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MODERN
PARABLES®

LIVING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

V O L U M E I

Participant Additional Study Materials:

Understanding the Parables

Living the Parables



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UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLES

What Parables Are Not

Parables are not simply moral stories that teach an easy-to-understand, universal lesson. Jesus Himself, when asked why He taught in parables, explained that, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'" (Matt 13:13). In other words, He taught in parables so that his hearers wouldn't understand what He was saying without first understanding "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 13:11)

One of the points we can draw from this is that the parables were not meant to stand on their own as nice little stories. In fact, many of them aren't nice at all: a king destroys an entire city for speaking out against him; a manager cheats his master out of money and he is praised for it; a fig tree is cursed for not bearing fruit. To be honest, when taken at face value, the parables can be confusing and hard to understand. So, to begin with, remember that *parables are not moral stories that stand on their own to teach a universal lesson.*

What Parables Are

Jesus had very specific purposes for teaching in parables. Matthew tells us that in at least one instance he spoke to the crowd only in parables, and said nothing without a parable (Matt 13:34). Why is this? To Jesus, parables are comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms that teach His followers different aspects of the Kingdom of God. In this sense, the parables are the keys to understanding what Jesus wanted His followers to know about His Kingdom. As He says in Mark, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?" (Mk 4:30)

It is therefore vitally important that you understand that the parables cannot be separated from Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. They cannot be understood properly if they stand on their own. Rather, they must always be used as lenses through which to view different aspects of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Himself often started His parables with, "The Kingdom of God is like..." The reason Jesus spoke in parables was that He knew they were the best method for teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Why is that?

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

Jesus did not invent the parable form. It was common among Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day to use parables to explain the Law of God. They were not the first to use the form, however. One of the most famous Old Testament parables is Nathan's story to King David about a rich man, a poor man, and a lamb. God used this parable to convict David of his sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. (2 Sam 12:1 and ff).

The Hebrews adopted the parable form because of its power to communicate the truth quickly and effectively. It's not hard to understand why: parables work in the familiar

world of the everyday, taking abstract concepts such as loving God and loving one's neighbor, and putting flesh on them. This recognition that there must be a relationship between theology and the real, feet-on-the-ground facts of life is an important aspect of true, Biblical religion.

Jesus, as the teacher par excellence, used a teaching method with which His first-century listeners were familiar. It was also one which perfectly emphasized the primary lesson He wanted to teach: the Kingdom of God is the spiritual world pressing into and transforming the natural world of the here and now. To Jesus, the Kingdom of God was about how His redemptive action was going to affect the daily, individual lives of His followers both in the present and the future.

Yet Jesus understood that spiritual things are often difficult to grasp on their own. What does it really mean to receive God's grace? How does repentance work? What is love? By using the parables as comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms, He was creating a series of doors through which His listeners could step and actually enter into new understanding about His Kingdom. As one writer has aptly put it, the parables are nothing less than "spiritual discoveries."¹

Jesus understood that there is a direct relationship between the natural and spiritual realms. After all, He created the natural realm and all that is in it. It is no coincidence that so many aspects of the world we live in (for instance: sheep, marriage, seeds) mirror aspects of the spiritual realm (respectively: believers, the relationship between Christ and the Church, spiritual growth). Jesus knew that He could go to this ready-made set of images and use them to guide his listeners through profound, and potentially complex, teachings about God and humanity's relationship to Him.

But what did He want people to understand? We mentioned before that Jesus on more than one occasion explained to His disciples that, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'" (Mark 4:10-12 NIV) Why did Jesus want the truth veiled from many of His hearers? And what was the "secret" He was referring to?

It's important to remember that Jesus' first-century audience already had strong opinions about the Kingdom of God. They expected a powerful Messiah to come and wipe out the Romans and setup a visible kingdom. But that was not God's plan. Instead, He sent a suffering servant to establish a spiritual kingdom that would grow to fill "the entire earth" (Dan 2:35), a kingdom that certainly would have natural manifestations – but not like those assumed by Jesus' audience.

Hence, unless one understood that Jesus and His unique ministry were what the parables were talking about then one could not understand the parables. The secret that had been revealed to the disciples was Jesus Himself and His unexpected method of redemption. As God prophesied in Isaiah (and was quoted by Paul in Romans), "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him

¹Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1992) 355.

will never be put to shame.” (Romans 9:33/Isaiah 8:14 NIV) Because many of the people rejected Jesus as the Son of God, they were ever seeing, but never understanding.

