THE STORYTELLING GOD

JARED C. WILSON

SEEING THE GLORY OF JESUS IN HIS PARABLES

"Growing up in church and Christian schools, I was taught that Jesus's parables were basically about how we should live. To be sure, many of the parables do show us God's standard for our lives, but they also reveal how we have failed to live up to that standard, and how God in his infinite mercy has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. My friend Jared Wilson shows how Jesus used parables to illustrate the upside-down and counterintuitive ways of God compared to our ways. We see how the parables are not a witness to the best people making it up to God, but rather a witness to God making it down to the worst people—meeting our rebellion with his rescue, our sin with his salvation, our guilt with his grace, our badness with his goodness. Thanks for the reminder, Jared. I keep forgetting that this whole thing is about Jesus, not me."

Tullian Tchividjian, Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; author, *One-Way Love: Inexhaustible Grace for an Exhausted World*

"Jared Wilson's new book is a punch in the gut. Gone are the tame, bedtime-story versions of the parables we've been told in the past. Instead, Wilson invites us to see them afresh with all of their explosive, imaginative power."

Mike Cosper, Pastor of Worship and Arts, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, Kentucky

"In showing us the parables of Jesus for what they are (and are not), Jared Wilson invites us into a deeper understanding of their author and the kingdom he came to establish. *The Storytelling God* teaches us to read and reflect upon the parables with great care, and rightly so. The parables, and this book, point the way to life abundant."

Scott McClellan, Communications Pastor, Irving Bible Church, Irving, Texas; author, *Tell Me a Story: Finding God (and Ourselves) through Narrative*

"My own bookshelf has precious few commentaries on the parables and this will definitely fit nicely into that gap. In fact, this book is actually two books for the price of one. Part devotional commentary and also doubling as a solid gospel tract. This book serves the gospel straight up on a plate. His chapter commenting on the gospel and the poor is worth the price of the book alone. Clear, straightforward, biblical, gospel-centered writing. Definitely recommended reading."

Mez McConnell, Senior Pastor, Niddrie Community Church, Edinburgh; Director, 20schemes

"With a characteristic combination of wit and wisdom—humor and sobriety—Wilson grabs your attention, fixes it upon Christ, and keeps it there for the duration of the book. Readers in search of a pastoral introduction to biblical parables that is rich with real-life applicability can gladly make room for this volume on their bookshelf."

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, Massachusetts; author, *Why Cities Matter*

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Introduction

Throw away your Flannelgraphs. They are flat and soft, and the story of Jesus is neither.

I don't remember the day I sat down to read the Sermon on the Mount for the umpteenth time (it was about ten years ago), but I do remember the distinct feeling that I was really reading it for the first time. I felt gut-punched and mind-blown. The text had not changed, but certainly *something* had. The words I'd been reading since I was old enough to read were finally familiar. And they scared me. I felt disturbed, interrupted. If the point of gospel ministry is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, I counted myself at that time in the latter camp.

Matthew 5:8, the sixth of the Beatitudes, is a good example: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Jesus isn't saying anything new, really, since this promise of blessing echoes King David's statement in Psalm 24:3–4. I don't know if it really had registered with me before that day what having a pure heart entailed, but it most certainly struck me that my heart was not pure. It is frustratingly difficult to keep it pure. I don't even have to think about thinking impurely—I just do. So when I read that the pure in heart are the ones who get to see God, I freak out a little. Okay, I freak out *a lot*. If purity of heart is the standard, how will I ever get to see God? And is there any passage of Scripture scarier than Matthew 7:21–23?

> Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my

> Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

These words push me to the end of myself, driving me back to the first word, the first beatitude in Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:8 shows me the depths of my poverty; Matthew 5:3 shows me the riches that await me upon this realization, upon my owning of it as the truth about myself. The afflicted receives comfort.

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount is like that, too, constantly revealing God's standard of living—the blueprint for what his kingdom on earth looks like lived out—and constantly driving us back to Jesus in desperation for this kingdom in spite of ourselves.

Actually, all of Jesus's teaching is like this, including the parables. When these oft-repeated stories from Jesus strike us as sweet, heartwarming, or inspiring in the sentimental sense rather than the Spiritual sense, we can be sure we've misread them. A generation of churchgoers grew up hearing the parables taught more along the lines of moralistic fables—illustrations of how to do the right things God would have us do. And they are that. But they are more than that. Some of these narratives are only a few lines long, but every parable, long or short, is fathoms deep and designed to drive us to Jesus in awe, need, faith, and worship. When we treat them as "inspiring tales," we make superficially insipid what ought to be Spiritually incisive.

In Matthew 13, after a barrage of parables, we are told that Jesus "said nothing to them without a parable" (v. 34) and that this approach fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 78:2: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35). When Jesus teaches a parable, he is not opening up "Chicken Soup for the Soul" or a fortune

cookie but a window to the hidden heavenlies. He is revealing a glimpse of eternity crashing into time, a flash photo of his own wisdom brought to bear. The parables give us a direct portal to the kingdom of God being done on earth as it is in heaven. "Indeed," Edward Armstrong writes, "they are sparks from that fire which our Lord brought to the earth."[1]

The parables are in some sense the truer and better editions of Ransom of *Perelandra*'s appraisal of the ancient myths: "gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility."[2] And just as the ancient myths point in their falsehoods to the Myth that is fact, the parables in all their earthiness and everydayness point in their truisms to him who is called True (Rev. 19:11). In other words, the parables don't just tell us about the true ways of life but shine into darkened hearts the way, the truth, and the life (see John 14:6).

