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Bridges for Peace Israel Teaching Letter

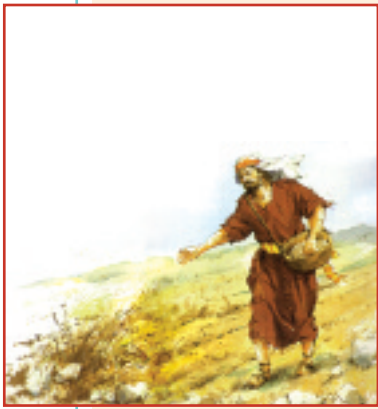
Vol. #770506

May 2006

YESHUA and the PARABLES



YESHUA and the PARABLES



the sower
matt. 13:3-8, 18-23

mustard seed
matt. 13:31-32

hidden treasure
matt. 13:44



Everyone loves a great story! Although we often think of storytelling in terms of its educational and entertainment value for children, the ability to tell and to comprehend a good yarn has served teachers and parents, pastors and preachers, psychiatrists and bartenders very well throughout the ages.

Among our ancient ancestors, as well as tribal peoples that remain in parts of the world today, families gathered regularly around campfires or on hillsides to hear the tales of their history, life in their

villages, and perhaps of their future. Those stories, though simple in nature, not only helped the hearer deal with everyday life in his culture, but also served to connect him to his community...past, present and future.

In our modern culture, the storyteller has been replaced by of all things, the television set, with its incredible popularity, speaks with the ageless appeal of the story as a means of grappling with life. Millions of people around the world spend hours every week laughing at themselves in sitcoms, weeping for themselves in tragedies, and cheering for themselves in that recent phenomenon called reality TV. And certainly we are most attentive on Sunday morning when the pastor tells *his* personal stories...the time he



spilled his coffee in his wife's lap or she backed the car over his new mountain bike. The human ability to recognize oneself in the experiences of others and to apprehend greater truth through those everyday occurrences have made the storyteller a key figure in virtually every culture and religion in man's history.

As Bible believers, we can attest to the importance and impact of stories. Both the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and the New Testament are rife with the sagas of prophets, kings, and ordinary people involved in life and conflict: loving their children, fighting their enemies, struggling with unjust overseers, and embracing the mercy of righteous rulers. These stories are set in the countryside of ancient Israel and take place within the context of a rich and vibrant Jewish culture. They concern themselves with crops and animals, with the land itself, and the seasons. They examine everyday life, relationships, and human interaction with the Divine. They are rich and colorful, designed to be entertaining and engaging, and have only one purpose: to teach man the ways of God.

A Hebrew Word-Picture

A wide variety of literary forms are used in the telling of these stories, including allegory, fable, and metaphor. By far the most widely used and appreciated, however, is the parable. This form of instruction differs from the rest in that it is simple

and credible, in and of itself, and most often begins by making a comparison. The meaning of the parable is dependent upon the context in which it is spoken. Here, the reality of God is revealed through the word-picture. Concrete illustrations touch the heart and challenge the mind as the Scriptures use vivid stories of everyday life to describe the nature of God and human response to His love. These visual representations of spiritual concepts were always meant to effect behavior. Since the Hebrew mind centered on active response, the parable was designed to guide the hearer to righteous action.

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action.

As much as the parable is common in the Bible, it is also prevalent in the Talmud (collection of Jewish traditions and commentaries) and other ancient Jewish writings. The rabbis of ancient Judaism made extensive use of parables as a definitive method of teaching, and even in these extra-biblical sources, the parables speak of God in a form deeply rooted in the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible. The imagery used to describe God and His interaction with man is the same as the vivid images we find on the pages of our Scriptures. Further, the rabbis clearly identified the parable as a means of understanding the truths and spirit of *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.). The sages compared the parable to a handle by which a jug of boiling water could be carried or a bucket let down into a well of sweet, cold water.

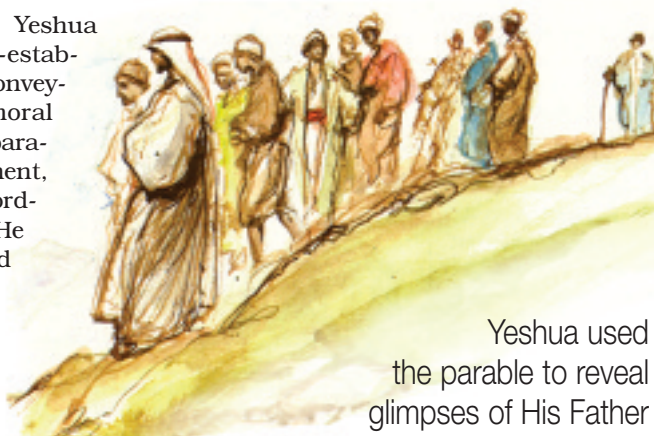
Some have ridiculed the parable as lacking in intellectual depth, disregarding its lessons since it is clearly not a profound or weighty means of instruction. In response, the Talmud points out that a candle, which is practically worthless, is used to find a precious stone that has been lost. Similarly, says the Talmud, “a parable should not be lightly esteemed in thine eyes, since by means of it, a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of the *Torah*.”



