

Prodigal Servants and Unfaithful Fathers? Six Rules on How (not) to Read and Apply the Parables of Jesus

The parables of Jesus are the most well-known and beloved stories of the Bible. There is an endless flood of parable studies. Their theological implications have been probed thoroughly for almost two millennia. The parables are preached on time and again. As a result, we easily think we master the parables: we know what they say, we know how they surprise us, we know how to apply them. The parables are hidden by “the veil of familiarity”. We need to “clean our windows” so that the parables may be freed from the “drab blur of triteness”. Fresh perspectives combined with common-sense guidelines challenging pre-conceived conceptions opens our minds to perceive and understand anew how striking Jesus’ parables really are.

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Introduction: New perspectives on old stories

- Cryptic tales open to multiple interpretations or self-explanatory narratives?
- Attempts to inform, shock, or persuade the audience?

Rule 1: Acknowledge your assumptions about the parables.

- Read the text rather than your interpretation of the text.
- Listen more to the parable than the scholar or the pastor.

Rule 2: Respect the context(s).

- Some contexts demand more respect than others.
- The Gospel authors understood the parables better than modern readers.

Rule 3: Beware of external information.

- In the end, details and gaps are just that – details and gaps.
- The parables tell us what is essential for us to know.

Rule 4: Find the emphasis of the parable – and stick to it.

- The ending is there for a good reason.
- The emphasis hints at proper application.

Rule 5: Theologizing tends to mistreat the parables.

- Every king is not God, every shepherd is not Jesus, every vineyard is not Israel.
- Faithful theology is not the same as faithful interpretation.

Rule 6: Look beyond the parables for Jesus the parable teller.

- The parables are signposts to, not mirrors of Jesus.
- Two keys: analogy and typology.

Selected readings:

Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2012.

K. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Lauri Thurén, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.