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# THE KINGDOM EQUATION

A Fresh Look  
at the Parables  
of Jesus

JOHN TIMMER

Second Edition

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of Jesus

JOHN TIMMER



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Ideas for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter are adapted from a leader's guide written by Andy De Jong for the first edition of *The Kingdom Equation* in 1990.

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# About the Author

John Timmer brings to this book a careful study of language and its functions, biblical interpretation, and cultural sensitivity. He reviews and critiques several typical ways of looking at parables and presents an interpretation of parable as metaphor.

Timmer is a pastor emeritus in the Christian Reformed Church. He is a graduate of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. He earned advanced degrees from Hartford Theological Seminary (S.T.M.) and the Free University of Amsterdam (Th.D.). He served as a Christian Reformed missionary in Japan (1959-1974) and as a pastor in Ridgewood, New Jersey (1974-1980), and Grand Rapids, Michigan (1980-1995) until his retirement.

Other books by John Timmer include *They Shall Be My People* (Faith Alive, 1983), *God of Weakness* (Zondervan, 1988; Faith Alive, 1996), and *Four-Dimensional Jesus* (Faith Alive, 2001).

# 1 Jesus, Parables, and the Kingdom of God

Jesus often told parables to the people who gathered to listen to him. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed . . .” he would say (Matt. 13:31). Or “the kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet . . .” (Matt. 22:2).

Some of Jesus’ parables were one-liners: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matt. 13:33). Others, like the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), were short, compressed stories. But whatever their size or shape, each parable had a special message for those who listened.

## Why Parables?

Why did Jesus use parables to teach about God and his kingdom? What are the dynamics of a parable? What is a parable?

## Some Misleading Notions

People have defined the word *parable* in many different ways. Some say a parable is “an illustrative story.” Others define it as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” “an allegory,” or “a story that makes a single point.”

The rabbis of Jesus’ day viewed parables as *illustrative stories* that helped listeners understand an obscure point or a general truth—much as today’s sermon illustrations do. But Jesus did not teach in the same way. He did not reduce the parable to an illustrative device that carries no message of its own.

By far the most popular description of a parable is *an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*. But this description is misleading if we mean by it that Jesus used earthly stories to focus our minds only on heavenly things. Parables do not draw comparisons between earth below and heaven above, but between our world and God’s world. Parables don’t seek to

make us disdain this present life for the sake of life after death, but rather to open our eyes to the presence of God's world inside our world of everyday experiences.

From the beginning of the Christian era till about the twentieth century, Jesus' parables were widely treated as *allegories*: coded stories that veil their message in secrecy. In an allegory everything stands for something else and is intelligible only to those who have "cracked the code." But that approach introduces problems. First, interpreters who claim to have "cracked the code" tend to read their own theology into the parable. And once the "coded" text is "cracked," the parable itself becomes dispensable. A parable, however, can never be dispensed with. Each interpretation or translation always says less than the parable itself.

A similar problem arises in the theory that a parable *makes a single point*. This theory implies that all the other elements in a parable serve only to enhance the one point and have no significant meaning of their own. In other words, the other elements would be dispensable. But that theory doesn't ring true in many parables that make several important points, such as the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32).

### **Parable as Story Metaphor**

More recent studies view parables mainly as *story metaphors*. A metaphor sees one thing as something else. A metaphor uses language playfully. It equates the unknown with the known, the unfamiliar with the familiar.

For example, suppose you had never before seen a chair. How would you go about describing one? You could not do much better than people did when they named the four things on which a chair stands "legs," the part you lean against the "back," and the parts you rest your arms on "arms." In other words, you probably couldn't do better than to describe the unfamiliar chair in terms of your familiar body.

Jesus' teaching is shot through with metaphors. He called himself a vine, a door, the bread of life, the good shepherd, and the resurrection. He called Simon a rock (Matt. 16:18; John 1:42), and he called James and John sons of thunder (Mark 3:17). Jesus piled metaphor upon metaphor in announcing the good news of the kingdom of God.

