

Gleaners Bible Studies c 1

THE PARABLES OF LUKE'S GOSPEL (PART 1)

Study 1

The Purposes of Parables

Read

Luke 7: 36-50; Luke 8: 1-15

The Bible is full of picture language. Eastern writers were far more colourful in their writing than those of the western world. The Hebrew language is tremendously expressive, so that the Old Testament is full of beautiful illustrations and parables. The same can be said of the New Testament, although perhaps not to the same degree. Greek, the language of the New Testament, is certainly much more colourful than English and adds beauty to the things that are written.

The New Testament, which contains nearly 40 parables of Jesus and our Lord often used parables to convey His teaching. Indeed at one stage, we even read that He did not say anything without using a parable. (**Matthew 13: 34**) A parable has often been described as 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' Literally, the word means 'to put things side by side in order to compare them.' In the case of the parables of Jesus, those two 'things' were a short story, and a particular spiritual truth, usually concerning the kingdom of God. (**Luke 8: 10**) Therefore great spiritual truths could be taught through the medium of simple stories of everyday life.

But if the parables of Jesus were so prominent, what was their purpose?

There are two answers to that question, both of which can be found in the reading of Luke 8.

a) To reveal the truth to some.

In these verses, Jesus makes it clear that people listened to, or received **"the word of God"** (**Luke 8: 11**) in different ways. You can trace this in each part of His explanation of the story. He mentions **"the ones who hear"** - **verse 12**; **"having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit"** - **verse 15**. He even adds at the end of His story, **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"** (**verse 8**) But notice what happened next. The disciples asked Him what the parable meant. (**verse 9**) They were not satisfied with just hearing a fascinating story, then idly speculating as to what it might mean. They wanted to know, so they came to the Lord Jesus for the answer. That must always be our attitude when reading the Bible. We can never understand it by mere human reasoning. But the Christian has two priceless assets. One is the Holy Spirit, who, the Lord promised, will lead him to know the truth. (**John 16: 13**) The other is prayer. (**James 1: 5**) Notice too that Jesus emphasised that spiritual understanding is a gift from God. (**Luke 8: 10a; Matthew 13: 11**) Spiritual truths are **"mysteries"** which only God can reveal to us. So be thankful to the Lord when He enables you to 'see' what the Bible means; and a frequent reading of **Matthew 11: 25** will help you to keep humble.

b) To conceal the truth from others.

However strange or even harsh this may seem, we must not turn away from this very important point. Compare **Luke 8: 5** with **verse 12**; **verse 6** with **verse 13**; **verse 7** with **verse 14**. People who hear the word casually, carelessly or superficially are like this seed which fails to come to fruition. The whole point is vividly brought out in **Luke 8: 10b**. Compare this with **Isaiah 6: 9-10**. Those

who treat parables as no more than interesting stories will end up with nothing but interesting stories! In spiritual matters, the clarity of men's hearing depends on the state of their hearts. Jesus went even further than this by saying that a man must be willing to do God's will before he will be able to discern it. (**John 7: 17**) Therefore the man, who is not prepared to heed God's word, will not even be able to hear it correctly! 'It is for this reason that parables become windows to some people and walls to others.' (John Blanchard) How important therefore that we learn to approach the Bible with an honest, open, earnest heart, genuinely willing to know and to DO God's will. If you do so, you will find yourself in the 'fruitful field' of **Luke 8: 15**.

So this is why Jesus used what is often referred to as the parabolic method of teaching and He used it very effectively. Have you ever noticed the great variety of subjects Jesus used to illustrate His teachings? Think of some of them:

Parables from nature:- The Sower, The Mustard Seed.

Parables about people:- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector; the Friend at Midnight.

Parables linked with occupation:- Servant and Master; The Wicked Husbandmen; The Lost Sheep.

Parables about social life:- The Great Supper.

Parables involving relationships:- The Prodigal Son.

