# Exploring the Parables: Themes and Conclusions

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## Part 1: Two Parables That Don't Fit Classic Patterns

There are two passages that we have not said anything about from the Gospels that are probably more often than not nevertheless included in the more extensive and comprehensive studies of Jesus' parables, and we want to deal with them in this video segment. They don't really quite fit into any of the classic patterns that we've been discussing. The first is often called the parable of the children in the marketplace. It's found in Matthew 11 and in Luke 7 in almost identical wording.

I'll read from Matthew 11:16–19. Jesus says,

> *"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."*

In Luke, Jesus says,

> *"Is proved right by all her children."*

And that's really the only significant difference in the two accounts. Jesus is responding to the growing skepticism about His ministry; just as after initial euphoria, there was a greater rejection and ultimately Herod's arrest and imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist. He likens it to a common scene in an out-of-doors market where parents didn't leave their children with nannies or a daycare center, but they were playing and milling around along with everyone else.

The language of music suggests a modern-day analogy: *"We want you to play wedding with us."* A wedding was a festive occasion where flutes and other wind instruments that can generically be called pipes were played (even an oboe has been suggested was a common instrument). But this other group of playmates said, *"No, we don't want to play that."* Do you remember that experience? I do. So then they swung the pendulum to the other extreme: *"Well, let's play funeral."* I remember an elaborate funeral that my friends and I concocted once just for fun.

*"We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."* We don't want to play that either; so lifelike, so much like some kids. But the application is not to children's forms of recreation but to John and Jesus. And Jesus goes now in reverse order creating a bit of an A, B, B, A structure. John was the one who came in an austere mode: fasting; not eating a normal diet out in the wilderness; living a very rigid, almost nomadic lifestyle. And people rejected that as inappropriate: He must be demon-possessed.

So Jesus came; and we read throughout the Gospels that He was frequently invited to banquets. He had no problem with going to lavish events with His disciples. Sometimes they were thrown for Him by tax collectors and those who were seen as the outcasts of society. There is no evidence that Jesus literally overate or over-drank; but if you were to caricature Him, you'd be much more likely to accuse Him of partying too much than of being too austere. And yet a good portion of the Israelites' society rejected Him as well.

How would you diagram the structure of this? On the one hand, you might imagine the uncooperative playmates as the unifying figure, almost a master figure, not in the sense that they command anybody, but they're the ones who are in the position of power to, in this case, not choose between a good and a bad example but reject both of two contrasting options. Or maybe we should put the playmates suggesting the games—since they're the ones taking the initiative to try to command or encourage their playmates to come along—at the top of the triangle and then put the uncooperative playmates at the bottom twice, reacting to each of the two proposals.

Whichever way we do it, it's not a classic triadic model of a master with contrasting subordinates; and yet there is something three-pointed about it. The application that Jesus draws comes first from the populaces' general reaction to John, which eventually

became a general rejection of him. The second application is to the populaces' general reaction to Jesus, which eventually became a general rejection of Him. And then the third point comes in this somewhat cryptic, proverbial-like statement at the end of the passage:

> *"But wisdom is proved right by her deeds." Luke says, "By her children."*

Those like John and Jesus, who are on God's side, and the deeds or the works that they manifest, they accomplished good in their time. There were people who repented because of the ministry of each of them. And wisdom in Greek, sophia, is regularly associated with God's wisdom in the Bible, especially in Proverbs 8 and 9. This may be Jesus' way of saying,

> *"What doesn't seem like a wise plan—God sending John and Jesus because of a majority of people rejecting them—ultimately will be proved right to have been a very wise plan based on the long-term results of their ministries."*

The other passage that is often included in studies of parables that we haven't looked at is not as unusual in its structure. It's the story that's often referred to as the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46. What's different about this is that it really only starts as if it's going to be a parable. There is a king and there are sheep and there are goats; and it becomes clear that the king is Jesus, the Son of Man, and the sheep are His followers and the goats are those who are not His followers.

