

## Exploring the Simpler Three-Point Parables



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### Part 1: Three-Pronged Parables

We have by now perhaps overly belabored the point that I think the parable of the prodigal son has three main characters and that they are structured like a triangle, and that the two subordinates have a surprise dimension to them so that the one who we wouldn't expect to be the hero turns out to be the hero and the one we wouldn't have expected to be the bad example does, in fact, by the end of the story turn out to be the bad example. I've also made the claim that almost two-thirds of Jesus' parables fit into this model. But is that true? How would one come up with thinking along these lines in the first place? The parable of the prodigal son is the longest of all of Jesus' parables. Maybe it's unique.

As we mentioned ever so briefly already, the parable of the prodigal son is not the beginning. It's not at the beginning of the context in which it appears. That is the beginning of Luke 15, where we read that the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Jesus actually proceeds to tell a trio of parables, which we know as the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and what my NIV subheading (not-inspired paragraph heading) says, the parable of the lost son, which maybe we should've called the parable of the lost sons, plural, and not lost son, singular.

If I'm looking for passages that might prove similar to the story of the prodigal son, I only have to go back to the beginning of Luke 15 and notice these two. There is in each of them a master figure—a shepherd, the woman searching for her coins—and there are contrasting subordinates. Now, the contrast isn't quite the same because they're not human characters. One lost sheep compared to ninety-nine who are safe in the fold or maybe in the pastureland. One lost coin, and nine that the woman knows

where they are and they're kept safe. But there are still significant parallels to the dynamics of the story of the prodigal son. The focus is the character, the top of the diagram, the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the lost sheep until he finds it.

We didn't mention it before, but there's an interesting detail in the parable of the prodigal. The father does not leave home to search for his lost son, but he does recognize him when he is returning home at a distance. Luke 15:20 says,

*"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion."*

That could not have happened unless that dad on some kind of a regular basis went to the edge of the town where the boy headed off however many weeks or months before, years even, down the road in the direction of the foreign country. There is a sense in which, even though it's muted in the parable of the prodigal, the master figure is seeking that which is lost.

In the parable of the sheep and the coins, it has to be emphasized because sheep who get lost—unlike, occasionally, stories about dogs and cats—don't find their way home on their own. Coins that might have rolled away don't roll back on their own. The only way to save sheep and coins is for their owners to do all the work, so of course the seeking is going to be emphasized. But throughout all three of these stories is a message about, as Jesus puts it in the Zacchaeus story:

*"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).*

There's also an emphasis on joy in all three of these stories. The shepherd finds the sheep, brings it home, and he calls his friends and neighbors together and says,

*"Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep" (Luke 15:6).*

Commentators debate, is that a little over the top? Shepherds tend to be hardened people, rugged, hardened by the elements, nomadic. Periodically, they lose one of their flock to a predator, to being lost. Is this going beyond the general realism of the story? Did you have a party and call all your friends because you found one out of a hundred sheep? It might be, but that's also regularly one of the keys to the second level or symbolic meaning of the

parables, that, although they are generally lifelike, something is a bit unusual that gets our attention; that we're not just talking here about the normal practices of shepherding.

We don't know what kind of coins the woman had or how much each one was worth. There are all kinds of interpretative speculations about that. And that's what they are: they're speculations. There is nothing in the parable to suggest that these are particularly expensive coins. There's nothing to say they're not. I suppose it's a little more realistic that if you recovered one-tenth of what could've been a substantial sum of money, you would rejoice with your neighbors. Then again, ancients were no different than modern people in not necessarily wanting all their neighbors to know exactly how much money they had; and their possessions were much more vulnerable to theft, so we wonder if this is quite realistic also. But at the spiritual level, the point is clear. There should be great rejoicing when one lost person is found, whether they have the ability to come back on their own as the son did or whether it's almost a case of snatching them out of the jaws of darkness and death.

Then, although it's definitely more muted than in the case of the prodigal's older brother, Jesus could have told these two parables also about a shepherd who lost a sheep and went out and found it and rejoiced, and about a woman who lost a coin, who went and found it and rejoiced. There doesn't need to be the ninety-nine and the nine. They must be there for some reason, and it's not that the sheep or the coins have the ability, sadly, to begrudge God's generosity, to begrudge the shepherd's efforts and the woman's efforts at finding the lost.

