

Overall Goal: The overall goal for all the lessons by Fig Tree Ministries is to help people deepen their understanding of the biblical text.

Class Learning Objectives: Gain a better understanding of how Jesus uses Parables in his teaching.

Cultural Background: Jesus, like his 1st-century Rabbinic counterparts, used parables to enhance their teaching about the Bible. The ancient Near Eastern culture, within which Jesus and his disciples lived, was a *storytelling* culture. Storytelling was the preferred method to communicate difficult topics. Both the Rabbi and their audience were familiar with this style of communication. Ancient Near Easterners expect meaning in communication deeply layered throughout the message.

1. **Homework** – This review of parables is leading up to the parable in **Mark 12: 1-12**, known as the *Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen* or the *Wicked Tenants*. The parable is based on **Isaiah 5** and finishes with a quote from **Psalms 118**. This is a complex parable. Based on the reaction of the priests to whom Jesus presents, it is evident that they immediately get the point.

2. **Parables**¹:

- a. What are they?
- b. How are they used?

Definition: a parable involves a comparison – a feature or characteristic of something known is transferred explicitly or implicitly to something unknown.

3. **Scholarly Resource:** *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* – Kenneth E. Bailey

History of Parable Interpretation: During the early church fathers – think St. Augustine – it was popular to *allegorize* each parable rather than seek to interpret them as the Jewish Rabbis used them. For many years this was the only way people read the parables. Once Jewish and Christian scholars began to study the New Testament side-by-side, along with other parables, interpretation began to move back toward the original context of 1st-century Judaism.

Notes:

¹ McArthur and Johnston. *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1990.

4. Characteristics of a Parable:

1. Story – stories captivate, inspire, and have the capacity to transform us.
2. Fiction – not intended to relate a set of historical events
3. Carry Truth – the story itself carries the truth inside of it – even though it is fictional
4. Jesus adds twist / shock – Jesus often shocks his listeners by adding a twist for emphasis

5. A parable about parables:

“a teaching without a parable is like a basket without handles.”

6. Parable – Hebrew and Greek

Hebrew	Greek
<i>Mashal</i>	<i>Parable</i>
‘to make a comparison.’	‘to cast alongside.’

7. Parable Diagram:

Difficult / Unknown	Known
Kingdom of Heaven (God)	Yeast

Notes:

8. Parable v. Fable

Parable	Fable
Human Characters	Animals – with human characteristics
	Plants – with human characteristics

9. Scholarly Resource: *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Century of the Christian Era* – Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston.

10. Rabbinic Parables:

- a. 1500 + Rabbinic Parables.
- b. approximately (40) parables are attributed to Jesus.
- c. 1/3 of Jesus’ teaching is presented in a parable.

11. Common Parable topics and comparisons

Unknown / Difficult	Known
Kingdom of God	King
God/Humanity relationship	Shepherd
Human / Human Relationship	Father
Commandment	Farmer

12. Matt. 13:33

Unknown / Difficult	Known
Kingdom of God	Yeast (Leaven)
	A woman
	3 measures (65 pounds)

Notes:

13. Jesus regularly draws on the **Old Testament** (his Bible since the New Testament has not been written) to bring his parables to life and provide the meaning. The imagery and lessons from the Old Testament stories are pulled into his parables with a word or a phrase.

14. **Genesis 18** – To understand this parable – and by extension, the Kingdom of God – we must be aware of how Genesis 18 was interpreted in the Jewish mind.

- Abraham did not initially know that the men approaching were angels, but his hospitality towards them is over the top regardless.

- The Sages of Israel noted the outsized amount of flour that Sarah was able to knead. Was this outsized amount a mistake in their sacred text? Or was it evidence of a miracle? It must be a miracle that happened with God showed up amid the hospitality.

- The kingdom of Heaven is manifested when people show hospitality.

15. The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

- **Yeast:** it spreads unseen. You can't stop it. Only a little bit of yeast will work its way into the entire loaf.

- **Woman** – The woman is Sarah, which brings in the lesson from Genesis 18 and hospitality.

- **60 (or 65 some say) pounds:** When Jesus uses this amount of flour, the audience immediately knows he is drawing on the Genesis 18 story.

Faith Principle: When you spread even the smallest amount of the Kingdom of God into a community it spreads unseen and unstoppable.

When you show hospitality to a stranger – God show up.

To reach an unbelieving people – don't just tell them about the Kingdom of God – **SHOW** them what the Kingdom of God looks like.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Hebrews 13:2