

Parables of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, sisters and brothers, this is an unabashed advertising session for a lunchtime Bible study that is planned for September of this year and onwards to Christmas and possibly beyond.

Normally when I stand up here and say something about the Bible, I am helped by the fact that I have met with a group of Christians over a period of time and studied the Word together and we've had some opportunity to reach agreement as a community as to what God is saying to us in His Word.

So I stand up with trepidation today because I have no backing. I trust that we will have some backing in the fall and that will be a profitable exercise.

The context of the talk and of the proposed Bible study series that we will do on Wednesdays at lunchtime is this. I'm frequently, well, let me say I have in the past been attacked with the comment that the Gospel of Paul is diametrically contradictory with the Gospel of Jesus.

I'm sure you've met it in one form or another. Sometimes it's a very harsh statement, sometimes it's just simply a joke. But it presents itself with some very interesting questions.

[1 : 43] What is the relationship between the Gospel of Jesus and the Gospel of Paul? And it seems to me that the parables are an entree into the solution to this question.

I've only just got five parables with me today. And the thought is that we will cover 40 or so parables in the study series.

But the five that I have brought are intended to illustrate not the identical nature of the Gospel according to Jesus and the Gospel according to Paul, but the essential compatibility of the Gospel of Paul.

There are, of course, differences of emphasis. But it seems to me critical that we understand that there is a complete compatibility in these statements.

After all, Paul frequently talked about this one Gospel, the Gospel that had been delivered to him by Jesus in a conversation which all of us would love to have been in on when he was met by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

[3 : 08] But clearly there is an understanding of the coherence of these two Gospels. What I propose to do in this short time is to review with you the Gospel as stated by Paul in his letter to the Romans.

This is normally a topic for six months, but we'll do it in five minutes this morning. Then to look at four parables that directly parallel the discussion and the way in which the Gospel is presented by Paul in the letter to the Romans.

And the fifth parable, which is very often called the Gospel in a Gospel, will be a summary statement of the coherence of the parables in the Gospel.

So let me start by simply reviewing the way in which Paul sets out the Gospel in the letter to the Romans.

You all know it much better than I, but I take the liberty just to remind you that Paul bases his Gospel statement on the righteousness of God.

[4 : 35] He, in the first three chapters, talks explicitly about God's righteousness. In chapters 4 to 8, he talks about God's saving righteousness.

In chapters 9, 10, and 11, he talks about God's righteousness towards Israel and the Gentiles. And in chapters 12 to 15, he talks about God's righteousness in everyday life.

The argument does not start from the love of God, but from the righteousness of God. God's righteousness in the first three chapters, essentially in the face of the sin of man.

And the way in which God, necessarily, is forced to judge the sinfulness of his creature.

The saving righteousness of God developed and climaxed in the just living by faith, in the section from chapters 3 to 8, is essentially the description of how that is possible for God, the righteous God, to save the world through the blood of his Son.

[6 : 32] The three chapters 9, 10, and 11, which I used to think, as a boy, seemed to be a digression, and nevertheless a fundamental part of the thesis, as to the way in which God treated and treats Israel and the Gentiles.

And then the last section, in which God's righteousness in everyday life is expressed in a variety of practical considerations. If you could bear that structure in mind, of these four sections of the Gospel as presented by Paul, and my task is to persuade you that the four parables that I have selected reflect that same emphasis in the way in which Jesus discussed each parable.

A parable, by the way, I always used to think, was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, but parables, in fact, come in very many different forms, very many different sizes.

It might be more practical, it might be more realistic, to talk about a parable as being an earthly story with a heavenly meaning and a very direct earthly practical application.

But the scholars tell me that that doesn't do. And at the best definition that I've been able to dig out, is a story with intent.

[8 : 15] A story with intent to disrupt the thinking of the audience to such a point that it forces action and response and a reviewing of the assumptions of that individual.

