

The Provocative Parables of Jesus, and The Challenge to Make Sense of Them

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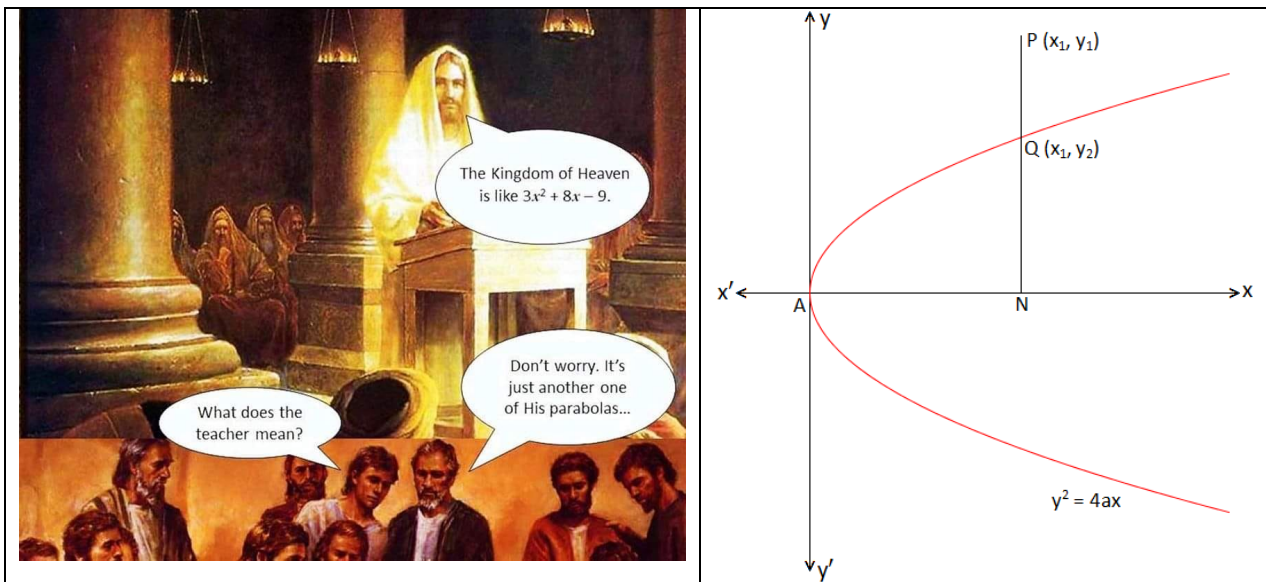
Contrary to popular belief, the parables of Jesus are not simple stories, with simple messages, originally intended for simple people. Rather, they are puzzling stories, intended to provoke listeners into thinking and asking questions. The gospel writers themselves struggled to make sense of the parables. If we can grasp how they responded to these challenging stories, we can join them in responding to the challenge.

No doubt Emily Dickinson was thinking of her own poetry, and not the parables of Jesus, when she wrote the following lines:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant"? "Success in Circuit lies"? "The Truth's superb surprise"? Sounds like the parables of Jesus to me!

What, after all, is a "parable"? What does the word mean? Let's tackle this question by means of what Emily Dickinson might call a "slant," or a "circuit." Here's a clever joke on the left, and a hint of an explanation on the right.



This clever joke is based on fact. Both a geometric "parabola" and a narrative "parable" derive from the same ancient Greek word that means literally "to throw alongside." One thing thrown alongside another thing. Want to know about the Kingdom of God? Well, let me tell you a story about a farmer sowing seed or a woman baking bread. One thing described in terms of something else.

One could just as easily say that the parables of Jesus are "metaphor" or "symbol." A "metaphor" is literally something "carried over" from one thing to another. A "symbol" is literally one thing "thrown together" with another thing.

In other words, all three of these terms—parable, metaphor, symbol—describe the same experience, talking about one thing in terms of another thing.

Or to take another angle on this, parables are not handing us on a platter straightforward, clear lessons. They do not so much give us answers as much as provoke questions within us. The parables of Jesus are not simple stories, with simple messages, originally spoken to simple people. Rather, they are intended to provoke us into thinking and questioning for ourselves.