The word *parable* from the Greek means "to cast alongside," and like the seeds cast in one of the few parables for which Jesus offered an interpretation, the parables may land on rocky soil. It is there that they are often softened for duller spiritual senses, when it is the senses that ought to be softened instead. I'll say more about that in the first chapter. For now, though, it is enough to say that the parables are designed to stir those whose antennae are tuned to their frequencies, and to confound those whose antennae are not.

Because the real-life and common scenarios of the parables belie their otherworldly power, it is imperative that we continue to click "refresh" on our familiarity with them. I hope this book will help with that. It's possible for familiarity to breed apathy or numbness if we come to Jesus's stories in lackadaisical, unexpectant, unsubmissive ways. Instead, let us come again and again to the "old, old story" of Jesus and his love and behold his power freshly, ever-newly.

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[1] Edward A. Armstrong, *The Gospel Parables* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), 11; quoted in Vernon D. Doerksen, "The Interpretation of Parables" in *Grace Theological Journal* 11.2 (1970): 3–20.
[2] C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 201.

No, the parables are not flat felt. They are white-hot sparks. And if the parables are sparks, let us scatter them far and wide. May they set our vision for Christ's kingdom afire, and may our teaching of these stories be torch-wielding, our sharing of their gospel nucleus be an illumination of the light of the world, that he who is the radiance of God's glory might cover the very earth the parables put in their crosshairs, like the waters cover the sea.

1

Postcards from the Revolution

The Gospel of Luke shows us that Jesus began his public ministry in an instance of brilliant audacity. He went to church on the Sabbath like a good Jew, proclaimed the coming of the Lord's favor according to the prophet Isaiah like a good preacher, and then, stunningly, in essence said, "This prophecy is about me" like a good instigator. The congregation was stirred, pleased. Who wouldn't want to hear that the prophecy of Isaiah 61 was being fulfilled? They "all spoke well of him" and found his proclamation "gracious" (Luke 4:22).

But the tide turns. As so often is the case throughout the Gospels, the crowd attracted to Jesus becomes the crowd crying for his blood. What happened? Jesus finished his self-centered sermon and sat down among them. Maybe that's what did it. He should have drawn a sword or issued an altar call. Instead he took a seat.

"Wait a minute. Isn't this Joseph's kid?" someone says.

Hearing their murmuring, Jesus adds a coda from the pews:

> "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell

> you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4:23–27)

What happens next is one of the quickest mood shifts in the history of mood shifts. The crowd that had been marveling, that had been struck with the impression of grace, "were filled with wrath" (v. 28). Instead of shaking his hand at the narthex door, they drive him out of it. Right out to a cliff, ready to throw him off.

Now, I have preached some bad sermons in my day (and have plenty of bad sermons yet to preach), but none of my sermons—as far as I know—ever drove anyone to want me dead, still less to physically attack me. But if we are reading the text correctly, we will see it wasn't a bad sermon that stirred up wrath, but a good one. A very good one. It was the inauguration of the public ministry of the climactic good news itself, actually. But something in that addendum drove the point home in such a way that it drove its hearers to murderousness.

Jesus recalls the way God has preserved his people in the past by passing over the likely to minister in the nooks and crannies to the unlikely. In a nutshell, he is saying to his congregation, "You probably won't accept me. So this message is not for you. It's for widows and Syrians." This is what we might call a public dis-invitation. They don't teach this model in preaching classes at seminary. Some pastors work for years to perfect the art of the altar call. No one practices an altar refusal.

From the very beginning, Jesus insists that the kingdom is not for the healthy but the sick (Matt. 9:12). The prophecy itself makes this clear! Who is the gospel for, according to Luke 4 and Isaiah 61, but the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive, the mourner, and the faint? And if we may add in the preamble to Jesus's epic king-

dom announcement, the Beatitudes introducing the Sermon on the Mount, we include the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the pure, the merciful, and the peacemaking.

Jesus is turning something upside down, and for that the angry crowd wanted to turn *him* upside down.

But really Jesus is turning something right side up. And when we read the parables he employed to teach the crowds throughout his ministry, we could do a lot worse than to see them as narrative portraits of rebellion against rebellion. The rightful king has landed, and he is leading an insurrection against the pretenders to his throne.

As the crowd in Nazareth has Jesus between rocks and a high place, he calmly passes through them and walks away. Jesus, like the stories he told, didn't look like much, but the power of the eternal God was in there.

This story in Luke 4 illustrates something central about the illustrations we call the parables, namely, that they are not for everyone. Jesus's message of the day of the Lord's favor sounds wonderful . . . until he says it's only for certain people. He says a similar thing about the parables. On the one hand, this is counterintuitive because we think of the parables as "sermon illustrations" of a sort, stories designed to make Jesus's teaching plain and clear and easy to understand. But on the other hand, the way the parables actually function is *entirely* intuitive—which is to say, you either get them or you don't. More on that in a bit, but for now, let's pan out to see the larger context of Jesus's ministry. The parables can't be understood without it.

