“All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.’”

It is said that the adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” was first coined in the early 1900’s of our country by a newspaper editor urging his reporters to use a photograph and fewer words in their articles. The use of photographs in newspapers and advertisements was in the early stages in that era. Today, in our age of social media and cameras everywhere, we take for granted the power of a single image to convey information and evoke feeling(s).

In Jesus’ day there were neither cameras nor social media. However, when Jesus was teaching, He drew verbal pictures by telling stories sketched from the daily life of people in Galilee. He talked about building a sturdy house that would withstand storms; sowing seeds in the fields; lighting a lamp, but not covering it over with a container; about sheep, coins and sons that got lost; and many other things that the people experienced daily in their culture. He then likened these everyday experiences to spiritual truths. He built a bridge from the natural with which the people were very familiar to the spiritual, in order to teach deep spiritual truths. He found the sacred in the ordinary.

R. T. Kendall states: “It was Jesus’ way of helping people to make the transition that each of us must make every day of our life – to move from the natural level of life to the spiritual level of life. Jesus revealed these insights through parables so that those for whom the truth was intended might know the meaning, but those for whom it was not intended would not understand.”

We will discover that Jesus’ verbal pictures (parables), while concise, are chock-full of meaning. They not only convey information and evoke feelings, but are like arrows that are driven straight to the heart. Jesus’ parables are indeed worth more than a thousand words, and worth more than a thousand photographs, because they teach us valuable spiritual lessons that are vital for this life and the next.

**WHAT IS A PARABLE?**

A parable is a short, simple story “which is drawn from ordinary, everyday life, which conveys a religious or moral lesson, quite indirectly, and which is intended to convince or persuade, to bring the hearer to decision or action.” A more concise meaning is this: “An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”
1. THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLES

To Sow Seed

“Jesus used the parables to sow spiritual seed. His teaching had a long-term purpose: to sow seed into people’s lives that would later grow and bear fruit. Seeds take time to grow. Jesus didn’t expect His followers to grasp everything He was saying in one go, so He allowed for a delayed understanding.”

For example, early in my Christian life when I studied what has been called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” I only focused on the younger son who left home and squandered his inheritance in reckless living as the prodigal. Years later, in contemplating this same parable, the Holy Spirit revealed to me that the older brother was a prodigal as well. He was “the self-righteous, always following the rules while harboring resentment in his heart” brother. I wasn’t like the younger son who left home, and lived a reckless lifestyle. But I had to ask myself if, at certain times and in particular situations, I had a sinful, resentful attitude like that of the elder son. The truths in that parable are like a seed that have been planted in my mind and heart, and have born much fruit. Be assured: all of God’s Word is relevant to our lives; and when we take it to heart and obey its truths, we will bear much fruit. However, the story-form of the parables often helps us remember them more easily, and, therefore, they stick with us.

To Make His Message Accessible

Jesus used parables to make His message accessible to the common people. For a number of years I lived among Highland Quichua Indians and other indigenous peoples who had not yet learned to read or write; therefore, theological concepts were very difficult for them to grasp.

Even today, the Quichuas live in remote mountain villages, and continue to live much like people did in first-century Palestine. Like those to whom Jesus spoke, they are very knowledgeable about farming, sowing seed, and reaping a harvest. Because they are shepherds, they understand the heart of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to go and look for the one lost sheep. They too are oppressed people in their culture and are all too familiar with those who would take advantage of them and unfairly collect “taxes” of some sort. Therefore, they are right at home with the parables. Jesus spoke the language of common people and used language and illustrations that were common in their day.

Many of the Quichuas with whom we worked were humble, hard-working people, and were hungry for the Word of God. They begged us to teach them about Jesus; their attitude was, “If Jesus said it, we must do it!” It is to people who eagerly accept God’s Word that the Holy Spirit gives understanding.