But there still is a contrast. There still is a foil. There's the sense that lest somebody say,

“Ninety-nine sheep is enough. Now and then you lose one. The dangers of trying to find it outweigh the benefits of maybe finding it.”

Same thing with the coin: maybe not dangers, but the hassle of sweeping a house to find a single penny. There's something here about the value of each lost individual, no matter how many are already safe. In that sense, I think we can say that these two parables have the same structure and a similar trio of lessons as the prodigal son.

But are there any others that are like the three in this chapter? Where would we look for them? Well, we're in the gospel of Luke. What if we just start at the beginning and read through the gospel of Luke until we find a parable?

Well, if we do that, the first one Luke introduces to us comes embedded in a much longer narrative in Luke 7:36–50. It's the story of Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee for a festive meal in which there is a party crasher. If we look at a diagram of a typical fancy party in ancient Israel in what was called in Latin—because it was borrowed from the Greek and Roman practice of three couches put in a rectangular shape minus the fourth side—it was called a triclinium. You reclined at table, put one elbow on a cushion. I can't imagine eating that way, which is a reminder that the past is a foreign country, but they liked it.

There was an open end to the atrium where the servants brought in the food and the drink from wherever they were prepared, but that also meant that anybody from the outside could crash the party. This one is crashed by a woman who is described literally as a sinner in the city, which probably means a prostitute. Before too long, she is breaking an expensive flask of perfume, pouring it on Jesus' feet, kissing those feet. Even today, that looks like a come-on. This was not what you did in the home of a respectable Pharisee.

Not surprisingly, this man grumbles and says,

*“If this man were the prophet that the crowds think he is, he would know who's touching him and what kind of a woman she is—that she is a sinner.”*

In response, Jesus tells a story about a man with two debtors. It only takes three verses (vv. 41–43). There's no surprise in it. The answer is so straightforward. Simon can't miss it. Who is going to be more grateful if you have two debtors—one owing ten times as much money as the other—if the money lender forgives the debts of both? Well, duh, the one forgiven more. Uh-oh, a sting in the tail. That's the woman.

Simon may not have had as much to be forgiven for. At least, he didn't think he did. The woman did. She's not coming on to Jesus; she is showing lavish thanksgiving, even if in a somewhat countercultural way. Jesus lambasts Simon for all the hospitality he has not provided.

Three prongs. Are there three points here? God forgives all kinds of sin in amounts and natures. Those brought out of a very wayward life may well be more grateful and respond in unusual and extravagant ways, and that's okay. Others may respond more calmly. But if they begrudge God's generosity to the wayward, maybe they show they haven't really appropriated His forgiveness at all. Suddenly, I've got a story that sounds a lot like the prodigal son, only very much in miniature.

Well, we're up to four. Are there any others? Tune in next time to find out.

## **Part 2: More Three-Pronged Parables**

We have looked thus far at a series of parables that are similarly structured and teach somewhat similar lessons. We began with the parable of the prodigal son and suggested a strategy of reading the parable through the eyes of each of its three main characters, and then asked the question, Are there other parables of Jesus that are similarly structured that would yield valid interpretive results if we adopted the same strategy? It was extremely natural to go to the two shorter, immediately preceding passages in Luke 15 of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Then we looked at a small parable embedded in a larger story in Luke 7, when Jesus is invited to a banquet at the home of Simon the Pharisee and is interrupted in the proceedings by a woman who is described simply as a sinner in the city coming in and somewhat scandalously anointing His feet with perfume and wiping them with her hair. That leads Jesus to tell a little story about two debtors, one who is forgiven ten times as much as the other; and the implication is this woman is showing love for Jesus, probably from some previous encounter, and therefore there's nothing scandalous. She is simply lavishing an outpouring of thanks that Simon ought not to have begrudged. We see some of the same dynamics that we saw in the comparison of the older and younger brothers, the lost and not-lost sheep, and the lost and not-lost coins.