The Gospel of the Kingdom

When Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, went about preaching that the kingdom of God (or "heaven," to use Matthew's circumlocution) was "at hand," they were clearly not saying the kingdom was coming thousands of years from then. They had no illustrated charts or infographics chronicling an eschatological timeline involving

Israeli statehood, Russian tanks, American Blackhawk helicopters, Swiss supercomputers with ominous nicknames, and UPC tattoos. They said, "It's here. It's arriving now." In Mark 1:15, Jesus seems as unequivocal as you can get: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

This makes sense when we read back in Luke 4 that Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). Matthew summarizes the message of Jesus as "the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35).

The gospel of the kingdom is the announcement that Jesus the Messiah has arrived and has begun restoring God's will on earth in and through himself. The fulcrum upon which this restoration turns is Christ's substitutionary work in his sinless temptation, suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection from the grave.

Through Adam's disobedience, sin entered the human race, affecting human dominion and the environment. Look at all that is cursed in Genesis 3:14–19. If we cannot tell from the world itself that the whole place is messed up and we along with it, the truth is plain enough throughout all the narratives that make up the Bible. From the fall of mankind onward, the Scriptures show us the breakdown between man and God, man and man, and man and the created world. When Adam and Eve, deceived by the Serpent and driven by their prideful lusts, ate the forbidden fruit in the hopes of greater peace, the result was the diminishing of it. So the Old Testament portrays a broken world groaning under the weight of the consequences of its sin. But it also portrays the loving faithfulness of a holy God who will not let sin and the Serpent have the last word. Every new day the patriarchs are breaking covenant, and every new day God is keeping it.

The promise of vindication may come as early as Genesis 3:15, which casts a long shadow to the foot of the Messiah in the New Testament, pierced in crucifixion yet victorious *in the crucifixion* over the Serpent. After the four hundred years of silence that began at the closed door at the end of Malachi, God's people are ripe for redemption. Jesus's preaching ministry from top to bottom proclaims

this inevitability and the purpose and effects thereof. In his incarnation he is the second Adam (Rom. 5:12–14), redeeming the human experience from the first Adam's failure. In his teaching he is Wisdom made manifest, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets and actually embodying what they foretold. In his miracles he is signaling the in-breaking of God's restorative kingdom. In his suffering and crucifixion he willingly submits to the wrath of God owed to true sinners and thereby satisfies the wages of sin and conquers its power. In his bodily, glorified resurrection he conquers the power of death and becomes the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:22–24) of the promises like those in Psalm 16:9–10 and Job 19:26. Everything rad is coming true.

The kingdom is at hand because it is at Jesus's hands. In his ministry, from that first explosive sermon on that Sabbath day in Luke 4, it comes violently (Matt. 11:12).

But if the gospel Jesus and his disciples preached was the gospel of the kingdom, what *is* the kingdom, exactly?

Some may say that the kingdom is heaven, and in some sense it is, but too many who say this have in mind a celestial place of disembodied bliss, the place the Scriptures sometimes refer to as paradise. Matthew, as we have noted, speaks of "the kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God," but what is in view here is not some extraterrestrial, spiritual locale. Matthew's intended audience is Jewish, and because the name of God is unutterably sacred, he substitutes "heaven" where the other Gospels use "God." Therefore, Jesus was not really preaching that the location of paradise is "at hand," at least not in any material way. In any event, since God is omnipresent and the locale of paradise, whatever that locale *is*, is best thought of as the place where God is, heaven has in some sense always been at hand. For instance, heaven broke into earth in the temple religion of the Old Testament Israel. Heaven was "at hand" in the Most Holy Place. No, when Jesus preached the kingdom, he was not specifically talking about the place we often think of when we hear the word "heaven."

Some will say that the kingdom of God/heaven is the church. There is an element of truth in this as well, but it still will not do.

The church indeed cannot be prevailed against by the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18), which sounds a lot like the forecast of the kingdom in Daniel 2:44 (among other texts). But the kingdom and the church are distinguished in numerous places. In Luke 17:21, Jesus says that the kingdom is "in the midst of you," which makes little sense if the kingdom *is* you. It could be that Jesus is saying the kingdom is in the midst of you *plural*, you together, as in the body of believers. But when we read the descriptions of Jesus and his disciples preaching the gospel of the kingdom and hear the commands to the church to preach the kingdom, it ought to be clear that Jesus is not preaching "the church," still less that the church ought to be preaching itself. "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5).

The place heaven is not the kingdom, and the people called the church is not the kingdom, but the gospel of the kingdom of God tells us something about heaven and calls the church to do the telling. The kingdom is the manifest presence of God's reign. George Eldon Ladd puts it like this:

> When the word refers to God's Kingdom, it always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised. Psalm 103:19, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." God's kingdom, his *malkuth*, is His universal rule, His sovereignty over all the earth. . . . The Kingdom of God is His kingship, His rule, His authority. When this once is realized, we can go through the New Testament and find passage after passage where this meaning is evident, where the Kingdom is not a realm or a people but God's reign. Jesus said that we must "receive the kingdom of God" as little children (Mark 10:15). What is received? The Church? Heaven? What is received is God's rule. In order to enter the future realm of the Kingdom, one must submit himself in perfect trust to God's rule here and now.[1]

[1] George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 20–21.

