

# The Quintessence of Jesus' Teaching: Provocative Parables

By Ross Winkle, PhD

Pacific Union Conference Secondary Bible Teachers' In-Service

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A lot of this, and a lot of that

**JUST WHAT DID JESUS DO?**



# Matthew 4:23

- “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.” (ESV)



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## Mark 6:6

- “And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.” (ESV)



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James Tissot

*Jesus Discourses with His Disciples*  
(*Jésus s'entretient avec ses disciples*)

1886-1896



Many things in parables

# THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE TEACHING OF JESUS



# The Chosen Pedagogy

- Speaking in parables was Jesus' chosen, core method of teaching spiritual truths.



# Matthew 13:1-3

- “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. **And he told them many things in parables, . . .**” (NRSV)





**James Tissot, *Jesus Preaches in a Ship* (Jésus prêche dans une barque), 1886-1894**

## Matthew 13:34-35

- “All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, **he said nothing to them without a parable**. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.’”  
(ESV)



## Mark 4:34

- **“He did not speak to them [the crowds] without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.” (ESV)**



# Matthew's Chiastic Focal Point

**A**

**Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7)**

**B**

**Outward missionary work (chap. 10)**

**C**

**Parables (chap. 13)**

**B'**

**Inward church relationships (chap. 18)**

**A'**

**Last things (chaps. 24-25)**



# Matthew's Chiastic Focal Point

A

“when Jesus finished these words” (7:28)

B

“when Jesus finished teaching” (11:1)

C

“when Jesus finished these **parables**” (13:53)

B'

“when Jesus finished these words” (19:1)

A'

“when Jesus finished all these words” (26:1)



# Hyperbole?

- Approximately 1/3 of the recorded teachings of Jesus are *clearly* in parables.
- But usually all of the teaching of Jesus was connected or related to parables.
- According to Robert M. Johnston, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Andrews University, the parables of Jesus are the most important part of the Bible.
- The parables are the heart and soul—the quintessence—of Jesus' teaching.





**James Tissot, *Jesus Discourses with His Disciples*  
(*Jésus s'entretient avec ses disciples*), 1886-1896**

Pieces of the puzzles

# LITERARY COMPONENTS OF THE PARABLES OF JESUS



# Literary Structure of the Parables

**1**

**Illustrand**

**2**

**Introductory Formula**

**3**

**Parable Proper**

**4**

**Application**

**5**

**Proof Text**



# A Pharisaic Parable

- “‘A possession of the assembly of Jacob’ (Deut 33:4). . . . The word ‘possession’ teaches that the Torah [Law] is a possession of Israel.
- “A parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like a son of kings who, as a child, was taken captive into a distant province. If he is summoned, even though it be after a hundred years, he is not ashamed to return and face it, for he says: ‘I am returning to my own possession.’
- “Even so, a wise scholar who separated from the words of Torah and then afterward walked according to them, if he is summoned to return, even though it be after a hundred years, he is not ashamed to return and face it, for he says: ‘I am returning to my own possession.’ It is as it is said: ‘A possession of the assembly of Jacob.’”



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## Luke 12:15-21

- “And he said to them, ‘Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.’ And he told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” And he said, “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.’” (ESV)



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- ““ [. . .] And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ And he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.’” (ESV)



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James Tissot, *Jerusalem Jerusalem (Jérusalem Jérusalem)*, 1886-1894

Not the same as the Pharisees and Rabbis

# FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENCE



# Function of Pharisaic Parables

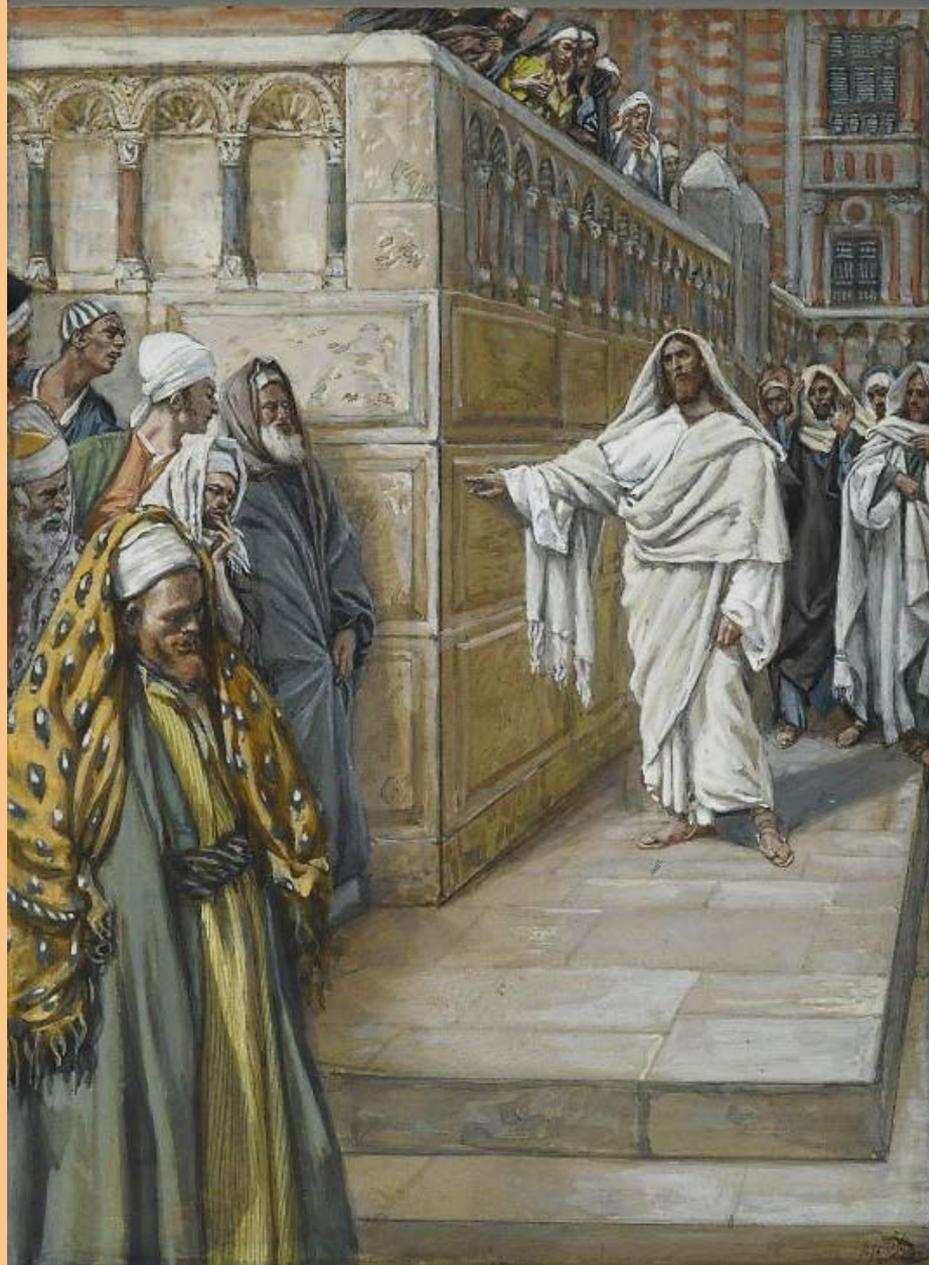
- Pharisaic parables supported conventional pieties.
  - They confirmed people in their conventional religious beliefs.
  - They were reassuring.
  - Most were created to explain a difficult point of Scripture or to solve other theological problems.
- Example: Rabbinic parable parallel to Jesus' parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
  - Pay is proportionate to work.