The possibility of having the truth in front of us yet not grasping it is a natural result of being blinded by our sin. This is yet another reason that Jesus taught in parables: they are the perfect method for sneaking past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God. By creating a world that a listener willingly enters into (remember David hearing Nathan’s story and getting angry at what the characters were doing), we willingly enter into the stories and check our preconceived notions at the door. Of course, once inside the world, we (like David) find ourselves interested in and often convicted by the actions of the fictional characters.

In sum, Jesus taught in parables because they (1) were familiar to His audience, (2) could communicate the truth quickly and effectively, (3) used the relationship between the natural and spiritual realms to make complex ideas easy to understand, (4) veiled the truth from those who did not recognize His unique ministry, and (5) created a fictional world that slipped past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God.

How Parables Work

At face value, a parable is just a simple story. In Jesus’ hands, it could be quite short (Matt 13:44) or more fully developed (Luke 15:11-31). Either way, Jesus used parables to explain the Kingdom of God as the Jewish rabbis did to explain the Torah: they were stories He could deliver in at most a few minutes time which instantly gave shape to what he wanted his listeners to understand.

Jesus’ parables are filled with characters and elements familiar to the first-century middle-easterner: the rich master, the powerful king, the clever manager, the wayward son, the self-righteous Pharisee. Although we are two thousand years away from Jesus’ culture, there is still a universal sense to many of His personalities: times have changed but people have not. In filling His parables with characters not so far removed from His listeners, Jesus knew it would be that much easier for them to step into His fictional worlds.

But if Jesus’ characters were familiar to His audience, those characters’ actions were certainly not. Sons who prematurely asked for their inheritance, landowners who paid all their workers the same regardless of their work, kings who forgave enormous debts: all these actions and others seemed strange and unexpected to Jesus’ listeners.

Jesus, of course, understood exactly what He was doing. By creating a world that appeared on its surface just like the natural realm, yet operated according to a different set of rules, He was showing in minute detail exactly how the Kingdom of God operates. It is as if He were saying, ‘It is true that fathers do not forgive prodigal sons in the normal world, but in the spiritual world I am ushering in, their model in heaven most certainly does.’

Yet Jesus did not stop there. In his reach for comparisons, He took everyday events in the natural realm and imbued them with new significance: the Kingdom is like the spread of yeast, the growth of seed, or the capture of fish. In all these instances, He was using figures

that would have been extremely familiar to his audience then asking them to think again about what the Kingdom of God is like.

Jesus Himself set the stage for understanding the comparisons when He explained the parable of The Sower and showed how it corresponded exactly to the types of hearers of His message. But even then He knew that his listeners would be slow to understand and complained to His disciples, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” (Mark 4:13)

He asks a good question. After all, understanding a parable isn’t simply understanding a comparison. Although the allegory or simile or metaphor is the beginning of understanding, many people simply stop there and don’t move forward. In Jesus’ words, they do not have “ears to hear.” The comparison that seems obvious is less about figuring out the pieces of the puzzle, and more about judging how we stack up according to the standards of the Kingdom of God. In most instances, we fall far short of the standard established by Jesus.

This is the real thrust of the parables. If they are being read and understood as Jesus intended, then they are a way of experiencing the truth at a visceral, gut level by means of the story. Again, let us consider David who, after hearing Nathan’s fictional parable, “burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’... Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’” (2Sam 12:5-7,13)

The spiritual psychology of good parables is extraordinary. If we can truly enter into the story, then a strong emotional connection with the characters and events ensues, somehow binding us by our honest judgments and feelings to that fictional world. Nevertheless, because the world of the parable is directly connected to our own world, we are helplessly forced to carry our judgments into this real world. Often this transference of judgment from the fictional world to the real is what truly begins to teach us.

That is the power of parables. To those of us who have been brought up using more systematic, doctrinal thinking, this power may appear wild and uncertain: what if someone doesn’t get the right interpretation? Shouldn’t we tell them what it means so they’ll know what to think?

