in our next segment.

Part 4: Six Structures in Jesus' Parables

So far, in our first three segments, we read the parable of the prodigal son. We raised questions about what does it mean? Can I collapse all of its rich detail into a single point? Should there be two or three? What about those throughout the history of the church who have allegorized in a fashion that looks for detailed spiritual or symbolic meaning in virtually every detail of the passage? And we left off in our third and last segment with some structures. Those of you who are engineers or like flowcharts or geometry, maybe you were thrilled. And for those of you who prefer less technical, more free-flowing literary approaches, you might've been wondering, Is this necessary? Where is all this going?

I made the claim at the end of the last segment that there really are only about six structures in Jesus' parables as you study the way people have tried to classify Jesus' parables, because they're not all the same. Usually people have focused on their content. Some parables talk about the beginning of the kingdom. Some talk about the end in judgment day, some focus on the nature of God, some deal with human responsibilities. And there's nothing wrong with doing all that.

But once you realize that of all the many different ways Jesus could have told stories that were abundant in His world and have been used by storytellers throughout time, the fact is that He chose no more than six pretty simple structures, with rarely any more than three main characters. There are props. There are those people that if you were putting this on stage get to make a cameo appearance. They have just a few lines, as it were. But in terms of the main foci, the points of focus of the passage, there's seldom more than three. That's probably extremely significant. We need to focus on the results from telling stories narrated in this fashion.

And I began already in our last segment to point out some illustrations of different kinds of structures of Jesus' parables with the slide in the background that just focused on the general structure. Hopefully for the sake of clarity and reinforcing this, I wanted to go through a few more slides built exactly on the model of that previous slide and once again focus on these main structures but put in the characters. Some of them are the same that we already talked about briefly. Some of them are different. We've mentioned now in every one of our segments the parable of the prodigal son. If the figure at the top of the triangle is the master figure, then clearly that's the father. If the good subordinate—and certainly not the one expected to be at the beginning of the story, but the one who turned out to be—is who we put at the bottom left-hand corner of the triangle, then that's the prodigal son. And that leaves the older brother who we would have expected to be the good example, but who turns out to be the not-so-good example.

We mentioned the parable of the good Samaritan as the only one that, well . . . you'll see what you think as we go through this series. I've often had audiences put other parables in this category as well. The one that seems completely clear to me is the story of the good Samaritan. The man left for dead by the side of the road who's not in a position of power. But he is able to judge that the Samaritan, shockingly, is the good example. The priest, then the Levite, who we expected to be the hero, the Jewish clergy of the day, were not.

And we mentioned the example of the king with two servants under him, one of whom was in turn under the first servant. For two-pointed parables, we mentioned the farmer and the seed growing secretly or automatically as some translations put it. The tax collector and the Pharisee we could have mentioned under the category of a single-pointed or a monadic parable; the treasure hunter and its twin or companion, Matthew 13, the pearl of great price. The kingdom is worth so much. It's worth everything; and it's worth sacrificing whatever is necessary in order to be a part of it. And if that means selling everything you have to acquire enough money to purchase a field with a treasure hidden in it (if the treasure stands for the kingdom), then that's what we need to do. And if that means ditto for a pearl of great price—selling everything you have in order to purchase an oyster that you know has the most amazing pearl ever in it—if that stands for the kingdom, then that's what you have to do.

Or, we can flesh out the very same diagram with the parable of the workers in the vineyard, beginning in Matthew 20. At first glance, this is one of the more complex examples, like we mentioned with the sower. In fact, it's more complex than the sower where there were four different kinds of soil. But how many workers were hired several different times throughout the day? This is that story in Matthew 20, where at the end the farmer pays the wages in the reverse order of the amount of time that people have worked in the fields. Enabling them to see what each other is getting or at least to hear about it through the grapevine that quickly is created with the queue of people waiting to be paid. It's a fascinating story; and we're going to come back to every one of these examples as this series continues.

But it ends with a puzzling statement: "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Who are the first, and who are the last? There are a couple of ways you could think about this. You could think about the last hired meaning just those hired at the eleventh hour, at 5:00 in the afternoon if we start counting from 6:00 a.m., the average time of daybreak in that part of the world. They worked for only one hour. They were the last hired, yet they were given a full day's wage.

Or we can think of everybody except for those who worked the whole day long as the last hired. Because everybody except the first group of workers got more than they anticipated. And then depending on which way you go with that determines whether you call the first hired everybody up to but not including the eleventh hour workers, or just those hired at the beginning of the day. It gets more complicated. But either way, if all we're looking at is the structure, it's still a straightforward triangle.

I mentioned I'm not aware of other parables that I think are best diagrammed like the good Samaritan, but I know of at least one other that matches the parable of the unforgiving servant with that top-down structure, often called the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1 and following: a master with a steward who somehow has been cheating on him; and then that steward, who cooks the books, finds a clever way of ingratiating himself to his master's debtors under both of them.

One can turn to Luke 18:1–8 and the parable of the unjust judge. Or should it be called the parable of the persistent widow? Both of those terms are used. Because there are two clear characters. The judge in a position of power, the widow in a position of

powerlessness. But again through a very creative and surprising technique, the widow does get justice granted and Jesus says, “God is far more eager than this unjust judge to grant justice.” But there may need to be, as in the little parable, a period of waiting. Will the Son of Man find faith on earth if that delay or period of waiting goes on longer than some are expecting?

A simple contrast without a master figure is the parable of the man who built his house on the rock and the one who built his house on the sand. Here there’s no surprise. Everybody in the first century, maybe even better than some of us, knew that you needed a solid foundation. The temptation, if you are especially putting up temporary dwelling places like campsites, is to find a nice, flat open sandy beach that is dry 364 days out of the year. But if you happen to camp there when the flash flood once a year comes through, as tragically has happened many times in Colorado where I live and teach, you can lose your life.

Two characters, obvious contrast. The wisdom is sound. No surprise here, except not everybody follows it. And then we can again give the example as we did in the last segment of the tower builder, the king going to war.

Here’s where we’re going with all of this. Here’s the hypothesis I want us to try on for size in the rest of this series: Because there is such a limited number of structures of Jesus’ parables; because most of them reoccur multiple times; because most of them are built around a very limited number—one or two or three main characters—granted that we sometimes lump two or three or five details together when they function identically as a single character—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. Sometimes with more than one of those figures. And depending on which one you identify with, you learn something a little different.

What you learn from each reading or hearing of this 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 super simple and concise, don’t sacrifice meaning for the sake of a simple point. Make sure you have both or all three prongs accounted for. But don’t revert to the rampant allegorization of much of the history of the church. Because along with other

problems, it usually winds up being highly anachronistic and coming up with things that nobody in the beginning of the first century in a peasant, Galilean, Jewish audience could have ever come up with. Now it's my task to convince you of that approach as we move briefly through each of the major parables of Jesus in our coming videos.