# Function of Jesus' Parables

- Jesus' parables subverted and broke conventional pieties.
  - They made things *harder* and were *troubling*.
  - Jesus' parables caused *problems*.
  - They *broke* and *subverted* conventional religious beliefs.
    - That was *not* the *goal*, but it was the *result*.
- Example: Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
  - Pay is *not* proportionate to work.





James Tissot, *Jerusalem Jerusalem (Jérusalem Jérusalem)*, 1886-1894

From misunderstanding to murderous plots

**PROVOCATIVE?**



## Mark 4:10-13

- “When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. . . And he said to them, **‘Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?’**”  
(NRSV)



## Matthew 15:10-16

- “Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’ Then the disciples approached and said to him, **‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?’** He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’ But Peter said to him, **‘Explain this parable to us.’** Then he said, **‘Are you also still without understanding?’**” (NRSV)



## Matthew 21:45-46

- **“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.” (NRSV)**



# Matthew 26:1-4

- “When Jesus had finished saying all these things [including several parables], . . . the chief priests and the elders of the people . . . **conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.**” (NRSV)





**James Tissot, *The Chief Priests Take Counsel Together*  
(*Les princes des prêtres se consultent*), 1886-1896**

Way back then

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JESUS' PARABLES



# The Parable of the Pricey Pearl

- "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matt 13:45-46, ESV)



## (continued)

- The pearl was known as the “Queen of Gems” in the ancient world.
- Pearls were virtually incomparable in value, and they were more expensive than gold.
- They were so expensive they were reserved almost exclusively for the noble and the very rich.
- Rome’s “pearl craze” reached its zenith in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.
- Pearls were such a major status symbol that Julius Caesar passed a law forbidding non-royals from wearing pearls.





(continued)

- The Roman historian Suetonius wrote that the general Vitellius, at the peak of the Roman Empire, financed *an entire military campaign* by selling just *one* of his mother's pearl earrings (fortunately, he won the campaign).

## (continued)

- The most expensive dinner in history centered around two fabulous pearls.
  - In 41 BCE Cleopatra VII of Egypt asserted to Marc Antony that Egypt had such a fabulous heritage and tremendous wealth that it was above a Roman conquest. To prove it, she made a wager with her lover that that she could give the most expensive dinner in history.
  - Though he had finished a lavish meal and was reclining with an empty plate, Cleopatra—also reclining with an empty plate—removed one of her earrings that contained a large pearl.



## (continued)

- The world's first gemologist, Pliny, wrote in his famous *Natural History* (IX.lxviii), the following about this pearl and its twin:
  - “The first place and the topmost rank among all things of price is held by pearls. . . . Their whole value lies in their brilliance, size, roundness, smoothness and weight. . . . There have been two pearls that were the largest in the whole of history; both were owned by Cleopatra. . . . They had come down to her through the hands of the kings of the East.”





Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra, 41 B.C.*, 1885

## (continued)

- After dangling the pearl before her guests, Cleopatra [probably had the pearl crushed and] then dropped it in a goblet of wine vinegar, let it dissolve, and then drank it down.
- Lucius Plancus had been assigned the role of umpire, and he immediately stopped Cleopatra from doing the same to the other pearl and declared that Marc Antony had lost the wager.
- Pliny wrote that the two pearls were worth an estimated 60 million sesterces, or 1,875,000 ounces of fine silver (approximately \$46,875,000 with silver at the current price of \$25/ounce).





Detail from Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, 1744



**World's oldest pearl found near Abu Dhabi in 2017.  
Pink pearls were the most valuable in the ancient world**



**When reading the parables, a good dose of surprise and shock helps.**

# The Parable of the Boxing Widow

- “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”’”





(continued)

- And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’” (Luke 18:1-8, NRSV)

# Another Look at the Judge

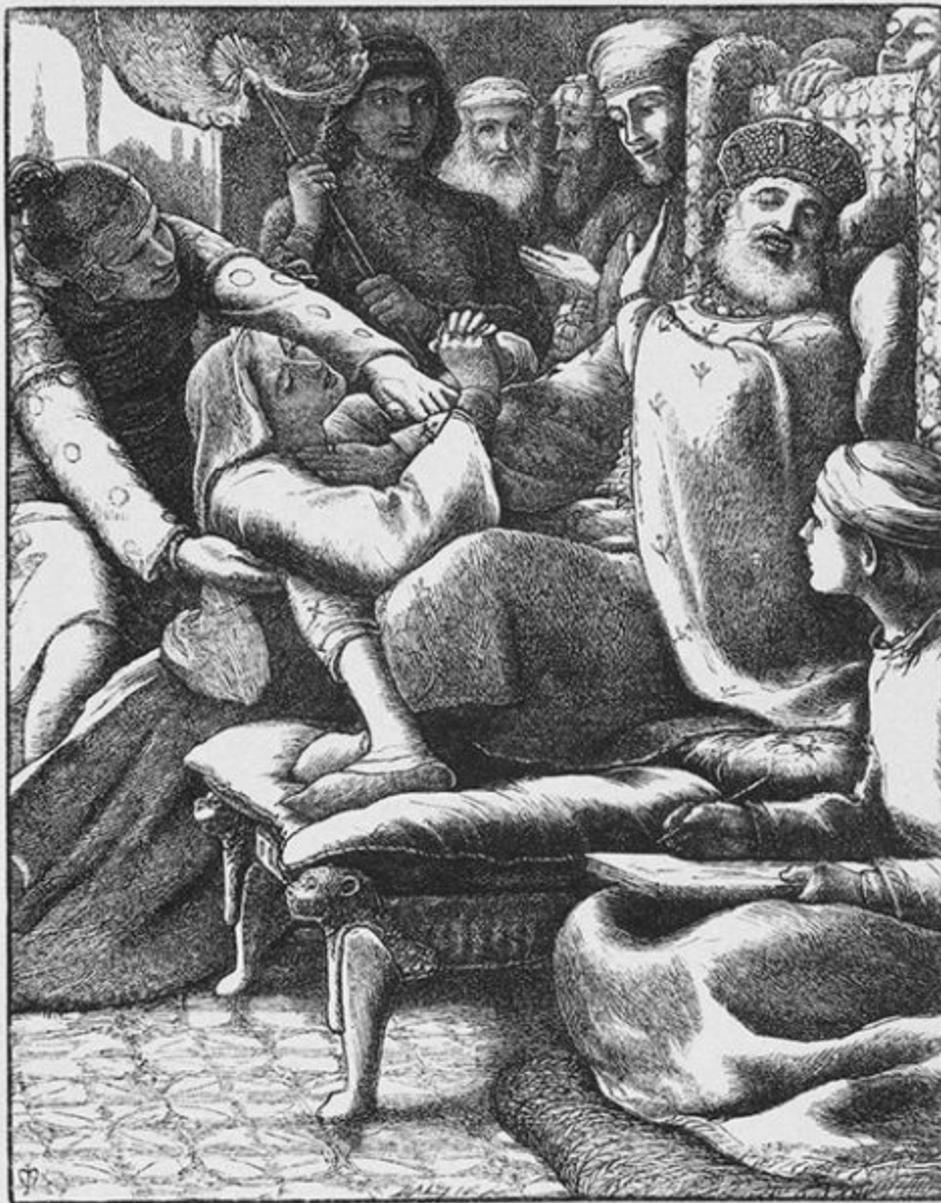
- “. . . yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not **give me a black eye** by continually coming.” (Luke 18:5, NRSV)