There are at least two problems with the view that exalts doctrinal statements above parables. The first is that the Bible is filled with doctrine, Jesus often spoke in doctrine, and so there are plenty of doctrinal checks to keep us in the right spot. Yet that “right spot” can be much more problematic than the seeming uncertainty of the parables. It often is an unmoving, static position where we think right thoughts but don’t do right actions. We affirm the truth of a doctrine without living it out. It is that very problem (a problem Jesus often pointed out amongst the Pharisees) that the parables seek to rectify. By reducing them to a simple statement, we essentially lobotomize Jesus’ teaching and make it powerless.

Second, the whole point of the parables is that they are to show how doctrine works itself out in the real world. In this case, how the doctrines of the Kingdom of God have real, everyday application to the lives of believers everywhere. Yes, we can affirm that we are to love others like we love ourselves, but in the face of Luke 10 (the parable of the Good Samaritan) what does that really look like in our daily life? The brilliance of Jesus' parables is that they do not allow us to sit in a nice doctrinal position and judge the world; rather, they force us into the world to make judgments about our own personal character and actions. For most of us, it is an unsettling experience.

Interpreting the Parables

It is true that the parables are simple stories. They are also over 2000 years old. They were told by a first-century Jewish rabbi to a first-century Jewish audience. They were spoken in Aramaic and recorded in Greek. It is thus an enormous testimony to Jesus' genius that they have such resonance with us today. Yet there still is work that must be done to understand just exactly what Jesus was talking about. For instance, most people today are not familiar with the history of the Samaritans. Just reading the text wouldn't let people know that Samaritans were hated half-breeds who were considered arch-enemies of the Jews. Knowing that single cultural fact puts the parable of the so-called "Good Samaritan" in a new light, especially when you consider that it was spoken to an audience of Jews, and more particularly an expert in the Jewish law.

There are certain questions that should be asked when looking at the parables. They are, in something of a logical order:

1. **WHAT DO THE ORIGINAL WORDS MEAN?** Most teachers today recognize that word studies of the original text (in this case Greek, along with assumptions about Aramaic) go a long way to telling us what the author was intending. Translation always involves some level of interpretation. It is therefore necessary to go back to the original languages to understand exactly what was being said.
2. **WHAT WOULD THE ORIGINAL CULTURE HAVE KNOWN THAT ISN'T EXPLAINED?** Jesus lived and taught in a first-century Middle Eastern peasant culture that, like all cultures, held countless assumptions that weren't talked about but just understood (for instance, what was worn at a wedding banquet or how crops were sown). Three sources for understanding the original culture have been recommended by Dr. Craig Blomberg: traditional cultural practices of the Middle East; ancient historical information of the time, and similar symbolism in parables of other early rabbis.
3. **WHAT DOES THE STRUCTURE OF THE STORY TELL US?** One of the interesting attributes of the parables is that they often follow a particular structure in terms of the way the story is laid out. These can be parallel stanzas, sentences, or ideas. They can be repetitions or contrasts. Or they can be combinations of all of the above. For instance, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the structure of action with the first three characters who approach the man (the robbers, the priest, and the Levite) is COME/DO/GO; the Samaritan, however, demonstrates a COME/DO/DO pattern. By observing these internal literary structures (something found

throughout the Old and New Testaments), a reader can better recognize what Jesus is trying to communicate.²

4. WHAT DOES JESUS OR THE GOSPEL WRITER SAY ABOUT THE PARABLE, WHAT OTHER EVENTS OR PARABLES ARE AROUND IT, AND TO WHOM WAS JESUS TALKING? All these areas are known as context. For instance, when Luke introduces the parable of The Widow & Judge he tells us that “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1 NIV) In chapter 15, Luke intentionally groups together three parables concerning lost things (i.e., the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons). And in chapter 16, Luke points out that Jesus told the parable of Lazarus and the rich man to the “Pharisees, who loved money.” In these instances, the context helps guide us to Jesus’ primary point of comparison for the parable.

Once these areas have been explored, everything should be pulled together to provide a proper framework through which to interpret and engage the parable. In each instance, a parable has a primary teaching that Jesus is trying to communicate. But since the parable is modeled on real life (which is complex and can be seen from multiple perspectives) there are many theological themes that undergird and support the primary teaching. In fact, when looked at more closely, it is all these theological themes working together that create the primary teaching.