In other words, we might say that the parables are poetry, not prose. They are not literal, factual language. They are symbolic, metaphorical, poetic language. I've already invoked one poet, Emily Dickinson, but let me now turn to another poet, Billy Collins. Once again, he's also not talking about the parables of Jesus, but he might just as well be. Imagine his poem, "Introduction to Poetry," in a classroom of students:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

In the same spirit, here is a wonderful definition of parable coined by the esteemed British scholar, C.H. Dodd: "At its simplest the 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." Arresting the hearer...vividness or strangeness...tease...into active thought. (My only criticism of Dodd's definition is his reference to "simile." A simile is a comparison, yes, but only one-dimensional—busy as a bee, cold as ice, sharp as a tack—unlike the multi-dimensional possibility of metaphor. Otherwise, his definition is superb.)

And the gospel writers took up this challenge repeatedly, doing their best to make sense of Jesus' provocative stories. But in spite of their best efforts, scholars have long recognized that Jesus' stories are often much richer, much more challenging, than the gospel writers could do justice to. They tried their best to explain and clarify the parables for us, but we would be wise to seek our own insights and questions, inspired by the example that the gospel writers have set before us. After we recognize how they struggled with the parables, maybe we can go and do likewise.

So what kind of interpretive strategies did the gospel writers employ to make sense of Jesus' provocative stories?

1. **They edited the wording of the parables to indicate their own particular understanding of them.** No two versions of any parable have exactly the same wording! Someone is editing their wording. E.g., the "Leaven" parable appears in three different gospels, and "Mustard Seed" appears in four, and the editorial differences among them are often significant.

2. **They created a narrative framework within which to place a parable.** The parables originally circulated orally as free floating, independent stories—the narrative contexts in which we now find them written are entirely the invention of the various gospel writers.

3. **Sometimes they added a moral to the story at the end.** Invariably these morals don't begin to do justice to the richness of the story that precedes them! "Let anyone with ears, hear" and "Go and do likewise" are nice advice, but not very deep!
4. **On occasion the gospel writers treat the parables as if they were allegories, coded stories waiting to be de-coded.** E.g., Mark tacks on his own allegorical interpretation of the Sower well after the parable itself (Mark 4:13-20 decodes Mark 4:1-9). The story of the Feast in Matthew 22:2-14 has allegorical decodings woven into the fabric of the story itself, completely unlike what the other gospel writers do with the same parable.

Advice for Making Sense of Provocative Parables

1. **Don't be in a rush to find only positive, upbeat lessons in the parables.** Yes, they may inform us positively about what the Kingdom of God is like, but they may sometimes tell us what the Kingdom of God is not!

- Are you old enough to remember the old 7Up TV ads about the "UnCola"? (Began in the late 1960s.) What is 7Up? NOT Coke or Pepsi! I swear, many of the parables are parables of the UnKingdom of God! In Emily Dickinson's words, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant"? "Success in circuit lies"?

- I like the title of Bernard Brandon Scott's book on the parables: *ReImagine the World*. Sometimes the parables entice us to reimagine the whole world and not just the Kingdom of God, which may or may not be reflected clearly in the parable.

- FYI, scholars are tending more and more to suggest that instead of the translation "kingdom," perhaps we should be using the word "empire," as in the "Roman Empire." This would lead to the insight that Jesus is inviting his hearers to embrace the Empire of God as opposed to the Empire of Rome. Daring to challenge the Empire of Rome was risky business. It could get a person crucified.

2. **Along the same lines, be wary of practicing your own version of allegorical de-coding, for example, by turning rich or powerful figures in the parables into God.** In Jesus' stories, rich or powerful figures are frequently ruthless, cruel tyrants. I don't think that's God!

3. **Be on the lookout for the odd, strange, weird, or surprising.** If it puzzles you or makes your brain hurt, congratulations! You are probably on the right track! That is to say, if you think a parable is simple, easy, and clear, you're probably missing something.

4. **Be suspicious of the titles the Christian tradition has attached to parables, or biblical passages generally.** E.g., the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, etc. Those titles often fail to do justice to the stories to which tradition has attached them.

5. **Ponder the beloved parables that appear in only one gospel!** E.g., the Good Samaritan (Luke 10 only) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15 only). See how close we came to losing those forever? Imagine how many were not written down anywhere and therefore were lost!

6. **We don't have many, but we do have some parables that have survived only outside of our canonical NT gospels, for example, in the Gospel of Thomas (e.g., Jar and Assassin).** Are we willing to embrace those as authentic stories from the historical Jesus? Why or why not? If you reject those parables because they appear in a non-canonical gospel, what do you do when that same non-canonical gospel echoes a parable that is found in our canonical gospels?