## (continued)

- The language that Luke uses is that of the sport of *boxing*.
- Jesus was comparing the persistent, tenacious, and even aggressive demand for justice by the widow to a *TKO*—a move that would *give the judge a “black eye.”*





John Everett Millais, *The Unjust Judge and the Importunate Widow*, 1864

From then to now

# CATCHING THE PARABLES OF JESUS



## Detour Ahead: A “Problem” Parable

- An infamous parable where Seventh-day Adventists frequently have focused their energies on the point that *wasn't* the focus



**ROAD  
CLOSED**

**DETOUR**



Link-Belt



## **The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)**

# Problems and Solutions

- Adventists frequently get stuck in defending the “state of the dead” in this parable and miss the actual point of the parable.
- The fictional story Jesus told about the eternal rewards of Lazarus, the diseased beggar, and the uncaring Rich Man was a kind of “cosmic eschatology.”





*“You’ve been randomly selected for additional screening.”*



(continued)

- “[The rich man] said, ‘Then, father [Abraham], I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but **if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.**’ He said to him, ‘**If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**’” (Luke 16:27-31, NRSV)

## (continued)

- If the Jewish people did not believe what Scripture said, would they believe what a resurrected person said that supported Scripture?
- If we don't believe Scripture, would we believe a miracle that supported what Scripture said?



# The Most Famous Parable of Jesus

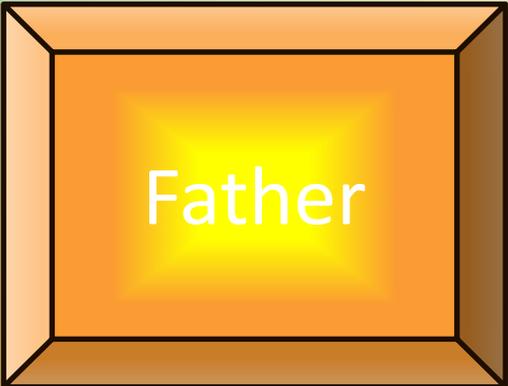
- It's the most misinterpreted parable of Jesus.





Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1661-1669

# Main Characters in the Parable of the “Prodigal Son”



Father

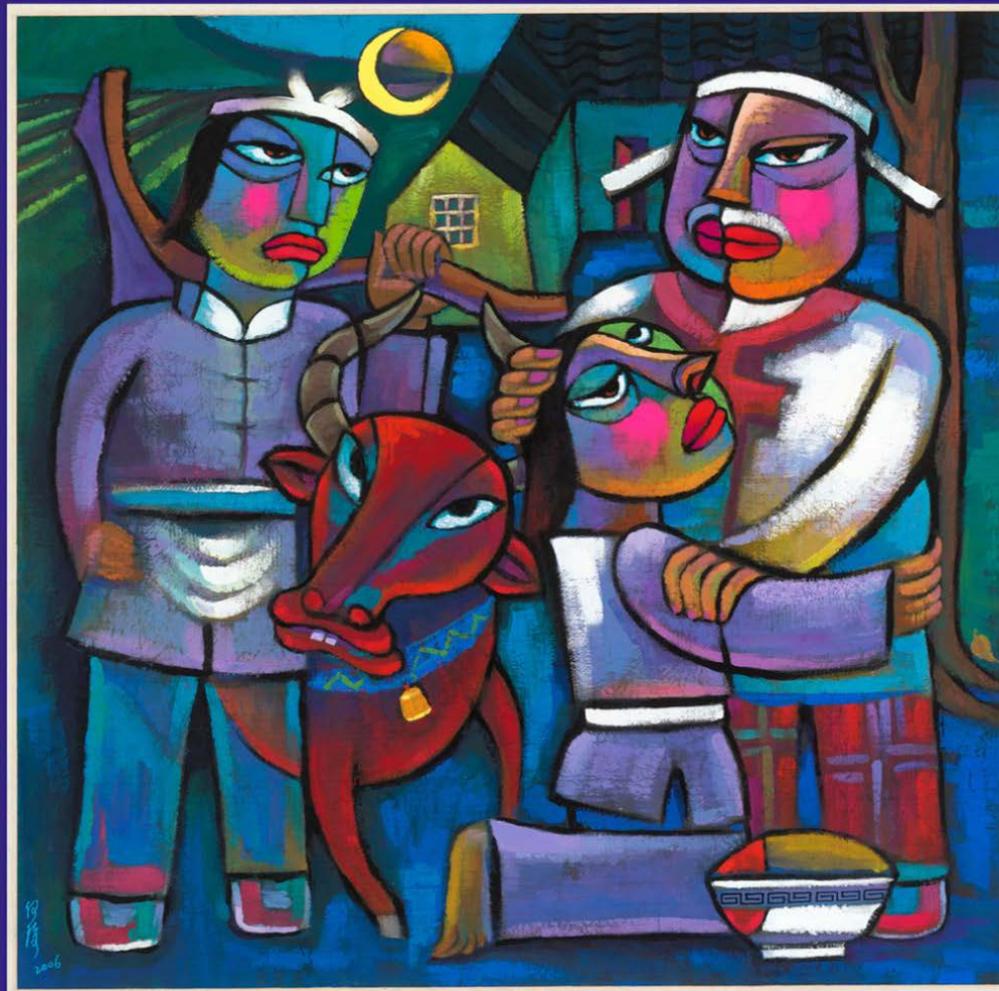


Elder Son



Younger  
Son





He Qi, *Prodigal Son*, 21st century



Brooke Huval, *The Prodigal Son*, 21st century

# Structure of the Parable of the “Prodigal Son”

Younger Son

“He was lost but  
has been found”

(15:24)

Elder Son

“He was lost but  
has been found”

(15:32)



# Mistitled

- The “Parable of the Prodigal Son” has been mistitled.
- For one thing, we don’t know what “prodigal” means in the first place.
- In any case, the parable is *not* about the younger son alone.
  - The first part of the parable does *not* solve the problem upon which Jesus was focusing.
  - The first part of the parable about the younger son sets the scene so it can get to the its climactic point.



## The Real Focus of the Parable of the “Prodigal Son”



(continued)

- In fact, the *emphasis* and *focal point* is on the *second part*—the part with the *elder son*.



IT'S NOT

FAIR

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# Problems and Solutions

- This parable does not respond to the initial reason Jesus told the parable *unless the emphasis is on the second part about the elder son.*
- In Luke 15:1-3, Jesus hosted “sinners” and tax collectors—the scum of society—and the religious leaders grumbled about it.
  - According to the *Mekilta* on Exodus 18:1, “The wise say, ‘Let not a man associate with sinners, even to bring them over to the Torah.’”
  - Avoid sinners at all cost!