To Make His Message Inaccessible

Those people who readily accepted Christ’s message of salvation were given understanding. But many other people were in direct opposition to Jesus. These unbelievers had hardened their hearts against Christ; they shut their eyes and their ears to His teaching; therefore, the meaning of Christ’s parables remained unknown to them. In
other words, the unbelievers could not comprehend them. By resorting to parables, Jesus effectively separated the truth seekers from the curiosity seekers.

In Matthew 13:10-13 we read, “Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them [crowds of people] in parables?’ And he answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

“Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.’ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they can barely see, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”

It is the Holy Spirit who gives enlightenment of the Word of God, and if people reject Him and His ministry in their lives, they will not have spiritual understanding. Theologian R. T. Kendall states: “That is why not even the most brilliant, intellectual mind in all the earth can simply “figure out” the meaning of the parables. You can have an IQ the equivalent of Albert Einstein’s and still not understand the parables. Why? Because you need the Holy Spirit to reveal their meaning to you by His power.”

In teaching the parables, Jesus desired to affect His hearers, to influence them, and to bring them to a decision. But the spiritual truth of the parables was hidden to those who hardened their hearts against Jesus. Psalm 85:9 states, “Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him.”

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARABLES

The Themes of the Parables

A. The general theme is: The Kingdom of Heaven. (Examples found in Matthew (4:17, 23; 13:11; 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47.)

B. Three sub-themes:
   1. The Character of the Kingdom. (Examples found in Matthew 13:31-32, 33, 44, 45-46.)
   2. The Character of the King. (Examples found in Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 20:1-16.)
   3. The Character of the King’s subjects. (Examples found in Luke 10:30-37; 11:5-8.)
The Realism of the Parables

Have you ever read a novel where you thought the story was not true to life? It seemed like the author had tried to write an interesting story, but it was disconnected from real life and real people. In the parables, everything is real and true to nature and to life. Each story or point made is something that can be readily observed or experienced, whether it is the process of nature or the actions of people.

Jesus took the illustrations for His parables from nature, as in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9); from familiar customs of everyday life, as in the parable of the lamp set on a stand (Mark 4:21); from well-known events in recent history (Luke 19:14); and sometimes from occasional happenings, as in the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:2-8).vi

C.H. Dodd writes: “There is a reason for this realism of the parables of Jesus. It arises from a conviction that there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order; or as we might put it in the language of the parables themselves, the Kingdom of God is intrinsically like the processes of nature and of the daily life of men.

“Jesus therefore did not feel the need of making up artificial illustrations for the truths He wished to teach. He found them ready-made by the Maker of man and nature. That human life, including the religious life, is a part of nature is distinctly stated in the well-known passage beginning, ‘Consider the fowls of the air…’ (Matthew 6:26-30). This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premise of all of the parables.”vii

This realism must be uppermost in our minds when we interpret the parables.

Meaning in Parables

In all speech, there are only two possible kinds of meaning: literal and figurative. Every parable without exception has both levels of meaning. No parable is told simply for the story; it is always intended to convey a message. The direct, literal meaning is the story; it is present in the words themselves. The indirect, figurative meaning is its message or point; it is not stated in the words of the story, it is important to observe, but is only suggested indirectly. The hearer must deduce the lesson from the story. And this is the challenge! An example is found in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). On the literal level, this is a story about a lost son’s return to his father; on the figurative level, it is a lesson about our heavenly Father’s loving mercy toward the repentant sinner.

3. INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLES

Interpreting the parables does not require thorough training in theology, but it does require careful adherence to certain principles of interpretation.

One of the major obstacles in understanding the parables is our distance from the culture and context in which they were taught. “When studying the apostle Paul, one is...
dealing with theology expressed in conceptual language. But in the case of parables, their theology is expressed in stories about particular people who lived in a given cultural setting at a specific time in history. To understand the theology of parables, therefore, we must recapture the culture that informs the text.\textsuperscript{viii}

The truths of God’s Word are eternal and applicable to all generations. That is the miracle of God’s Word – it is always relevant to all people in all cultures and at all times. However, if we do not understand the culture, the situation and the context in which Jesus taught these parables, we could easily misinterpret the parable.