Often the Lord used just a brief illustration to convey a truth, such as the old cloth on a new garment, or the old wineskins being unfit to take new wine. (**Matthew 9: 16- 17**) In these studies we are going to consider the parables recorded in Luke's gospel. Luke gives us a picture of the Lord Jesus as a true man. It is the most 'human' of all the gospels and His parables clearly speak of His close involvement with the people He came to save.

What should we look for when we study the parables?

1. The Setting. Notice what gives rise to the words that are spoken. Often the Lord Jesus was dealing with a problem or some definite need when He used this method of teaching.

2. The Story. The parables are rich in colour and illustration. Just in themselves, they provide very useful material, giving us an insight into life in Palestine in those days.

3. The Substance. Always ask yourself, 'What is Jesus seeking to teach?' Remember, that while a parable may have many applications, usually it has only one interpretation, and that is what really matters. So look out for this!

4. The Sequel. Frequently, but not always, there was a sequel to the parable spoken. Watch for anything that shows a reaction to what Jesus said. This is important.

With these four points in mind we can look at the first parable in our series in Luke's gospel.

THE TWO DEBTORS Luke 7: 36-50.

1. Setting. The Lord Jesus is invited to a meal in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Looking at the way Simon treated Jesus, it is obvious that he did not invite the Lord because of his love or

devotion. No doubt he was just curious, but it is obvious too, that he was coldly critical. His treatment of Jesus was almost crude. Mingling with the guests was a woman with a notorious reputation for leading a 'sinful life'. She finds her way to the feet of Jesus and anoints His feet with costly ointment. Simon was deeply embarrassed by the whole affair and expected the Lord to rebuke her. When Jesus did not do so, he concluded it was because Jesus did not realise who the woman was – and that He could not therefore be a prophet sent from God. (**Luke 7: 39**) The Lord then turns to the woman, but speaks this parable to Simon.

2. Story. The story is brief, covering just two verses. It concerns a money-lender and his debtors. He is owed fifty pence by one (about two month's wages), and five hundred pence by the other (about 18 month's wages). As they were both bankrupt, he forgave them both their debts. – A simple story built on just a few facts.

3. Substance. The Lord poses a question to Simon. The point of the story was not so much the debts as the reactions to the forgiveness. Although Simon had not said a word, we read that Jesus **"answered him"**. (**verse 40**) Simon had not read Jesus' mind correctly – but Jesus had read his perfectly! **"Simon, which of them will love him more?"** Simon quickly gave the right answer. **"I suppose the one to whom he forgave more."** Jesus agreed, but then came the crunch! The Lord wanted Simon to realise two great truths from this parable. One was that in God's sight he was the same as this woman whom he despised so much. He may have only been a 'fifty-pence' debtor, but he still had nothing with which to pay! He needed God's forgiveness. But the main point of the story lies in the devotion of the woman who felt the greatness of her sin and the wonder of God's forgiveness. She loved much because she was forgiven much. Simon, as the host that evening, had not even performed the common courtesies of the day towards Him. But the uninvited stranger, had lavished tears, kisses and perfume on Him. The lesson was clear; much love was a sign of much forgiveness. (**verse 47**) Simon's actions (or lack of them) had betrayed the state of his heart. Is your love for Christ any indication of His love for you?

4. Sequel. **Verses 48-50** are worth studying carefully. They put the corner-stone into the incident. To the amazement of the assembled guests, Jesus publicly announces the woman's forgiveness (**verse 48**) and commends her faith. (**verse 50**) **"Go in peace"** He says to the woman. And I am sure she did! But Simon – I wonder what happened to him? One thing is sure – he was left with his prejudice and pride, while the woman in her penitence, entered into peace. Contemplating Calvary is the greatest possible motivation for holy living and faithful service.

"We love Him because He first loved us". (1 John 4: 19)

Study 2 Who is my neighbour?