## (continued)

- Jesus was addressing this parable to the grumblers—those who did not *rejoice* because the “lost” had been “found.”
- Instead of *criticizing* these people, one should *rejoice!*
- Consequently, the focus of the parable is:
  - *Not* a proclamation of the Good News to the poor
  - *Not* God’s love for those who return to him
  - But *rather* a vindication of the Good News in reply to *Jesus’ critics*





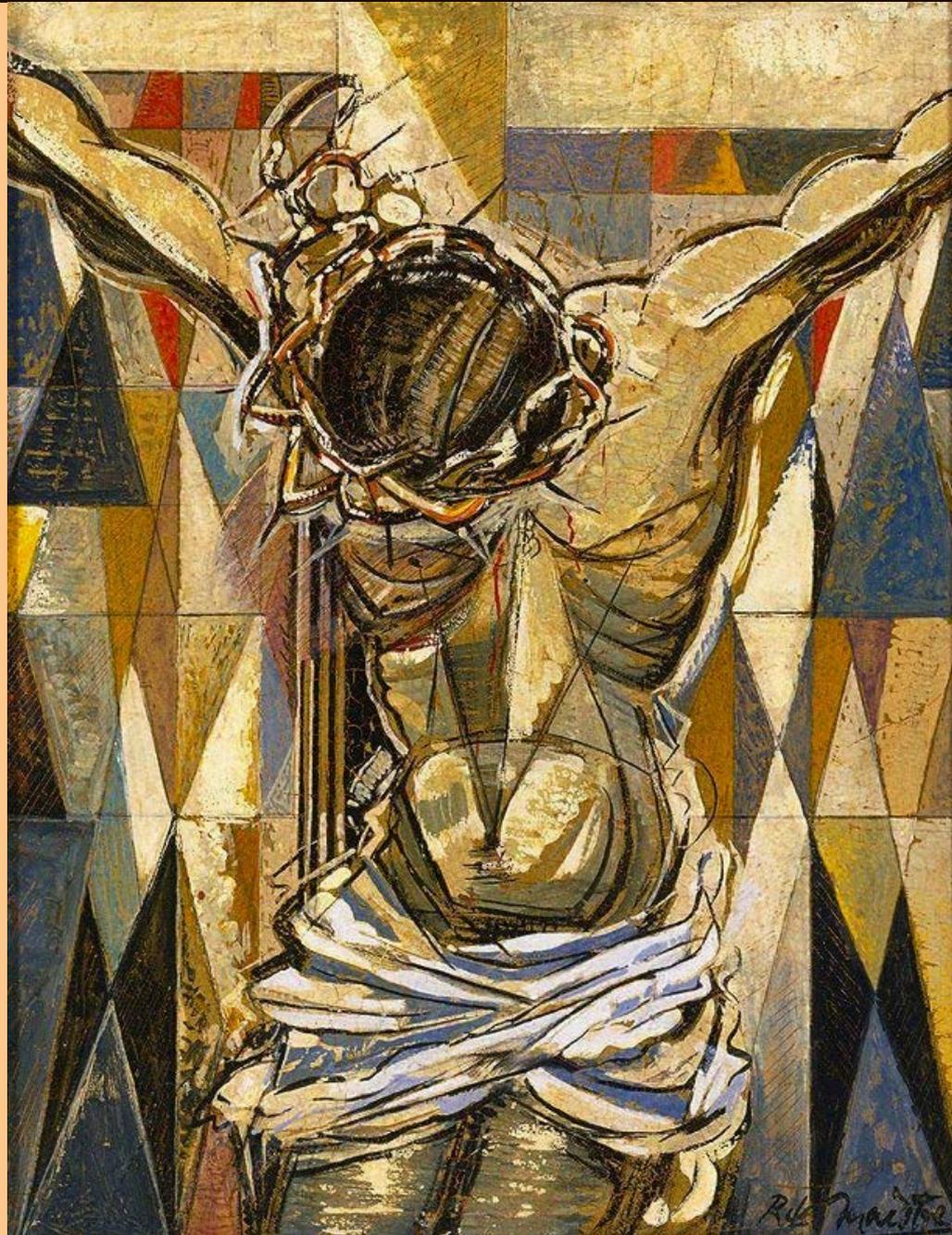
(continued)

- How often do we *grumble* and *complain* because of:
  - Someone going against our spiritual traditions
  - Someone doing something that's "not fair" in our church community
- When do we have opportunities to *rejoice* because of the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ?

# Parable Without End

- Why did this parable not have an “end”?





Sr. Margaret Kerry, *Crucifixion*, 1957

On a serious note

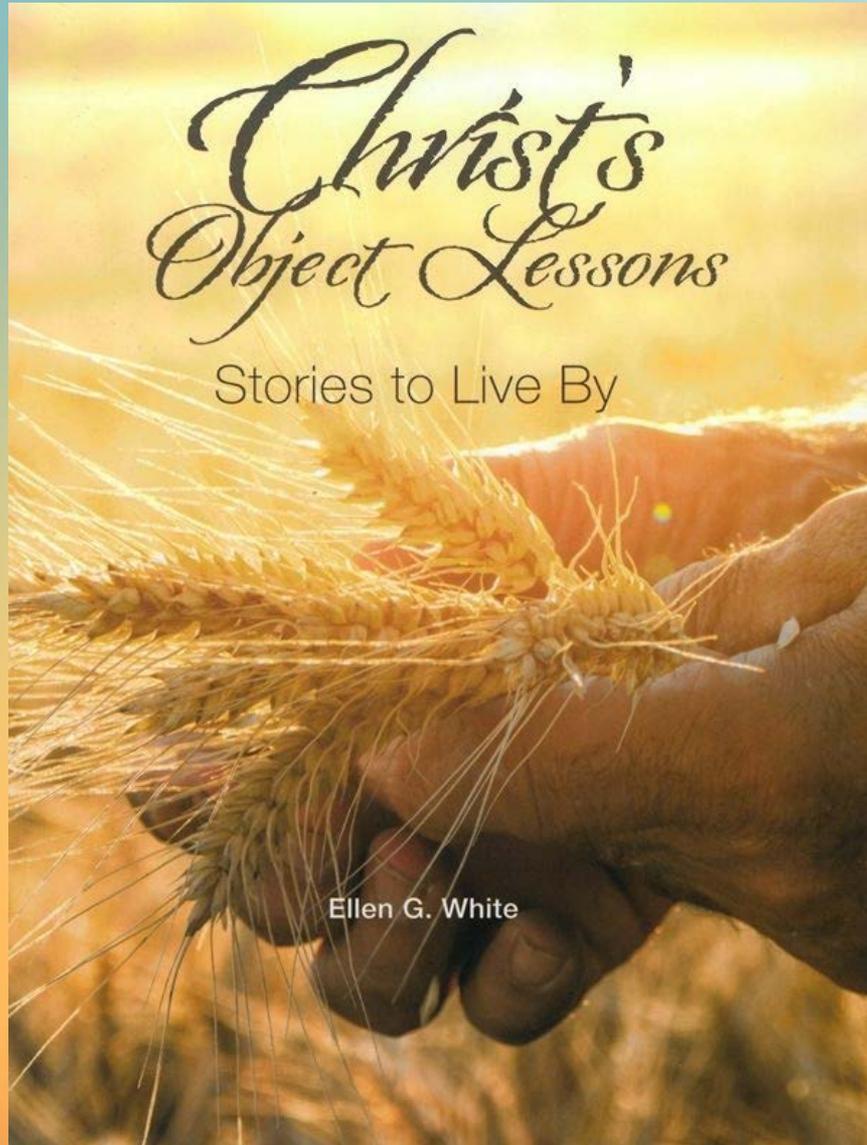
# PARABLE RESOURCES (PART I)

