Notes

Definition:

A parable is a story which indirectly points to a truth (earthly story with a heavenly (Kingdom of God) meaning. With Jesus, he is teaching about a way of living, being in a kingdom, that can be chosen, that has no territory except where God’s sovereignty and will is honored. His stories provide insights, stimulate the conscience, and move one to action. They are concise and marked by simplicity (never more than two persons or groups in the same scene, like in Hebrew stories). Sometimes they reverse one’s expectations (just as God’s way is different from our way). They arise in a context so that they speak to the situation. Occasionally, they are grouped together for greater impact (e.g., the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost sons). They reflect the agenda of the gospel, and they are in the synoptic gospels and none in John.

Interpretation:

Hear them as stories from an oral culture, note their construction, consider the “gaps,” determine the function in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Different parables:

Parable of the sower (a parable about parables or the message of Jesus—importance in proclamation and the response)
Three points: The kingdom is a kingdom of the word. The parable calls for attention and a reorientation of one’s life. The kingdom is presently at work—harvest is now and ahead.

The unforgiving servant—the forgiveness of God must be replicated in the lives of the forgiven. (Similar to Luke 7—story told to Simon the Pharisee about the two who owed money,
one 500 pieces of silver and another 50. Simon’s answer points out his lack of compassion, his blindness).

The three parables in Luke 15 (Luke has more parables than the other two gospels) lost sheep, lost coin, lost sons (the prodigal son (Tim Keller THE PRODIGAL GOD and Henri Nouwen THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON [REMBRANT’S PORTRAIT]) Let’s take some time here. The first two speak about something lost and the joy when it is found. We would expect the third parable to reflect the same dynamic and it does and doesn’t. All the sheep matter but the focus is on the one lost and the joy at its discovery. All the coins are important, but the focus is on the one lost and joy at its discovery. So, does the story of the so-called prodigal son (this along with the Good Samaritan are the best known and loved parables) follow these? It will in a different order and therefore mirrors and at the same time, shifts the focus. The context—Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law for welcoming sinners and eats with them (the well doesn’t need a physician; he goes to the sick) so he tells these parables. The first two will warm the opposition up and the last one will call them to repentance and change of heart. Let’s unpack this.

• Younger son asking for his inheritance (as though father is dead)
• Younger son taking his portion and wasting it
• Younger son sinks to the lowest possible situation
• Younger son’s realization (scheme?)
• Younger son’s acceptance of the graciousness of his father
• Father gives the portion to the younger son freely
• Father allows his son his freedom
• Father longs for his son and runs to greet him
• Father receives him back into the family as a son, not a servant
• Father starts a celebration
• Father goes out to the older brother
• Father comments on his treatment of the younger brother (implied question that functions like the question that ends Jonah?)
• Older son lays out his position; I’ve been dutiful and no celebration but he has been a wastrel and you give him a party (“never” to father’s “always”)
• The parable leaves us standing with the older son as he hears his father (judgment implied?)

The wheat and the weeds—we live in the world as kingdom folk and leave the judgment to God (in Paul—Vengeance is mine says the Lord).

The mustard seed and the leaven—the message and method of the kingdom consciousness seems insignificant but it has great effect (look at how insignificant Jesus and his movement in the shadow of the Roman empire [kingdom] and how much it has affected and influenced the world).

The treasure and the pearl of great price—one’s action when the truth is revealed—if the kingdom is present, radical response is needed now (note Elijah and Elisha, note Jesus saying “let the dead bury the dead”—follow Jesus now!).

The two sons—which son did what the father wanted. We are not judged on the basis of our intentions or words, what we do is the proof. The kingdom commitment must be lived. The
book of James says much the same thing—Faith without works is dead.

The wedding banquet and the feast—Again, when the invitation is given, one must accept it (Israel has been invited but offers excuses, so others, considered unfit by the religious authorities are welcomed because they are “hungry.”

Two builders—on rock (those who hear and do the word) and on sand (those who hear and don’t do).

The “good” Samaritan—“good” is an adjective we have added and thus lost the punch of this parable. In Luke, this story comes after Jesus’ being questioned about the greatest commandment (note in Matthew this appears without the parable; he is still being tested. In Mark, Jesus answers and the questioner affirms him so that Jesus tells him he is not far from the kingdom.) This parable is not about being moral and good; there is a more radical message. In this parable we are to put together two contradictory words referring to the same person—“Samaritan” and “neighbor.” Not about definition, but about actions, even from an outcast. Disciples of Jesus are those who refuse boundaries for the identification of neighbor and instead love even their enemies. This parable confronts the sin of racism.

Workers in the vineyard—Here we confront God’s graciousness as opposed to our view of justice (or jealously?). The owner pays what he promises and folks could celebrate their wages (they are working) and those others who were included in the generosity of the owner. We twist and turn with this parable.

The rich fool—a parable which exposes what is our relationship to possessions and generosity. One could also see a message about the frailty of life and that we can’t tell what
the future holds. Possessions can be the biggest obstacle to following the demands of the kingdom of God (check the sermon on the mount). Trust in God, not possessions.

The unjust steward—this is a rough one and really rubs us wrong. Why does Jesus say he wish he had more followers like this steward? There is really demonstrates Jesus’s stress on urgency like we saw in the treasure in the field. He saw the writing on the wall and he acted dramatically (unethically? Illegally?) to insure his future. Jesus wants the same level of awareness and action from his followers. Could there also be a message on money?

The rich man (Dives) and Lazarus—only one with a named person and focuses on the afterlife (consequence of how a life was live—connect to Matthew's sheep and goats story). This parable attacks a certain type of wealth, wealth that does not see poverty and suffering. The juxtaposition of wealth and poverty cannot be tolerated. What we have been given by God is to be shared with our brothers and sisters. In the kingdom of God, everyone is welcomed and taken care of. When we see someone in need, we act. (I’m convicted) We should be attentive so that we “see” others, particularly those mostly dismissed. That the rich man asks for an extension is foolish; he has received already messages in the law and prophets that instruct him to aid those in need.

The unjust judge—Not about badgering God, but that if this judge finally hears this woman, how much more would a benevolent, caring God hear our prayers and act.

Pharisee and the publican-juxtaposition to underscore the message. How does God’s perception of a person differ from our assessment? This parable speaks of humility and repentance over against arrogance and hypocrisy. This
parable is a “living” one for it constantly leads to uncovering our kinship with the Pharisee.

The faithful and the unfaithful servants—eschatological tone. We must be about our kingdom business anticipating the coming judgment.

The sheep and the goats—not really a parable, but stresses what we need to be doing before judgment comes. We are not to be tribal and only help those in our group; we treat everyone with the same regard as if they were Jesus (Mother Teresa). This too is eschatological; we will be responsible for our actions whether compassionate or not. We must see those about us (not like Dives who showed little attention or compassion).