

## Special Section: The Kingdom Of God

### Lamps, Leaven, And Lost Lambs How to read the parables of the kingdom

By Clinton E. Arnold

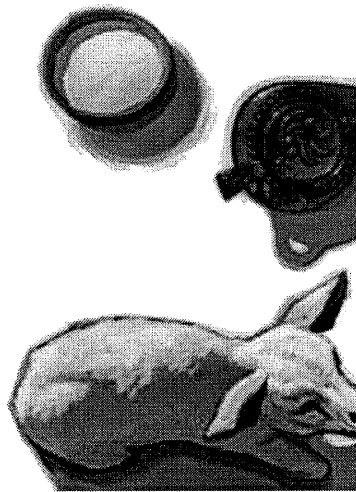


Illustration by Kevin Short

The Jews living at the time of Jesus longed for the coming of the kingdom of God. They were looking for a descendant of King David who would sit on the throne in Jerusalem and reestablish Israel as a self-ruling nation. He would come as a mighty warrior and purify their sacred land from gentile contamination.

This military ruler is what the crowds had in mind when they “intended to come and make [Jesus] king by force” (John 6:15). This is also what the throngs yearned for when they laid down palm branches for Jesus as He rode into Jerusalem. They exclaimed, “Give victory, O Lord!” (expressed by the Aramaic word *Hosanna*).

Through parables, Jesus sought to radically alter any militaristic perception of the kingdom of God. These stories and word pictures communicate the true nature of the kingdom that He had come to establish. That’s why an accurate understanding of the parables is so vital.

The parables comprise one-third of Jesus’ earthly teaching as recorded in the first three gospels. Yet they are often misunderstood and misread, leaving many earnest believers fearful of trying to interpret them. But Jesus told these stories so that His followers would understand His kingdom. The key lies in learning to read the parables in the way Jesus intended.

Several principles can guide us toward an accurate and enlightening understanding of the parables—and thus into a deeper understanding of the kingdom of Jesus.

## **Realize the kingdom focus of the parables.**

Through these concise, fictional stories, Jesus teaches His disciples the nature of the kingdom and how to live as kingdom citizens. The most extensive teaching about the kingdom is found in the eight parables of Matthew 13 (some of which are also given in Mark and Luke): the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the net, and the owner of the storeroom. Before you begin reading the parables, fix this kingdom focus firmly in your mind.



Illustration by Kevin A. Short

## **Explore what Jesus says elsewhere about the kingdom.**

As a first step to interpreting the parables, we must discover what Jesus says about the kingdom outside of the parables. He had a lot to say; in fact, the kingdom was the primary focus of His teaching.

The first time Jesus taught, He spoke about the kingdom. He proclaimed, “The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15). After He died and rose from the dead, Jesus still focused on the kingdom: “He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

Use a concordance to browse through the references to kingdom in one of the gospels. It would also be helpful to read an entry on the kingdom of God in a reliable Bible encyclopedia (such as the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* or the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*). The parables do not stand alone in their message; they are part of the overriding theme of Jesus’ teaching.

## **Discover what kind of kingdom the Jews in Jesus’ time were expecting.**

Jesus burst common expectations regarding the kingdom. To more thoroughly understand His parables, therefore, we must grasp what His original listeners were anticipating. Once again, you’ll find a good Bible encyclopedia helpful. Look up topics such as “messiah,” “kingdom,” or “messianic expectation.” The dreams and hopes of the first-century Jews for a conquering Messiah were not totally off base, but they fell short of realizing all that God was about to accomplish through Jesus in a two-stage fulfillment. When we discover how wide the

### **Ask how Jesus' contemporaries would have understood a particular parable.**

Once you understand in general what first-century Jews expected the kingdom to be like, you can read a specific parable through their eyes and imagine their stunned response. On numerous points, they would have exclaimed, "This is so different from what we expected!"

The parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43), for instance, would have surprised a contemporary of Jesus because it taught that the kingdom was not initially coming in an overt display of God's judgment on evil. Rather, there would be a period of time in which Christ would be at work in individuals' lives, and, at the same time, the devil would be doing all he could to thwart God's work. God's decisive action against evil would only come later, at the end of the age.

### **Ask what the parables reveal about the kingdom.**

The primary question you should ask of a parable is how it illuminates a facet of the kingdom. Jesus introduces the parable of the 10 minas (Luke 19:11–27) by saying, "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return" (Luke 19:12). This shocked first-century Jews because it taught that Jesus would delay the full establishment of His kingdom—after He had already said that "the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20) and "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). This parable indicates that the King's coming in judgment would be reserved for a future time that follows a period in which He has endowed His servants to "do business" until He returns.