Well, that definition seems to be very helpful, and so I'll suggest we move with that for the rest of this discussion. So the first parable that I wanted to direct our attention to is that of the workers in the vineyard.

It's told in Matthew 20, verses 1 to 16. And it's been used for much debate amongst labor union organizers as an example of the unrighteousness of the parables.

But you will recall that each of the workers in the vineyard, those who turn up at 6 o'clock in the morning, and those who turn up at 5 in the afternoon, all get the same wages.

And the culminating sentence in the parable is the statement, Am I not allowed to do what I choose with that which belongs to me?

[9 : 51] Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last. That's the summary statement to those who groaned about the fact that they worked in the heat of the day and got the same as the laggards who turned up in the late afternoon.

Well, what's the point? I'm sure those of you who read the first three chapters of Romans would see the very strong parallel well, am I not allowed to do what I choose with that which belongs to me?

The statement about God's righteousness in his creation, in his dealings with sinful creatures.

are you ignoring my generosity? He said. Well, isn't that the theme of the first three chapters?

That there is a generosity in God's plan of salvation which is expressed partly in the way in which he has provided the evidence for his grace and goodness in creation, and partly for the evidence of his graciousness and generosity in allowing us to know of his plans and his activities.

[11 : 28] So it seems to me that this parable, the workers in the vineyard, essentially talking about God's treatment of people, his judgment, which is not based on human reckoning and human standards of justice.

There are issues of envy, of justice, and goodness done to others, which all are derived, these issues, essentially derived from the righteousness of God.

And that, then, is the first three chapters of Romans. The second parable that I want to direct your attention to is the parable of the sower.

By the way, some of you may have been shocked last week to see in the church bulletin that the topic today was to be the parables of Jesus continued.

It shook my early morning. But, presumably, the confusion, such as it might have been, had to do with the fact that when we were talking about the question of Christian discipleship in the real world, I did dilate somewhat on the parable of the weeds, and the parallel growth of the weeds and the seed in the real world.

[13 : 04] But, anyway, those of you who have been worrying about this for the last week, rest assured, we have not started parables yet. And, please, don't mistake the parable of the sower with the parable of the weeds, which we discussed last time.

So, the parable of the sower is a remarkable one. As you will recall, the generous sowing of the same seed over the whole landscape generates differential response.

There is an opportunity equal for everyone in that the seed is sown liberally, generously, and widespread.

Jesus says to the disciples in Matthew, blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see. all of you are familiar with Isaiah chapter 6 will see the resonance of that whole interpretation.

[14 : 38] Isaiah says that the people of Israel have eyes they don't see, and they have ears and they don't hear. Just like professors at UBC, a very common problem.

But the issue here of hearing and seeing the word as communicated by God to the world.

What does the second section of Romans talk about? God's saving righteousness. It talks about the righteousness. So, God being accessible, his whole creation being savable through the work, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And faith in that is the core of the gospel as presented by Paul. what is Jesus saying in the parable of the sower?

He's saying that God's generous soul, his saving righteousness is displayed by the fact that the seed is sown generously and widespread.

[16 : 12] bread. The blessing of those who see and for those who hear is described in the gospel according to Paul in very dramatic terms, the blessing associated with saving faith.

in the parable it's described in the context of the way in which the seed is sown and those who respond who are depicted as being those with deep soil, those who are productive, those who have a heart that is sensitive to the revelation of God in Christ.

that represents the second part, one of the elements of the second part of the gospel according to Paul as reflected in this second parable.

There's a focus here on Jesus' role in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and the responsibility of hearing, understanding, and responding to Jesus' message.

And I think that Isaiah chapter 6 is worth contemplating. The whole of that chapter, which we read various times of the year, but not so very often in relation to the reception of the gospel, is just the core.