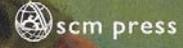
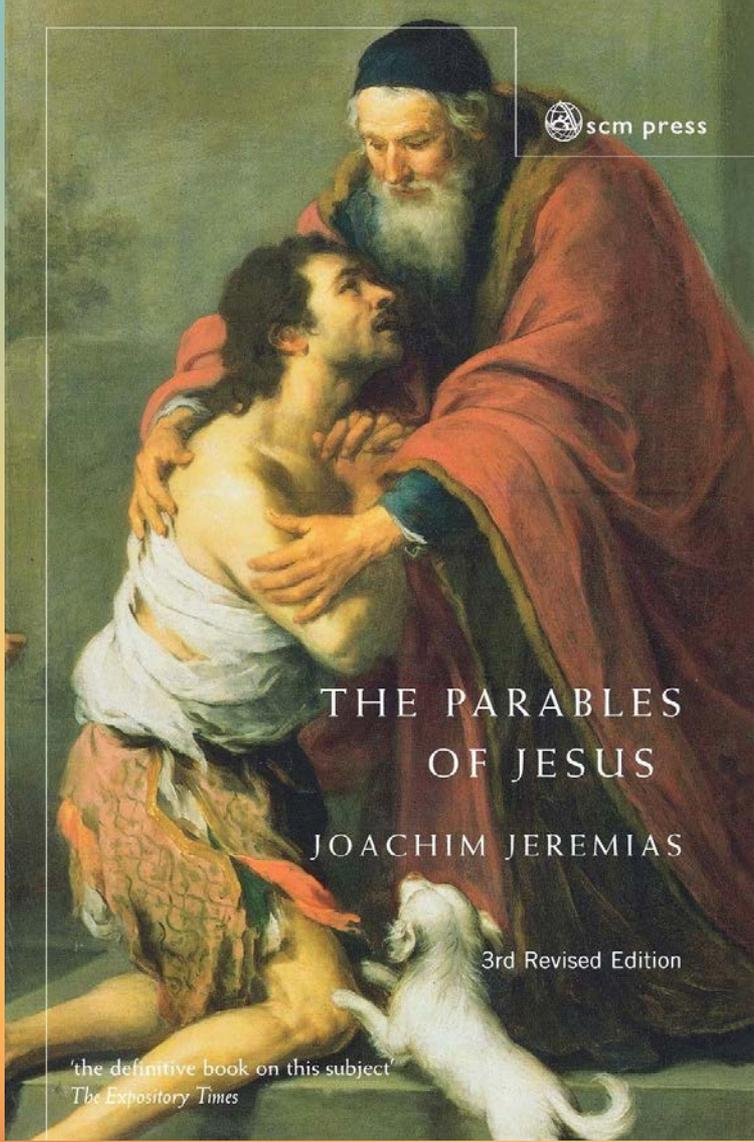


# Christ's Object Lessons

Stories to Live By

Ellen G. White



The logo for SCM Press, featuring a circular emblem with a stylized 'S' and 'C' and the text 'scm press' to its right.The book cover features a classical painting of an elderly man with a long white beard and a red robe embracing a younger man. The younger man is shirtless, wearing a white cloth around his waist and a patterned garment. A small white dog is at the bottom. The background is a soft, hazy landscape.

THE PARABLES  
OF JESUS  
JOACHIM JEREMIAS

3rd Revised Edition

'the definitive book on this subject'  
*The Expository Times*



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# Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes

CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE GOSPELS





# The Cross & the Prodigal

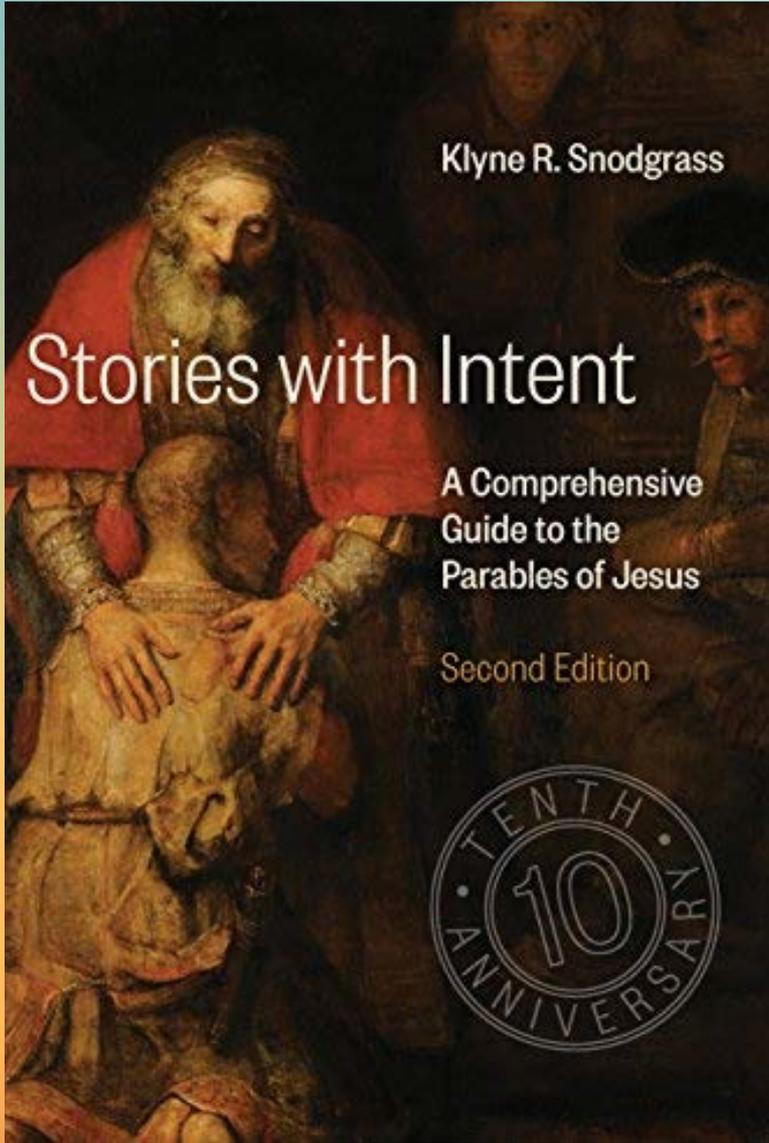
*Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*