As we continue looking around to see if there are other passages similarly structured with similar messages, a passage in Matthew 21 (beginning at verse 28) that is often just called the parable of the two sons, strikes us. Many commentators have seen this as virtually the entire story of the prodigal son with most of the details stripped out of it. It's only five verses. Matthew 21:28 has

Jesus asking,

*“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?”*

At first glance, you’d say,

“This is so hopelessly obvious. There couldn’t be any creative twists as we’ve seen in the parables.”

They reply, correctly, *“The first.”* But here, the twist or the surprise is in Jesus’ application, not unlike the little parable of the two debtors that we just reviewed. Jesus said to them,

*“Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*

We assumed that the woman in the parable of the two debtors was a prostitute. Here, tax collectors, those who had sold out to the hated Roman army and collected Roman taxes, extravagant quantities, and then made it worse by the fact that the tax collectors earned their own money by charging even more than the Romans required and skimming that money off the top for themselves. Two despised categories of individuals, from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism,

*“are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*

Intriguingly, there are some manuscripts that reverse either the order of the two commands to the two sons, or the conclusion, so that the person whom Jesus is seen to praise is the one who promises to go but doesn’t go. What motivated those changes is very difficult to determine. They are certainly not in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, but it is a reminder that there is something challenging—even to Christians, even to the later Christian scribes who did that—to the idea that people who make promises, who seem to make commitments, but then don’t follow through on them show, thereby, that they are the outsiders to



God's kingdom. We have to take that seriously. This is similar to the older son in the parable of the prodigal. The one who said, "I won't," but then changed his mind and went is virtually identical to the prodigal, who went off, disobeyed his father, squandered all of his inheritance, but then came to his senses and returned and was welcomed.

One of my colleagues, Elodie Emig, who teaches Greek for us here at the seminary, years ago came up with what I think is a wonderful way of encapsulating the teaching of this passage when she said,

"Performance takes priority over promise."

You say, "Wait a minute, Craig. What happened to your three prongs to the passage?" Well, they're all there in those three P words. Performance, at the end of the day, no matter how things started out, is what the son who should be praised illustrates. Mere promise without follow-through is what the other son illustrates. Weighing between those two in terms of which one should we value is reflected in that little word priority. Certainly, look for a way to encapsulate the three prongs of a three-person passage, but don't do so at the expense of those three prongs if you can't find a simple and pithy way to do so.

There is one other little passage, easily neglected, just a few chapters later in Matthew that I think has the same dynamic. It comes in a series of parables that Jesus is telling His disciples on the Mount of Olives as He has left the temple for the last time and knows His end is near. Matthew 24:45–51 read,

*"Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly, I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

One could easily have had two separate servants in this passage to contrast them. There's really no difference in terms of the

dynamic of the story that Jesus simply considers one servant from two different hypothetical vantage points. Here there's no surprise in which one is considered good and which one is considered wicked. There's not even an application to surprise us. The teaching is very straightforward. The surprise comes in the fact that the master is delayed.

It's always important to keep parables in their larger context. There are, in fact, a series of three stories here. The other two, we'll come back to in later discussions. In verses 42–44, Jesus commands alertness because Christ's return will be like a thief, like a burglar, where if a householder knew someone was coming to try to steal property, they would keep watch. They would be on guard. Christ isn't likened to stealing anything, but just coming at a very surprising moment.

Then we have the story we just read where the master returns unexpectedly early, followed by a parable of the ten bridesmaids, again, about the end times, the return of Christ, where the bridegroom, the master figure, is unexpectedly delayed. We can see what Jesus is doing. His return may simply be unexpected. It may be sooner than some people are expecting. It may be later than some people are expecting. I think that covers all options.

Jesus, of course, also in this same message, has already said (in 24:36),

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

It's amazing throughout church history how often Christians claim to know what Jesus Himself, in the voluntarily adopted limitations of His incarnate state, said He did not and could not know. We must be ready for the return of Christ at any point, and therefore be like the servant who does his master's will, and not like the one who thinks he's got time to be wicked and then change later.

A rabbi in the ancient world, when a disciple came to him and asked, “When should I repent?” answered, “One day before you die.” The young man was caught off guard and said, “But I don't know when I'm going to die.” The rabbi said, “That's right, so repent today.” Some of that spirit, I think, is here in Jesus' teaching, as well.