Yeshua's Favorite Teaching Tool

In first-century Israel, the people were well-accustomed to parables. Children growing up in the synagogue listened to the rabbis as they “talked in parables” and heard their fathers grapple with the riddles and deeper meanings often found in them. From this rich religious and cultural heritage, Yeshua (Jesus) emerged as a first-century religious leader, teacher and itinerant rabbi. One of Yeshua's favorite teaching tools was, not surprisingly, the parable.

In His parables, Yeshua was employing a well-established rabbinic form of conveying ethical and moral lessons. There are 31 parables in the New Testament, fully one-third of the recorded sayings of Yeshua. He used the everyday and the mundane to drive home His message of God's love for mankind. Through His genius as a teacher, Yeshua used the parable to reveal glimpses of His Father



Yeshua used
the parable to reveal
glimpses of His Father
and His divine character.

fish net
matt. 13:47–50

lost sheep
matt. 18:12–14

unmerciful servant
matt. 18:21–35





workers in
the vineyard
matt. 20:1–16

wedding banquet
matt. 22:2–14

ten virgins
matt. 25:1–13

and His divine character, allowing His listeners to glimpse the unknowable through experiences common to their own lives. He challenged them to the high spiritual standards and ethical requirements of the *Torah*, proclaiming a powerful message that demanded a decision. However, the Gospel parables—as Dr. Brad Young calls them—must be interpreted within the context of first-century Judaism. After all, Yeshua was Jewish and His parables represent a form of the Judaism of His day. In his book *The Parables*, Dr. Young says the following:

“While parables have a message that transcends time, the reinterpretation of the illustrations in a new context often has distorted the authentic meaning. Far-fetched allegories and teachings directly opposed to Jesus and his Judaism have undermined the force of the parabolic messages that the original audiences heard.”

In other words, a true comprehension of the message of each of Yeshua’s 31 parables requires a deeper look at the historical and cultural context in which it was originally spoken. Although this teaching letter doesn’t afford the time to examine each of the parables, a closer look at two important passages of Scripture will shed light on many of the stories Yeshua told.

Marriage at the Resurrection

“The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, saying: ‘Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her.’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.’ And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together” (Matt. 22:23–40).



Although this is not a parable per se, it is an example of the use of the events of everyday life as tools for grappling with the weightier matters of Scripture. Here, the Sadducees are attempting to trap Yeshua into denying *Torah* by creating a somewhat preposterous scenario based on God’s instructions in Deuteronomy 25:5–10.

“God is not
the God of
the dead,
but of
the living.”

The key to Yeshua’s answer lies in the belief system of the Sadducees, men who were wealthy, powerful members of the priesthood and responsible for the keeping of temple Judaism. They recognized only the *Torah*, or what we know as the first five books of the Bible, and disregarded the rest of

the Hebrew Scriptures. They did not believe in the oral law, which the Pharisees regarded as teaching given to Moses by God at Mount Sinai along with the commandments. They did not believe in the resurrection, life after death, angels, demons, or the existence of a spiritual realm, all of which were part of the belief system of the Pharisees. The Sadducees were known for their spiritual pride



and for frequently ridiculing the other sects of Judaism of the day.

Clearly, the Sadducees were attempting to draw a line in the sand. Would this Yeshua align Himself with them or with the heretical Pharisees? And as the story unfolds, we must remember that it is occurring in front of the multitudes, hundreds or even thousands of ordinary people, struggling to understand the complexities of first-century Judaism and its mandate to live in covenant relationship with the one true God. Unfortunately, these same multitudes have more than likely been exposed to this discussion before, as the Sadducees and the Pharisees threw arguments and accusations back and forth on frequent occasions.

But this time would be different. Yeshua's response gets immediately to the heart of the matter. The Sadducees cannot understand the full revelation of God because they only believe part of His word. And the most profound manifestation of the power of God is, in fact, the resurrection. How could they even consider this question since they have failed to acknowledge the truth of the heavenly realm, including the angels?

In typical Jewish fashion, Yeshua ends His answer with a question. *"Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."* The multitudes were astonished at His teaching. Perhaps their astonishment had less to do with the fate of the hypothetical woman in the story and more to do with Yeshua's ability to silence the Sadducees once and for all with but a few short sentences spoken with power and authority.