KENNETH E. BAILEY

REVISED AND EXPANDED





Klyne R. Snodgrass

# Stories with Intent

A Comprehensive  
Guide to the  
Parables of Jesus

Second Edition



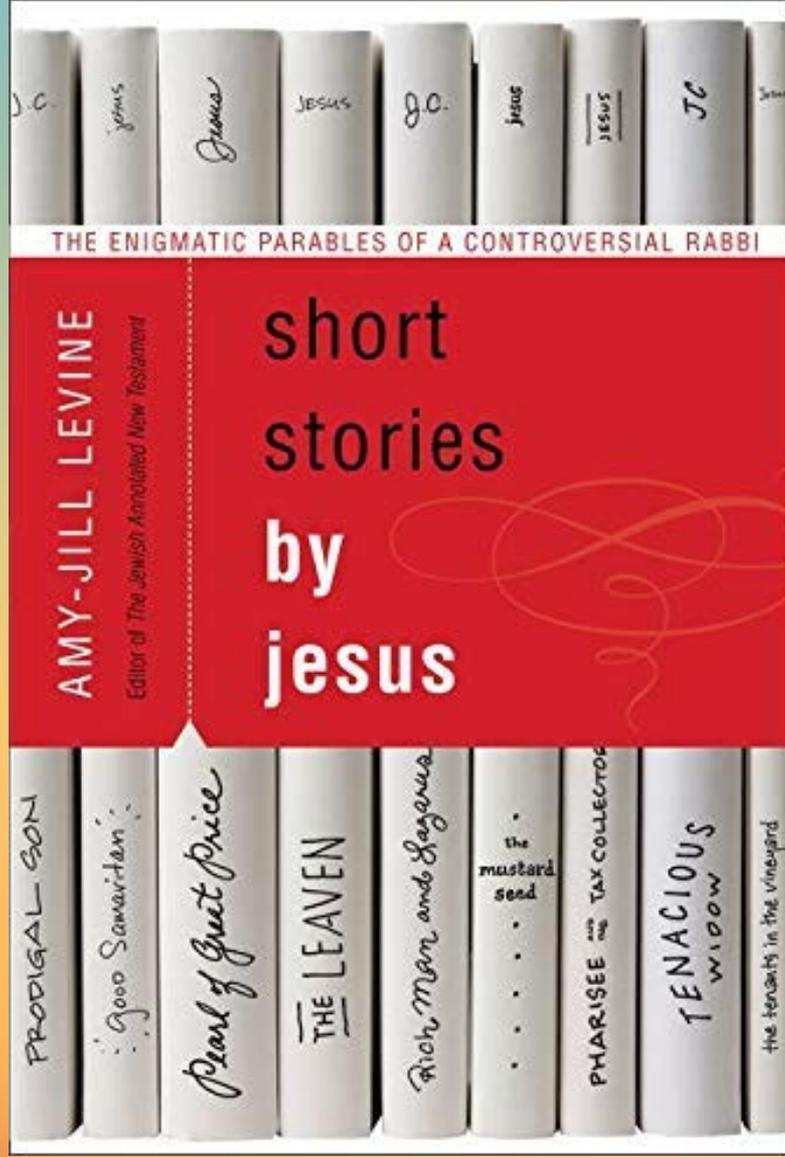
# KINGDOM, GRACE, JUDGMENT



*Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication  
in the Parables of Jesus*

ROBERT FARRAR CAPON





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**HIDDEN TREASURE**

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**WINNER BEST NARRATIVE**

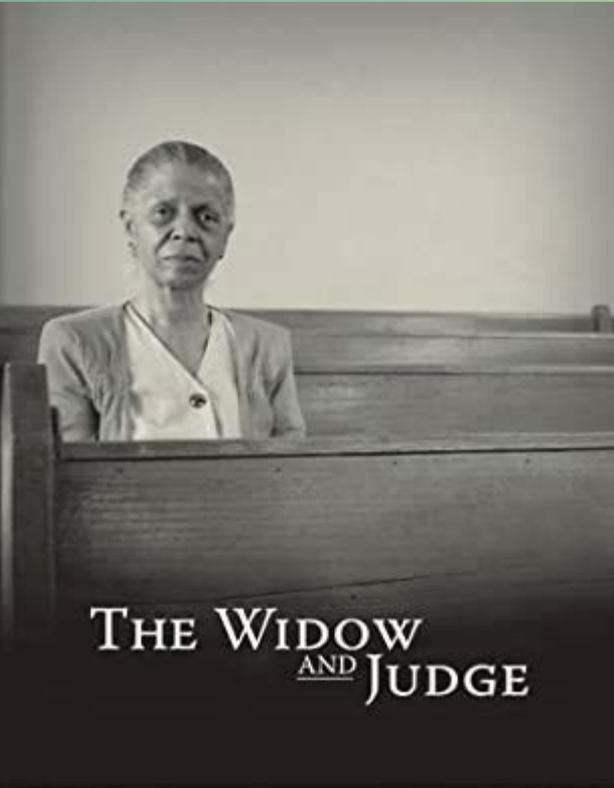
**SAMARITAN**

**MODERNPARABLES™ VOLUME 1 LESSONS 3 & 4**  
PARABLE OF THE SOWER  
 Based on Luke 10:25-37

**THE SHREWD MANAGER**

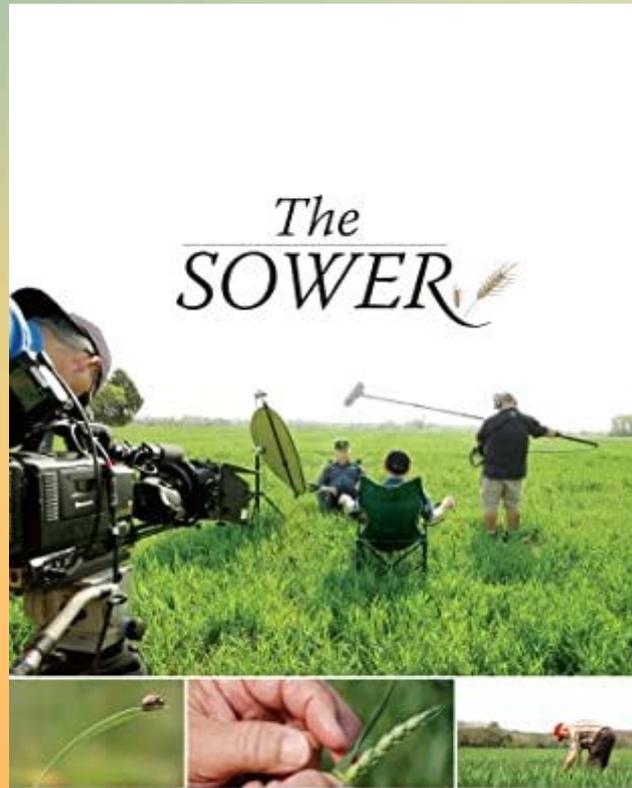
**MODERNPARABLES™ VOLUME 1 LESSONS 5 & 6**  
PARABLE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD  
 Based on Luke 16:1-9