One author has referred to this combination of themes as the “theological cluster.”³ The cluster of different themes in a single parable work together to push the listener to respond in a particular way. For instance, in Nathan’s parable to David, Nathan’s primary teaching was that David had taken advantage of his position and sinned greatly. In light of that, David makes a single response: “I am a sinner.” Yet there are numerous theological themes in the parable that push David to that point: stealing is wrong, abuse of position is sinful, coveting is wrong, familial love is sacred, etc. In no particular place does the parable state that David is sinful, nor does it talk about adultery or murder. Yet the comparison between the two worlds works powerfully, and once the link has been made (Nathan’s “You are the man!”) then all the pieces fall into place and conviction occurs.

All this happens sub-consciously. Jesus’ listeners wouldn’t have had to do any kind of scholarly thinking because the parables just made sense to them as stories. Even those who disagreed with Jesus often knew He was talking about them in His parables; they just thought He was wrong!

As we stated earlier, the goal of Modern Parables is to recreate the immediacy of the gut-level reaction of the first-century audience hearing Jesus’ parables. The viewer of the films has a natural understanding of the issues involved in the original parable. And those issues are always related to the Kingdom of God.

² Kenneth Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, 1983), 74-75. Bailey identifies 8 ways that literary structure can assist exegesis.

³ Bailey, 38.

The Kingdom of God

As we stated earlier, the Kingdom of God was the central message in Jesus' teaching. It began His preaching ministry (Mark 1:15) and was the subject of the last question His disciples asked Him before His ascension (Acts 1:6). The parables were one of His primary methods of explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God: "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?" (Mk 4:30)

Although a third of Jesus' sayings consisted of parables,⁴ He nowhere defined what He meant by the term "Kingdom of God." Rather, He knew His audience already had an opinion as to what "the kingdom of God" meant from generations of use and prophetic expectation. The Old Testament paints a picture of the Jews identifying God's theocratic reign over Israel as "the Kingdom" with God as the sole king, dispensing His laws, His justice, and His blessings on both individuals and the nation. With the fall of the Northern and Southern kingdoms in the 8th and 6th centuries B.C. respectively, the remnant of the people gravitated toward the prophetic hope of a future Messianic kingdom that would restore the fortunes of Israel under a new, Davidic king. By the time of the first-century A.D., there were many opinions as to what this kingdom would look like, when it would actually come, and what this Messiah would really do.

Needless to say, Jesus did not live up to any of those current expectations. His humble demeanor and His unexpected message made no sense in light of the grandiose hopes the people had for their Messianic king and his conquering kingdom. Even the disciples struggled with what they expected Jesus to be in comparison to what He actually was. It is sometimes difficult for us to comprehend just how extraordinarily "not right" Jesus' ministry seemed to the people of His day.

In proof of this, even John the Baptist was confused about the odd mode of His coming and sent his disciples to ask Jesus about it. Jesus told them to look at His miracles as proof that He was truly the Messiah, then said "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Matt 11:6) In other words, 'I realize that I'm not what you're expecting, but don't let your disappointment cause you to miss my salvation.' Although the mode of His coming was not according to their expectations, He truly was ushering in the long-awaited Kingdom of God, as He explained: "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." (Luke 11:20)

From its start, Jesus' ministry was about re-defining how people understood the Kingdom of God. He did this through both His words and His deeds. He knew that the parable form was perfectly suited to explore the truth about the Kingdom. In this sense, the Kingdom of God can be compared to a large gem with many facets. The parables are like the facets which, when the gem is turned, each reveal a new aspect of the single, complex stone. This brings us back to our original definition of what the parables were to Jesus: comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms that teach His followers different aspects of the Kingdom of God. By studying the parables, we come to a new understanding of how we are to live as members of that Kingdom.

⁴ Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Hendrickson, 1998) 7.

What do the Parables teach us about the Kingdom?

The primary purpose of Modern Parables is to understand the Kingdom. Each pair of lessons will explore what that particular parable is saying about the Kingdom of God. There are three specific areas that the parables explore on a regular basis: 1) Teaching about God, 2) Teaching about God's people, and 3) Teaching about those who are not God's people.⁵ Modern Parables will examine how each of the parables relates to these three areas.