7. **Can you imagine yourself as one of the characters in the parables?** How would that work for you? A colleague of mine once made an intriguing suggestion that with the story of the Prodigal Son, maybe we should try to imagine ourselves in the sandals of all three major characters, the younger son, the doting father, and the older son. Try that on for size!

To understand the treatment of the parables by the gospel writers, pay close attention to:

I. the editorial differences between the various versions of a parable.

- A. Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31 and three other versions)
- B. Leaven (Matt 13:33 and two other versions)
- C. Treasure (Matt 13:44 and one other version)
- D. the parables that only occur once in ancient texts were surely also edited, but this is harder to discern, because there's no other version with which to compare

II. the setting or framework that surrounds a parable in a particular gospel.

- A. the parables originally circulated as independent stories—the narrative contexts in which we now find them are entirely the invention of the various gospel writers
- B. thus, be suspicious of any helpful introduction or final conclusion added to any parable—the best evidence is that Jesus offered his stories without comment or explanation. The parables ARE the instruction, not preparation for it.

EXAMPLES:

- C. the framework that Luke creates to encompass the story of the Good Samaritan. The parable itself (Luke 10:30-35) is from Jesus. The surrounding framework (Luke 10:25-29, 36-37) is from Luke.
- D. the parable of the lost sheep in Matt 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7. In Matthew the story is framed as a teaching about rescuing insiders in the church who have gone astray (e.g., Matt 18:1,6,10,15,21), but in Luke the parable is supposedly about outsiders, "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:1-2).
- E. all of Luke 15 (Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son) is an elaborate construction by Luke

III. 'morals' added to the stories by the gospel writers to offer a clarifying explanation of the parable

EXAMPLES:

- A. "Let anyone with ears, hear" (Matt 11:13; 13:43; Mark 4:7, 23; Luke 14:34)
- B. "The first will be last, and the last, first" (Matt 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:39)
- C. "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37)
- D. This one tops them all: the parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke 16:1-8a is followed in 16:8b-13 by six or more 'morals,' or maybe suggested 'sermon notes!' The early church struggled to discern the wisdom in Jesus' stories!

IV. 'allegorizing' interpretations—i.e., interpretations that treat the parables as if they were coded stories, with the challenge being to break the code. In the gospels, such allegorical interpretations are from the gospel writers, not from Jesus.

EXAMPLES:

- A. an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Sower in Mark 4 was added either by Mark or possibly a predecessor. The version of the parable in Thomas 9 totally lacks the allegorical interpretation.
- B. the story of the Feast as told by Matthew in Matt 22:2-14—allegorical details are woven into the story itself. All of these allegorizing touches are absent from the alternative versions of the story in Luke 14:16-24 and Thomas 64.

C. see the famous allegorical interpretation of the Good Samaritan from St. Augustine in roughly 400 CE

The "Good Samaritan" According to Augustine and Dodd's Definition of "Parable"

[C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 1-2, 5.]

The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. They have upon them, taken as a whole, the stamp of a highly individual mind, in spite of the re-handling they have inevitably suffered in the course of transmission. Their appeal to the imagination fixed them in the memory, and gave them a secure place in the tradition. Certainly there is no part of the Gospel record which has for the reader a clearer ring of authenticity.

But the interpretation of the parables is another matter. Here there is no general agreement. In the traditional teaching of the Church for centuries they were treated as allegories, in which each term stood as a cryptogram for an idea, so that the whole had to be de-coded term by term. A famous example is Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely, of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the Gospel."--(Quaestiones Evangeliorum, II, 19--slightly abridged.)

This interpretation of the parable in question prevailed down to the time of Archbishop Trench, who follows its main lines with even more ingenious elaboration; and it is still to be heard in sermons. To the ordinary person of intelligence who approaches the Gospels with some sense for literature this mystification must appear quite perverse.

Yet it must be confessed that the Gospels themselves give encouragement to this allegorical method of interpretation. . . .

At its simplest the 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.