Luke 10: 25-37

There are very few people who do not know at least something about this parable we are now going to study. The 'Good Samaritan' has become a figure of speech for one who shows an unexpected kindness in some way. This story is a classic example of how wonderfully the Lord Jesus could use a local incident to teach a spiritual lesson. **"Down from Jerusalem to Jericho"** – everyone would know the dangerous road which stretched between the two towns. It is important here to distinguish between the application and the interpretation of the story. I have heard many applications – have even used some of them myself. But we are going to study the interpretation of this parable, while perhaps not forgetting some of its wonderful applications.

1. Setting. A lawyer (an expert in the Old Testament religion),

comes to Jesus seeking to test Him. **"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 25)** This was a fair enquiry, being, no doubt, a question in many people's minds. The Lord Jesus countered with two parallel questions, which pinned the man down to his specialist subject, **"the law"**. First, **"What is written in the law?"** The man's reply showed a very clear grasp of the Old Testament, and was in fact a summary of the Ten Commandments. Commendation came from the Lord, and the comment, **"do this and you will live"**. (**verse 28**) But now the lawyer was trapped, for while in theory he was right, no man had ever kept the law perfectly, so the possibility of gaining eternal life by doing so was purely hypothetical. So he tries to justify himself by raising a point of interpretation. And this is the question upon which the parable pivots. **"Who is my neighbour?" (verse 29)**

2. Story. You know the story well. The journey to Jericho, the unexpected skirmish and the plight of the man as he is beaten, robbed and left for dead by the roadside. Can you imagine it? A Priest and then a Levite, both representatives of the Jewish religion, come along. They take in the situation and pass by on the other side of the road. Then comes the Samaritan who, seeing the wounded man, is moved with compassion. He hurries to give him first-aid, takes him to an inn, and agrees to pay for the entire cost of his convalescence! The Lord Jesus told the story of this act of kindness to the very full, for he was also telling the story of His own heart. The people listening would have been stunned by it, as the Jews and Samaritans were constantly at loggerheads. (Compare **John 4: 9**)

3. Substance. This story is a lesson in good neighbourliness. Notice the command of the Law. **"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"**. (**verse 27**) This is one of the great pillars upon which the whole building of the law depended. The other was whole-hearted love to God. In life, tragedies often occur. In the days of the Lord Jesus there was much disease and poverty, and He did not have to look very far to find opportunities for His kindness and power to be exercised. Many broken bodies and disquieted minds existed, and as He drew near to many, He helped and healed them. As the story is told, we can see the direction of our Lord's thinking. The Priest and Levite represented the established religious authority of the day. The Priest was the minister of God – the representative of the people in their worship of God. In his link with the Temple, the Priest held high office and if he exercised his ministry faithfully, he could be the means of blessing to his people. The Levite was a servant of the Temple. All the Temple business was shared among the Levites, and theirs was a high privilege in God's service. If you want to know more about these people, read through the Book of Leviticus. Yet, according to the parable, in the face of need in one of their fellow-men, both failed dismally.

It seems certain that the Lord Jesus was painting a picture of conditions in Palestine, of which He was very much aware. Those who professed to love God and serve Him, had no real feeling for the deep needs of their society and no love for their neighbours. They mockingly called Jesus **"the friend of tax-collectors and sinners."** (**Luke 7: 34**) And in the Good Samaritan we can see a picture of the great love, kindness and sympathy of the Lord Jesus. Read **James 2: 14-26** in this connection. As Christians we should fulfil our responsibilities to other people in their physical needs as well. We must **"do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."** (**Galatians 6: 10**) Think about this – it paves the way for winning people for Christ.

4. Sequel. The lawyer has asked a question about identifying a neighbour. Jesus now asked a question about being a neighbour. (**Luke 10: 36**) The answer was obvious. (**verse 37a**) The implication inescapable. (**verse 37b**) **"Which of these three do you think was neighbour...?"** – **"He who showed mercy on him"**. For the second time the lawyer gave the right answer. But the whole force of the parable is gathered up in the final words of the Lord Jesus. **"Go and do likewise."** (**verse 37**) However else this story is used, its real purpose is to show that everyone is our **"neighbour"**, and that we are to give whatever help we can to those we find in need, regardless of race, rank, colour, creed or anything else. To think this through is to

Study 3

The Great Supper

Read

Luke 14: 1-24

realise that here is the very heart of practical Christianity.