Again, there is some sense in which those who receive the kingdom "receive" the church and heaven, but those are the benefits of embracing the yoke of God's sovereignty, the implications of the gospel. What the gospel announces is that the God-man Jesus of Nazareth is doing the Messiah's work of tearing the veil between heaven and earth through his sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection. He brings the manifest presence of God's reign into fallen mankind and broken creation. And since he is bringing this reign in and through himself as king, he is preaching himself.

The parables, then, serve this end: they proclaim, in their unique way, the gospel of the kingdom of God and Jesus as king of that kingdom. The glory of Christ is to be had in the parables, provided the parables are had at all.

But while the glory of God has been brought to bear in the reign of Christ in and through Jesus's ministry and atoning work, the effects of sin continue and the brokenness is still to be endured for the time being. Habakkuk 2:14 holds out a vision for the world's end that has God's glory covering the entire earth like the waters cover the sea—itself a parallel to the Revelation forecast of Jesus as the illuminating sun of the new heavens and the new earth. In the teachings of Paul and Peter, in the prophecies of John in Revelation, and in the teachings of Jesus himself, we understand that while God's kingdom is "at hand," it is also not fully here. We may say that Jesus Christ inaugurated the kingdom, but he has not yet consummated it. He will do this at his second coming. Therefore, a biblical understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God keeps in tension the reality that the kingdom is both "already" and "not yet." As we will see, the parables capture this tension as well.

The Kingdom Story

God is the greatest storyteller ever. Our most brilliant, most captivating, most spellbinding authors have nothing on him. All good stories are but pale reflections and imitations of the great story of God's glory brought to bear in the world. The Bible is a book of

books, a combination of stories that tell one larger story, and in the Bible we have the overarching and thoroughgoing added element that the story is true. Only God can write a myth that is at the same time historical, factual. Only God can write a biography that is at the same time a history of biographies to come, because God is the only creative person who is also omniscient. Only God can write a story that resonates not just in the power of the imagination or the heart or the mind, but in the very soul; only God can write a story that brings dead things to life. Only the word of God quickens, divides, heals, resurrects. The poetry, the history, the laws, the lists, the genealogies, the proverbs, and the prophecies together make up the mosaic of God's vision for the universe with himself at its center.

What is the grand story that God is telling? It begins with his triune self as the only eternal good and holy, and then moves to his creation of the world and the men and women in it, creatures specifically designed to glorify him and enjoy him forever. But as in every good story, there is a conflict, a crisis. Mankind seeks his own glory, his own enjoyment apart from the Creator, and the result is death. Wretched men that we are! Who will rescue us from this body of death? (see Rom. 7:24).

Every good story has a hero, and God himself is the unparalleled hero of his story. Since the story is about his glory, this only makes sense. So throughout the Old Testament narratives, we will see just how frail and stupid the "heroes of the faith" really are. Only a few escape their narratives without blemish, but even an upstanding man like Boaz has a prostitute for a mother. Abraham lies and finagles, Isaac capitulates and spoils, Jacob schemes and wrestles, Joseph is a gullible braggart, Moses stutters and stumbles, David lusts and backstabs, and the list goes on and on. Why? Because they're sinners. But also so that we will see the one who is true and faithful, the hero of the story, the real dragon-slayer between the lines, hidden in the shadows, biding his time until the moment he is pleased to come and instigate the story's eucatastrophe, the moment at which all heaven breaks loose.

While the Old Testament heroes fail and fumble forward, God promises judgment and vindication, the former to the unrepentant workers of wickedness and the latter to his covenant children. These are the two primary things we want in a good story when our hearts are right: justice and a happy ending (or at least the hint of one to come later). This double-edged dynamic recurs throughout many of Jesus's parables.

The Old Testament is fraught with warnings and brimming with promises. If you read it right, you will feel the anticipatory tension building all the way into the last chapter of the Old Testament, where we see these ominous and ecstatic words of prophecy:

> For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 4:1–3)

There is the warning of justice and the promise of a happy ending wrapped into one teaser. And when this story closes, we can almost picture a "To Be Continued" title card appearing on the screen.

Every good story has a twist. In the true story that God tells about his glory brought to bear in the world, there are twists within twists. The really big twist is that God himself becomes the man who is the prophesied Messiah, rather than just anointing one more joker to add to the long line of jokers he's used throughout history. God is aiming at concluding the story and beginning a new one, and since only the pure in heart will see God (Ps. 24:3–4; Matt. 5:8) and there is no pure heart to be found under heaven (Rom. 3:12, 23), he does the job himself. This has been his plan from the beginning, hidden but evident in the ancient stories. When Jesus,

beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, interpreted in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27), I like to think the burning they felt in their hearts was a magnified version of what I felt when Bruce Willis realized at the end of *The Sixth Sense* that he was dead. The movie flashes back to scene after scene leading up to this revelation, showing that the attentive viewer might have picked up on it at one of many points before the end. That's good storytelling.