The passage tells us that as the news of the incident spread, the Pharisees were eager to gather around Yeshua, the young rabbi who had outsmarted their age-old enemies. But let's look at a parable Yeshua told in which He stuns even the Pharisees.



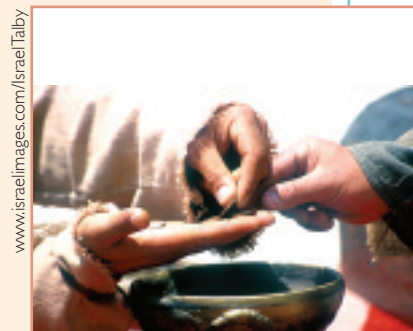
The Good Samaritan

"And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?' So he answered and said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' And He said to him, 'You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.' But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Then Jesus

money lender
luke 7:41-43

friend in need
luke 11:5-13

talents
matt. 25:14-30

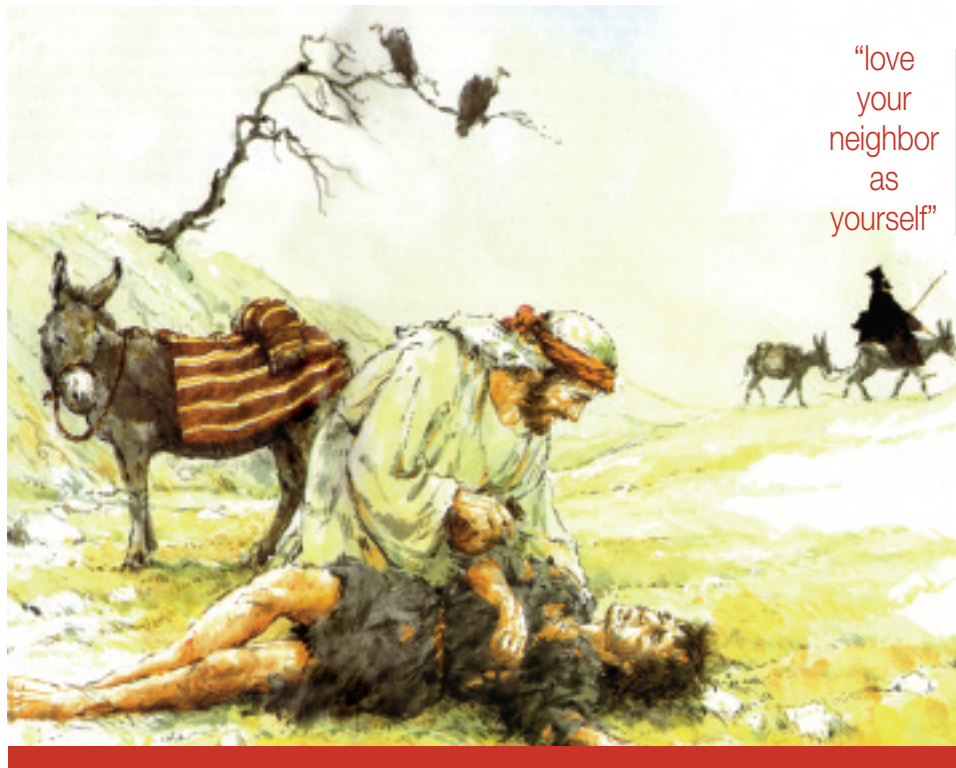




lost coin
luke 15:8-10

prodigal son
luke 15:11-32

shrewd steward
luke 16:1-8



“love
your
neighbor
as
yourself”

answered and said: ‘A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, “Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.” So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:25-37).

Here the question is being asked by a scribe, and it is probably a legitimate question. The concept of “testing” the teacher was commonly accepted as a part of first-century discipleship, and this man may well have been a sincere seeker. Note that his question involves action. He does not ask the master what he should believe, but rather what he needs to *do* to inherit eternal life. Again, Yeshua responds in a typically Jewish manner, answering the question with a question.

The seeker replies by quoting the greatest commandment, which is also a part of the *Shema*—the central tenant of Judaism that “*the Lord our God, the Lord is one*,” found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9—wisely acknowledging that eternal life is found in relationship with the one true God and a corresponding active love for those whom God has created. However, when the young man continues to question Him, Yeshua answers with a parable. Reaching into culture and geography totally familiar to His listeners, He shows His genius as a storyteller.

