

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 1

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] INTERPRETING PARABLES IN THE BIBLE

Introduce. In this kingdom preaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to interpret, preach and teach the parables of Jesus Christ in the right way. The parables have been grouped under various topics concerning the kingdom of God (See the contents of manuals 9 to 12).

This supplement is a teaching about parables. Consider the following: What is a parable? What is the purpose of telling a parable? What are the characteristics of a parable? And what are the guidelines for interpreting parables?

A. PARABLES

Read. Matthew 13:31-32; John 15:1-6; Ezekiel 4:1-8.

Teach. A “parable” is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is an illustration by means of a true-to-life story. It is designed to teach a spiritual truth or to answer a question. Jesus was the master parable-teller. He used *earthly stories* to point his hearers to *heavenly issues*. He used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal.

A parable is not a record of an historic event, but the story in the parable must be *true-to-life*. It describes things that *could have happened* in history. It limits itself to things that are real (actual facts). It does not go beyond the limits of actual probability (Matthew 13:31-32). It differs from other figures of comparison, such as an allegory (John 15:1-6) or prophetic symbolism (Ezekiel 4:1-8), which may or may not be true-to-life.

B. THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

Read. Matthew 7:6; 10:14-15,23,26-27; 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:10.

Discover and discuss. Why did Jesus tell parables?

Notes.

The purpose of telling parables is *to explain heavenly truths with earthly stories*.

Why does Jesus say in the parable of **the sower** that “the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God” has been given to his disciples and not to other people (Luke 8:10)? Does Jesus intend to keep the general public in the dark concerning the kingdom of God? No, this could not have been the intention of Jesus. Jesus intended all his teachings, including the parables, to be proclaimed publicly to all the people in the world. His intention was not to confine his parables to a small limited group of disciples, because he commanded his disciples to proclaim the truth concerning the kingdom of God from the rooftops (Matthew 10:27) and in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (Matthew 24:14)!

But proclaiming the truth publicly to all people in the world does not mean that all people want to hear it or understand what they hear! *The attitude of the hearers* is very important. By telling parables, Jesus purposes to make the truth plain to all people who have a good attitude and are responsive and to conceal the truth from all people who have a bad attitude and are unresponsive! He did not want to give what is sacred to “dogs” to tear apart or throw his pearls to “pigs” trample down (Matthew 7:6). The attitude of the hearers determined if they would understand the secrets of the kingdom of God or not.

Jesus also instructed his disciples not to endlessly preach the gospel message to those who scorned it. The disciples had to exercise patience, but there was also a limit. A moment arrives when constant resistance to the gracious invitation of the gospel and teachings of Jesus must be punished by the departure of the messengers of good tidings. That is why Jesus instructed his disciples not to remain too long in those places that rejected their preaching and teaching (Matthew 10:14). The parable of **the barren fig tree** teaches that God’s patience, although prolonged, is not endless (Luke 13:1-9). Also the apostle Paul and his co-workers taught that staying on and on in the company of those who ridicule the Christian religion is not fair to other fields that are waiting to be served (Acts 13:45-46; 18:5-6; Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10). Remember, the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few (Matthew 9:37).

C. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PARABLE

1. The possible elements of a parable.

Read. Matthew 13:31-32; Matthew 13:3-9,18-23; Luke 10:25-37.

Discover and discuss. What are possible elements of a parable?

Notes. A parable has three possible elements. They are the setting, the story, and the explanation or application. However, the parables in the Bible may only have one or two of these elements. For example:

- **The parable of the mustard seed** has only the story.
- **The parable of the sower** has both the story and the explanation.
- **The parable of the Good Samaritan** has the setting, the story and the explanation.

2. The three elements of a parable.

(1) The setting of a parable.

“The setting” of a parable is *the occasion and circumstances* which led to the telling of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What are the settings of these parables?

Notes.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. **Read** Luke 10:25-29. The setting of the parable of **the Good Samaritan** is the following. An expert in the Jewish law asked Jesus a question with the purpose of trying to trap Jesus in his words. He asked Jesus what people must do in order to inherit eternal life. This expert in the Jewish law himself believed that people must obey all the laws in the Old Testament (including the 613 human laws which the Jewish religious leaders had added to God’s law) in order to inherit eternal life. If Jesus would have answered that people must keep the whole law, then the expert in the Jewish law would have pointed out that Jesus and his disciples did not keep the law as the Jews interpreted it.