The twist of the incarnation gives way to other surprises that should not be surprises at all. The Messiah does not immediately take up arms against the occupiers. He does not come riding in on a white horse. Instead, common, ordinary people take up palm branches and welcome him on a donkey (Matt. 21:1–11). This is his triumphal entry, and it was prophesied (Zech. 9:9). This is just one telegraphed surprise. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 project the crucifixion, but this part takes the disciples by surprise too. The resurrection is deepest in the shadows of the Old Testament, so it is the biggest surprise.

Paul later writes this about Jesus's victory over death:

> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Cor. 15:20–26)

This is just an excerpt from an epic chapter about the gospel (see vv. 3–4) and its beautiful fallout, but it declares the veracity of Jesus's resurrection, reveals that its power is the ongoing power to do the same for the dead in Christ someday, and captures all of

this wonderfulness within the proclamation of Jesus's kingship. The passage also shows us the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God, affirming Christ's present reign and yet confirming that there is an all-encompassing revelation of this reign still to come.

In the story that God is telling the world, the resurrection was the turning point in his plan to execute justice and work a happy ending, but the resolution remains to be watched for. Let us sit on the edge of our seats. The historical work of Christ's resurrection tells death that its days are numbered. The resurrection activates the Christian's power over death. And someday death will be totally destroyed.

Then the next story will begin. The Scripture's vision of the second coming of Christ, upon which occasion mankind will be judged, the spiritually dead consigned to eternal condemnation and the dead in Christ raised to resurrection life, and when the new heavens and new earth will subsume the cursed land, is glorious.

It is this epic kingdom story that Jesus's little puzzle-stories distill.

What Are the Parables?

There are two errors readers of the Bible make most often about the parables of Jesus, each a pendulum swing away from the other. The first error is to believe that the parables are simplistic religious illustrations, almost spiritual folktales. In this erroneous reading, the parables are read superficially, as moral lessons. The parables are of course fairly simple up there at the surface—some of them simpler than others—and there are clear moral lessons in the stories. But the parables are more complex than that. On the other hand, there is another school of thought, equally erroneous, that would have readers poring over the parables as if they were some kind of Magic Eye hidden-picture painting. It is definitely possible to *over*think the parables, by which I mean to read them with too much speculative scrutiny, ransacking every point and detail for every possible meaning it may have locked up, squeezing symbols

out of symbols, bypassing the primary intent of the story for some imaginative concoction of biblical connections.

The way some people read the parables reminds me of Aesop's Fables. And the way others read them reminds me of the way some discern clue after perplexing clue in their Beatles albums as evidence for a cover-up of Paul's having died in a car accident.

The parables are simple and complex, but they are not simple and complex *like that*.

The parables are also not allegories—at least not in the normal literary sense. Allegory is a form of literature in which material figures represent immaterial virtues or vices. So in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the character Timorous represents fear and Mr. Worldly Wiseman represents worldly wisdom. In our day, distinction of genres has been muddled a bit, so we tend to regard any story with symbolic elements in it as allegorical, but it was not always this way. C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, for instance, are not allegories, even though they often are referred to as such, and Lewis himself said as much. If Aslan was symbolic for the virtue of sacrifice or some such thing, he would be allegorical, but Aslan is a material figure (a lion, in this case) who represents another material figure (Jesus), and in fact, Aslan in the stories isn't meant to symbolize Jesus so much as to *be* Jesus, except manifested in a different form in that alternate world.

The parables of Jesus could be said to contain allegorical elements, some more than others, but they are not themselves allegories, strictly speaking. While we could say the characters in the parables represent certain virtues or vices—the good Samaritan could represent compassion or mercy, for instance, or the older brother in the prodigal son story could represent legalism or pride—they more directly represent certain kinds of people. Jesus definitely deals in the world of virtues and vices, but he is most immediately interested in the world of human beings, their hearts, their words, and their deeds.

It is common also for people to refer to the parables as "sermon illustrations." I have heard this explanation employed in the

defense of using creative elements in a worship service, of using spectacles and production to attract people to church, and even in defense of abandoning the ministry of proclamational preaching. Jesus told stories, so the reasoning goes, in order to illustrate, to explain, and to clarify.

As in the allegorical approach, there is some truth to this understanding of the parables. There are real senses in which the parables illustrate, explain, and clarify. But if the parables are really analogous to what we today call "sermon illustrations," then Jesus was a terrible teacher, because the disciples kept saying they didn't understand them. If you have to explain your illustration—to decode it, as it were—it's not a very good illustration. Or at least, it's not functioning the way a sermon illustration is typically supposed to function. As we will soon see, the parables are designed to obscure as much as to clarify. This is not what preachers and teachers aim to do with illustrations.

Now we know some of the things the parables *aren't*. So what are they?

Robert Stein says it's nearly impossible to define *parable*.[2] That Jesus tells a variety of parables—some involving characters and others not, some offering positive examples and others negative, some sounding more like proverbs or similes than stories with a narrative—makes it somewhat difficult to nail down precisely what a parable is. One common definition is that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," and that is true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough, since the parable of the rich man and Lazarus appears to be a "heavenly story with a hellish meaning."