He paints a picture of the hot, dusty road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road well-known for attacks on travelers; a foolish man traveling the road alone; and a violent attack that leaves him nearly dead. Here it is important to stop and examine the oral law. The near-death condition of this man is called *goses* in Hebrew, meaning that he is beaten so badly he is very likely to die. However, until the

the
Lord
our
God,
the
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is
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moment of death, he is to be treated in every way as a living person. In Judaism, the principle of saving a life held uncompromised priority over every other law in the *Torah*. So even though the *Torah* forbids contact with a dead body in Leviticus 21, the concept of *pikuach nefesh* taught that all written laws of the *Torah* must be violated to preserve a human life.

When Yeshua's listeners heard that the man was half dead, they knew the oral law required that every attempt be made to save his life, setting aside any concern for ritual impurity. When the first man, who was a priest, and therefore a Sadducee, passed by the injured victim, they were not surprised. The priest did not believe in the oral law and could therefore justify his unethical conduct through a literal approach to the *Torah*. His concern for ritual purity took precedence over the sanctity of life. The second man, a Levite, is also part of the temple system. Another Sadducee. Again, the injured man is ignored in favor of ritual purity.

By now, the multitudes are on the edge of their seats. These were the rank and file of ancient Israel, everyday folks whose religious identity was linked very closely to the Pharisees. Yeshua has masterfully lead them through two encounters with their everyday enemy, the Sadducees. They have had the opportunity to cluck their tongues and wag their fingers at the legalistic behavior of those hypocritical priests. Now they wait with great anticipation for Yeshua to introduce the hero of the parable—certain to be a God-fearing, *Torah*-studying lover of the oral law—he would have to be a Pharisee!

Yeshua's next words must have stunned his listeners. A Samaritan?! The despised enemy of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in fact, of all Israel?



How could this be? How could Yeshua speak so favorably of this hated individual? We thought He was aligning with us! Here again, Yeshua's genius is at work. The insertion of the Samaritan into the story would cause each of His listeners to examine their preconceived notions of the principles of the story in light of the truth of God's Word. How could they continue in their attitude of self-satisfaction when the hero turned out to be an enemy rather than one of their own?

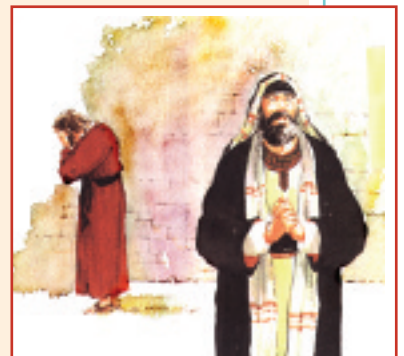
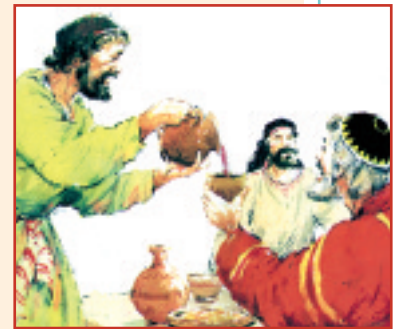
Once past the shock element, Yeshua reentered familiar territory, confirming the belief that true *Torah* discipleship is found in righteous action. Regardless of what the Samaritan might have believed, his actions indicated an understanding of the value God places on

the concept of
pikuach nefesh
taught that
all written laws
of the *Torah*
must be
violated
to PRESERVE
a human life.

master
and servant
luke 17:7-10

persistent widow
luke 18:2-8

pharisee and
tax collector
luke 18:9-14





human life and a willingness to go to any length to act accordingly.

Finally Yeshua asked the critical question: "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" With great wisdom, the young man recognized the heart of Yeshua's teaching. The love of God was clearly exemplified in the behavior of the Samaritan who set aside his ethnic and cultural prejudices to save a life. The

neighbor was not the injured man, or a person in great need, or even one identified as a Samaritan, but rather the one whose actions were filled with mercy. What was Yeshua requiring the young man to do? In order to inherit eternal life, he must *be* a neighbor; his life must be a constant, living witness of the truth of "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), loving both friend and foe with the same faithful, selfless love that God pours out on all of His creatures, each of whom bears the divine image.

As a master teacher, Yeshua continued to enlighten, instruct, and shock His followers through parable after parable. As the Messiah of Israel, He taught with power and authority. Certainly each of these wonderful stories has a universal meaning that touches each listener's personal experience. But the historical setting of the parables attests to the Jewishness of Yeshua and His message. How critical it is that we as modern Bible believers understand that context. May we study to show ourselves approved and respond to Yeshua's message with love and obedience that leads to righteous action.

By Cheryl Hauer
Deputy National Director
Bridges for Peace, USA



parables
have only
one purpose:
TO TEACH
MAN THE
WAYS
OF GOD

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Author's Note:

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Drs. Brad Young and David Flusser for their excellent research and deep insight which were building blocks in the preparation of this teaching letter.

All Scriptures are taken from the New King James Version.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