### **Shock!**

A good metaphor shocks. It brings together ideas that have never before been brought together. It upsets conventional language.

When Isaiah compared God to a whistler and to a barber (Isa. 7:18, 20) and when Hosea declared that God is "like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah" (Hos. 5:12), these prophets used imagery that would never have occurred to the average God-fearing Israelite. God had never been called these things before.



It can be a challenge, though, to avoid letting metaphors grow familiar. Our everyday language is full of metaphors. We speak of a needle's eye, a chair's back, a bottle's neck, the arm of the law, the foot of a mountain, and the mouth of a river without stopping to think that once upon a time each of these introduced a surprise.

Almost all of the language the Bible uses to describe God is metaphorical. Often we are not aware of this, especially if the metaphor language is familiar. But the next time you read a passage of Scripture, try to notice how God is called "king" or "judge" or "hen" or "shepherd" or "farmer" or "shelter" or "deceptive brook" or "lion that growls over its prey."

## **A Kingdom Equation**

A metaphor reveals something new. It offers a fresh insight and equates two things that have not been equated before.

Jesus uses this type of equation in his parables. He equates the unfamiliar kingdom of God with familiar scenes of everyday life. For example, he tells his listeners, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matt. 13:44).

A parable, then, is a *kingdom equation*, and through the use of an apt metaphor the whole story lights up what the kingdom is about. Each parable, each equation, gives us a new insight into God's kingdom. At first the equation may look rather tame and harmless. "Oh," we might say, "is that what the kingdom of God is?" But when we begin to reflect on the equation, sparks begin to fly. We are caught in a field of tension, wondering, "How can the kingdom of God be like that?" For example, how can the kingdom of God be like the actions of a dishonest manager (Luke 16:8)?

## **What Is the Kingdom of God?**

When we study the life and ministry of Jesus, we discover that through his teachings and miracles Jesus points toward the immanence of God's kingdom. Jesus' central message is this: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

When we discover this, we wonder, *What is this kingdom?* And as we struggle with this question, we meet another surprise: Jesus never defines the term *kingdom of God*. He never offers the kind of description that prompts us to say, "Oh, is that what the kingdom is? Now I know!"

## **Only in Stories**

Rather than offer a definition, Jesus tells stories about the kingdom of God. He tells parables that paint pictures of God's kingdom without offering precise descriptions. And Jesus tells so many stories that we

begin to wonder why he doesn't come right out and say in clear language what the kingdom is.

Why does Jesus talk about the kingdom only indirectly, in stories? One answer is that we cannot absorb strange and difficult truths directly. Suppose someone asks you, "What is time?" You could not possibly answer the question directly. St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, "I know what [time] is if no one asks me what it is. But if I want to explain it to someone who has asked me, I find that I do not know." Such a concept can only be explained indirectly: we can only say what time means to us and how it functions in our lives.

As we noted earlier, the easiest way to teach something new is to use metaphors that describe the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. Just as we cannot describe God directly—only indirectly by means of metaphors—so we cannot describe the kingdom of God directly. So Jesus describes it in story form, via parables.

### **What the Bible Says**

To begin to understand what God's kingdom is, we need to see what the Bible says about it. Isaiah 40 gives us one of the most beautiful and majestic statements about God's kingdom. According to this passage and many others, God rules over all. From their very beginning the ancient Scriptures confess that all things are under the universal umbrella of God's rule and control.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,  
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,  
or weighed the mountains on the scales  
and the hills in a balance?

Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD,  
or instruct the LORD as his counselor?

Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,  
and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge,  
or showed him the path of understanding? . . .

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

He brings princes to naught  
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

—Isaiah 40:12-14, 21-23

When Jesus starts his ministry by proclaiming that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15), he affirms the core proclamation of the Old Testament. What’s more, Jesus adds that with his coming, God is manifesting his kingly rule in a new way.

### **Present and Future, Slow and Hidden**

In Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom there is a tension between the present reality of the kingdom and the future fullness of the kingdom. Jesus opens the door to the future of God’s full reign. In Christ, the powers of the age to come begin to enter our lives.