[17 : 56] And Matthew, of course, refers very directly to that chapter in his chapter 13. The third parable that I want to direct your attention to is the parable of the wicked tenants, which I take from Matthew 21 and verses 33 to 46.

the summary after the tragic story of the way in which the tenants destroy the master's emissaries and finally kill his son, is a very direct reference to the God's righteousness, directed towards Israel.

The summary statement is that the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes.

That is in verse 42 in Matthew as the summary of what has happened to the wicked tenants. it is an extraordinary parable.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watch tower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

[19 : 36] And when the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants collect his fruit. The story of Israel and the constant turning away by the children of Israel, of the prophets, the whole attempts by God to alert them to what was going on, was rejected.

And so here is, if you like, a parable that reflects very directly, the chapters 9, 10 and 11 of the letter to the Romans. It raises questions about whether people will respond to the claims that God has on our lives or reject his messengers in favor of our own agenda.

this parable asserts the privilege of living in covenant relation with God, but that privilege also brings responsibility.

No community may presume that gifts like grace and election are permanent possessions. The kingdom comes with limitless grace and limitless demand.

in other words, not only does this direct itself to the fate of the children of Israel, but it directs itself also to the Gentiles brought into the covenant relationship with God.

[21 : 13] And it shows the opportunities and the responsibilities that go with that relationship. this part of the letter to the Romans, 9, 10, 11, which as a young boy I had thought was an afterthought or a digression, turns out to be a very central part of the gospel because it's not just concerned with the fate of Israel, but it's also concerned with the fate of all of us.

And so that seems to me to be one parable that reflects this part of the gospel according to Paul very directly.

The fourth and very familiar parable that I wanted to look at is the parable of the Good Samaritan. This being an illustration of the righteousness of God in everyday life.

The summary that we read at the end of the parable is this.

Which of these three, talking about the Levite and the priest, which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of thieves?

[22 : 43] And the expert in the law replied, the man who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, go and do likewise.

it is an interesting confusion when the claim is made that there's a contradiction between Paul's gospel and the gospel according to Jesus, when folks suggest that the actions of the Good Samaritan are the basis for his salvation.

So that's one of the emphases that is sometimes held out. In effect, what we're looking at is the way in which God's righteousness works out in everyday life.

We are expected to do no less, as is discussed in the last three chapters of Romans in a very specific way. So it seems to me that the examples, which of course number 40 or more, we could well explore to see which parts of the gospel they most adequately represent, and the extent to which the coherence of the gospel according to Jesus in the parables, and the gospel according to all in Romans is developed.

So the final parable, which is often called a gospel within the gospel, is sometimes called the parable of the prodigal son, and that's the way it's been most commonly projected in our early teaching.

[24 : 42] I think the title of this parable is much more adequately described as the parable of the compassionate father and his two lost sons, rather than the emphasis being on the prodigal son.

So that when we hear of the degradation of the younger son, in the pig's will and the whores and making a mess of things, we sometimes forget that the older son was in just as bad shape, even though he was at home behaving himself.

You can think of a comparison between people that you know, experiences that you know, from people's apparent, poor behavior and people's apparent correctness and apparent orthodoxy.

father and his two lost sons, which you can find in Luke 15, is surely a comprehensive statement of the gospel, as expressed not only in God's righteousness, his saving righteousness, his righteousness towards Israel and the Gentiles, as well as his righteousness in everyday life.

It seems to me that we have in the parable of the compassionate father and his two lost sons, the most complete parallel of any one parable with the comprehensive gospel as it's presented by Paul in the letter to the Romans.

[26 : 53] So it seems to me that if we could spend more time looking at the coherence of these two versions of the gospel that were projected through the parables of Jesus and that projected in the most complete statement, I guess, as in the letter to the Romans, that these two sets of insights will cross-fertilize to give a more balanced and completely coherent sense of what it is that God has been trying to do with his creatures.

So you raise some questions. Well, you may raise some other questions in a moment, but you raise questions about why am I not making the case that the two are identical?

