

PARABLES



What is a parable?

In the Bible, there are four books which recount the stories of the life of Jesus. They are named after their writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and provide four similar but not identical accounts of where Jesus went, what he did and what he taught.

The Gospels say that Jesus' teaching was characterised by the use of parables. A parable is like a combination of a story and a puzzle. Some of them are very straightforward and make a direct comparison between two things, but many are more complicated and tell a story which also has a partly hidden, deeper meaning. The Gospels record almost 40 different parables told by Jesus, and he probably told more that the Gospel writers didn't include.

If you had to explain to someone else what a parable is, but could only tell them four things, what would those four things be? Highlight them in the paragraphs above.

Why did you choose those four things?

Christians today believe that what Jesus taught through the parables is equally relevant and important to people today as it was to the people in Jesus' time. However, while Jesus' parables are usually simple stories which are easy to follow, the messages within them can be puzzling and sometimes even mysterious.

When someone reads a parable, he or she needs to interpret it, which means to think about what the author (Jesus) was trying to say and about what, if anything, the parable might mean for them. Different readers will often interpret a parable in different ways.

Within Christianity, it is generally recognised that there is no single correct interpretation of many parables, though some interpretations of parables are widely held and have become traditional.

Can you think of any other ways in which stories can be told which leave the reader, listener or viewer to work out the meaning for themselves?



The parable of the mustard seed and the Kingdom of God

One of the central themes of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God, and many of his parables focus on this concept.

The Kingdom of God is a complicated concept, but at its heart is the idea that people should live their lives in the way that God wants them to (which Christians might call God's 'will'). The Kingdom of God can be used to mean a time in the future when everyone lives according to God's will, but also to mean things in the present day which are in keeping with God's will.

Some of Jesus' parables are very short, and just make a single direct comparison between the Kingdom of God and something else. An example is the parable of the mustard seed. This is one of the parables which most people interpret to mean the same thing – that the Kingdom of God begins in a small and hidden way, but eventually grows into something large and good.

He (Jesus) also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

Mark chapter 4 verses 30-32 (NRSV)

Mustard seeds are indeed tiny, only about 1 millimeter in diameter (although not actually the smallest seed in all the world). The plants grow to between 3 and 4 metres tall.

The word parable has its origins in the ancient Greek word 'parabole', which means to put two things next to each other so that they can be compared.

What two things does Jesus put next to each other and compare in this parable?

What change happens to the mustard seed in the parable?

If the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, what does it start like, and how will it change?



How is that different to what Jesus' Jewish listeners expected God's kingdom to be like?

Do you think that the parable of the mustard seed is ...?

Clear

Mysterious

Disguised

Confusing

Obvious

Something else

The Pharisee and the tax collector

Others of Jesus' parables take the form of proper stories. Stories are usually made up of five elements:

- The **setting**, where the story takes place
- The **characters** who take part in the story
- The **plot**, or the things which happen in the story
- Often the story will focus on a struggle, disagreement or difference between the characters, which is the **conflict**
- The **theme**, which is the central idea, belief or message in the story

As you read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, identify these elements in the story (you could highlight them using different colours if it helps), then answer the questions on the next page to show what you have learned.

He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

The **Pharisees** were a Jewish religious group who followed the laws of the Old Testament strictly. Fasting (going without food) and tithing (giving one tenth of earnings to the temple treasury) were both associated with being deeply religious.



But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Luke chapter 18 verses 9-14 (NRSV)

Tax collectors were widely hated for being corrupt and for cheating people into paying too much tax, and for working with the Romans.

Where is the setting?

Who are the characters? Try to write a little about each of them.

What happens in the story to make the plot?

Where is the conflict in the story – how are the two characters very different?

What is the theme of the story – what message was Jesus trying to get across when he told it?



In his parables, Jesus very often used examples from everyday life that the people listening to him would have been familiar with. However, in the parables there is almost always a twist in the plot. The twist in this parable is that Jesus' listeners would have assumed that the Pharisee, being more religious and taking care to follow the rules carefully, would be more pleasing to God than the corrupt and dodgy tax-collector, but in fact Jesus says that the opposite is true.

What do you think it is about the Pharisee that Jesus wanted his listeners to think of as being displeasing to God? You can use words from the box on the right to help you answer if you want to.

What do you think it is about the tax collector that Jesus wanted his listeners to think of as being pleasing to God? Again, use words from the box if you want to.

Arrogant

Remorse

Uncaring

Self-centred

Superior

Humble

Sorrow

Smug

Can you suggest some ways in which a modern-day Christian reading this parable in their Bible or hearing it read out in church might think about himself or herself differently because of it? You could give your answer in the form of questions they might ask about themselves.



When the Gospel writers recount Jesus' parables, they often say who Jesus was talking to at the time. Sometimes, they just say 'a large crowd', but on other occasions they are more specific, probably because they thought that it would be useful for their readers to know. Who does Luke say that Jesus was talking to when he told this parable?

How does that connect to the message of the parable?

Do you think that means that the parable isn't useful for people who don't think that they are better than others and look down on everyone else?

The parable of the weeds

Matthew's Gospel describes a time when Jesus goes to a lakeside, sits down and teaches a crowd using a series of parables. One of the parables he tells is the parable of the weeds.

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Matthew chapter 13 verses 24-30 (NRSV)



Later on, the twelve disciples ask Jesus to tell them what the parable of the weeds means.

He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Matthew chapter 13 verses 36-43 (NRSV)

The Son of Man was a name which Jesus sometimes used to mean himself.

How Jesus explains the meaning of the parable to the disciples is an example of a particular way of interpreting parables which is known as allegory. In an allegory, everyday things in the story stand in for something else in a story which reveals significant spiritual or theological truths about himself, God, heaven and, as in the parable of the weeds, what will happen at the end of time.

Match up the things from the parable on the left with what Jesus tells the disciples that they mean on the right.

The one who sows the seed

The 'children of the evil one'

The field

The world

The good seed

The devil

The weeds

Hell

The enemy

Jesus

The harvest

The 'children of the kingdom' of God

The reapers

The angels

The barn

The end of time

The flaming furnace

Heaven



*What does the parable of the weeds say about:
Jesus?*

The devil?

What will happen at the end of time?

The idea that they can be interpreted as allegories has been applied to other parables by Christians who want to understand Jesus' meaning better, though Christians today are less likely to interpret parables as being allegories than they were in the past.

The earliest Christians, not long after the time of Jesus, often looked at the parables and tried to work out what each character or thing in the story was supposed to represent.

This remained the usual way to understand the parables until about 150 years ago. One of the first people to favour a non-allegorical interpretation of parables was a German Bible expert called Adolf Julicher. He argued that understanding parables as allegories resulted in too many different interpretations, not all of which could be right, and that Jesus' parables were actually intended to teach moral or ethical lessons.



Most Christians today would say that some parables, like the parable of the weeds, were supposed to be allegories but others were not, and that a reader needs to look carefully to work out which is which.

Do you think that the parable of the weeds is ...?

Clear

Mysterious

Disguised

Confusing

Obvious

Something else

Do you think that parables are most like:

A code

A jigsaw

A key

*A building block
Why?*

A riddle

Something else