**THE WIDOW  
AND JUDGE**

**MODERN PARABLES™** | VOLUME 1 LESSONS 7 & 8  
LEARNING IN THE SHADOWS OF GOD | Based on Luke 10:1-8



*The*  
**SOWER**

**MODERN PARABLES™** | VOLUME 1 LESSONS 9 & 10  
LEARNING IN THE SHADOWS OF GOD | Based on Matthew 13:1-23

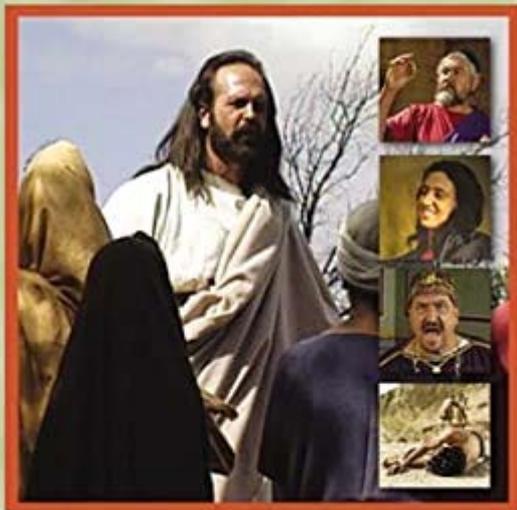


**PRODIGAL  
SONS**

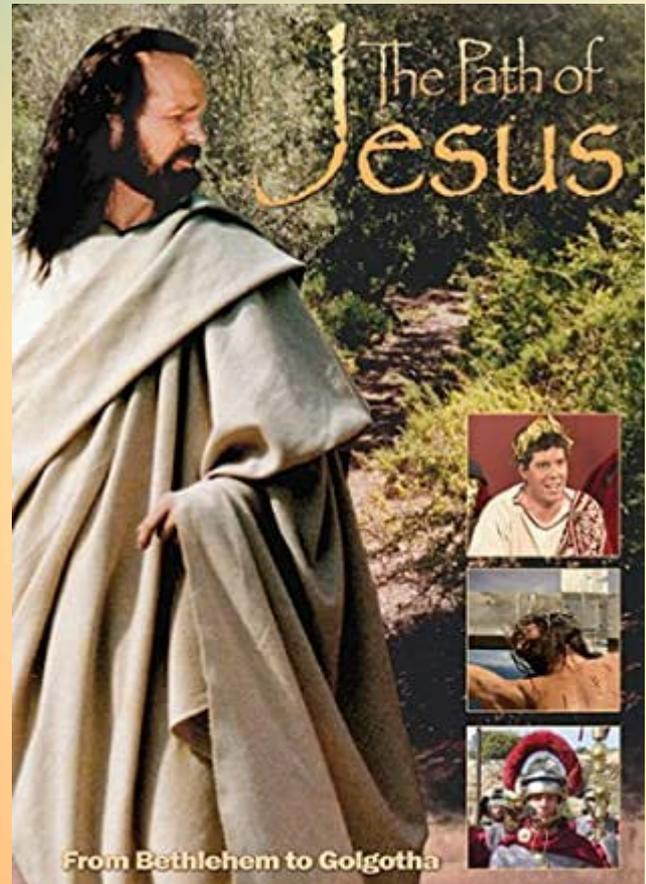
**MODERN PARABLES™** | VOLUME 1 LESSONS 11 & 12  
LEARNING IN THE SHADOWS OF GOD | Based on Luke 15:11-32