But the imagery is not kept up throughout the parable. What starts out as if it's going to be a story about earthly characters and animals quickly gives way to simply talking about the righteous and simply talking about the unrighteous, so that the application begins before the parable is even half over. We don't need to take the time to read the whole story; it's a familiar one. It's a picture of final judgment:

> *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory" (Matthew 25:31), "and all the angels with him."*

Like the people of the world—and Jesus morphs from one into the other—are separated like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Why sheep and goats? They were often kept together in one flock by ancient shepherds, separated out into separate pens

at nighttime. From a distance, both animals have about the same size, both come in both colors of black and white—not readily distinguishable until you got close enough—and they were just common examples of Jesus' world.

What's uncommon here is how the sifting, how the process of judgment is described. The King says to those He puts on His right hand (in the ancient world, the position of exaltation and honor and power),

> *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."*

There's nothing here about being a disciple of Jesus or believing or trusting in Christ.

We have to remember that, like every passage in Scripture, this one comes in a context. It comes in a context of a series of parables all of which we have looked at before, three that we looked at together ever so briefly starting at the end of chapter 24 about the timing of the return of Christ. And then one of those, the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, overlaps with the next triad of parables along with the parable of the talents and the parable of the sheep and the goats, all referring to something about how to be ready for judgment.

We already have learned if we were standing there in Jesus' original audience that you have to know the bridegroom, you don't want him to say, when you come belatedly trying to knock on the door,

> *"Truly I tell you, I don't know you."*

You have to have a relationship with the master who's entrusted you with bags of gold to invest and to work with. All of that is presupposed. But now Jesus is saying, here are some of the crucial ways that faith in Jesus transforms a person, how they live out that faith in helping the neediest of our world with practical actions.

It may even be that He has a particular focus on the needy Christian, because when He is asked by the people of the world, many of whom never saw Him alive in the flesh, *"When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger needing clothes or sick?"* He

replies, *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine . . ." "The least of these, my brethren,"* in older translations. And both of those words, the least and the term for brothers and sisters, are throughout Matthew consistently used either for literal biological kin or spiritual kin.

Of course, we should have compassion for and meet the needs of the people of the world, that's the message of the parable of the good Samaritan—even the enemy is our neighbor—and countless Old Testament prophecies. But here the focus may be particularly on the needy Christian brother or sister. If someone claims to be a follower of Christ and doesn't even show compassion on them, to say nothing of anybody else, it's hard to see how they can truly be one of His followers.

**Part 2: Parables in the Gospel of Thomas**

There is no authorized or canonical or official list of Jesus' parables, only about half of the stories that we've looked at in this series have the word parable somewhere in the text of Scripture. But we recognize a literary and a rhetorical form. You don't need to call something a joke to recognize from a certain kind of structure that somebody is telling a joke.

We have passages as short as, *"Physician, heal thyself,"* to quote the King James Version of a short little saying of Jesus in Luke 5 that one of the gospel writers calls a parable, which is a reminder that the ancient word parabolē in Greek and mashal in Hebrew had a much broader range of meaning of kinds of figurative speech. We've been focusing on those that can be thought of, however succinctly, as a narrative: there is some kind of beginning, some kind of plot development, and a conclusion.

Even if it's as small as a woman taking some dough, putting lemon or yeast into it so that the bread rises and having a surprisingly large batch of bread. Beginning, middle, and end. If we ask, are there any other parables that Jesus told that we know about that fit that definition: a short metaphorical narrative that has at least enough of a plot to be able to discern a beginning, a middle, and an end? the answer is, in the gospel of John, there are none. There are figurative sayings but none that match that form that we come to know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the rest of the New Testament. There are none.

Oh, in the rabbis' later literature reflecting tradition, some of

which were already in Jesus' day, there are literally hundreds of parables. Jesus picked up a well-known Jewish form, but He took it to another level; and even the later Jewish parables are not identical in form to His.

But there's one other early document that comes from a religious blend of Christianity and Greek philosophy that scholars call Gnosticism. Especially in the second century of the church's lifetime, it became quite widespread and had some fairly unorthodox teaching that became a challenge to the fledgling Christian church. By far, the best known document that we have recovered from ancient Gnostic circles is one that we knew of from some fragments but never discovered in its entirety until a large collection of such texts was honored at an Egyptian site not long after World War II known as Nag Hammadi. And the collection of texts largely, not exclusively, Gnostic has become known as the Nag Hammadi Library. They're sometimes put together in volumes with what is called New Testament Apocrypha. Not the Old Testament Apocrypha that Catholics have in their canon of the Bible but Protestants don't, but texts that no one has ever treated as inspired or inerrant or authoritative, but apparently were significant for certain Gnostic sects.