Why am I not saying that the gospel projected in the parables and the gospel projected in Romans are identical? Well, I'm not saying that because I don't think they are, but I think they're profoundly compatible.

Going from the most obvious point that Jesus, when he proclaimed his parables, still had not died, to the point that he was projecting the way of salvation with his own presence in the company of the people that he was talking to, those folks could touch him, speak to him, sense his glory and his divinity, and talking about the gospel in the same terms as Paul would do, a few years later, would have made very little sense to his audience.

He had not died, he had not risen again, there were lots of other places in the gospels where he projected that, but when he was trying to bring people on board to the big scheme of God's plan for his creatures, things.

[29 : 30] Then he was breaking it up into smaller segments, indicating in all cases consistency with the gospel as we know it, coherence, but also some differences of emphasis that mean that the wording in which the gospel is presented is quite different.

And this leads me to a conclusion which, again, may be quite heretical and may be demonstrated from this study group to be entirely wrong, so you please correct me as I go, but it seems to me that it makes the very important point, in my thinking at least, that the words in which the gospel is projected are relatively unimportant.

I think that, well, maybe there's a whole bunch of assumptions here, but perhaps one of the most fearsome things is being addressed by a contemporary Canadian in the language of Paul, in Elizabethan language.

The assumption being that the communication of the words as translated into either Elizabethan or more recent language is the essence of the story.

It seems to me that that is not the case. The essence of the story is the, it the general direction from which God's righteousness is developed in relation to his creatures.

[31 : 33] That all these examples of workers in vineyards, sowers sowing seed, wicked tenants, good Samaritans, and compassionate fathers with two lost sons, are all essentially the gospel in terms of the community with which Jesus was interacting.

the statement by Paul about God's righteousness and his saving righteousness and his dealings with Israel and the Gentiles and his illustration of the implications of this in everyday life were the expression of the gospel in the immediate post death and resurrection of Jesus and directed towards the whole of society from that point on.

I have a further point, again I'm open to correction on this, but we could think in terms of words as being direct communication and parables as being indirect communication.

So if I were to give you a treatise on some really fascinating kind of geography this morning, I can see you all lighting up at the thought, I would be attempting direct communication with you.

Whether or not I succeeded, some of my students have suggested, but that's never been possible. Nevertheless, that's an attempt at direct communication.

[33 : 34] Jesus in his love of parables, and by the way, 35% of the words that he spoke in the synoptic gospels were in the form of parables.

All of these parables were indirect communication, in the sense that they were not listing a set of data, but they were communicating a whole gospel of God's grace and his goodness to people like those in the vineyards, those in the fields, most of them were agriculturalists at the time.

These were the essence, and why did he choose indirect communication, rather than direct communication?

why was that a favoured approach? Well, I think the definition that parables are stories of intent is part of the solution here, that the intent is to disrupt people's day-to-day assumptions about what is important and what is not important.

and by turning upside down the assumptions, for example, the fact that the workers in the vineyard would expect to have different kinds of salaries, the fact that the sower is generous, but the nature of the receptacle is highly variable, the nature of people's response, highly variable, the fact that the activities of wicked tenants actually directly reflect the way in which people have dealt with God's emissaries through history.

[35 : 44] I mean, all these examples just seem to me to emphasize that it's the substance of the parables and the substance of the gospel, which we need to absorb and re-express, not in Shakespearean English, but in terms of our day-to-day experience and day-to-day needs.

things. This is in no sense meant to undercut the importance either of the gospel according to Paul in the Romans or the gospel according to Jesus in the parables.

It's meant to enhance them, to see that their essential compatibility is at the core of the substance of what is being projected. So the treatise, as I read it, of the letter to the Romans, is a treatise on God's righteousness and the person through whom sinners may approach a righteous God.

And we therefore, as we are enjoined to look to Jesus, the person through whom we may approach God, it seems to me that we can do very little better than considering very carefully the way in which Jesus himself spoke about the kingdom.