There are also three basic assumptions that this study makes in light of the Gospel-writers' general view of the Kingdom:

1. THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS BOTH PRESENT AND FUTURE ASPECTS TO IT. One of Jesus' favorite points of comparison was between organic plant growth and the kingdom of God (Matt 13:24-25, 31-32) Just as a seed looks very different from a full-grown tree, so too does Jesus' inauguration of His kingdom in the first century A.D. look very different from its final consummation at the end of time. This unique modality (or form) is what confused the first-century Jews. From this perspective, it is perhaps easier to say that the kingdom began its earthly manifestation in the first-century; has grown throughout the past twenty centuries (as church history visibly demonstrates); and will continue to grow until the end of time like a tree that grows "to the ends of the earth."
2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOW UNDER THE REIGN OF JESUS CHRIST, WHO CURRENTLY REIGNS FROM HEAVEN AS HE EXTENDS HIS KINGDOM ACROSS THE EARTH. Just before His ascension, Jesus explained to His disciples that kingly authority over the earth had been given to Him - "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" - and that they should in turn "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-19). Peter, in further explanation of this, preached to the Jews in Jerusalem that David's prophecy in Psalm 110 ("The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'") had been fulfilled in Jesus, and that He was currently "Lord and Christ" (Acts 3:13). Paul takes Jesus current reign and extends it to the end of time when he tells the Corinthians that "Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (I Cor 15:25). This means that Jesus' Kingdom is not a static thing, but is actively growing while you read this. Furthermore, it means that:
3. MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM ARE EXPECTED TO PLAY ACTIVE, DAILY ROLES IN THE EXPANSION OF HIS KINGDOM. Entering Christ's Kingdom is not like buying a ticket to a cruise line that pleasantly carries passengers to their destination. Rather, the comparisons that Christ and epistle-writers use are workers, servants, farmers, soldiers, and sons; in other words, those members of society from whom much work is expected. Those members of the Kingdom are to be bearing fruit, harvesting crops, and supervising investments.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (InterVarsity Press, 1990) 293-295.

Ultimately, it is this practical outworking of doctrine that the parables seek to inculcate in those who have “ears to hear.” When we are truly “Living the Parables” we are living in the Kingdom of God.



As a closing note, there are many excellent books that examine the Kingdom of God as a whole. For our purpose, we are only focusing on how the kingdom relates to the parables, as well as how one lives in the Kingdom. Some recommended books on the Kingdom of God include: Herman Ridderbos' *The Coming of the Kingdom* (P&R, 1962); George Eldon Ladd's *The Presence of the Future* (Eerdmans, 1974); and Geerhardus Vos' *The Church and the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1958).

LIVING THE PARABLES

Some thinkers in the ancient world developed a form of rationalistic thought that enabled them to step back intellectually and view a matter without necessarily being involved in it. For instance, Plato could talk about the idea of justice and attempt to discover true justice without actually being just himself. To the Greek mindset, you could understand or know something *without actually doing it*.

But most recognized that it was impossible to know something if you didn't actually do it. That is, doing was the natural offshoot of knowing. If you didn't act justly, then you didn't understand justice. If you didn't act lovingly, you didn't understand love. As James says, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." (James 3:13)

We who live in the West have perfected the art of knowing without doing. Many of us can discourse intelligently on the Bible and God's commands while ignoring them on a daily basis. Of course, we are not the first culture to do so. Some Pharisees in Jesus' day had also been infected with this kind of thinking. As Jesus pointed out: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (Matt 23:2-3)

This idea of practicing what we preach often makes us uncomfortable. The fact is, if we really did this, it would make our lives pretty tough. There is a general level of comfort that we live in which would likely be disturbed if we did exactly what we say we believe about taking care of the poor, tithing, loving our neighbor, and so forth.

Jesus knew that hypocrisy is endemic to all people, whether they've developed a philosophical system that encourages it or not. And one of His primary means of combating pervasive hypocrisy was the parable.

After all, the whole point of teaching in parables was to drive His followers to change their lives in light of the Kingdom of God. That point is still the same. Jesus expects us to read the parables and change our lives in light of the Kingdom of God. It does us no good to listen to the parable of the Good Samaritan, agree that it is important to love our neighbors as ourselves, and yet not love our neighbors more. To do so merely means that we don't understand the parable.

Now, some people may say that we can't change our lives ourselves, that we are sinful, and that the Holy Spirit must do this for us. Yes, that is true. But as C.S. Lewis pointed out, we do have the dignity of causality (in other words, we *can* do things). And if we are regenerate (or saved) then the Holy Spirit is working in us. Jesus, Paul and the epistle writers all used imperative verbs on a regular basis: *love* your enemies; *be* holy; *forgive* others. We not only have the ability to do these things, we are expected to do these things as followers of Christ and if we do not do them, we are in sin.