And for those of you who aren't familiar with Gnosticism, it was an amalgamation of different groups with varying beliefs. But what they tended to have in common was the conviction that the material world was inherently evil, that only the immaterial world was potentially good and redeemable. And therefore, like other forms of ancient Greek thought, a goal for a person was not to attain to a resurrected body—that would be to take something inherently evil with you for all eternity—but simply the disembodied immortality of the soul.

There was also a lot of teaching about finding spiritual truth within one's own soul, one's own person. And with that being a popular idea in our modern pluralistic society, you can see why parts of Gnosticism have attracted modern-day people. The Gospel of Thomas is not a narrative. It's not a story containing things from various parts of Jesus' life. It's merely a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, about two-thirds of which sound pretty similar to passages we find in any one or all of the four canonical gospels.

Another maybe up to almost a half of the sayings have something that seems to be noticeably Gnostic. It's doubtful that Jesus

said anything like that. But the remaining almost 20 percent is intriguing. It's susceptible to Gnostic interpretation. Could it be that there are some teachings of Jesus that were reasonably accurately recorded in the Gospel of Thomas that we don't know of from anyplace else?

We know of at least one teaching of Jesus in the book of Acts that's not found in any of the four Gospels, when Paul quotes Jesus in Acts 20 saying,

> *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."*

It would be extraordinary, with all of the impact Jesus and His first followers made, if some teachings of Jesus weren't preserved outside of the inspired Gospels, but are any of Thomas' in that category?

Or maybe there are some passages in Thomas that have parallels in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, but are preserved in an independent form that also reflects what Jesus taught or, as some critics might charge, that better reflects what Jesus taught. What are we talking about? Well, let's read from the opening few sayings just to get a feel for this book, and then I want to turn to some distinctive parables. That's why we're doing it in this series of Jesus because there are about eleven parables found in the Gospel of Thomas, a couple of which are not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke at all.

Here's how the text begins.

> *"These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and which the twin [Didymus in Greek] Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, 'He who shall find the interpretation of these words shall not taste of death."*

This was a common ploy in Gnostic text to refer to secret teachings so that if someone made the claim, *"Well, we've never heard this stuff before, why isn't it taught elsewhere?"* They could say, *"Well, it was passed along as a secret tradition to the especially elite."*

Saying 2,

> *"Jesus said, 'He who seeks, let him not cease seeking until he finds.'" Well now, that much sounds very much like the Jesus of the Gospels, "Seek and you shall find."*

But then it continues,

> *"When he finds, he will be troubled [something mysterious about this revelation]. And when he is troubled, he will be amazed, and he will reign over all."*

Number 3,

> *"Jesus said, 'If those who lead you say to you, "See, the kingdom is in heavens," then the birds of the heaven will go before you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will go before you. But the kingdom is within you, and it is outside of you. When you know yourselves,"*

the word gnosis, knowledge, is what we get. Gnostic, capital G is silent, Gnostic.

> *"When you know yourselves, then you'll be known, and you will know that you are the sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you are in poverty."*

It starts out sounding like a saying from the canonical gospels but moves off into very clearly Gnostic territory.

Well, here's a parable, saying 8,

> *"Jesus said, 'Man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea. He drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them he found a large good fish. The wise fisherman threw all the small fish into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

It starts sounding like the parable of the dragnet, but this isn't about good fish and rotten fish, this is about all the fish being small except for one good large fish.

The Gnostic—the one who has the elite, the esoteric knowledge, the peers—that Thomas (whoever this second-century Gnostic Christian writer was) has taken a parable from the canonical gospels and turned it in a Gnostic direction. But now consider saying 20,

> *"The disciples said to Jesus, 'Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like.' He said to them, 'It's like a grain of mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled ground, it*

> *puts forth a great branch and becomes shelter for the birds of heaven.'"*

That sounds almost exactly like the parable in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Although, if you were listening carefully and know the Bible well, you might've heard a unique word. When it falls on tilled ground, cultivated ground, is that a hint that this writer is thinking of human preparation for Gnostic truth?