**Interpret Within Context**

Webster describes “context” as “the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can shed light upon its meaning.” We need to understand the parables of Jesus within their (1) overall historical context and within the (2) context of Jesus and His ministry.

**A. Overall historical context**

Included in the overall historical context are the cultural, religious, and social customs of first-century Palestine. We must first begin to understand what the message of the parables meant to listeners in Jesus’ day before we can accurately understand what it means for us today. For instance, in order to get the full impact of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, one must understand why the Samaritans were so hated by the Jews. And in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is helpful to understand the inheritance laws of the Jews since those laws reveal the younger son’s utter disdain for his father.

While people of all ages and cultures share common problems that are addressed in the parables, such as family dynamics, jealousy, prejudice, and suffering, “patterns for expressing those problems or even discussing them are quite different.”\textsuperscript{ix} I mentioned earlier that for eleven years I lived among the Highland Quichua Indians. These people certainly expressed the problems of life differently than we do in our U.S. culture. I gained greater insight into Scripture simply living among the Quichuas. I found that, as I came to understand how the Quichuas expressed the issues of life, not only was my life enriched, but I came to a deeper understanding of human behavior in general.

My point is this: that as we gain insight into the culture of first-century Palestine, our study of the parables will be greatly enriched. We will have those “Aha!” moments that clarify the passage and thrill the soul! I realize that many of you will not have access to cultural information for first-century Palestine, and for that reason, this study will include explanations of the overall historical context. This will help to shed light upon the meaning of the discourse.

**B. The context of Jesus’ teaching and ministry**

We also need to understand the parables within the context of Jesus’ ministry as a whole. Throughout His ministry He proclaimed the Gospel of His Kingdom. He taught and healed in order to bring people into a personal relationship with God. His message
was, and still is, often counter-cultural; but it is truth, and how God has intended for us to live.

We need to be aware of Jesus’ audience. To whom was He speaking? What prompted Him to teach a certain parable? Was it in answer to a question from someone in the audience? For instance, in Luke 10:25-37, we read the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told that parable in response to a lawyer’s question about what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus often told parables in response to attitudes and behaviors he saw in the lives of His listeners. For example, a ruler of the Pharisees invited Jesus to his home for a meal with the purpose of trapping Him. Sure enough, while Jesus was there, He healed a man with dropsy, and the Pharisees were critical of Him because He did this on the Sabbath. Jesus asked them if their son or even an ox fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn’t they immediately pull him out? The Pharisees refused to answer Him.

Jesus then proceeded to tell the Parable of the Wedding Feast. And, as was often the case, Jesus’ parable took a turn we might not expect. You see, when Jesus first came into the home of the Pharisee that day, He noticed how the guests had vied for the best seats at the table. There was a climate of haughtiness and selfishness among those Pharisees and lawyers in that home, such that they seemed devoid of love and compassion for others. They had no empathy at all for the man Jesus healed or for others at that meal. So Jesus told them the Parable of the Wedding Feast which stressed humility: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

A Vital Principle for Interpretation

There were occasions when even the disciples did not understand the meaning of the parables. On one such occasion, when Jesus had taught the Parable of the Soils recorded in Mark 4:3-20, the disciples asked Him what this parable meant. Jesus explained its meaning and then He gave them a vital principle for gaining understanding of parables and all of God’s Word. He used the picture of a lamp to explain this principle. Just as a lamp is used (or put into practice), and thereby gives forth light, so as we use, (or put into practice) the truth that we have learned from God’s Word, more light or truth is revealed to us (Mark 4: 21-25).

Pitfalls to Avoid in Interpretation

In interpreting the parables there are primarily two major pitfalls to avoid. One is extreme allegorization of the parables, and the other is insisting that all parables are simple one-point parables.

A. The pitfall of extreme allegorization

Parables are short stories with symbolic meaning. Allegories, on the other hand, are extremely complex metaphors that can be difficult to understand and fully unpack. Unlike parables, virtually every character and occurrence has a symbolic meaning in allegories.
The overarching difference between parables and allegories is that parables generally, although not always, have one main point and one main application. Allegories are multifaceted, with many thoughts embedded within them. In an allegory such as “Pilgrims’ Progress,” each detail is a separate metaphor, with a significance of its own.