But instead, Jesus answered his question with another question, “What is written in the law?” “How do you read it?” Now the expert in the Jewish law was forced to openly state his own belief and he said, “Love the Lord and love your neighbour.” Jesus said to this man, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

The man knew that he did not love all his neighbours and so, in order to justify himself in front of the crowds who were listening, he asked, “Who is my neighbour?” In reply to this question, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus’ answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” Thus, the setting of this parable is the question “Who is my neighbour?”

The parable of the lost sheep. **Read** Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 18:12-14. The settings of the parables of **the lost sheep** in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are not the same. This means that Jesus must have told the same parable more than once, but each time in a different setting, in order to answer another question or to teach another spiritual truth. The setting will help us to understand the parable in each of these Gospels.

The setting of the parable of **the lost sheep in the Gospel of Luke** is related to God’s concern for lost people, like the tax collectors and the public sinners. The setting of the parable of **the lost sheep in the Gospel of Matthew** is related to God’s care for children. Both parables teach that Jesus Christ welcomes people into his kingdom. While Luke emphasises God’s association with despised sinners, Matthew emphasises God’s association with insignificant children!

(2) The story of a parable.

Discover and discuss. What characterises the story of a parable?

Notes.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. **Read** Luke 10:30-35. The story is designed to teach a spiritual truth or to answer a question. The story of a parable is always “true-to-life”. It limits itself to actual facts and events that might happen in history. It does not go beyond the limits of actual probability. For example, the story about a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, attacked by robbers and finally helped by a Samaritan is a true-to-life story and actually happened at times.

Read John 10:1-18; Zechariah 5:1-4. A parable differs from other *figures of comparison*, such as an allegory (John 10:1-18) or prophetic symbolism (Zechariah 5:1-4), which may or may not be true-to-life. The story of a parable is not a fantasy and it does not use prophetic symbols like that of “a flying scroll”.

(3) The explanation or application of a parable.

Discover and discuss: What are the explanations or applications of these parables?

Notes.

The parable of the pearl of great value. **Read** Matthew 13:44. Jesus gives no explanation or application of this parable.

The parable of the wise and foolish builders. **Read** Matthew 7:24,26. The application of this parable is not only to hear the words of Jesus, but also to put them into practice. Notice that Jesus does not give every detail of the story a separate meaning. He does not explain the meaning of “the house”, “the rock” or “the sand”, or the meaning of “the rain”, “the streams” or “the wind”.

The parable of the weeds among the wheat. **Read** Matthew 13:36-43. The explanation of this parable is that the kingdom of God in its present phase (form) consists of a mixture of good and bad people. Some belong to Christ and serve him, while others belong to the devil and serve him. It is not our responsibility to judge people (whether they are genuine Christians or not). It is also not our responsibility to separate the true believers from all other people. At the second coming of Jesus Christ, he will use his angels to separate the true believers from all other people.

Notice that, although Jesus explains the meaning of more than one of the details in this parable, he does not teach more than one main lesson in this parable. He explains the meaning of “the two sowers”, of “the wheat and the weeds”, of “the harvest and the harvesters”, and of “the place of burning and the barn”. But all these details only serve to explain the one main lesson of this parable, namely, that weeds have been sown among the wheat (that is, that there are always non-believers present among true believers)!

D. THE BASIC GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PARABLES

Introduce. When a person drives a car on a road, he must follow *the rules of the road* or he may get involved in an accident. Some of the rules of the road are about which side of the road one must drive, the maximum speed, the signs one must give when one turns or stops, etc. If a driver fails to obey these rules of the road, he will cause great damage and maybe loss of life.

Likewise, when Christians interpret the Bible, they must follow *the rules of the interpretation of the Bible (hermeneutics)*. If they fail to obey these rules of interpretation, they will teach false teachings and cause great spiritual damage to God’s people.