Let's jump ahead and see some places where the parables are more dramatically different. Saying 63,

> *"There was a rich man who had many possessions. He said, 'I will use my possessions to sow and reap and plant to fill my barns with fruit that I may have need of nothing.' These were his thoughts in his heart, and in that night he died."*

End of story, dramatically abbreviated. Was that the original form as some critics have suggested that Luke has elaborated? Probably not. Because if we go to one more passage that is found in the canonical gospels as well, the parable of the wicked tenants, saying 65, we read this,

> *"A good man had a vineyard. He leased it to tenants that they might work in it and receive the fruits from them. He sent his servant that the tenants might give him the fruits of the vineyard. They seized his servant, beat him, all but killing him. The servant went away and told his master. His master said, 'Perhaps they did not know him.' He sent another servant. The tenants beat the other also. Then the master sent his son and said, 'Perhaps they will have respect for my son.' Those tenants, since they knew that he was the heir of the vineyard, seized him and killed him."*

Again, it's an abbreviated version of the canonical form. But if you look in the gospel of Luke (Luke 20), in Luke's version of the wicked tenants, he is the only one to have the master say,

> *"Perhaps they will listen to him. Perhaps they will follow my son."*

Why does Luke have that? Because the son represents Jesus. There's no problem at the level of the earthly story of having a master say, *"Maybe they'll respect my son."* But they beat him and throw him out.

But once you apply that to God, people might ask the question, Did God not know what was going to happen? Could He not have planned for it? Would He have declared, they will respect my Son? And so Luke in his form clarifies by saying *"perhaps."* Since Luke is editing Mark, and Thomas parallels Luke, that almost certainly means that Thomas knows Luke's later form and is not reflecting an earlier form of the story. But now let's come to two passages that are not paralleled in the Gospels at all.

Saying 97,

> *"Jesus said, 'The kingdom of the father is like a woman carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking on a distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal poured out behind her on the road. She was unaware; she had not noticed the misfortune. When she came to her house, she put the jar down and found it empty.'"*

Should that be given an orthodox meaning and attributed to the historical Jesus?

What about saying 98,

> *"Jesus said, 'The kingdom of the father is like a man who wanted to kill a powerful man. He drew his sword in his house and drove it into the wall, that he might know that his hand would be strong enough. Then he slew the powerful man.'"*

You could give that an orthodox interpretation, but in light of everything else that we've seen, those are probably Gnostic creations of Jesus. So the next time you hear somebody asking about the Gospel of Thomas, perhaps because they've heard on a talk or seen on a website that claims that it represents the real Jesus, you might not want to be too convinced by that.

**Part 3: Theological Truths from the Parables**

Now that we have introduced in our first week some various approaches to interpreting Jesus' parables, latched onto a model that we have illustrated over the next several weeks with all of Jesus' major narrative parables, even in our last segment taking a detour of the canonical path into the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, how can we summarize theologically, doctrinally, somatically, what we've learned? Apart from each individual passage, is there any value to all these triangles?

Well, let me ask another rhetorical question. If you were to summarize the entire message of God's revelation from the beginning to the end of the Bible or at least the narrative parts from creation to new creation, how would you summarize that in a paragraph or less and be true to not some number of spiritual laws or principles but true to the narrative? Give your paragraph in story form, because that's the form of the overarching skeleton feel-like Scripture.

I suspect there is a triangle at the heart of the biblical narrative. God creates a universe with humans at its apex, but they rebel against Him. And the rest of the story is about God initiating an unfolding process of making it possible to bring people back to Himself, redemption. It starts in the garden with the animal sacrifice that provided skins to cover Adam and Eve. It progresses through the preservation of Noah and his family aligned despite the flood. It begins in earnest with the call of Abraham and the promise to give him a unique land and legacy and progeny and a people that would emerge from his descendants, the people of Israel.