For example, we can already experience the kingdom in such things as God’s forgiveness of our sins. We can also experience the presence of God’s kingdom each time we forgive someone else. God does not want us to live under the influence of this broken world. That would result in hating and resenting others, especially our enemies. Christ wants us to love and forgive them. He expects us to live by the power of the kingdom of God already available now.

We also experience the presence of God’s kingly rule through the breakdown of racial, social, gender, and other barriers. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3:28). With the coming of Christ, the power of God’s kingly rule has begun the slow and hidden but irreversible process of breaking down such barriers. When the kingdom of God has come fully, these barriers to unity will be completely gone.

In his parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32), Jesus speaks of the kingdom as present in hidden form and as developing toward fullness:

“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

This parable directs us to the world of daily experiences in which magnificent things are hidden in insignificant things and the greatest is hidden in the smallest. God’s kingdom is at work in a hidden way in the most ordinary of events. Jesus gives similar teachings in his parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26-29) and in his parable of yeast mixed into a batch of dough (Matt. 13:33).

## Jesus as Parable

Just as Jesus' parables proclaim the kingdom of God, so does Jesus' life. His entire mission—his life, teaching ministry, death, resurrection, ascension—proclaims the kingly rule of God. The story of Jesus discloses to us a new way of living that is marked by total submission to the rule of God.

So Jesus is more than a teller of parables. *Jesus himself is a parable*. Or, better, he is *the definitive parable*. At the same time Jesus is both proclaimer and proclamation of God's kingly rule.

### A Clear Window

We need to think of Jesus and his parables as a clear window to the reality of the kingdom of God. Windows invite us not to look *at* them, but to look *through* them. Jesus' parables do the same. They offer us a view of God's world beyond the parable story. They don't look at the everyday world we meet in the story; they look through this world to offer us glimpses of the world in which God's name is hallowed and his will is done.

In order for us to see what God's kingly rule is like, we must look through Jesus, who not only proclaims parables but whose entire life and ministry make up the ultimate parable revealing the kingdom of God. Like a clear window, Jesus does not attract attention to himself but to God's kingdom. He is not impressed with his own importance but is rather the human-divine transparency through which we can view God's kingly rule.

Jesus is the only window offering such a view. "When [people] look at me," Jesus says in John 12:45, "they see the one who sent me." Just as from the inside of our living room we can see the outside world only through the living room window, so from the inside of our life we can see God's kingdom only through the window that is Jesus.

As the definitive parable, Jesus invites us to see the kingdom of God through him because we cannot see it through anyone else. Access to the kingdom is gained exclusively through him (John 14:6). To submit to the authority of God is to submit to Jesus. And to submit to Jesus is to submit to the rule of God revealed in Jesus.

### Upside-Down

Whereas some of Jesus' parables portray typical, true-to-life situations, many of them do not. Many parables portray atypical, bizarre, or outright shocking situations.

For example, it is hardly typical for a merchant to sell everything in order to buy a single pearl (Matt. 13:45-46). The average merchant is cautious, not likely to put all his eggs in one basket.

Nor is it typical for a vineyard owner to pay equal wages to laborers he has hired at different times of the day (Matt. 20:1-16), or for every invited guest to refuse a banquet invitation at the last minute (Matt. 22:1-14).

In his parables Jesus often distorts things from the way we'd expect them to be. In the world of God's kingdom, things are often different from or even opposite to the way they are in our world.

Jesus' parables compel us to juxtapose our dog-eat-dog world, where the prime values are self-fulfillment, self-preservation, and security, with God's world, where the weak are cherished, the poor are blessed, and the last are first.

This upside-downness in Jesus' parables makes them shocking. Jesus' upside-down life and ministry are similarly shocking.

Jesus eats with "sinners" and tax collectors. He forgives sins, which only God can do. He cleanses the temple as though he owns the place. He ignores ritual washing. He goes out of his way to break Sabbath rules. He raises people from the dead. In short, he lives by values that run counter to many of the values by which we live. And he asks us to do the same. He asks us to live our lives by God's rules, challenging the status quo.

