

1 Growing up in the 60's and 70's, I was a child of network television. There was no Netflix or Hulu, no wi-fi, Roku, or TIVO, and not even DVDs yet. In fact, VHS cassette video tape was just coming into vogue, although we never owned a VCR when I was a kid. We still had a rotary dial telephone mounted to the kitchen wall, if that puts things in perspective for you, along with a list of important phone numbers taped to the inside of a kitchen cabinet door, marked all over with pencil and pen corrections and additions. On Saturday mornings, my brother and sisters watched old-fashioned cartoons that were broadcast on analog TV with a rabbit ear antenna, like the Rocky and Bullwinkle show. I can still sing the commercial jingles that became stuck in my young and impressionable mind after obediently sitting through and watching the commercials, over and over again. Maybe you did the same. Let's see: "If you think it's butter, but it's not! Its.....Chiffon!" Right! I see that I wasn't the only one permanently scarred.

One of my favorite parts of the Rocky and Bullwinkle show was the Fractured Fairy Tales segment. Do any of you remember that? You all know what fairy tales are. They're made-up stories that involve entertaining characters, places or events. Sleeping Beauty is a fairy tale, and so is The Three Little Pigs. A fractured fairy tale is one that takes a familiar story and then twists it in some surprising way by changing a character, a setting, or the plot. An example of a fractured fairy tale would be The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig; or, Sleeping Ugly instead of Sleeping Beauty. I liked watching the Fractured Fairy Tales cartoons because they were surprising. They never ended the way I expected them to.

It turns out that thousands of years before the invention of television, Jesus perfected the art of the fractured fairy tale, what we call parables. The parables of Jesus weren't exactly fairy tales, because their purpose went far beyond entertainment. They were supposed to teach something. But they were made up, and, just like fractured fairy tales, they usually had characters in unexpected roles and surprising endings. At least they were surprising to folks who heard them 2,000 years ago. These days, we tend to take them for granted. Just like I sat glued to the television as a child, thoughtlessly watching cartoons and commercials, it's all too easy for us to think we know all we need to know about the parables of Jesus, many of which we've heard tens, hundreds or even thousands of times.

This summer we'll dive a little deeper into some of those parables and try to rediscover the timeless truths that Jesus wants us to learn. We'll hear some modern versions of the parables as well as hear some stories from you about parables that God made real in your own lives. Incidentally, consider that an invitation. If you recognize any of the parables we're studying this summer in your own life, please talk to me! We'll start today with some tips and cautions for reading those surprising parables of Jesus.

As you came in this morning, I hope you received one of these bookmarks. The bookmarks include a list of the parables we'll be studying this summer, as well as some stories that I'd call "parabolic" but not regular parables. Jesus had a delightful habit of coloring outside the lines in his teaching, and that meant sometimes mixing his literary styles rather fluidly. On the other side of the bookmark are some tips and cautions for you to try out as we explore the parables. I encourage you to put the bookmark in your Bible and give some of these tips a try this summer.

2 This is a painting by Argentina-born artist Jorge Cocco Santangelo, who describes his artistic style as "sacrocubism."¹ I like his style because the lack of detail, the blocky lines, and the interesting colors all invite me to see the scene again for the first time, but from a different perspective. This scene actually could have been any number of the times Jesus sat down with his disciples to teach them, and the odds are good that if he wasn't specifically teaching them in parable, he was still using colorful images and metaphors his listeners could all relate to.

Which brings me to perhaps the most important tip for interpreting parables: Jesus didn't teach by stringing together random sentences, so be sure to read what comes before and after a parable! That may seem obvious, but especially with computers and smart phones, it's easier than ever to grab little pieces out of the Scriptures without ever even laying eyes on the writing that comes before and after. All of us, and not just politicians, have had the gut-wrenching experience of being misunderstood, being heard out of context, because either we didn't communicate fully enough, or because someone only heard a soundbite. It's aggravating, because everything we communicate- our body language, our

¹ <https://jorgecocco.com/bio/>

tone of voice, the words we use, and even our actions- all have a meaning that's particular to a time and place. Communication can get spectacularly derailed when taken out of context, and the same is true of our Bible reading.