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of the ups and downs and the apparent 14 of that promise with God in each case overcoming the obstacles until you reach Jesus, who is the full and final atonement for the redemption of humanity, so that God can declare that His kingdom has arrived in new and remarkable ways. But still there is one final stage, one final episode, Christ's return, which then leads to ushering in the new heavens and the new earth. This, which could be fleshed out in far more detail, is what some have called the grand narrative of Scripture.

Why did I say that was a triangle? Because you have God and God incarnate in Christ at the apex of the triangle with a rebellious humanity, some of whom accept His offer of redemption becoming the good subordinate, and those refusing it becoming the evil subordinate. Jesus' parables are consummately about God's kingdom. And if we think back through what we have seen and highlight some points we've made and perhaps moved on from too quickly, we can remind ourselves that basileia, the Greek word for kingdom like malkuth, the underlying Hebrew, means not so much a realm as a reign, R-E-I-G-N. Not so much a place as a power. God's kingship might be less confusing than kingdom. Or as Ben Witherington in his writings likes to put it: the dominion of God, His domain. Witherington has a wonderful little book on the message, the kingdom in the New Testament, that he calls

Imminent Domain, a play on the concept of eminent domain. The kingdom is also present, has been present throughout history, became present in a new and dramatic way at the time of Jesus but not yet in all its fullness—and that's what the gospels call the mystery of the kingdom.

Some people have erected an elaborate scenario: that the church is the kingdom in mystery phase, because Jesus came offering the kingdom to Israel but they largely rejected it, so He moved on to plan B, which wasn't the ideal, namely the church. But if we focus on Jesus' parables, thinking especially about His seed parables—the parable of the sower, different kinds of soil, different kinds of seeds, the parable of the seed growing secretly or automatically, the parable of the mustard seed and the leaven, the parables of the wheat and the weeds, and a twin that wasn't about seeds but about fish, the parable of the dragnet—George Ladd puts it well, I believe, when he says,

> "The mystery of the kingdom is that it has come. It has arrived but not yet with irresistible force."

It looks so small; it looks so powerless. There are times when God's people, today's citizens of His kingdom, of His reign, seem to be so small in number, so powerless in a certain part of the world or in a certain location, in a certain setting within a nation or within a people group, but God has promised great endings.

The theology of the parables then involves the arrival but without yet the fullness of God's kingdom. It's something we can enter into, but it's something we look forward to in the future as well. It's something clearly that has a spiritual component, but it also has a social dimension. It affects how we use our material possessions. If we get a bumper crop, we don't immediately hoard it and think only of how we can spend it on ourselves. We look at ways we can give generously to others.

If possessions are an obstacle, we get rid of anything that stands in the way (parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price). In order to be sure that we're a part of God's kingly reign, He gives us talents or pounds to invest wisely, but eventually we're reminded we have to give an accounting of all that He has given us simply on loan. It's still the master's; and we need to be concerned about the poor, about the hungry, about the thirsty, about the inappropriately or inadequately clothed. Especially among our own fellow Christian brothers and sisters but not

limited to them, because we learned from the good Samaritan that even our enemy is our neighbor.

What a rich cluster of theological truths and others we can derive from the parables, so many of them with their surprises of who is or isn't! The exemplary subordinates remind us, as C. S. Lewis once put it so memorably in The Great Divorce, there will be three surprises in heaven: who's there, who's not there, and that we're there. Some of the least likely people, some of the greatest sinners by the standards of Orthodox Jewish convention in the first century, become followers of Jesus.

And parables about tax collectors and Samaritans make them heroes, whereas Pharisees, priests, and Levites are the examples of behavior to avoid. There's a passage that we have said nothing about during this entire series, some of you may have been wondering about it. It comes in that segment of Jesus' parables where there are the greatest number back-to-back, at least in Matthew's account in Matthew 13, a full eight of them, not as many in the parallel accounts in Mark 4 or Luke 8.

But let me read from Mark 4:10, right after Jesus tells the parable of the sower:

> *"When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, 'The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,'"*

and then comes a quotation of a part of Isaiah 6:9–10,

> *"'They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.' Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'"*

The tacit assumption of all of this video series thus far is that the parables were meant to be understood and that probably people in Jesus' culture understood more of what He was saying more quickly than sometimes we do separated by nearly 2,000 years and all kinds of changes in culture. Do these verses contradict all of that? Do they say that parables are meant to conceal rather than reveal? No, I don't think so, at least not in a cognitive sense.