In the study of the parable in **Luke 14: 12-24**, it is good to bear in mind the opening verses of this chapter. As in **Luke 7**, the Lord was in the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. Notice it says that they were watching Him. (**verse 1**) Jesus constantly infuriated the Pharisees by healing people on the Sabbath Day. (**Luke 6: 6-11; Luke 13: 10-17**) Faced with yet another man in dire need, Jesus challenges his (**verse 3**) critics with a question. **“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”** Greeted with silence, He heals the man, then asked another unanswerable question. (**verses 5-6**) The incident undoubtedly increased the hostility of the Pharisees towards Him. How little they knew about the deep purpose of His mission! This opening creates the atmosphere of the chapter. Certainly the parable of the Great Supper reflects the effect that such behaviour by these religious leaders, had upon Jesus. The open-hearted kindness of the Lord was continually misunderstood by these men and such parables as this were designed to give evidence of the way in which the Lord worked.

1. Setting. The parable of the Great Supper seems to be the third story or illustration in a row which revealed some deficiency in the Pharisee's approach to life. The Lord Jesus took note of the way in which some of the guests wormed their way into the most important seats. (**verse 7**) Pride was one thing Christ hated. He was the most humble of men and consistently taught that pride was a dangerous evil. He thus told the simple but pointed parable recorded in **verses 8-10**, finishing with the statement that **“Whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”**. (**verse 11**) This principle appears again in **Matthew 23: 12** and **Luke 18: 14**, and the same truth is stated many times in the Old Testament. (e.g. **Proverbs 29: 23**) Pride makes a man small, however great he may be. Humility makes a man great, however small he may seem to be. This lesson is easy to learn, but difficult to live out. (**See James 4: 10**)

The second illustration leads on from the first. Not, going to a feast, but making one, is the theme. Invite those who cannot reward you, rather than those who socially share the same level. The care of the Lord for the needy is reflected in this, and He seeks to encourage this spirit in others promising them special blessings. (**Proverbs 19: 17 and Matthew 19: 21**)

2. Story. This story is simple and quite well known. It is inspired by the remark of someone who said, **“Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God”**. (**verse 15**) A great supper is provided and special guests invited. It seems to have been something of a ‘closed shop’ with reserved seats; part of the endless round of invitations involving the same people. Invitations to banquets were issued in two stages. In this parable, the invited guests began to cry off when the second invitation came. But they gave ‘excuses’ rather than ‘reasons’, making light of the invitation. Grieved at their refusal, the host sent his servants, first into the city and then into the countryside, freely inviting the most unlikely people: the poor and maimed, blind and lame, all were invited – eventually compelled to come in, for the king's house must be filled. (**verses 21-23**) The ‘specials’ do not share the provision. It is the needy that fill the house.

3. Substance. Many Jews believed that the Messiah's coming would be marked by a gigantic feast. Thus the Lord Jesus speaks of that which was prepared and of that which was ready for enjoyment. The ‘gospel’ is that which invites us to partake of the great blessings that God has prepared. The Lord Jesus wanted to make sure that people knew of the deep satisfaction that could be found in the message He brought. All things were indeed ready, for He had come. Today is still the “Gospel” day – the “day of Grace” and the invitation to the Feast is open for all.

Notice the Invitation. **“Come, for all things are now ready”**. (**verse 17**) The longing of God's heart was that men should share His blessings. Throughout the Old Testament God's prophets had been calling the people of Israel. Now Jesus was bringing the second urgent invitation. (**Hebrews 1: 1-2**) Yet the privileged Jews, God's own people, were rejecting it. (**John 5: 39-40**) As a result many Gentiles (not directly included in the first invitation) would gladly accept the call to the feast and enter the kingdom of God. (Paul expounds this truth in **Romans 9**) Thus the feast of the Gospel goes beyond the ‘privileged’ in its invitation. ALL may come, however great the need.