3 Very often, Jesus offers a parable as a part of his answer to a question, as he did when he told the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-35. In order to understand this parable, we need to understand that the giving of the parable was precipitated earlier in Luke 10:25 by an expert in religious law standing up to test Jesus by asking him, “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”² So presumably and at a minimum, the parable is intended to answer that question.

Similarly, in Matthew 13, perhaps the most dense concentration of parables in the Bible, it would be a mistake not to note the explanation Jesus offers in verse 12 when asked why he taught with parables. It is, Jesus said, all about granting understanding of the secrets of the Kingdom. Since Jesus clearly said he used parables to teach about the Kingdom of God (Matthew would say the Kingdom of Heaven), we should probably always ask, “What does this parable tell me about this Kingdom that Jesus is so excited about?”

Some parables have important historical context. Most study Bibles will offer at least a superficial explanation of the history of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans, for example, foundational for reading the parable of the good samaritan. But even more importantly, we need to examine the broader Biblical context of the parable to look to see what Jesus might be talking about. It sometimes amazes me how inventive Biblical commentaries can be in explaining a parable based on arcane historical supposition when the meaning of a parable is hidden in plain sight right in the text of the Bible. Sometimes Jesus himself even offers an interpretation later on in the account if we're patient enough to keep reading, as he does in the parable of the sower, which we'll look at next week. Often the meaning of a parable is reinforced by other teachings or events immediately surrounding the parable. As I said, Jesus didn't teach by stringing together random sentences, so we shouldn't interpret his teaching as if he did.

² Luke 10:25, New Living Translation (2nd edition)

4 We'll be ending our series with a look at the parable of the prodigal son, which will highlight the importance of paying attention to the characters within a parable. In many respects it's the story of not just one prodigal, but two lost sons. By allowing ourselves to identify with the second son, and not just the first, we'll see how the application of the parable can really change for us. More on that at the beginning of September. Meanwhile, I invite you to send some time in your personal devotions reading these and other parables. Read them in different translations- you can use the Bible Gateway app or visit the church library. Read the different accounts of the parables in the other Gospels. Try to grapple with the meaning yourself, before turning to the many commentaries available, including your study Bible notes. And remember, the goal of the exercise is not to come up with the best or most inventive answer, but to allow the Word of God to penetrate your heart and change your life.

5 And that's the real purpose of the Parables, and in fact all of the teachings of Jesus and the prophets who came before him. Isaiah said it so well: "Harden the hearts of these people. Plug their ears and shut their eyes. That way, they will not see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their hearts and turn to me for healing."³ It's our hard hearts that prevent us from the kind of understanding of the parables that will transform our lives and the world around us. It doesn't matter how many study Bibles you own or how many times you read your Bible through in a year. The parables of Jesus will always remain hidden secrets to you if, as you read them, you're not also surrendering your life to Jesus.

Do you have a hard heart this morning? I think we all have at least some calluses on our hearts: scars from past hurts or lost loves; indifference to the plight of hurting people who are out of sight and out of mind; preoccupation with things that capture our attention and subtract from our devotion to God. Here's the thing about hard hearts. Every day we have a choice, to continue to allow our hearts to get harder, or to begin the process of softening, surrendering our burdens to Jesus and allowing him to do what only he has the power to do- Bind up the broken hearted.

³ Isaiah 6:10, Ibid

By the way, your bookmarks are missing the critical first step in interpreting any parable. Get out a pen and write “pray!” at the top of the bookmark. Before you even open your Bible, quiet yourself in the presence of God and ask that God open your eyes, open your ears, and give you the kind of understanding that softens your heart and changes your life from the inside out. God loves to answer that kind of prayer, because it’s what God has wanted for you, and the world around you, all along.



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