Because we recall Mark 12:12 at the end of the parable of the

wicked tenants where Mark says Jesus' opponents, the Jewish leaders, went away plotting to kill Him because they understood He had told this parable against them. They could explain it intellectually. They knew he was likening them to those wicked tenants. No true biblical understanding goes beyond the intellect. It goes to a heart attitude. It goes to a matter of the will. People will understand Jesus' meaning His claims. That's why sometimes they get the most upset.

The real understanding that some never have is the understanding that leads to taking the next step, the step of discipleship. But is this irreversible? It's interesting to look at Isaiah 6, which Jesus is quoting, the famous passage,

> *"In the year that King Uzziah died," where the prophet has this amazing vision of the Lord, he hears the angelic creatures singing the thrice "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty."*

He refers to himself as a person of unclean lips but has his guilt taken away; and then he is told in an even stronger form of wording,

> *"Go and tell this people: Be ever hearing, but never understanding."*

But the passage ends with a glimmer of hope. Although in the short term there is nothing but judgment, the last half of verse 13 says, "

> *As the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

This is not the place to discuss if God predestines people to irreversible salvation or judgment. These passages are about God's response to humans who've already freely chosen rebellion against Him while always leaving the door open for a remnant to return if they repent.

**Part 4: The Christology of the Parables**

How do we finish off this series on the parables? There are so many other things that we could talk about. In our last segment, we tried to summarize a little bit of the overall theology, the doctrinal or thematic teaching of the parables. It would seem fitting in this final episode to talk more specifically about the

parables' Christology, the doctrine of Christ. What do they teach about Jesus? Just as in our opening lessons, we talked about the long history of overly detailed allegorizing of the parables.

There is a long history, sorry about the big word, of overly detailed christologizing of the parables; or to put that in English, people have rushed too quickly to see Jesus too explicitly in the parables. We've talked about so many stories where there is a master, a king, a shepherd, a landlord, a father, a God figure of some kind. And as Jesus' followers became more and more aware, more and more convinced that He was God incarnate, it was completely natural to put Him in that same box, at that same corner of the triangle where God was.

And then it naturally followed that the good and bad subordinates became different kinds of Christians, but that's when various troubling things began to happen. Take the parable of the talents. If we immediately make the master Jesus, well then Jesus' servants have to be some kind of disciples. And then you have good disciples and bad disciples and you have those who invest and are praised by their master, but then you're stuck with a wicked disciple who is cast out into outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I have had Christians come to me. I've had pastors ask me the question, *"Is there a compartment of heaven where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?"* And I go, *"What? Of course not. Heaven is a great place, there's no suffering. In the new heaven and new earth, there's no pain, there's no crying, there's no mourning"* (Revelation 21, opening four verses). Why would you ask such question? Well, there's this parable where one of Jesus' disciples is cast into outer darkness, or maybe less dramatically, that then becomes a doctrinal father for the view that you can lose your salvation. At least then we have outer darkness being hell, which it's supposed to be.

The problem with that whole line of reasoning is that we have jumped too quickly away from the original context where Jesus is teaching the parables: A Jewish rabbi addressing a Jewish crowd in Israel at the beginning of the first century talking about masters, kings, shepherds, fathers, with almost 100 percent success rate, leads His audience to assume He's talking about God, not Himself. And the good and bad servants or subordinates are going to be the children of Israel, God's people.

Jesus' message in its original context is that not everyone who thinks they're among God's true people in the land of Israel truly are. In fact some who most think they are, and are most complacent and self-confident about that among the leadership, are the ones who most clearly are not. And some of those same people would clearly put as outsiders either are or can become insiders. If we start there, we'll get the parables right.