Now think just a moment about the Excuses. What an insult to the man who had prepared the supper! Would a man buy a field before he had seen it? (**verse 18**) Could the oxen not be tested a day or two later? (**verse 19**) Could the newly-wed not bring his wife? (**verse 20**) No doubt the Lord Jesus looked into the lives of many whom He had invited to enjoy His blessings and saw such excuses. Remember, there is no valid excuse for refusing God's great salvation, and certainly no reason for slighting His kind and wonderful invitation.

Lastly, look at the purpose in the preparation of the feast. **“That my house may be filled.”** (**verse 23**) What a motley crowd came to the feast! Certainly not very attractive by man's standards, but then, God works like that. All needy folk find a welcome in His house – at His table. It is certain too, that although many who excuse themselves from accepting Christ will be left outside, Heaven will be filled. The Lord Jesus died so that we might enjoy the great feast of His salvation. **Psalms 16: 11** tells us that **“in His presence is fullness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures for evermore.”**

4. Sequel. I wonder what the sequel was to this incident. Very little is said, except that **“great multitudes went with Him”**. (**14: 25**) Perhaps we can ask ourselves what the result of such teaching as this will have on us? Let us enjoy ALL the blessings of God's salvation to the full. He has given us so much to enjoy in the Lord Jesus.

Study 4

Man's Approach to God

Read

Luke 18: 1-14

It is noticeable that many of the parables in Luke are directly connected with the Pharisees and the rulers. All that we have so far considered have had this in common. The Lord Jesus was so conscious of the failures of these religious leaders. What was more, in failing themselves, they were misleading the people. Through His teaching the Lord Jesus was exposing their failings and this was why He encountered such bitter opposition. When He consistently claimed to be the Son of God, they counted this as blasphemy and eventually determined His death.

You will observe that this parable contains much teaching on prayer – man's approach to God. If you read the opening verses of the chapter, you will see that the Lord Jesus is telling this parable so that men might always pray and not faint (or lose heart). This is the point of the parable of the unjust judge. He draws the persistent entreaties of a widow woman, how much more would God willingly answer and avenge His own people who were in trouble. So prayer needs to be determined and persistent, for God IS ready to answer. Then follows the parable we are now going to study.

1. Setting. **Verse 9** clearly gives us the background to the story. **“He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.”** This tells us much more about the attitude of the Pharisees. They wanted to establish their own righteousness. As the Lord Jesus came with His great message to sinners, they felt that they were outside the scope of that which He had to offer – His message didn't apply to

them! Obedience to the Law and a careful observance of all its demands gave them all the righteousness they needed. They could not see their need of Him or His message. Some have scornfully said of the picture that Luke gives of Christ, that Jesus was the champion of the underdog and the outcast, to such an extent that He ultimately created the very divisions that He condemned. This is not true! The Pharisees put themselves outside the provision that God had to offer them in Christ. So much so, that we can remember the words again, **“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Luke 5: 32)** Keep this constantly in mind when studying the parables.

2. Story. Again this is a very simple story. A Pharisee and a Publican (Tax Collector) go to the Temple to pray. This was an everyday occurrence. (though possibly more in the case of the Pharisees than the Tax Collectors!) Their prayers are recorded for us to study. Actually the proud Pharisee never really got around to praying. He spent all his time boasting to God of his honesty, purity and generosity and his general moral superiority. **(verses 11-12) “Praying ... with himself!”** Jesus called it. There is no reason for us to doubt that the Pharisee was telling the truth, but his whole attitude was one of insufferable arrogance. In his own eyes he was morally head and shoulders above other men. **(verse 11)** The tax-collector on the other hand, was totally different, both in words and actions. He stood **“afar off”** with bowed head and beat upon his breast. **(a sign of grief – see 23: 48)** His only words were, **“God be merciful to me, a sinner.” (verse 13)** Literally, he used the phrase **“the sinner”**, as if he was the worst sinner in the world. (Compare Paul’s estimation of himself in **1 Timothy 1: 15**) Possibly he did not even notice the Pharisee, fervently thanking God that he was so different from this Tax Collector. The difference in their attitudes could be summed up in the words PRIDE and PENITENCE.