If we uncover the Greek tradition behind the word *parable*, we could say that a parable is a short story, allowing that some of these stories are unconventional, more like vignettes or sketches. But if we go to the Hebrew tradition, from which Jesus would have been drawing more deeply in his ministry anyway, we learn that the Hebrew word for parable is rooted in *mashal*, which essentially

[2] Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 39.

means "proverb." This root grounds a more versatile definition for *parable* and appears to best fit the multifaceted approach of Jesus to parable-telling. In the Old Testament we find that proverbs, stories, riddles, and similes are all identified with the word *mashal*. A *mashal* is an illustration of wisdom.

With this background in mind, Jesus's parables, briefly put, are wisdom scenes. But despite their common settings and scenarios, these aren't scenes of common wisdom. Jesus was not just throwing out some homespun tales of cleverness and ingenuity. The parables function in Jesus's ministry as representative stories about the kingdom of God.

Overthinking the parables can take us far afield of the immediate impact they mean to make. I know a fellow whose meticulously constructed parable interpretation code locks in leaven/yeast as always referring to sin, which reveals he has not been meticulous enough, considering that Matthew 13:33's parable tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven. Overthinking has also caused many a headache with regard to the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) and the parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1–10).

Parables are illustrations meant to run alongside their points and reveal them in rather immediate ways. In other words, if you are deciphering in the parable of the prodigal son that the pigs symbolize one thing, the feast another, the table the feast is served on still another, the robe placed on the son yet another, and so on, you have likely gone too deep to see the immediate point—that Jesus has come for sinners. There are other points the prodigal son story makes, but that is the main one.

Nearly every one of Jesus's parables has one primary point. Some have only one point. Others have one main point with one or two secondary points. Some have one or two equally primary points. Craig Blomberg has argued fairly convincingly that most of the parables feature one point per character.[3]

In any event, the parables aren't literary scavenger hunts. Med-

[3] Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

itation on them will reveal previously unnoticed nuances, but they are designed to showcase their central truth right away to those ready to hear it.

We have had a framed print of Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son* in our home for about ten years now. It hung over our mantel in our house in Nashville and now hangs prominently over my writing desk in our house in Vermont. I never get tired of looking at this work of art because I always notice something new. At first glance, it doesn't seem to contain much detail. At first glance, the focal point seems to be the only point. There in the foreground, illuminated by some mysteriously focused light, is the repentant son on his knees before his compassionate father, his face pressed into the paternal bosom. This is the main point of the painting and the main point of the parable. To the returned son's right stands his older brother, arms crossed. He is also illuminated, since in the story his role is prominent. In the darkness of the background are other figures. Who are they? Over the years I have discovered new things about the painting. I never noticed, for instance, that one of the father's hands looks more feminine than the other. I didn't notice for a long time that the prodigal son had what appears to be a scabbard on his belt. Is there a dagger in it or not? In the upper left of the painting there appears to be a feminine figure standing in a doorway. Is this the mother, not mentioned in Jesus's parable? A sister? Just a servant? These are all interesting details, just as there are interesting details of varying significance in the biblical parable, but the main point is right there in the light—the father welcomes his "sinful" son with the same love as he has for his "righteous" son, and in fact this story (and painting) turns the assumed perspective of the sinful and the righteous inside out, as does the parable of the good Samaritan.

What Do the Parables Do?

The parables are wisdom scenes. But what wisdom are they picturing, and what are they revealing in this picturing?

Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom of God—he is the Word of God—so at their center, the wisdom scenes of the parables picture the centrality and supremacy of Christ. But they come at this central proclamation in a variety of ways, revealing different applications and implications of Christ's lordship. The parables, in fact, give us peeks behind the veil between earth and the place where God's will is most manifest; they show us glimpses of the day when that veil is torn and that world conquers and integrates with this one.

Blomberg writes,

> The central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. It is both present and future. It includes both a reign and a realm. It involves both personal transformation and social reform. It is not to be equated either with Israel or the church, but is the dynamic power of God's personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus in every area of their lives.[4]

The parables show us that the kingdom of the "gospel of the kingdom" is God's reign over all creation, not just part of it. So in the parables we see the effect of God's reign and the expanse of it too. These gospel stories provide glimpses of what God's reign will look like.

Basically, the parables show us what "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) *looks like*. Jesus did the same thing with his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Those aren't stories, of course, but direct proclamations, but the aim is the same—to reveal what the kingdom of God, brought to bear in creation, is and does. Since the fall, the way of the world has been to destruction. We all like sheep have gone astray, obeying the lusts of the flesh and worshiping the god of our bellies, following the prince of the power of the air, and dutifully slouching toward hell along with the conveyor-belt system

[4] Ibid., 326.

of "the world." Our hearts are idol factories, and we spend every moment apart from Christ on the assembly line exceeding quota. The parables, though, show us how Christ-centeredness rebukes, subverts, and sabotages the sinful kingdoms of the world.