We are talking about living as Christians on a day-to-day basis. We are talking about the choices we make from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. We are talking about money, about prayer, about love, about trust, and about all the other things

that come with being part of the Kingdom of God. All these things are the primary subjects of the parables. In fact, it was exactly because Jesus knew that these things would be the bread and butter of our lives that He told us parables about them. The key is incorporating the parables into our daily lives.

Four Aspects of Living the Parables

In normal Christian parlance, we often talk about applying the scripture to our lives. This is not a bad way of saying things. Application is putting something into operation, actually doing something. But it also suggests a conscious effort, something we have to think about and do. The idea of living, however, is much more basic. Living is what we do whether we think about it or not. It's the basic level of our being. If we're not living, well... you get the picture.

Living is just the daily outworking of life. And Jesus tells us over and over again that true life is found only in Him: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it." (John 5:21) What is this life, and how does it work out into our daily living?

At its base level, this life is knowing God (John 17:3). But knowing God is not a static thing; rather, it manifests itself in an ongoing, redemptive relationship with God as He changes us from being naturally sinful to naturally holy (a process also known as sanctification). Dan Doriani has identified four aspects of living in God's kingdom that are manifested in our living out the commands and principles found in the Bible.⁶

1. WHAT SHOULD I DO? THAT IS, WHAT IS MY DUTY?
2. WHO SHOULD I BE? THAT IS, HOW CAN I BECOME THE PERSON OR OBTAIN THE CHARACTER THAT LETS ME DO WHAT IS RIGHT?
3. TO WHAT CAUSES SHOULD I DEVOTE MY LIFE ENERGY? THAT IS, WHAT GOALS SHOULD I PURSUE?
4. HOW CAN I DISTINGUISH TRUTH FROM ERROR? THAT IS, HOW CAN I GAIN DISCERNMENT?⁷

All four areas of living are not found in every parable. But most are found in every parable, with some parables answering all four of the questions in light of its particular area of emphasis. We will briefly look at each of aspects:

I. What should I do? That is, what is my duty?

The moral life begins with commands. As Jesus Himself said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." (John 14:23) and "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:28). Jesus expects us to obey His commands; it's our duty to love others, to give to the poor, to love God. In a Biblical sense, duty is what is expected of us. Duty the ground floor where we all have to start.

⁶ Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work* (P&R Publishing, 2001) 97.

⁷ Doriani, 98.

Now, there is a lot of controversy today about the idea of duty. Some Christians warn against being too consumed with duty; others see it as the key to a happy life. The fact is, were there no sin in the world, we would all naturally do our duties (loving God and loving our neighbor) and there would be no debate. However, our sinfulness can take the principle of duty and make it a means of personal salvation or condemnation (legalism) or we can rebel against it and make it a hated concept (antinomianism).

But let's look at an example of duty put in the proper Biblical perspective. It is the duty of a husband and wife to love one another. Assuming they have a healthy relationship it is an easy thing to love one another. In fact, their duty can be very enjoyable and not "seem" to be a duty at all (evidence that the word itself has taken on bad connotations). Of course, if a husband and wife are in a fight and have sinned against each other, the duty of loving one another can be onerous and even impossible. The Holy Spirit is required in both instances: in the first instance, the Spirit was actively involved in the pleasant doing of their duty; in the second, one or both were sinning against the Spirit and needed conviction and change. The point here is not that the duty is altered, but that sin affects the exercise of duty.

Doriani explains it well: "By schooling people in their duty we establish a necessary minimum standard for conduct."⁸ And the concerns about falling into legalism? "The best way to combat legalism is to join duty and character. Character balances duty by stifling the notion that Christian living consists in adherence to a set of rules."⁹ And it helps us realize that we live the Christian life fundamentally in gratitude to God for saving us in a way we could never have done ourselves.

2. Who should I be? That is, how can I become the person or obtain the character that lets me do what is right?

If duty is about what we should be doing, then character is about who we should be. It concerns the state of our hearts, our internal nature. Jesus explained it as: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart." (Luke 6:45) Our character directly influences our actions; in fact, it is the source of our actions.