In the Bible, there are several different kinds of literature:

- Historical narratives (Matthew 1:18-25), genealogical lists (Matthew 1:1-17), letters (Philemon).
- Teachings (John 14:6), commands (John 13:34-35) and prohibitions (Matthew 5:39; 6:1,5,16,19,25; 7:1,6).
- Figurative speech of many kinds, like similes (Isaiah 53:6), metaphors (Psalm 23:1), types (Hebrews 10:8-10; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8) and symbols (Psalm 119:105; Jeremiah 23:29).
- Poetry (Job, the Psalms and Proverbs).
- Parables of Jesus.
- Prophecies (Isaiah and Jeremiah)
- Apocalyptic literature (Daniel and Revelation).

Each of these different kinds of literature has its own rules of interpretation. In this study, we will consider “the rules for the interpretation of parables”.

The following are six rules for the interpretation of parables:

Rule 1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

The first responsibility is to understand the natural story. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore, study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discover and discuss. What are the things and events described in the story and what did these things and events mean in the ordinary life at that time?

The parable of the wedding banquet. **Read** Matthew 22:1-14. In the parable of **the wedding banquet**, the following are part of the true-to-life story: It was common to extend invitations to the banquet more than once. The different responses to these invitations were very realistic. An eastern king often inflicted severe punishment on those who rejected his invitations. It was common to fill up the wedding hall. And it was the practice to wear a special wedding robe during the festivities.

Because people did not have calendars or diaries, it was not unusual among the Jews to first send out a general invitation and later to specifically call the guests who had been invited. Like it so often happens in ordinary life, not all people can or want to come. So they either ask to be exempted or make excuses. In the old days, it was very rude and really impossible to reject the invitation of a king. People, who nevertheless refused to come, were often arrested and killed. Many people accepted the invitation and came to the wedding festivities.

There is historical evidence that in the Near East a person who wished to enter the king’s presence was required to wear a robe sent to him by the king. Because most of the guests were drawn from the underprivileged ranks and did not own such a robe, they were probably given a robe before entering the wedding hall.

Rule 2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

The second responsibility is to examine the context of the parable. “The context” of the story of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state *the occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting of a parable is usually found *before* the story of the parable. The explanation or application of the parable is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the specific context of each of the following parables?

The parable of the Good Samaritan. **Read** Luke 10:29. In the parable of **the Good Samaritan**, the context of the story of the parable consists of both the setting and the application. The setting is a question, which was asked by

somebody in the crowd. The expert in the Jewish law asked Jesus a question, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The application made by Jesus shows that the purpose of telling this parable was to teach “To whom am I a neighbour?” rather than “Who is my neighbour?”

The parable of the lost sheep. **Read** Luke 15:1-2. In the parable of **the lost sheep**, the context of the story of the parable consists of both the setting and the explanation. The setting is an observation of Jesus. Jesus noticed the attitude of the Pharisees towards other people. Luke writes, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep to teach people God’s attitude towards tax collectors and sinners. Also the explanation made by Jesus shows that the purpose of telling this parable is to reveal God’s joy over one sinner who repents.

The parable of the persistent widow. **Read** Luke 18:1. Sometimes the purpose of telling the parable is expressly stated, like in the parable of **the persistent widow**. Luke writes, “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to teach his disciples to pray persistently and confidently.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard. **Read** Matthew 20:1-16. The parable of **the workers in the vineyard** begins with the word “For” and shows that this parable is linked to the setting of the rich young ruler in the previous chapter (Matthew 19:16-30). Moreover, Jesus’ application of the parable is the same as his application to Peter’s question about what he would receive for leaving everything and following Jesus (Matthew 20:16 and 19:27,30). The attitude of those who were hired first and last (Matthew 20:9-10) and the attitude of the rich young ruler and of the apostle Peter (Matthew 19:21,27,29) with regard to “things they have” and “things they desire to receive”, supplies the link between these two passages. The main message or central point of this parable is a solemn warning to any person (like Peter) who is too much concerned with what they will receive as a reward from Jesus Christ.

Rule 3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

The third responsibility is to identify which details in the story of the parable are relevant and which are irrelevant to the teaching intended. Great care should be taken not to ascribe independent spiritual significance to all the details of the stories of the parables. From among the relevant details, first determine the central truth or main message of the parable. Then determine which other details in the parable are essential for strengthening that main message.

(1) Determining whether the passage is an historic event, an allegory or a parable. This has significant consequences for identifying the relevant details.

An historic event or a parable?

The parable of the rich show-off and the beggar Lazarus. **Read** Luke 16:19-31. Is the parable of **the rich show-off and the beggar Lazarus** a description of an historic event or a parable?