### Part 3: Surprising Twists

In our last segment, we referred to the parable of the ten bridesmaids as part of the context of the little story of the faithful or unfaithful servant at the end of Matthew 24. I want to pick up with that parable because it, too, I'm convinced, has a triadic or triangular structure with a master figure and contrasting subordinates. Here we see for the first time more than a single individual considered as a subordinate. There are five wise bridesmaids and five foolish ones. Nothing should be made of the number five, other than to have ten bridesmaids then, as now, meant that you were having a very lavish, festive occasion, probably funded by some of the wealthier people around.

We read in Matthew 25, starting at verse 1, that *"At that time,"* so we're still talking about the time of Christ's return, *"the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins,"* the NIV says, because that is what the Greek word means. But the point in context is not about her virginity but about the fact that she's a bridal attendant, so I will refer to them as bridesmaids from here on,

*"who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep."*

We have to understand the setting in a Galilean or Judean village of the first century. There was last-minute haggling between, usually, the bridegroom and the bride's father, often over her dowry. Maybe the closest modern analogy that I've experienced is how those people who have pictures taken after a wedding ceremony sometimes leave their guests wondering, *"Are these ever going to be completed, and can we get on with the party?"* So there is an uncertainty as to when the rest of the festivities will occur.

In a world without electricity, it's getting dark. Perhaps the wedding even took place in the evening, and so there must be oil lamps with enough oil to keep them lit. It's "midnight," this was a long hagggle, when

*"the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the bridesmaids woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones [who hadn't brought enough] said to*

*the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'"*

Now we don't want to get distracted by extraneous questions here. Is this a case of the wise bridesmaids being unkind? No, because when we see the context and the application of it for Jesus, He's talking about salvation. He's talking about something that's not transferrable from one person to the other, "Here, just take some of mine."

Someone else may ask, "*Wait a minute, there aren't going to be any stores open at midnight.*" Well, actually, when a small, traditional village had some big evening-time festivity—this was certainly true at the time of the Jerusalem festivals—stores would be open. They're not stores as we think of them. They're people who have set out their wares or their goods, maybe in a marketplace, because people do run out of provisions in situations like that. So yes, there would've been someone available to go and to get oil. The point is these women have to make a decision on their own. They can't just live off the good bridesmaids' preparation.

Verse 10,

*"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later, the others also came. 'Lord, lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' But he replied, 'Truly, I tell you, I don't know you.' Therefore, keep watch, because you don't know the day or the hour."*

We've been suggesting that parables are largely lifelike to the culture of the early first-century Israel. We've also been suggesting that there's usually at least one surprise somewhere in each passage that is a key to the spiritual symbolism or level of meaning of the story.

Here, perhaps more so than in any of the passages we've looked at thus far, it's easy to think something is unusual that wasn't, and vice versa. Thus far, there's nothing at all unusual. It would've been natural to imagine the bridegroom certainly would've come before midnight. That some of the bridesmaids didn't have oil for that long a wait is not terribly unusual. We've discussed how the dialogue between the girls, surprising as it might be to us, would've fit the original context.

Now comes the surprise. If these truly were good friends of the bride or the bridegroom, or both, in a wedding, it doesn't matter how much you messed up. You come late. You finally got the oil. The door has been shut, but it will be opened. You want to welcome your friends in. You want to forgive them. The surprise, the main shock of this passage is that they won't open the door, and what is more, the bridegroom says, "*Truly, I tell you, I don't know you.*"

Well, obviously, there's at least some superficial acquaintance. They wouldn't have been invited to be part of the wedding party. The bridegroom doesn't say, as in some other places in Jesus' teaching, "I never knew you," but neither does he say, "I knew you, but I don't anymore." It's simply a present tense declaration, "*I don't know you.*" The impression is these are people who have been masquerading as true bridesmaids.

Are there three points to derive from this story? The end may come later than we expect. I've met a lot of Christians convinced Christ is returning in their lifetime, and they're not planning properly because that might turn out to be wrong. Discipleship may be more arduous than we expect, is surely the lesson to be learned from the wise bridesmaids. Be more prepared. Have more oil than maybe you think you need. A day is coming when it'll be too late to make a genuine decision for Christ, seems to be the message from the foolish bridesmaids who were unprepared for the long haul.