Of course, we need to apply it to the Christian church, but the way we apply it is to say, *"Not all who say, 'Lord, Lord'"* (the parable of the two builders), not all who claim to be bridesmaids (parable of the ten bridesmaids), will be welcomed in. Some Jesus will say as he does in the parable just preceding the parable of the two builders, *"Depart from me for I never knew you."* There is no compartment of heaven called outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But we don't have to see in the parables, His teaching, the loss of salvation either. But what they are teaching, though, and we dare not lose the sting in the tail (double meaning intended) is there are people who think they're in, who by the development of what happens throughout their lives demonstrate that they were never in. There are other ways the parables can be wrongly christologized. Ever since Augustine in the early 400s, there has been this allegory of the good Samaritan in which Jesus becomes the good Samaritan. Adam and Eve are the ones who leave the heavenly city, are attacked by sin and Satan, left dying, as it were, because of their sins. The priest and the Levite stand for the Law and Prophets who are unable to save or unwilling to save, and Christ becomes the Samaritan; and it's a very clever point-by-point allegorizing that corresponds to nothing in the text of Scripture. This is not a parable that Jesus explains, nor does it even fit the context of Luke 10 where Jesus is answering the question He has been asked, *"Who is my neighbor?"*

Does Jesus show remarkable compassion even to His enemies like the Samaritan did? Of course, He does. That's different than saying that's the intention that He had when He told the story and used a Samaritan as one of the characters. The point was for the man left for dead to learn the lesson that even His enemy could be His neighbor. There've been attempts to align Jesus with characters in parables other than the master or the unifying figure. There've been attempts to say Jesus is like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal. And there are ways to unpack that that fit with biblical teaching and have a measure of plausibility, but they lose

focus on the structure of the parable where the master figure is the father, the King. Yes, if you want to put Jesus somewhere, you have to put Him at the top, not like one of the other vertices, but don't put Him at the top too quickly. There's still another way that the parables have been abused, especially in fairly recent decades, and that's to miss the significance of having some rather unsavory characters as the master figures in the parable.

Remember when we studied the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20,

> *"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."*

And only that first group of workers got exactly what was promised, everybody else got more.

There are commentators who, failing to capture the very genius of Jesus' teaching, have said,

> *"Those workers' complaint is legitimate, this master is being unfair."*

God cannot be unfair, so this master cannot be a symbol for God. How else could we explain the story? This master is a very realistic character like ruthless farmers and the landowners and the landlords and fathers and kings in Jesus' day.

And then maybe we should start to look to other passages, like the wicked tenants and the talents and pounds and the great supper and the banquet, wherever there is judgment on some of those who do not respond in the way that the master desires. And maybe we should see these figures not as symbols for God at all but for what was wrong in Jesus' world with the abusive power and see Jesus telling these stories as ironic laments on the way power functioned in His world implying that

> *"but as for you, it shall not be thus."*

Well, it's true that Jesus taught that the gentiles and their kings lorded over the people and that, with you, it should not be this way. But that is a very bad misunderstanding of the dynamic of parables and how Jesus uses them. We've all heard the statement that analogies break down sooner or later, the same is true with

the symbolism in Jesus' parables. There is always something about a master figure that makes him an appropriate symbol for God, but that does not mean that we are to read everything else that that character does as a literal representation of divine action.

Sometimes, as in the parable of the unjust judge, we are given in Jesus' words an explicit *"how much more"* type of logic. If a human and somewhat evil character can in certain situations act a certain way, how much more is God not eager to act that way; and we should probably keep that logic in mind, even in parables that don't have that as a formal structure. But let me end with this parable that we've just raised: the workers in the vineyard.

We mentioned when we went through it that it would be a legitimate charge of injustice had the man paid everyone 1/12 of a denarii, making all of those who worked more than one hour equal to those who worked the last hour by giving no one more than 1/12 a day's wage. But that's not the way he equalized things, he equalized them by giving everyone as much as he had agreed to give the first group of workers, as if all of them had worked a full day.

God is so often so gracious. We dare not ask Him to be only fair, because when we apply that at the spiritual wealth level, that's a request to be damned if we ask God to give us our wages. Paul says in Romans 6,

> *"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life."*

We love to complain to God in so many situations in life, *"But God, that's not fair."* Now we don't ever want God to be fair, because we do nothing to merit His justice or favor. All we want from Him is grace, and that demands that we allow Him to be gracious to others even when it doesn't seem fair to us.