Some scholars and preachers have applied allegorization to the extreme when interpreting the parables and, as a result, have lost or muddled the true meaning and simplicity of the parable.

Augustine (Bishop of North Africa from AD 396 to 430) was a scholar who utilized extreme allegorization. “He explained the Parable of the Good Samaritan as follows: The man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam, going down from the city of heavenly peace to the world; the robbers who assault him are the devil and his angels; they attack him and leave him half-dead in sin, and the priest and the Levite, who represent the Old Testament law and the prophets, pass him by on the other side; the good Samaritan is, naturally, Christ himself, who takes ‘man’ into the inn of the church.” (Well, for all the kudos we give Augustine who was one of our early church fathers, we can see that he too is certainly fallible!) 😊

It seems quite apparent that the original intent of the parable is hidden by this extreme allegorization.

B. The pitfall of insisting on one point

Just as over-elaboration is to be avoided when interpreting the parables, so is oversimplification. Generally speaking, there is one lesson to be learned from each of Jesus’ parables. However, in some of his parables several lessons are to be gleaned. In the story of the prodigal son, for instance, the emphasis is placed on our Father-God who finds great joy in forgiving and restoring His children to a right relationship with Him. But the parable also clearly emphasizes the true nature of repentance as well as the sin of jealousy and self-righteousness.

4. The Kingdom of Heaven

The general theme of Jesus’ parables was “the kingdom of heaven.” Therefore, I think it will be helpful to understand that term. Just what does “the kingdom of heaven” mean?

The Use of Kingdom of Heaven versus Kingdom of God

First we need to recognize that there is not a difference between the terms “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven.” Matthew used the term “kingdom of heaven” almost exclusively, while the other gospel writers used the phrase “kingdom of God.” It is generally accepted Matthew’s usage of “kingdom of heaven” is due to the fact that he wrote his gospel to Jews. Matthew did so because of the Jews’ reluctance to use the name of God (out of reverence). Also, he used it because the Jews believed that the Messiah would set up an actual physical kingdom. But the phrase, “kingdom of heaven” would emphasize and indicate a spiritual, rather than an earthly kingdom.
The Kingdom of Heaven Involves Four Interrelated Concepts

A. The kingdom of God is the reign of God

The kingdom of God/heaven is wherever the dominion of God is manifested. In one sense, the kingdom of God has always existed: “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19).

But in a special way, the reign of God on earth was manifested with the coming of Christ: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15).

B. The kingdom of God is spiritual in nature

The kingdom of God/heaven is not a physical kingdom: “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world’” (John 18:36).

 The kingdom of God/heaven is manifested in spiritual ways: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

C. The kingdom of God is visibly manifested today in the Lord’s church

The Lord’s church (the body of Christ), is composed of all those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ and in His completed work on the cross. The church can properly be referred to as the kingdom of God/heaven because God reigns in the hearts and lives of His people. Jesus used the terms “church” and “kingdom” interchangeably when speaking to Peter: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19).

D. The kingdom of God is both present and future

The kingdom of heaven has a future element as well as a present element: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matthew 25:34).

Therefore, it may be said that in the present sense, the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom since God rules in the hearts of men who commit their lives to Him. The outward manifestation of the kingdom of God is through the church of Jesus Christ.
In the future sense, the kingdom of God/heaven will be culminated with the coming of the Lord, and when Jesus Christ, the One who died for us, delivers the kingdom to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:43).

5. PERSONAL APPLICATION OF THE PARABLES

The purpose of Jesus’ teaching is to bring us to a decision and application of these truths to our lives. Put yourself into these parables and ask probing and sincere questions: “Who are the Samaritans in my life and what is my attitude toward them?” “What is my response when God’s Word is sown in my life? Do I allow the cares of this world to choke it out?” “What about my relationships? Am I harboring resentment or jealousy in a relationship with a family member or friend?”