There's another parable. We won't take the time to read it in its entirety. It's a long one. It's very well-known. It's found in Luke 16:19–31. It, again, has to do with salvation. It has to do with a master figure with contrasting subordinates. Now we're back to a situation where there is a surprise in terms of who's in and who's out.

It's the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a rich man who is described with such luxury by the standards of the day that he has to be among the 1 percent or 2 percent of the wealthiest people in the land. He dresses in royal colors, with the costliest of clothing, and lives in luxury daily, banqueting to such an extent that a nearby poor beggar would've been happy to eat simply the crumbs from his table. That's the second individual. He's given a name, Lazarus. It means God Helps.

A lot of people have wondered, "Is this really a parable?" It's not

called one, but half of the texts we refer to as parables aren't specifically called parables. More significantly, it has characters with names, Lazarus and the master figure, the spokesman for God in this story, Abraham. There's probably a reason for that, too, though. If we knew our Old Testaments better than many of us do, we would know that there is a famous Old Testament Lazarus. Well, actually, he's Eleazar, which is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Lazarus, Abraham's faithful servant. That explains the pair of Abraham and Lazarus.

Others say, *"Well, this is the only parable that teaches about life after death in terms of describing some of its detail."* That's true. But if we make this an actual story about real people, we get some theological problems. We have in verse 26 a reference to those who want to go from here where Abraham is to you, the rich man. There are people who want to go from heaven to hell? Let's be careful not to derive too much detailed teaching about life after death.

There is, in fact, a triangular structure here that will keep us on track: Abraham at the top; Lazarus; and the rich man, who a fair number in Jesus' audience would've expected, following that strand of Old Testament thought where riches were reward for a good and godly life, that the rich man would be the one who would go to Abraham's side, and that Lazarus, the poor beggar, is being punished for some sin. That's not at all what happens. Is this salvation or damnation by socioeconomic bracket? No, not at all. In verse 30, the man pleads that Lazarus go back and warn his brothers who are still alive because, he says, *"If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent,"* a clear indication that he hadn't ever truly repented either.

Three prongs: Those whom God helps, like Lazarus, will be borne into His presence, just like faithful Eleazar was at Abraham's side. Those who demonstrate that they've never repented by refusing to be even the least concerned for drastic human need that they can easily meet right around them show that they have no relationship with God. They don't even know Moses' and the prophets' Old Testament teaching, which regularly commends generous help for the poor. Then there is an interesting climax. Jesus said, *"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."* God's Word is enough. Resurrection, sadly, even when it's clearly documented, does not convince the skeptic and the person who doesn't want to believe. Looks like we still have three prongs to the story that

we need to keep intact.

#### Part 4: Simple Three-Point Parables

There are at least two more parables that I think we can call simple three-point parables. We've seen a little bit of variation thus far. We've seen a tiny bit of complexity introduced, for example, in the parable of the ten bridesmaids, where technically there are eleven characters, but the five foolish and five wise bridesmaids function the same as if there had just been a single one in each category. Here is a passage that, at first glance, does not seem remotely likely to fit into a simple three-point model, the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24 and following.

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you're pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First, collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"*

How many characters are there here? There's a sower. There's an enemy and the owner's servants. The owner, the farmer, and the sower apparently are all one and the same. Well, that could be three prongs, but the enemy isn't subordinate to the sower.

What's more complicated, this is one of those two passages we talked about last week where Jesus gives His own pretty-detailed allegorical explanation. The other was the parable of the sower, which we have yet to come back to in verses 37 and following. After the disciples have gone indoors with Jesus and left the crowds behind, they ask for an explanation of this parable. It's apparently not as transparent as some. Jesus answers, *"The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man,"* His favorite self-reference, coming out of Daniel 7:13, *"One like a son of man"* was ushered into the presence of the ancient of days and given dominion over the kingdoms of the world. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people

of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

We're well beyond three main characters or details already, but if we stop and think about the core plot, it really is about a farmer confronted with wheat and weeds. Yes, there are servants, who are the harvesters, but they represent the farmer since he can't go out and do all the work himself. Yes, there is an enemy, who is identified as the devil, as Satan, who's responsible for sowing the weeds, but he does not figure in the climax or denouement of the story. He and the weeds can be associated together. The core plot really is about a farmer confronted in his field with wheat and weeds.