- If this is a record of *an historic event*, used to illustrate a particular truth, then every detail has meaning. Then the fact that the rich man is able to communicate with Abraham while he is suffering in hell tells us more about the actual condition of people in hell. But then the fact that the rich man wound up in hell and the beggar in heaven, although a serious matter, may not have any spiritual or theological implication.

- If, however, this is *a parable*, then the fact that the rich man wound up in hell and the beggar in heaven is a significant detail. It is the central point or main message of the parable.

The setting shows that this is a parable and not an historic event. The setting is the same as in the previous parable of **the shrewd manager**: Jesus confronts the Pharisees about their love for money (Luke 16:1,19). Details like the rich man living in luxury every day and the beggar longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table are significant details, because they reinforce the point of discussion, which is to say something additional about the use of wealth as a preparation for the future. The central point or main message of this parable is to teach that “the consequences of the rich man’s life-style before his death in this present world are irreversible after his death”.

An allegory or a parable?

Read John 15:1-17 and Matthew 13:3-23.

The vine and the branches. An “allegory” is *an extended comparison*, in which several elements of the allegory represent several truths. For example, John 15:1-17 contains an allegory. The gardener represents God the Father, the vine represents Jesus, the fruit bearing branches represent true Christians, the fruitless branches represent people who have never been true Christians, etc. This allegory does not say that Jesus is actually a vine with branches and grapes on it. It implies that the relationship between Jesus and people can be *compared* to a vine and its branches.

However, we should not attempt to explain every characteristic of the symbol. “The branches that bear fruit” represent true Christians. However, “the branches that do not bear fruit” do not imply that these branches bore fruit previously that is, they do not represent born-again Christians that and afterwards fell away from the faith. Such a conclusion would contradict the clear teaching of Jesus in John 10:28 (and of Paul in Philippians 1:6)! The allegory clearly teaches that “the branches that are cut off and thrown into the fire” represent people who never once bore fruit, because they have never been in a close relationship with Christ. They were never true believers and their so-called “in-Christ-relationship was possibly inherited traditionally or acquired culturally, but had remained outward!

The conclusion is that this allegory does not teach that born-again Christians can lose their salvation again. It teaches that nominal-Christians will remain fruitless and born-again Christians will bear much fruit. Thus, while an allegory has several elements that may be compared, a parable has only one central point, one main message.

The parable of the sower. “A parable” is a true-to-life story, while an allegory need not be that. Although both might have a central theme, a parable is created to make one principle point, whereas an allegory might be created to teach many related or even unrelated truths. **The sower** seems to be an allegory, because in Christ’s explanation of the four kinds of soil, he makes a spiritual application of virtually every point in the story: “the seed” represents the message of the Bible, “the birds” represent the devil, “the hard soil” represents a hardened heart, etc. Nevertheless, this story is not an allegory, but a parable, because the context (the explanation) that follows indicates clearly one single theme, namely: “the result in one’s life depends on one’s response to the Word of God. And one’s response to the Word of God depends on the condition or attitude of one’s heart”. Jesus deliberately designed many of the details of the parable of the sower to reinforce that central message.

(2) Treating parables as allegories.

Should Christians *allegorise* parables, that is, treat parables as allegories and ascribe to each detail in the parables a different spiritual meaning? Because the early Christians did not know how to interpret the parables, some of them allegorised the parables and found all kinds of wonderful meanings in the details of parables.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. **Read** Luke 10:25-37. In the following example the parable of the Good Samaritan is allegorised: “The man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” represents Adam or the doctrine of the fall of man into sin because of his disobedience. “Jerusalem” signifies paradise or heaven and “Jericho” signifies the world. “The robbers” are the powerful adversaries or demons, or the false prophets who lived before Christ. When Adam was created, he fell into sin because of the attack of the devil and his angels. “The wounds” represent disobedience and sins. “The man stripped of his garments” represents man’s loss of his incorruptibility and immortality and the loss of all his virtues. He is “half dead”, because although his soul is immortal, his human nature is dead. “The priest and the Levite” stand for the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets could not save fallen mankind. “The Good Samaritan”, of course, represents Jesus Christ. He came to save fallen mankind. “The wine” represents the Word that instructs and corrects and the oil represents the doctrine of love, pity or mercy. “The donkey” represents the body of Christ, which carries man to the Church. “The inn” represents the Church and “the innkeeper” represents the apostles and their successors, like bishops and other officials of the Church. “The two silver coins” represent belief in the Father and the Son, or the two Testaments of the Bible, or love towards God and the neighbour. Jesus saves fallen mankind by giving his body to die on the cross and by establishing the Church as a place that protects believers until the second coming. “The Good Samaritan’s promise to return and reimburse the costs” represents Christ’s second coming.

