

The Parables at a Glance

A Classic Definition

A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

(C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 1961)

In Other Words, a Parable...

1. Compares two different realities using simple, true-to-life word-pictures
2. Describes something new or unknown in terms of something very familiar
3. Grabs the imagination with an unexpected twist
4. Demands a response or reaction from the hearer

Purpose

In the parables, Jesus gives us a chance to recognize the God we cannot see by comparing what God is like to what we can see.

The parables show us in concrete and vivid ways what God is like. But the parables also show us what we are like! They even challenge us to change how we think and act. They tell us, subtly or forcefully, what God wants of us.

The parables announce the good news that the Kingdom of God is a reality worth living for. They compel us to make a decision about Jesus and his mission and ours: Is God really that merciful? Must I really repent and be that merciful too?

Context

To help understand the parables, we need to discover, as best as we can, the context in which they were first used.

Jesus addressed himself to real people, in a particular historical situation. What did he intend to say, and what must have been his effect on his hearers?

The very early Church handed on the deeds and words of Jesus, finally putting them down in writing. In doing so, they applied his parables to their own particular situation and needs. How has this clarified or added other perspectives to the parables we read today?

The parables still speak to us in our own time, and to our own needs. This is true because the parables are the living word of God. How do our personal lives, and our experience of contemporary society deepen our understanding of the parables of Jesus? What do they demand of us?

Message and Themes

Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

(Mark 1:14-15)

1. Kingdom of God Is Now
2. The Real Crisis Is Repent or Perish
3. God's Mercy Is for Sinners
4. Disciples Live Ready
5. The End Is Real