3. Substance. This parable teaches us a most important lesson in our approach to God. The idea of self-righteousness is firmly condemned in Scripture. Notice what **Romans 10: 3** says about people like the Pharisees. **“For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.”** Where did the Pharisee go wrong? He began his prayer in the wrong place – “himself”. Can I impress God with myself? The answer is an emphatic “NO”! Even at best being right with God does not begin with self. **“There is no one who does good, no not one.” (Romans 3: 10)** All MY righteousness – my righteous acts – amount to that which is compared to filthy rags. The starting place of all such prayers is wrong. Again the IDEA of his prayer is wholly wrong. **“I”, “I am”, “I give”, “I fast”**. Did God want to know about his activities? No, of course not! He knew all there was to know already. The idea that prayer is parading goodness before God so that He will be gracious, is foolish. Also the whole relationship of his prayer is at fault. **“I thank You, I am not like other men.”** What a mistake! God says, **“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3: 22-23)**

In the Tax Collector’s prayer, PENITENCE was the main feature. I love the masterly way the Lord Jesus gives the contrast. The prayer begins, not with himself, but with God. This is the starting point of all true prayer – it is God-centred. His basic idea was right! There was no parading of virtues, no recounting of good deeds, but just humble confessions and a plea for mercy. I’m sure this Tax Collector felt the loneliness of his sin; as if he was the only one who had ever sinned. He did the only sensible thing a man can do, he cried to God for His kindness and mercy – and God heard his prayer.

4. Sequel. The Lord, who so wonderfully tells the story, gives the picture of the sequel. **“He went down to his house justified, rather than the Pharisee.”** Do you know what it means to be justified? It is a great New Testament word which means “reckoned, or declared righteous” – just as if I’d never sinned! I suggest that you read **Romans chapter 4** in this connection. This parable tells us clearly that by humbling ourselves and

forsaking our own righteousness as a claim for God’s blessing, and confessing we are sinners in God’s sight, we can find certainty of forgiveness through that which the Lord Jesus has done for us at Calvary. We can be declared right with God! But the man who is not penitent cannot be pardoned!

“God’s mercy is greater than man’s greatest sin.”

Questions

Study 1: THE PURPOSES OF PARABLES

1. a) What is a parable?
b) What were the two ‘things’ in the parables of Jesus?
2. What were the two main purposes in the parables?
3. a) What are the two priceless assets the Christian has when studying the Bible?
b) How should we approach God’s Word?
4. What two great truths did the Lord want Simon to learn from the parable He told?
5. What three things did Jesus do for the woman?

Study 2: “WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”

1. How did the Lord Jesus answer the lawyer’s question?
2. What were the two greatest commands of the law, which summarise the Ten Commandments?
3. a) What did the Priest and Levite represent?
b) What picture did we see in the Good Samaritan?
4. How can we ‘pave the way for winning people to Christ’?
5. How would you now answer the question, **“Who is my neighbour?”**

Study 3: THE GREAT SUPPER

1. How did Jesus constantly arouse the Pharisees’ hostility?
2. What recurring principle, connected with pride, is stated many times in both Old and New Testament? Give two references.
3. What kind of people did Jesus tell the Pharisees they should invite to their feasts?
4. Of what is the Great Supper a picture?
5. a) What can we learn from the invitation, **“Come, for all things are now ready”**?
b) Of whom are those who gave excuses, a picture?

Study 4: MAN’S APPROACH TO GOD

1. What point was Jesus teaching in the parable of the unjust judge?
2. What was the general attitude of the Pharisees, to the Lord Jesus and His message?
3. What did Jesus mean when He said the Pharisee **“Prayed ... with himself”**?
4. a) What was the main feature of the Tax Collector’s prayer and how did it show itself?
b) What was the result?
5. What lessons does this parable teach us about man’s approach to God?