This was the interpretation of the church father called Origen (A.D. 185 - 254). He thought that every detail of the story had a specific meaning. And in spite of the fact that *Jesus himself gave the explanation* of the parable, *Origen gave his own interpretation to it*. It is clear that Origen with all his fanciful ideas had not understood the parable at all. If Origen had studied the parable in the context of its setting and explanation or application, he could not have arrived at this interpretation!

Conclusion: Christians should not allegorise parables, that is, treat parables as allegories and ascribe a different meaning to every detail in the parables.

(3) Identify which details are relevant.

The relevant details are those details that strengthen the main theme or central message. These truths may be interpreted and applied.

The parable of the lost son. **Read** Luke 15:11-32. “The fact that the father stayed at home and did not go seeking the son” is an irrelevant detail, because Jesus was not teaching that the Father in heaven does not seek lost sinners. He had already made that clear in the two preceding parables. However, that “the father was eagerly waiting, that he ran to meet his son, that he responded with joy and eager acceptance”, are all relevant and significant details, because they reinforce the central point, which is to reveal the attitude of God the Father towards lost people.

(4) Identify which details are irrelevant.

Although all the details in a parable have significance for the story of the parable, they do not all have significance for the message of the parable. Jesus did not intend every detail in a parable should have some spiritual significance. Those details that are not relevant for the message of the parable should be identified and set aside.

The parable of the unworthy servant. **Read** Luke 17:7-10. Is it Christ’s intention to sanction slavery? Does he give principles for labour-management relationships? Or does he teach what must be considered as generous, gracious and courteous behaviour? The setting of this parable (Luke 17:3-4) contains Jesus’ instruction about rebuking a brother who sins and forgiving him when he repents. The central point or main message of this parable is that Christians do not deserve credit for doing the right thing. The other details in the story are irrelevant to this central purpose and should not be further interpreted.

Rule 4. Identify the main message of the parable.

The fourth responsibility is to identify the main message of the parable. “The main message” of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself.

From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main theme, one important message, or one central lesson. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but we should look for the one main lesson.

Discover and discuss. What is the main message in each of these parables?

Notes.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. **Read** Luke 10:25-29. What is the main message in the parable of **the Good Samaritan**? Should Christians *allegorise* this parable, that is, ascribe to each detail in the parable a different spiritual meaning? Then it would seem as if this parable tells God’s salvation history in symbolical language (see interpretation of Origin above) instead of teaching one main lesson. No, Christians should not allegorise the parables. The historical context of the parable of the Good Samaritan shows that the main message of this parable is Jesus’ answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” or better, “To whom am I a neighbour? Or “When am I a neighbour to someone else?”

The parable of the sower. **Read** Matthew 13:3-9. What is the main message in the parable of **the sower**? This parable is not a parable about the responsibility of the sower (the preacher) – where and how he must sow the Word of God? There is no hint in the parable of the sower that only 25% of all the people in the world would respond to the preaching of the gospel and be saved. Such an allegorical interpretation goes beyond what Jesus himself explained. The explanation of Jesus shows that this is *not a parable about the responsibility of the sower of the Word of God, but rather about the responsibility of the receiver of the Word of God*. This parable is a parable about the condition of the heart or the attitude of the heart of the receiver. Jesus teaches that the hearers of the word of God are responsible how they react (respond) to the preaching of the Word of God. The main message is that “the result in one’s life depends on one’s response to the Word of God. And one’s response to the Word of God depends on the condition or attitude of one’s heart.” Therefore, Christian workers may expect different responses to their preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the Bible.

