

## Parables Session 1

### Introductory Comments

1. **The Parables of Jesus** rank as some of the best literary creations of western literature, and testify to the religious genius that Jesus had in communicating his unique vision of God. Jesus' parables have remained riddles or mysteries almost from the very beginning. Mark seems to represent the position of many: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables" (Mark 4:11). For Mark, a parable is a riddle. Yet for many others, the parables are simple stories, illustrations for the common people. Such interpreters almost always end up with trite meanings for the parables. For my part, I have never found parables to be simple. Many of them don't lay flat, and aren't intended to. For this class, we will examine many of Jesus' parables, consider their historical and literary context, and explore possible meanings.
2. **What is a parable and how does it function?** A parable is a short, open narrative intended to evoke engagement and wonder. The Greek word for "parable" literally means "to throw beside," as in a comparison. In Hebrew, the word for parable is *mashal*, which means a "proverb" or a "riddle." As such, parables have multiple meanings and layers, and different audiences inevitably hear different messages. Insofar as religion is defined as that which "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable," we do well to think of parables as doing the "afflicting." If we hear a parable and think, "I really like that," or worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough. It may be helpful to think less about what parables "mean" and more about what they can "do": remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb...
3. **Where do we find parables?** According to some scholars, parables only occur in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of Thomas. No parables are ever placed on the lips of Jesus' opponents, nor does Paul or any other New Testament author use or create parables. The Gospel of John contains no parables (though I would argue differently). In the later Christian tradition, many different sayings of Jesus are reported, but no new parables. Parables are not autobiographical, but fictions told by the storyteller. We do not know if any of them relate to Jesus' biography. Of course, many scholars note parables in the Jewish tradition (cf. Judges 9:8-15 and 2 Sam 12:1-7), which provide a basis for Jesus' use of parable. Parables also became popular in later Rabbinic texts (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE).
4. **What do parables tell us about Jesus?** Not much. They give us no clear insight into Jesus as a person, and they don't add detail to the scant outline we have for his life. We know he was born, but not where or when. We know he died under Pontius Pilate but not when and not exactly why. We know some of the events between his birth and death, but not how to arrange them. What outline we have of a life of Jesus comes from the author of Mark's Gospel, probably sometime after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Mark had no more access to evidence for an outline of Jesus' life than do we. So we are left with no way to arrange the material in chronological order, no way to see development, whether psychological or any other kind.

5. **Are there themes evident in the parables?** Yes. A number of parables which are adjacent in one or more gospels have similar themes. The parable of the *Leaven* follows the parable of the *Mustard Seed* in Matthew and Luke, and shares the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven growing from small beginnings. The parable of the *Hidden Treasure* and parable of the *Pearl* form a pair illustrating the great value of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the need for action in attaining it. The parables of the *Lost Sheep*, *Lost Coin*, and *Lost (Prodigal) Son* form a trio in Luke dealing with loss and redemption.
6. **Parable as a contest between the unnamable and the everyday.** Below is a quote from one of the great modern parable tellers:

“Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says, ‘Go over,’ he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow is the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.”

~ Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*

## Questions

\*\*\*For next session, read Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21; Thomas 96.