A Sample of the Provocative Parables of Jesus

Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."	Mark 4:30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 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."	Luke 13:18 He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."	Thomas 20:1 The disciples said to Jesus: "Tell us whom the kingdom of heaven is like!" 2 He said to them: "It is like a mustard seed. 3 <It> is the smallest of all seeds. 4 But when it falls on cultivated soil, it produces a large branch (and) becomes shelter for the birds of the sky."
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Leaven

Matt 13:33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in ["hid in"] with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."	Luke 13:20 And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in ["hid in"] with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."	Thomas 96:1 Jesus [says]: "The kingdom of the Father is like [a] woman. 2 She took a little bit of yeast. [She] hid it in dough (and) made it into huge loaves of bread. 3 Whoever has ears should hear."
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Treasure/Pearl

Matt 13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.	Thomas 109:1 Jesus says: "The kingdom is like a person who has a hidden treasure in his field, (of which) he knows nothing. 2 And [after] he had died, he left it to his [son]. (But) the son did not know (about it either). He took over that field (and) sold [it]. 3 And the one who had bought it came, and while he was ploughing [he found] the treasure. He began to lend money at interest to whom he wished."
Matt 13:45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.	Thomas 76:1 Jesus says: "The kingdom of the Father is like a merchant who had merchandise and found a pearl. 2 That merchant is prudent. He sold the goods (and) bought for himself the pearl alone. 3 You too look for his treasure, which does not perish, (and) which stays where no moth can reach it to eat it, and no worm destroys it."

Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, **"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.'** 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Lost Sheep/Lost Coin/Lost Son

Luke 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." [contrast Matt 18:1,6,10,15,21; see also Thomas 107]

3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Dishonest Steward

Luke 16:1 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' •8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. •9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes. •10 "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. •11 If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? •13 No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. •You cannot serve God and wealth."

Sower

Mark 4:2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on a path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "If you have ears to hear, then hear!"

10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the

Thomas 9:1 Jesus says: "Look, a sower went out. He filled his hands (with seeds), (and) he scattered (them). 2 Some fell on the path, and the birds came and pecked them up. 3 Others fell on the rock, and did not take root in the soil, and they did not put forth ears. 4 And others fell among the thorns, they choked the seeds, and worms ate them. 5 And others fell on good soil, and it produced good fruit. It yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure."

secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, 12 in order that

‘they may indeed look but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be
forgiven.’”

13 And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the age and the lure of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” [see the revisions of Mark 4 in Matthew 13:3-23 and Luke 8:4-15]

Unmerciful Servant

Matt 18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 18:23 **“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, 25 and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”**

Feast

Luke 14:12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case

Matt 22:1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and

they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Luke 14:15 One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" 16 Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. 17 At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is ready now.' 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' 19 Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' 20 Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' 22 And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' 23 Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Thomas 64:1 Jesus says: "A person had guests. And when he had prepared the dinner, he sent his servant, so that he might invite the guests. 2 He came to the first (and) said to him: 'My master invites you.' 3 He said: 'I have bills for some merchants. There are coming to me this evening. I will go (and) give instructions to them. Excuse me from the dinner.' 4 He came to another (and) said to him: 'My master has invited you.' 5 He said to him: 'I have bought a house, and I have been called (away) for a day. I will not have time.' 6 He went to another (and) said to him: 'My master invites you.' 7 He said to him: 'My friend is going to marry, and I am the one who is going to prepare the meal. I will not be able to come. Excuse me from the dinner.' 8 He came up to another (and) said to him: 'My master invites you.' 9 He said to him: 'I have bought a village. Since I am going to collect the rent, I will not be able to come. Excuse me.' 10 The servant went away. He said to his master: 'Those whom you invited to the dinner have asked to be excused.' 11 The master said to his servant: 'Go out on the roads. Bring (back) whomever you find, so that they might have dinner.' 12 Dealers and merchants (will) not enter the places of my Father."

throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."		
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Vineyard Laborers

Matt 20:1 **"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'** So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13 But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Jar/Assassin

Thomas 97:1 **Jesus says: "The kingdom of the [Father] is like a woman who is carrying a [jar] filled with flour. 2 While she was walking on [the] way, very distant (from home), the handle of the jar broke (and) the flour leaked out [on] the path. 3 (But) she did not know (it); she had not noticed a problem. 4 When she reached her house, she put the jar down on the floor (and) found it empty."**

Thomas 98:1 **Jesus says: "The kingdom of the Father is like a person who wanted to kill a powerful person. 2 He drew the sword in his house (and) stabbed it into the wall to test whether his hand would be strong (enough). 3 Then he killed the powerful one."**

Recommended reading:

Gospel of Thomas, translated by Stephen J. Patterson and James M. Robinson,
http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gth_pat_rob.htm

Bernard Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2001)

Robert W. Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, and James R. Butts, *The Parables of Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988)

Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018)

Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., "God is more than two men and a bird," *U.S. Catholic* (May 1990): 20-27 [PDF available upon request]