The parable of the shrewd manager. **Read** Luke 16:1-13. What is the main message in the parable of **the shrewd manager**? Does Jesus teach Christians to be dishonest (unrighteous) like this manager? Does he teach his disciples to use other people for their own advantage? No. The central point of the story is found in verse 8, and the application of the story in verse 9 is directly linked to this central point. Jesus Christ does not commend the dishonest behaviour of the manager, but rather his sharp foresight. Just like this manager, the disciples should use their present resources to plan their future! The main message of this parable is that “a sharp, sensible and wise person will use his present earthly means to prepare his eternal blessings in heaven”.

Rule 5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

The fifth responsibility is to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable.

The truth in each parable has parallel or contrasting truths that are taught in other passages of the Bible. Therefore, always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

(1) Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared.

The parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27). The nobleman gave *the same amount* of money to each of his ten servants, but he gave *a different reward* to them on his return, when it was discovered that some had earned more than others had.

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The man going on a journey gave *a different amount* of money to three of his servants, but he gave *the same reward* to his faithful servants on his return.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). The landowner hired workers *at different times* of the day, but he gave them all *the same reward* at the end of the day.

The central theme for all these parables is to be ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ, because every person will have to give an account of his stewardship with respect to what God had entrusted to him.

(2) However, each parable also teaches a different truth.

The parable of the ten minas teaches that the servant, who has greater faithfulness, will also be given greater future responsibility. There are *different degrees of rewards for different degrees of faithfulness and diligence*.

The parable of the talents teaches that the rewards are *not based on the servant’s different degrees of success* due to the different opportunities they were given.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard teaches that the Lord will reward every person who comes to him, irrespective how long they know him or serve him. The reward consisting of eternal life is not dependent on how long you have been a Christian.

Rule 6. Base Christian teachings only on the clear passages of the Bible.

The sixth responsibility is to base Christian teachings or doctrine only on the clear passages of the Bible, that is, on commands, prohibitions and clear teachings of the Bible. Parables should not be made into *primary* sources and foundations of Christian doctrine. Christian doctrines, which are already established, may be illustrated or further confirmed by the parable. However, it is not allowable to use parables to constitute new Christian doctrines. The order of Scripture interpretation has always been recognised as moving from the literal to the figurative and from the clearer to the more obscure. Therefore, always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct teaching of the Bible.

The parable of the weeds among the wheat. **Read** Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. When Jesus gives an explanation of a parable, the explanation may be used like all other clear teaching to build Christian doctrine. For example, the parable of **the weeds among the wheat** is explained in Matthew 13:36-43 and this explanation may be used to build Christian doctrine.

However, in general, the figurative language of parables is not the best material for building Christian doctrine. For example, the parable of the weeds among the wheat teaches that the people in God's kingdom (or the Christian Church) are mixed. There are both born-again Christians and nominal Christians (traditional or cultural Christians), in God's kingdom (or in the Church) on earth.

But the following three conclusions may **not** be drawn from this parable:

- Everyone ("the sons of the kingdom" and "the sons of the evil one") should be baptised with water without discrimination (because they are already in the church).
- No attempt should be made to judge applicants for membership.
- No member should be disciplined, no matter how grievously he has sinned.

The Christian doctrines of who may become members, who should be baptised and how members should be disciplined for sins committed, must be based on other clear teachings of the Bible (Matthew 28:19; 18:15-18).

The parable of the lost son. **Read** Luke 15:11-32. Another example. This parable teaches that God welcomes repentant sinners. But this parable does **not** teach that a sinner only need to show remorse for his transgression, but does not need to accept the sacrifice of atonement of Jesus Christ. The Christian doctrine of atonement and salvation must be based on other more clear teachings of the Bible (Romans 3:21-26).

Therefore, in general, we do not use parables to establish teaching or doctrine, but consider them to confirm and strengthen truth that is taught elsewhere in the Bible.

E. ASSIGNMENT

(1) *Memorise* the six basic guidelines for interpreting parables.

(2) *Determine* the setting and the explanation or application in the following parables:

The answers are given in brackets.

- Matthew 13:47-48 (Matthew 13:49-50)
 - Matthew 25:14-30 (Matthew 25:13)
 - Luke 11:5-8 (Luke 11:9-10)
 - Luke 12:13-20 (Luke 12:21)
 - Luke 15:3-32 (Luke 15:1-2)
 - Luke 16:19-31 (Luke 16:14)
 - Luke 19:12-27 (Luke 19:11)
-