Doubtless, some of you may think the parables of Jesus are rather simple and there is little, if anything, new to learn. But I believe as you commit yourself to the study of these parables you will discover there is a great deal yet to be understood and put into practice. And as you allow these truths to impact your life, you will discover that these deep spiritual truths, presented in succinct common language, will indeed change the course of your daily life.

Reatha Saylor

HOW MANY PARABLES ARE THERE?

How many parables of Jesus are there? That is a difficult question to answer. Jesus sometimes told the same parable with details changed a bit and in a different context, thereby making a different point. Scholars vary greatly on this point, but for the purpose of this study, I will take my information from the *NIV Bible in Chronological Order* (hardcover) and *Daily Bible in Chronological Order* (paperback) by Dr. F. LaGard Smith of Pepperdine University, published by HarvestHouse.

Dr. F. LaGard (Smith) indicates there are 46 parables of Jesus, most of them being found in the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, there is one parable found in the gospel of John. Dr. LaGard lists the parables in the following chronological order:
## Parables in Chronological Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parables</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Luke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>New cloth on an old coat</td>
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<td>2:21</td>
<td>5:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New wine in old wineskins</td>
<td>9:17</td>
<td>2:22</td>
<td>5:37-38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lamp on a stand (also see #6)</td>
<td>5:14-15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Moneylender forgives unequal debts</td>
<td></td>
<td>7:41-43</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>12:16-21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servants must remain watchful (also see #44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wise and foolish servants (also see #42)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Hidden treasure</td>
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<td>Valuable pearl</td>
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<td>Fishing net</td>
<td>13:47-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owner of a house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lost sheep (sheep as children, also see #29)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The sheep, gate, and shepherd (John 10:1-5, 7-18)</td>
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<td>Master and his servant</td>
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<td>17:7-10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lost coin</td>
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<td>Shrewd manager</td>
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<td>Rich man and Lazarus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workers in the vineyard, early and late</td>
<td>20:1-16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persistent widow and crooked judge</td>
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<td>Two sons, one obeys, one does not</td>
<td>21:28-32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicked tenants</td>
<td>21:33-44</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Invitation to a wedding banquet</td>
<td>22:2-14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wise and foolish servants (2nd time, see #9)</td>
<td>24:45-51</td>
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Questions for the Introduction

1. What is a parable? (p. 4)

2. What is the purpose of the parables? (There are three purposes listed.)
   A. (p. 5)
   
   B. (p. 5)
   
   C. (pp. 5-6)

3. What does it mean that there is realism in the parables? (p. 7)

4. Every parable has two possible kinds of meaning: literal and figurative. What is the literal meaning and what is the figurative meaning? (p. 7)

5. What is one of the major obstacles in understanding the parables” (p.7)

6. What is the meaning of “context”? (p. 8)

7. We need to understand the parables of Jesus within their overall historical context and within the context of Jesus and His ministry. For the purpose of this study, what is included in the overall historical context? (p. 8)
8. We also need to understand the parables within the context of Jesus’ ministry as a whole.

(a) What was the primary thrust of all of Christ’s teaching? (p. 8)

(b) As we read the parables of Jesus, what questions do we need to ask in order to get a better understanding of the context? (pp. 8-9)

9. What is a vital principle of gaining understanding of the meaning of the parables? (p. 9)

10. When interpreting the parables, what are two pitfalls to avoid? (pp. 9-10)

11. Many of the parables point the reader to the character of God. Everything hinges on the character of God. We make the mistake of thinking the parable we call, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” is all about the son who went astray. Instead, the main theme of that parable is the father (representing God) who so quickly, so lovingly, and so lavishly welcomes the son back to him.

In his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer wrote: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” What comes into your mind when you think about God? (Don’t give the answer you think you are supposed to give, but what is really in your mind and heart.)
Introduction

1 Matthew 13:34-35 (quotation from Psalm 78:2).
4 R. T. Kendall, 15.
5 R.T. Kendall, 18.
9 Kenneth E. Bailey, 28.