Teaching the Parables

What is a parable?

When Jesus taught people, He often told stories. But, Jesus' stories were not typical stories- they were called parables. A parable is a story that tells two stories: the parable itself, and what the parable means.

Give an example of a parable.

In Luke 15: 1-7, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. The parable of the lost sheep is a simple story. In the story, a shepherd has 100 sheep, but one is missing. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to go look for the one lost sheep. When he finds the sheep, he brings it back home with joy and tells all his friends, calling for them to celebrate with him because the sheep has been found. This is the first story.

But we know that Jesus isn't *just* telling people a story about sheep. There is *another* story Jesus is telling as well.

The other story is this: God has many people He cares for, but some leave Him. Some people wander away and sin. But God, in His great compassion, will go and find those who have left Him, and bring them back home. God rejoices greatly when this happens, and He calls for all to celebrate with Him in Heaven.

When Jesus tells a parable, He tells two stories: the parable, and the parable's meaning.

Why did Jesus tell parables? What were they like?

Jesus told parables when teaching people, often in a group including His disciples. Jesus used simple, ordinary things in His parables that the audience would have been familiar with, such as sheep, seeds, weddings, farmers, local roads, servants and masters, families, and taxes. He even adapted familiar stories and used them as parables, like the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Sometimes Jesus told parables to specific people rather than crowds, such as in the story of A sinful woman anointing Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-50.

Sometimes Jesus told everyone the parable's meaning right away. Sometimes Jesus only explained the parables to His disciples. Sometimes He did not explain at all. Jesus comments on why He tells parables in Matthew 13:10-17, Mark 4:10-20 and Luke 8:9-10. His comments are rather puzzling, but it is clear that parables were one of Jesus's ways of communicating the truth to people, knowing that not everyone who heard them would understand what they meant. Perhaps the people who wanted to understand the truth would look deeper into the parables' meanings and find it, and those who didn't want to understand, wouldn't.

Jesus told many other parables that are not lessons listed on this website. You can find Jesus' other parables in the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Can children understand parables?

Children will easily understand the story of a parable, but they may not understand what it means without some guidance.

For example, a child may easily understand that a sheep was lost and then found in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, but they may not naturally make the connection that people are *like* lost sheep, and that God is *like* the good shepherd who finds us. You will need to make these connections very clear for most children, and not expect them to do so on their own.

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The older that children are, the easier it becomes for them to understand analogies, symbols and deeper meanings in parables. This is because children's minds are meant to understand concrete, tangible things, and are not fully capable of understanding abstract concepts until around age 12. You will find that some children understand metaphors, symbols and abstract concepts more easily than others. Children ages 10 and above are more likely to understand some of these things in Jesus' parables.

Remember that even the adults who heard Jesus' parables did not always understand them. When it came to Jesus' teachings, it was often uneducated and humble people who understood what He meant rather than the prestigious, educated leaders. Children may surprise you with their insights.

Teaching Approach

Since we know parables have a second meaning, it can be tempting to tell the parable but quickly move on to what it *really* means. However, children love stories! Letting them enjoy and connect to the story will help them internalize the parable. Even if they know the story of the lost sheep but not its meaning, that's okay. The story and its deeper meaning may come back to them later, even in adulthood- perhaps when they need it most.

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