God's good news is the good news contained in Romans, we do have a problem. But there's no element, it seems to me, of contradiction.

[37 : 46] There's simply a different way of expressing the same truth. In one case, the man Christ Jesus is expressing the way to God and the kingdom in his lifetime.

And then the other, as a result of a conversation between Jesus and Paul, is expressing the long-term consistency and accuracy of the gospel.

We have one gospel, not two, but the gospel is stated in very different words, depending on the context, depending on the person who is saying it.

that the coherence is guaranteed by the fact that they had this conversation. As I say, many of us have longed to find out exactly how that conversation went, but clearly it was an extraordinary way in which Paul and Jesus encountered each other.

So now, the purpose of the Bible studies, which I'm advertising for, is to look into the full range of parables and to explore the extent to which these other parables also cohere with the gospel in the Romans.

[39 : 40] And it seems to me that there will be a lot of work involved in reading, but more importantly, there will be a lot of work involved in meditation and in considering the way in which Jesus proclaimed the gospel and the way in which Paul absorbed it and the way in which we ourselves identify with that gospel today.

So I would invite you all to, well, I guess, all of these, of those of you who are retired, come to Bible studies lunchtime on Wednesdays in the fall, and to explore the full range of parables.

Just one final comment about this. I guess we've all had the parables from childhood onwards, or most of us at least, but it doesn't seem to me that they have grown very much in terms of the way in which they are communicating to us, or perhaps I'm speaking to myself, that I haven't spent enough time absorbing and reflecting on the parables.

One thing, there has been a certain fear, I suppose, that they might turn up some inconsistencies, but it seems to me that the very simple, first-cut parables have an enormously important influence on our evolution as youngsters and young Christians.

But it seems to me that we have probably only touched the fringes of the significance of these parables. And I would invite us, and I also need assistance, as is obvious, in doing this, that together we might explore the fundamental coherence of the Gospel according to Paul and the Gospel according to Jesus as communicated in the parables.

[41 : 55] Thank you. Thank you. Please feel free to correct me.

Yes, please. Here's one explanation I've read, is that a missing element in recent Gospel presentation has been the law of God.

Not to do, but to hear. In other words, to know just what, how stringent God's commandments are. In other words, the fact we've broken all of God's ten commandments, rightly understood in the past, we're doing that right now, and we'll continue to do that.

And that's a necessary preparation for the Gospel. Otherwise, it makes no sense. Christ died in the year, why? How do I need him? So we see our need for it.

And in other words, this is true not only of Christ, but also of Paul. Think of his reasonings of what was the dentist with Felix. Righteousness, self-control, the judgment to come until he trembled.

[42 : 58] In other words, to the proud and the impenitent, the self-righteous, like the rich young ruler, Jesus gave the law. And to the humble and the open, you know, the penitent, this is Nicodemus was the Gospel.

He must be born again. And even the story of the rich man in hell, he in effect asked for the Gospel, sent Lazarus back from the dead to warn them.

That's Abraham's answer. They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them, not obey, hear. He says, no, no, no, no, they won't repent, but give them, send Lazarus, they will.

And he says, in essence, if they reject God's standards, their sense of need will be lost. And the Gospel will be useless. Sounds as if you should be leading this Bible study in the fall.

I may have a job later. No, I appreciate your comments. Bill. The comparison of the two stories, the parable of the different wages, and the first parable you were talking about, I pray the same at the end of the day, as at the beginning of the day, with the thief on the cross.

[44 : 22] It's an example of that, in action. Can I go as far as to say, what to say, what happened to the thief on the cross is a stumbling block to the established church, in many ways.

Because I, in conversation with a number of established people in the church, they don't like that in scripture, because the thief didn't seem to have worked for anything.

he hadn't contributed anything, and yet, he was given the full wanting, as you might say.