This revolutionary work begins with the Spirit's quickening of dead hearts to receive the treasure of Christ through the open hand of faith. Until that point, the kingdom of God is a puzzling thing, a ridiculous thing, a repulsive thing. In Luke 8:10, Jesus says that the parables confound those who are not privy to "the secrets of the kingdom of God." There we see a vital connection between the parables and that mysterious, Spiritual wisdom they represent. But we also see a vital truth about how these stories of Jesus work, or don't work, in the hearts of those who hear them.

How Do the Parables Work?

Someone once wrote film critic Roger Ebert and asked him why critics loved Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in Translation* so much while audiences in general didn't appreciate it. Ebert responded that the film transmitted on a different frequency than audiences are accustomed to receiving. I was reminded of this tidbit from Ebert's "Movie Answer Man" column only a couple of days later while overhearing a conversation in a restaurant in which two men discussing the movie revealed no hints of even knowing what it was about.

Is it true that some works of art are broadcasting on frequencies of understanding and appreciation that only certain readers, hearers, and viewers are tuned to receive? I think so. And I think this hypothesis about the subjective reception of and appreciation for creative works reveals a deeper truth about how the parables of Jesus function.

On the level of direct readership, any person of average intelligence can interpret the parables. The disciples appeared to fumble with the meaning while on the immediate scene, but with the benefit of centuries of hindsight and the completion of the biblical

canon, it doesn't take a J. I. Packer to make heads or tails of basic parabolic interpretation.

We can start by looking at the context. Some of the parables come as responses to specific questions asked of Jesus. So the questions help us decipher the answer. To whom is Jesus talking? What predicament are those people in? Some parables conclude with an explanatory note, a "then" to the parable's "if." Jesus often helps his hearers out by connecting the dots for them, as in the parable of the man who built his house on the rock, for instance (Matt. 7:24–27). But when he doesn't make the meaning explicit, we can look for other contextual clues.

How does the parable end? Most of the parables have a climax or "end stress." What is stressed at the end? That is usually the central point of the parable, whatever else may precede it.

With what teaching content or narrative scenes does the Gospel writer surround the parable? Is there a connection there?

These are all basic principles for understanding the immediate point(s) of a parable of Jesus. But the immediacy of the parables is something more potent than mere cognitive understanding. The parables, as the wisdom of God, are aimed not only at the mind but also at the heart. And since the parables preach the gospel of the kingdom—like the gospel itself—they are not taken to heart by everyone who hears them. Paul writes,

> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)

This difficult truth is in full effect when it comes to the parables, and Jesus illustrates this truth about parables (and the gospel of the kingdom in general) *with* a parable!

> And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the

> path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Luke 8:4–8)

That concluding admonition is another clue to how the parable works. Those who have the ears to hear will hear the story. In other words, the "natural man" won't be able to understand the power of the parable, but the Spiritually abled person will. He has been given the ears to hear it.

Simon Kistemaker puts its simply:

> When we hear a parable, we nod in agreement because the story is true to life and readily understood. Although the application of the parable may be heard, it is not always grasped. We see the story unfold before our eyes, but we do not perceive the significance of it. The truth remains hidden until our eyes are opened and we see clearly. Then the new lesson of the parable becomes meaningful.[5]

The parable of the sower is one of the few parables that Jesus took the time to interpret for his disciples:

> Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit

[5] Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 9.

> does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11–15)

We will come back to this parable for a closer look later on, but for now what we see in Jesus's interpretation of the story is that the message gets shared everywhere without distinction, but only good soil receives the seed in such a way as to bear fruit. In the same way, the parables need the good soil of a Spiritually enlightened heart to take root.

Since the parables themselves come from the mouth of Christ, they contain the power to open eyes and ears to behold what they reveal. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), and this Spiritual truth is no less in effect in Jesus's telling of stories. The parables in their power enlighten the elect to understand the parables in their content.

At the same time, the parables that illuminate themselves to the effectually called obscure themselves to those spiritually darkened. The same sun that melts the ice, as they say, hardens the clay. Jesus says as much himself:

> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them 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. . . . 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 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.'
>
> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (Matt. 13:10–11, 13–16)

Is Jesus actually saying he speaks in parables to make sure that people won't hear or see the truth of the kingdom? Yes.

Again, if the parables are meant to be one-to-one analogous to sermon illustrations, they make a terrible job of it, since they are designed to simultaneously bless the Spiritually sensitive and confound the dull. This should not shock us, as we see it played out constantly in the life of the church today. The beauty of Christ and his gospel continues to captivate millions of believers all over the world and drive them to passionate worship while it simultaneously disgusts, angers, or bores millions of others.

I continue to remind myself of the Spiritual prerogative behind a sinner's response to the gospel every time I share it with someone. Sometimes a man's response to the gospel of the kingdom looks like when Tom Hanks "discovers" fire in *Cast Away*. Other times it looks like the guy in *Office Space* when his supervisor asks him about the TPS reports. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). The day of the Lord's favor is a new dawn to widows and lepers, but to the self-centered, self-righteous rabble, it's just any old day. The parables are just any old stories to some, but they are smart bombs of glory to others.