# Parables of Jesus

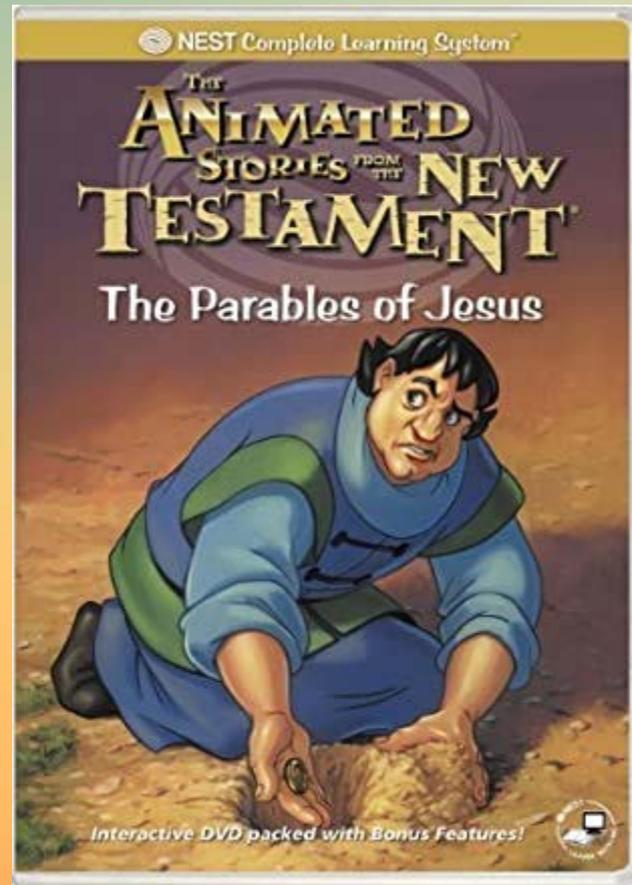


Through the lens of Bible times



From Bethlehem to Golgotha

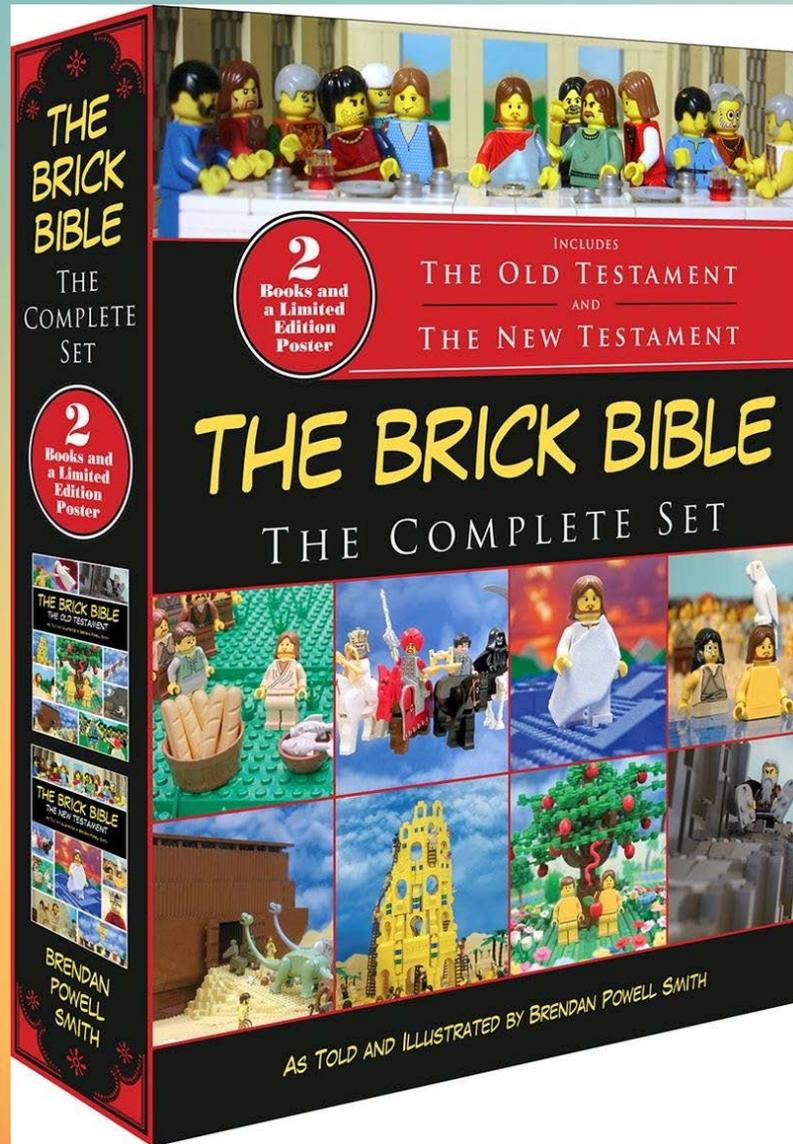


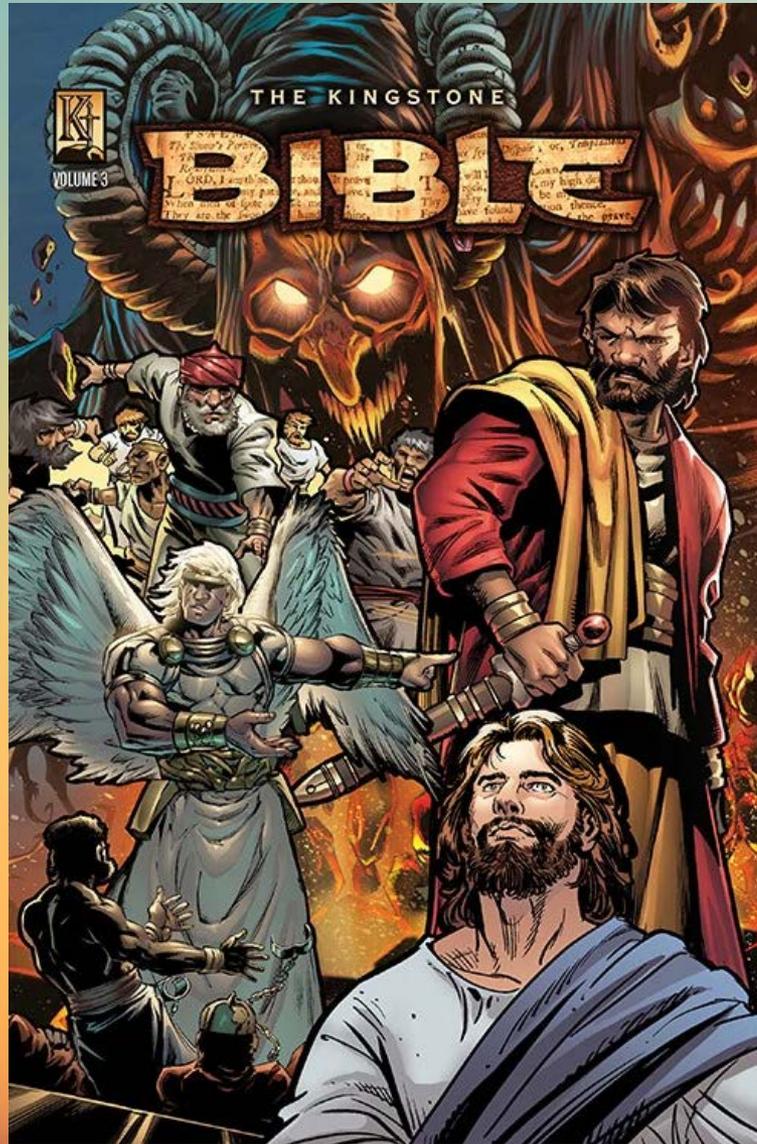


On a less serious note

# PARABLE RESOURCES (PART II)









A Fawcett Crest Book

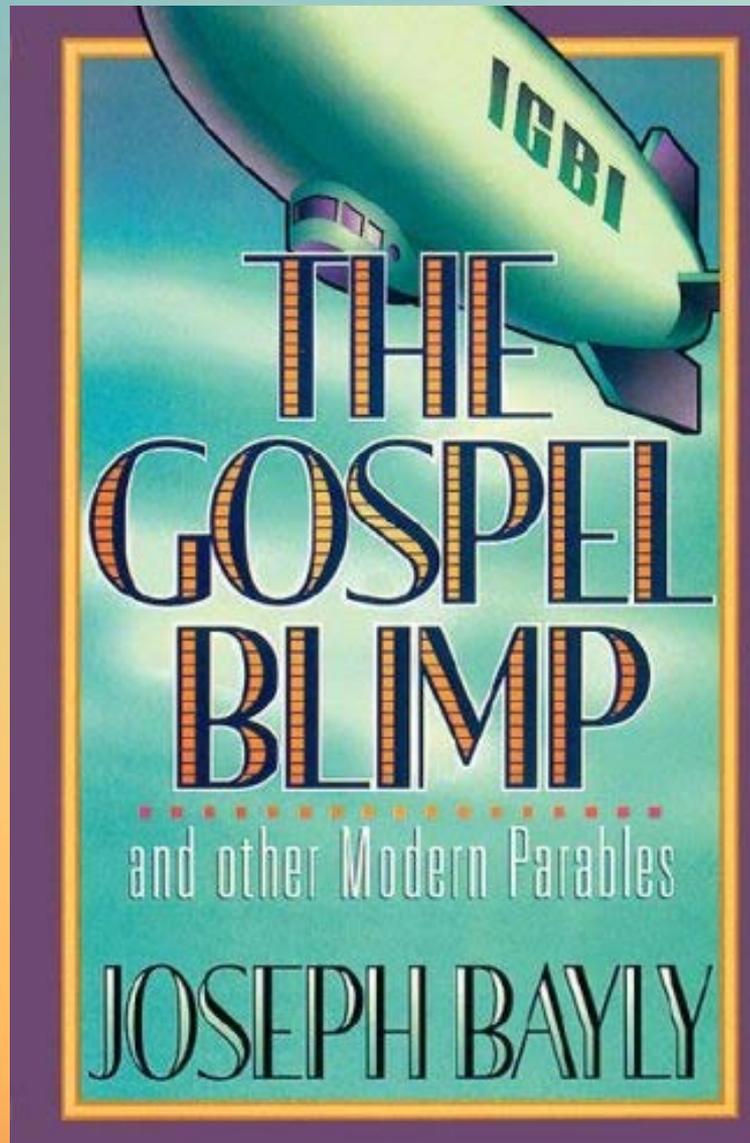
# THE PARABLES OF PEANUTS®



by **ROBERT L. SHORT**

Author of **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PEANUTS**





# Politically Correct Parables



BY ROBERT MARTIN WALKER



# NOT THE PARABLES OF JESUS

REVISED SATIRICAL VERSION (RSV)

FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU CRITICISED SOMEONE ELSE FOR NOT FEEDING ME

John Spencer

# MORE NOT THE PARABLES OF JESUS

REVISED SATIRICAL VERSION (RSV)

I'M NOT WORTHY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON..

CORRECT. NOW CLEAR OFF!

John Spencer

STILL MORE!

# NOT THE PARABLES OF JESUS

REVISED SATIRICAL VERSION (RSV)

SUPPOSE ONE OF YOU LOSES A SHEEP, DOES HE NOT JUST BUY ANOTHER?

John Spencer



Do you have  
any questions?



