

## Week 44 – Tough Questions – Why did Jesus teach so many parables?

Tim Perry here, pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church. Thanks for joining me here for Week 44 of Tough Questions.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? That's the question we want to deal with this week. Parables are trickier to understand than we realize.

So let's take a look at Jesus' own rationale for why he teaches like this and then I've got some suggestions for how to read parables so that you get the most out of them.

Here we go. Here's what Jesus says about how he teaches and why he teaches in parables:

*The disciples came to him and asked – why do you speak to the people in parables? (This was just after Jesus gave them the parable of the soils and the seeds and the farmer sowing the seeds.) He replied to the disciples: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. (Who is “you” and who is “them”? Well, the disciples are the ones who get it. “Them or those people” are the ones on the outside who aren't getting it.) Whoever has will be given more and even in abundance. Whoever does not have what he has will be taken away from him. (That doesn't sound fair) This is why I speak to them in parables. Though seeing – they do not see, though hearing – they do not hear or understand. (Jesus is quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.) In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus says, you will be ever hearing, but never understanding. You will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused. They hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes – otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men long to see what you see, but did not see it. And to hear what you hear and did not hear it.*

So Jesus' explanation sheds a little bit of light on why he teaches in parables. Parables have the mysterious property of being able to reveal and conceal truth at the same time. It depends on the orientation of the listener. If the heart of the listener is good soil, then what Jesus is saying about the kingdom through these parables, gets understood immediately. We pick up on the meaning. We put it to use in our lives, and we say to ourselves this truth about the kingdom of Jesus works itself out in our experiences spiritually because we believe in it, we put our faith in it, we hold it to be true.

But for other people who aren't oriented toward living in the kingdom of God, they're just going to hear nice little platitudes, nice little illustrations and stories. They're not listening with a heart to obey it. They really don't want to understand

what it means and what the implications of that meaning are for how they live. So it bounces right off of them like the seeds sewn on the hard path.

Well let me give you a few more details related to parables that will help you interpret them and understand them. I'm reading here out of the Project 4:4 Readers Guide. I put this little guide together so that I would help people as they get to different sections of scripture know how to read that particular part of scripture. So what we're talking about is genre and the genre of the parables, you need to understand a few things about it in order to read more productively.

So let me just give you a few pointers right out of my guide here and then at the end of this guide, I'll give you a snapshot of this page I'm reading off of and if you want to take more notes or write it down, you can write it down.

Parables appear in over 96 places in the Gospels. Some of them repeat – they overlap a little, but Jesus uses parables a lot. It says here about a third of everything Jesus teaches in Matthew, Mark and Luke is in the form of a parable. That's pretty big!

Jesus used common imagery in His parables – parables that used things like seeds, soils, a father with two sons, wedding feasts and oil lamps. They're images that are timeless almost. We can still read them today and get them.

Sometimes Jesus actually used a parable as a weapon. Remember those tense conflicts he has with the Pharisees. He often would tell a parable to explain his rationale, and when the Pharisees got the parable, they realized - oh – Jesus just told that story against us.

It's easy to make a parable to say more than Jesus intends it to say. That's reading into the story lots of things that Jesus never intended.

Here's a definition of the word "parable". This might help you – a literal meaning is the "setting of things side by side for the sake of comparisons".

So parables are not fables, they're not really allegories where every last detail in the story has some symbolic meaning. Parables are stories drawn from real life situations where the world of the parable is brought side by side to the world of the listener. Parables illustrate truth in the spiritual realm by means of a story in the natural realm. That's how they work.

Now the function of parables - we talked about this just a second ago. Mark 4:11-12 states that Jesus teaches in parables so that the people oriented toward hearing and obeying are going to soak it up and use it up. The people who aren't - it's just going to deflect off of them.

Parables are meant to reveal the kingdom to those who have ears to hear. Parables also have the affect of actually hiding the kingdom from those who don't want to hear. Careful!

Now I want to give you a few guidelines. I've listed six or seven here in this little booklet. These are just things to keep in mind when you're reading parables.

1. Pay attention to the context and the setting of the parable. It's just as important as the details of the parables themselves. The people in Jesus' audience when a parable was told usually could be seen in one or more elements of the parable itself. Remember the parable of the prodigal son. Well, it was told in an audience that contained Jewish dads. They would have got that parable because of who they were.
2. As you read, note the structure of the parable. What happens as each new scene unfolds in the story line of the parable? What are the characters or objects doing in the parable itself? What are the points of reference between the reader and the characters in the parable?
3. Uncover the background of some of the elements in the parable and it will give you a lot more insight. A talent, for example was a unit of monetary value that helps you understand the parable in today's terminology. So the person who had the 10 talents versus the 5 talents – those are monetary units so we can think of that parable in terms of stewardship.
4. Determine the main points of the parable. This is so important. That which is lost is found – we must rejoice! That's the simple main point of the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus told two other parables right next to it, and three of them taken together is simply trying to get the point across – that which is lost is found – let's celebrate! We can interject all kinds of interesting subplots, but that's the main thing Jesus is saying. It's got one basic point that it's trying to make.
5. Relate the main point of the parable to the rest of what Jesus is teaching about the kingdom. All of these agriculture parables that Jesus uses in Mark Chapter 4 are trying to show us something about how we communicate the kingdom, how that communication is heard and then put to use in people's lives.
6. Be careful making a case for a parable teaching a doctrine unless that doctrine is also taught somewhere else in scripture. That's really important. Use scripture to help interpret and integrate scripture when you build your theology. Don't try to make a huge elaborate theology – just off of one parable like the parable of the prodigal son. People always over-theologize parables.
7. Apply the main point of the parable to contemporary life today. Preaching the gospel results in various levels of response with fruit-bearing conversion hoped for outcome. That's the basic upshot of the parable of the soils.

Well if you found this really helpful. If you've got any comments or questions for me, hit on the link there and let's talk.

Thanks for being with me this week. We'll see you next week on Tough Questions.  
This has been Tim Perry, pastor of Spiritual Discover at Christ Community Church.