

# Jesus' Parables and Paul's Letters

## BACKGROUND

- “There are six explicit references to ‘words of the Lord’ in Paul’s letters” (*Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, “Jesus, Sayings of”). The four interesting ones are 1 Cor 7:10 regarding divorce, 1 Cor 9:13 regarding payment of clergy, 1 Cor 11:23 regarding the eucharist and 1 Thess 4:15 about the second coming.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Robert Capon divided the parables into three groups: parables of the kingdom, of grace, and of judgment. What groups or topics do you see the parables as most naturally falling into? Equivalently, what topics do the parables address? (E.g., the life of the disciple, the community of faith, the salvation of individuals or Israel, the problem of evil, etc.)
2. What has struck you as we’ve surveyed the parables? Was anything surprising? Is there anything you would expect to see there but don’t, or vice-versa?
3. Bruce Metzger<sup>1</sup> helpfully describes the theological emphasis of Paul’s letters as falling into four chronological groups:

“The first letters that he wrote (the two to the church at Thessalonica) deal primarily with problems bearing on **eschatology**—the second coming of Christ and the end of the age.

“A few years later, during his third missionary journey, Paul sent four of his most weighty letters to the churches in Galatia, Corinth, and Rome. Amid the variety of theological topics considered in these four, the apostle’s preoccupation is with **soteriology**—the doctrine of the way of salvation.

“Several years later while Paul was in prison in Rome, his letters to Christians at Ephesus, Colossae, and Philippi deal primarily with **Christology**—the doctrine of the person and work of Christ. In this period also falls the very brief personal note to Philemon.

“Finally, whoever may have been responsible for the present form of the three Pastoral Letters, which are traditionally associated with Paul’s second Roman imprisonment (1 Tim, Titus, 2 Tim), it is obvious that their chief concern is with **ecclesiology**—the duties of a pastor in providing instruction and leadership for the local church.”

Broadly speaking, what areas does Paul address which Jesus doesn’t?

4. Paul is unique among the apostles both for his dramatic effect on church growth among the Gentiles, and for his not having been a follower of Jesus during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Paul’s history may be one factor in the way he draws upon Jesus’ teaching. According to the *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (entry “Jesus and Paul”),

When one moves from the Gospels to the Pauline letters one is immediately struck by the virtual absence of quotations of sayings of Jesus. While Paul makes Jesus Christ and his work of salvation the center of his preaching, he hardly ever quotes actual sayings of this Jesus or refers to his deeds, except to his death and resurrection. In his *paraenesis*, or teaching, he gives instructions similar to those of Jesus, and yet he seldom cites the latter... This state of affairs is

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Testament*, Abingdon, 1983, pp. 217-218.

puzzling when contrasted with the often observed continuity in theology and attitude between Jesus and Paul.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's knowledge of the Gospel comes both through direct revelation (Gal 1:12) and through the teaching handed down to him (1 Cor 15:1-3). It is thought probably that Paul learned the Gospel in detail first from the same Hellenistic Christians whom he had just been persecuting—that "if there is any 'bridge' between Jesus and Paul it must lie here" (DPL).

How do the differences in emphasis between Paul's teachings and Jesus' reflect Paul's background?

5. Consider also the differences of context between the recipients of Paul's letters, and Jesus' pre-resurrection disciples. What differences do you see between John's Gospel and his letters? What similarities do you see between Paul's letters and Peter's (setting aside for the moment authorship issues)?
6. Paul rarely refers to the kingdom of God, a term and concept central to Jesus' teachings in the parables. Compare the kingdom theology in the following characteristic passages to that in the parables.

*1 Cor 4:18*: Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. 20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

*1 Cor 6:9*: Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (Very similar: Gal 5:19; 1 Thess 2:12.)

*Rom 14:15*: If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. 16 Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

7. The crucifixion is an apparent horizon past which Paul feels no need to look in his epistles. As the DPL says,

If Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as breaking in through his ministry, he pointed primarily to the effects of his preaching and healing. From the other side of the cross and resurrection, Paul understood the rule of God as focused in the risen Lord, and thereby highlighted an event and emphasized a Christology which are at most implicit in the teaching of Jesus.

Do you agree? What is lost or gained by each perspective? How do you see each at work in the writings of Paul and the teachings of Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> "This does not mean, however, that Paul's teaching is not influenced by Jesus' teaching. A good case can be made, for instance, for thinking that Paul's eschatological teaching in 1 Thess 4-5 and 2 Thess 2 depends to some extent on the Olivet Discourse (e.g. Mk 13)" (Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Zondervan, 2005, pp. 370-371).