In general, the parables speak to the nature of the kingdom as it is currently present. But they also reveal a coming, future manifestation of the kingdom.



Illustration by Kevin A. Short

### **Ask what the parables reveal about God.**

The parables not only teach us about the kingdom, but they speak volumes to us about God. The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7) and the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32) point to a God who passionately loves His people. The invitation to the down-and-out to come to a sumptuous wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1–14) depicts the amazing grace of God that reaches out to all. The parable about the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16), some of whom are hired at the end of the day and only work an hour, reveals a God who is rich in mercy and does not impart His grace on the basis of merit.

### **Beware of allegorizing every detail or forcing deeper meanings.**

S. Lewis or John Bunyan might expect. Whatever meaning is found in a parable must be viewed in light of what the original first-century Palestinian readers would have understood. In his outstanding book on this topic, *Interpreting the Parables*, Craig Blomberg helps us determine which parts of the parables we can legitimately interpret allegorically. He explains, “The main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation, and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters.”

For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), we can derive three lessons related to each of the three characters: (1) The prodigal son teaches us about the importance of repentance, (2) the father’s response to his repentant son gives us an appreciation of God’s incredible love and forgiveness, and (3) the example of the older brother warns us against coldheartedness.

It is inappropriate to dig for second-level meanings in the parables. A close friend told me about a college professor who read a deeper-level meaning into the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10). The teacher saw the woman with the 10 silver coins as a metaphor of all of us in our lack of wholeness and psychological well-being. To achieve a higher degree of mental health, she suggested that we need to apply ourselves to the task of uncovering each of our hidden or repressed parts. Our goal is to find the one lost coin and thus arrive at a complete and whole self.

But is this what Jesus intended when He told this parable? Clearly not. The immediate context identifies the lost coin with “one sinner who repents,” not an individual fractured by past trauma.

### **Let the context help you interpret the parable.**

The introduction to the parable, its literary context, the details of the parable, and the historical circumstances surrounding it will help us accurately grasp what the parable teaches. Jesus told a parable about 10 young bridesmaids (“virgins”) waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom who was delayed in his coming (Matthew 25:1–13). Five of the women had prepared well and brought enough oil to keep their lamps burning into the night. The other five did not have adequate oil and ended up missing the groom’s arrival and the wedding.

The interpretation of the parable is closely tied to the three main sets of characters. The bridegroom represents the Lord Jesus Christ in His second coming. Although we must be prepared for His return at any time, He may be delayed. The women represent two groups of people: those who are spiritually prepared and those who are not. Some interpreters have also said that there is significance in the oil. They suggest that it represents good works, saving faith, or the Holy Spirit. Yet attention to the details of the parable shows that the oil cannot stand for any of these. Five of the women hurry off to buy more oil. But no one can buy a greater provision of the Holy Spirit, faith, or good works. The oil needs to be understood in the simplest, broadest possible sense of preparation for the coming of the Lord.

### **Investigate historical details.**

We can’t fully appreciate the teachings of the parables until we understand related matters of cultural, social, political, and historical importance. For someone unaware of the terrible racial tension between Samaritans and Jews, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan loses its punch. Here again, a good Bible encyclopedia or a set of reliable commentaries is imperative.

## Ask what the parables say about how to live.

Jesus delivered the parables not simply as information to satisfy curiosity, but as teaching that demands a response. The parables of the treasure and the fine pearl (Matthew 13:44–46), for instance, teach that the kingdom is worth any sacrifice. In both parables, the person gives up everything he has to obtain a great treasure. The parable calls us to ask what might prevent us from giving our whole heart and forsaking all else for the sake of Christ and His kingdom priorities.

As you read every parable, ask what it is that God is calling you to do.

## More than Nice Stories

The parables are wonderful stories that teach good lessons. But this view alone sells them short. They are incisive—and, to first-century readers, often shocking—stories that confront us with the reality of what God is accomplishing in the world. For all who read them, they invite a response to participate in the kingdom and to live in accordance with all that it entails.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

CLINTON E. ARNOLD is professor of New Testament and director of the Th.M. program at Talbot School of Theology. He is also author of *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Baker).

Clint and his wife, Barbara, enjoy teaching and discipling new believers in their church.

Few people know that Clint's mother was a rodeo star in western Nevada, where she rode bucking broncos.