In fact, if it's not obvious at first glance that this is a simple, three-point triadically structured parable, it's clear that there are three scenes or short episodes in the parable. It begins, like every good drama, with a situation of stasis, of things being well, of the world functioning as it should. *"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field."* This comes right on the heel of the parable of the sower, where the good seed is what everyone hoped for. So far, so good. It's a very short episode, but things begin well, and it appears that the farmer can look forward to a good harvest.

Now comes the complication: the enemy who sows the weeds. Typically, especially if no attempt at weeding is made, this is going to thwart the goal of a good harvest. The second scene then runs from verse 25 up through verse 28. It looks like the weeds are going to win, like Satan will have the upper hand.

Then in the third scene, until the end of the parable, it turns out the surprise in this passage—which, by the way, is not Satan and enemies sowing weeds in a field—the surprise is the command not to try to weed, because apparently the farmer realizes that the roots are so intertwined, and perhaps the appearance of the plants so similar, that too much of the wheat, the good seed, will be picked out in the process. The surprise is the promise that there will still be enough for a good harvest, and there is. The wheat triumphs after all.

A farmer, weeds, and wheat—three prongs. That fits Jesus' explanation. But this is a unique passage, also, because there is a second explanation, or at least a second run through the imagery of the story in verses 40–43. Jesus adds,



*“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”*

Most of the allegorical equations are identical. The Son of Man is still the farmer. The harvesters are still angels. The wheat and the weeds are still the good and the wicked people of the world. But notice one important shift. Verse 41:

*“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom . . .”*

The kingdom appears in the same place as the field, which, in verse 38, has been identified as the world.

Unfortunately, there’s a long history of careless interpretation of this passage where it is assumed that this is a story about not trying to weed out of the church those who are truly not God’s people, to allow people to become church members whether or not they have a credible confession of faith. The field is the world. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is not the same as the church. It’s God’s heavenly reign or rule on earth over all the world. The church is a subset of the kingdom.

This is a story that fits very much the midpoint of Jesus’ ministry, where it falls in Matthew 13. As opposition has been growing, should Jesus’ followers try to fight all of the opposition they’re experiencing right now in this life? Surely their fledgling movement is going to get stamped out if they don’t. No, says Jesus, trust in God, keep growing, do what you know is right, and there will be an adequate harvest. Don’t try to take the vengeance that’s reserved for God into your own hands. Jesus, three chapters later in Matthew, will promise to build His church, the collection of His people, and the gates of hell will not destroy it. We don’t have to worry about the field, the world, and try to take God’s vengeance into our hands prematurely.

Later in the same sermon of parables, there’s a much shorter version of virtually this same plot. Matthew 13:47–50: “

*Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let*

*down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Just like the wheat and the weeds; only instead of harvesting a crop, people are fishing, like they did all the time on the Sea of Galilee. They’re harvesting the crop of the sea. They’re gathering fish and various other things, a dragnet, a large net scraping the shallow bottoms of the edge of the Sea of Galilee, or the portions of the sea that can be reached with a net if you’re out further in deeper water. There will be dead fish that will come up. There will be fish that are too small. There will be diseased fish that are rotting. There will be flotsam and jetsam of things that have decayed or fallen into the sea, and so there has to be a sifting, just as with the wheat and the weeds.

Fishermen, good subordinate, bad subordinate, no surprise as to which falls into which category. Hardly anything unusual in the development of the story itself, except for the word translated in verse 47, kinds. All kinds of fish, *ethnoi*. It’s the word that normally means all people groups. While I suppose you could say species with respect to fish, all tribes might be a common first-century translation. It’s not a term normally used with fish or plants or animals, suggesting even here Jesus’ vision of having a universal impact, of not being just another Jewish movement. Otherwise, it’s the parable of the wheat and the weeds, with fewer details, similar structure, similar meaning.