This does not mean that our character is static. Rather, due to the sin in our hearts, our character is flawed at its source. Were it not, we would naturally do the duties and obey the laws required of us. The Holy Spirit, however, is continuously sanctifying our character in order for us to do what God wants us to do. As Paul tells us, "But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." (Rom 8:10-11)

⁸ Doriani, 104.

⁹ Doriani, 105.

In other words, our character is constantly being pulled between our sinful natures and our new natures in Christ. Not being robots, we do have the ability to choose between these two options. And our choices not only spring from our character, but progressively influence our character on a long-term basis. C.S. Lewis explains this well when he says, "Every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you...into something different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature."¹⁰

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is transforming our characters to reflect the character of Christ. As Paul tells us in Corinthians, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2Cor 3:18 NIV)

3. To what causes should I devote my life energy? That is, what goals should I pursue?

The two preceding aspects of living out the parables, duty and character, were personal in nature. That is, they related primarily to us as individuals. These two aspects are the twin foundations of living in the kingdom of God, but they must naturally grow outward into the goals God has for our lives.

History shows us that God is redeeming this sinful world through the work of His servants. One need only glance at the ways Christianity has impacted the world for good to see how He is doing this: civil laws, hospitals, orphanages, art, business practices, and so forth. God is redeeming the world not only through changing the inner lives of people, but then by using those people to alter the institutions and culture of the world through the choices they make for their lives.

A classic example of this is William Wilberforce, the member of British parliament who set as his life goal the abolishment of slavery in the British Empire. He used the skills that God had given him and the position that God had put him in to push forward the Kingdom of God in a specific and important way.

We are living in the midst of an enormous war. There are, as Chuck Colson put it, two Kingdoms in conflict, and as Christians, we are the soldiers fighting Christ's battles with Him. This is the meaning of David's prophecy concerning Jesus: "The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle." (Psa 110:2-3 NIV) Paul confirms this when he tells Timothy, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2Tim 2:3 NIV)

In light of this, the choices that we make in terms of our daily work, our friendships, our hobbies, our places of worship, our missions activities, our evangelism, our service to others, our recreation – all these choices relate to the goals we have set for ourselves. The daily choices we make are not inconsequential. A building is built one brick at a time. But

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1956) 86-87.

as Klass Skilder pointed out, there are only two possible uses of those bricks.¹¹ One builds an abortion clinic while another builds a church. In our daily decisions, we are following goals that support the growth of either the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Satan. There is no middle ground.

The parables force us to examine our goals and then to set them in light of the Kingdom of God. "Pursuing the right goals, we improve our corner of the world and feel God's pleasure at our actions."¹²

4. How can we distinguish truth from error? That is, how can we gain discernment?

Solomon admonishes us in Proverbs to "preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck." (Prov 3:21-22 NIV) In this sense, discernment is directly related to Biblical wisdom. It is "the insight...to see things as they are from God's perspective."¹³

In our daily lives, there are countless things that compete for our attention. We are constantly making decisions between competing duties, competing character issues, and competing goals—and as often as not, the choice isn't between good and bad, but between good and a little better. It is the attribute of discernment that helps us to see through the issues to what God would have us do at that particular moment.

The Bible is clear that it is the Spirit who gives us discernment. Paul tells the Ephesians that "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you the Spirit of wisdom" (Eph 1:17 NIV). Biblical discernment helps us to look at our culture and see what is edifying and what is not; it helps us look at our work and see what is godly and what is not; it helps us look at our relationships and see what is Biblical and what is not.

In our day and age, discernment for daily living is a necessity. The parables teach us to think God's thoughts in relation to the world and to see things with His worldview. Such a worldview often means that we will be going against the grain not only with those outside of God's Kingdom, but even with those lacking discernment within His Kingdom. It is to this end that Paul encourages us "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ." (Phil 1:9-11 NIV)

Living in the Kingdom of God

As a study, *Modern Parables* sees the process of 'Understanding the Parable' leading directly into 'Living the Parable.' Each relates to each naturally, just as a seed naturally grows into a

¹¹ Klass Skilder, *Christ and Culture* (G. van Rongen and W. Helder, 1977) 72.

¹² Doriani, 110.

¹³ Doriani, 114.

tree. The blueprint of the tree is embedded in the seed; it just needs sun and water to live and become what it was created to be.



Consult your Modern Parables Study Book for further information about specific parables. If you do not have a Study Book, you can buy copies online at www.modernparable.com.