The parables are postcards from heaven. "Wish you were here," they say. Supernaturally, however, they can transport us exactly to the place they depict, the place where God's kingdom is coming and his will is being done on earth as it is in heaven. As Jesus conducts his kingdom ministry, he lays these stories on thick, seeding the alien nation of God with rumors of that other world, casting shadows of the realer reality like the flickering images on the walls of Plato's cave.

As we survey the parables of Jesus in this book, I hope you will be praying along with me that God would open the eyes of our hearts to behold the one who is the radiance of his glory. These earthy stories are awash in Christ's glory. Let us steep in them, meditate on them, lay them to heart.

Once upon a time, a king came to earth to tell stories, and the stories contained the mystery of eternal life.

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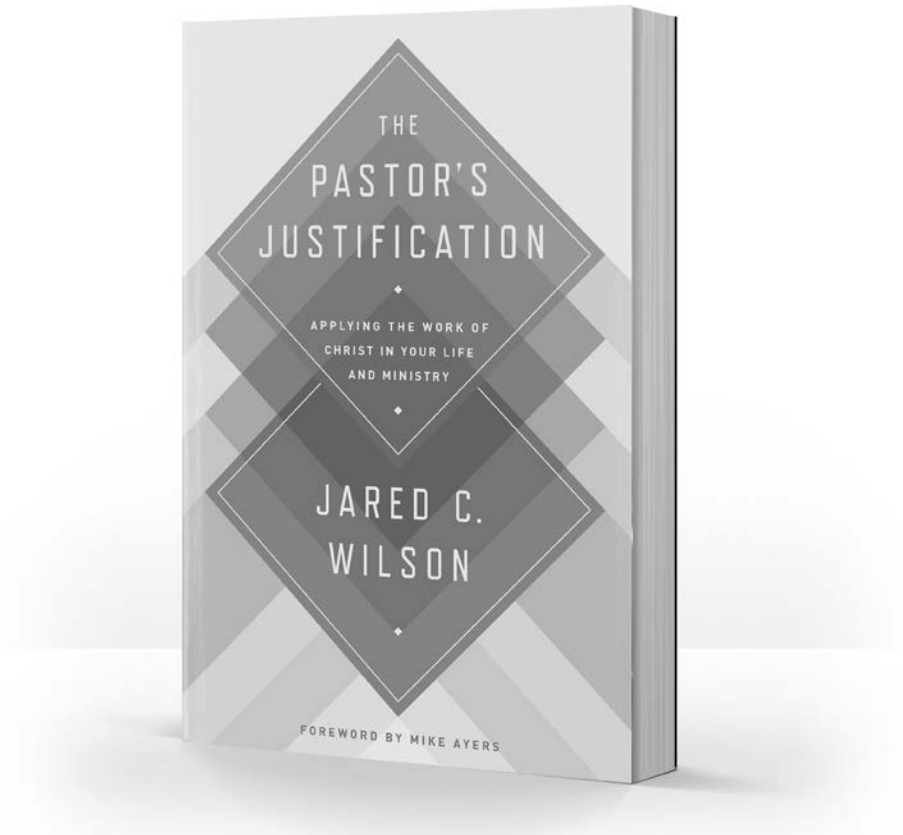

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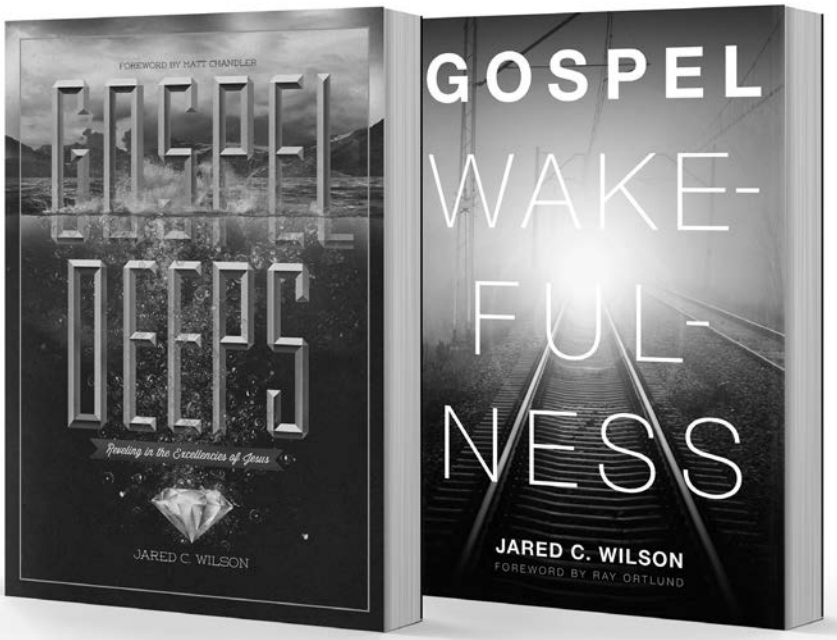

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The prodigal son. The good Samaritan. The treasure hidden in a field. Most of us have heard Jesus's parables before. Yet if these stories strike us as merely sweet, heartwarming, or sentimental, we can be sure we've misread them. In *The Storytelling God,* pastor Jared Wilson helps us to see how Jesus's parables reveal profound spiritual truths about God, humanity, the world, and the future.

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