In Luke 11:27, a woman in the crowd says to Jesus, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." This sounds like a compliment to Jesus' mother. If we had been part of that crowd, we might have been deeply moved and thought, "What a nice thing to say!"

But what sounds like a compliment to Jesus' mother is really an indirect compliment to Jesus. And Jesus, surprisingly, does not take too kindly to it. He does not say, "Thank you. I appreciate that." Instead he says, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28).

Here Jesus the parable is speaking, for his reply places the woman in a situation in which she must decide either to leave her old world and its values behind and to enter the kingly rule of God, or to remain in bondage to her old world with its many loyalties.

Jesus' parables always do this to his listeners. Either we can stay outside the kingdom by admiring Jesus from a distance, or we can enter the kingdom by hearing and obeying Jesus' words. Through parables the Lord shocks and alerts us to the fact that because he has come, we are at a crossroads of two possible choices: continue on as before or follow him into the kingdom of God.

## For Reflection and Discussion

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### Begin

You may wish to open your discussion of this chapter with a brief prayer like this one:

*Father in heaven, above all the noises that compete for our hearing, give us a longing to hear your voice clearly and fully. Grant that the noise of our old worn-out ways of thinking about you may give way to the voice of new insights, leading us to praise and honor you with renewed hearts. Make clear what is unclear and refresh us through your Spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

You might also include readings from among the following Scriptures depicting God's sovereign rule and the kingdom that Jesus came to reveal:

Genesis 1:1-2

Job 38:22-35

Psalms 18:1-19

Isaiah 40:10-14, 21-26

Isaiah 55

Mark 4:26-34

1 Corinthians 15:12-28

Revelation 21:1-4, 22-23

### Discuss

Here are some questions that can help guide group discussion. If you don't have time to use all of these, choose the questions that seem best for your group or setting.

#### *Parables as metaphors*

1. Has this chapter changed your impression of parables and why Jesus used them in his teaching? Explain.

2. Timmer writes that metaphors “seek to capture the new and unknown by means of the familiar”—and “a good metaphor shocks” by introducing a surprise.
- List some examples of familiar things the Bible uses to describe God’s character and power.
  - Think back on some of the metaphors in Jesus’ parables mentioned in this chapter. How do they help spark our imagination or open our eyes to Jesus’ message?

*God’s kingdom*

3. How do Jesus’ parables help shape our attitude toward the kingdom of God?
4. In your experience, how much emphasis do Christians today give to the kingdom of God?
5. Do you think most Christians relate their everyday experiences to life in God’s kingdom? Give some examples to support your answer.
6. What details of day-to-day living might look different in a kingdom-centered life?

7. From your own (or a friend's) experience, give an example or two that portrays an upside-down or otherwise shocking aspect of God's work in your life. Reflect on how can you use examples like these to share the good news of God's upside-down kingdom at work in this world.

*A breathtaking view*

8. The author points out that Jesus is the only window through which we can truly see the kingdom of God. Looking through Jesus as a window, however, can be distracting if our concern is mainly with certain details of the window itself. Consider the following "parable":

A builder once held an open house to feature the latest in windows from a reputable window company. The house was set on a magnificent wooded lot with an idyllic stream running through it. Woodland creatures could often be seen enjoying the stream's cool waters, warming themselves on its sunny banks, or resting in the shade of its trees and bushes. Many of the guests touring the house were so caught up in the craftsmanship and particulars of the windows that they missed what only a few saw when they looked *through* the windows—a breathtaking view of God's creation.

How might we be tempted to look *at* Jesus without considering what he urges us to enjoy *through* him—that is, a breathtaking view of God's kingdom? In other words, do we sometimes get caught up in the details and facts about Jesus without really listening to his words and obeying them? Explain, giving some examples to support your answer.

**Close**

Close your session by together acknowledging God's care and keeping and by asking for continued guidance in this study of Jesus' teaching (through parables) about the kingdom of heaven. You may wish to read together a confessional statement about God's kingdom (such as Q&A 123 of the Heidelberg Catechism) and conclude by saying together the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13).