He was given the full wanting. Not at work, so that any man should boast. You've got to have to have done something. You've got to have worked something for your salvation.

Is that what you concluded? Is that what you concluded? That you have to do some work? The established church. Oh, the established church. I don't know who these established people are.

[45 : 40] There's quite a variety of them. The big brother, he expresses it the same way, doesn't he? I've done all this. Well, I don't know.

It seems to me that that's a pretty equal distribution of misconception around not only established persons, but also others.

Harvey? Sir, why has John decided to give us a fulsome picture of Jesus minus herald? Will that come into your study? That's an interesting, very interesting point, Harvey.

I couldn't answer the question, of course, not having known John. I haven't seen a explanation of that, because in fact it would seem on the first blush that it would be consistent with John's style in the sense of his very profound and abstract discussion, very often indirect communication.

So that's a question I can't answer at all, because I just think John's gospel is the most amazing and wonderful presentation of the gospel imaginable.

[47 : 04] Paul, there is a difference, it would be an interesting thing perhaps to study the parables, John and Romans, as a threesome, to see the emphases in these three.

Do you have anything to help us on that, Harvey? not a see. Well, then I don't feel so badly.

Dr. Packer, in his book, *Knowing God*, I think it's in one of the latter chapters, he brings out that both Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the epistle of Romans as the gateway to the Bible, so I think you're covering the parables of Jesus and using Romans to complement each other.

You're a great trap for a good Bible story. I hope so, I hope so. I mean, it seems to be that there's no more systematic statement of the gospel. One of the curiosities about storytelling is that it usually touches people at different levels and with different opportunities.

You can tell two people the same story and one person will relate to in one way and the other will be totally struck by some other point. Good. That's very helpful.

[48 : 35] I think that it's fascinating because you think that the opportunity the disciples had to get to know what was in Jesus' mind and they were confused most of the time.

that the parables were attempts to get at people's thought words and to really get them to re-examine their assumptions.

Yeah. No, that's helpful. The indirect communication in general. Just storytelling of any form of indirect communication. anything. Yeah.

It's just all these different words. These different people. Right. That's pretty much. Thank you. Yeah. Just, I'm sure this is in everyone's mind but just to, you didn't actually say it but when it talks about Jesus speaking in parables it was so that by hearing they would not hear and by seeing they would not see.

That there's in some sense parables presented to show us that we're not seeing more than to actually help us see in a nice way with stories. I mean it really has more to do with showing us up by telling us in a simple way in a story we understand we still understand.

[49 : 53] Yeah, nice point. Yeah, sure. Just following up on that I'm wondering why the emphasis on the righteousness of God which I think you made a really clear statement about had the Jews missed the point was it the God of judgment that they knew from the Old Testament and kind of forgot about the rest why spend his whole ministry kind of telling them this is what God is about if they had really not lost sight of that or am I missing something here?

Because the other writers of the New Testament are really trying to show us what Jesus was about you know Jesus never said I'm going to be a substitutionary sacrifice here watch for it it's coming you know all of that was not important to Jesus in his preaching but having us understand the righteousness of God was so could you say a little more about that?

Well I think the way I've seen this is that Paul's strategy is extremely well based. If one starts from the assumption of love in a formal statement of this kind it seems to me that it is extremely difficult to get out some of the realities of sin and of judgment.

Whereas if one starts from the principle of righteousness righteousness then the grace and the goodness and the love of God are easily accommodated within that framework.

In other words if one is going to go for a logical argument as Paul was inclined to do given his background then it's far safer to start with the nature of God's righteousness righteousness than to start on the basis of his love.

[52 : 02] Not suggesting that one is more important than the other but they're equally important but you start on the basis of love and it's well very hard to argue the sort of disaster that the human race has become.

And indeed the disaster of the last twelve months which will indicate some of the realities. Harry, you're very quiet.

We don't think you continue to be. Not everyone is expected to sit.

