

Parables E1 Final

The Purpose of Parables

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Jon: Hey, everyone. A quick update before this episode begins. Today's Monday, March 15th, 2020, and the world is figuring out how to deal with the novel Coronavirus called COVID-19, and I'm sure this is affecting your life in some way. The West Coast of the United States, where we are located, has banned gatherings of 250 people or more, amongst other precautions.

Tim and I, we were talking about this, we have both worked on church staff in the past and we know how impacting a church cancellation is. On the local church, there's a direct connection to the people attending on a Sunday and how much the church receives in gifts that week. And so we want to encourage you if you're part of a local church that can't gather to consider making an extra effort to continue to give to your church during this time.

Tim: Also, if you're on our email list this week, you're going to get some ideas on how you can use some BibleProject resources during smaller, informal gatherings that may be an alternate to the large weekly gatherings that are being canceled. If you aren't on our email list, you can get on it. Go to bibleproject.com, scroll to the very bottom of the page and you'll see a place to sign up for our newsletter. Above all, this is a time for us as followers of Jesus to remember we have a hope that transcends all of this. And it's an opportunity to practice his vision of generosity and self-giving love to others. Now on to the episode.

Hey, this is Jon at the BibleProject, and today we're kicking off a new series on how to read the parables of Jesus. Even if you've never read the Bible, odds are you've heard one of Jesus's parables. A couple of famous ones are the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son. These parables have stuck in our culture because they're memorable. But why did Jesus tell parables? One reason was he wanted to introduce us to the way he views the world.

Tim: So they're not primarily just more or less big tales telling you what could be a good person, but they do often address ethical values. But what was his announcement of the kingdom of God except that this is life in a whole new upside-down ethical value set? Parables that we often think are about morals are actually usually about the new value system of the kingdom of God.

Jon: The parables of Jesus also introduce us to how he thinks about himself, and what he's doing in his kind of place in human history.

Tim: Instead of reading a parable and saying, "How is this about me and my relationship to God?" it's reversing it and saying, "How is this about Jesus and his inauguration of God's kingdom? And if I'm a part of God's kingdom too, then this teaches me something about the new world and

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the new value set of God's kingdom that I'm a part of." And that's how it then starts to speak to me. But it's not about me. It's about Jesus.

Jon: Today, we're going to start to frame or perhaps even reframe our understanding of how the parables Jesus work. That's all ahead. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

Jon: How do you want to begin?

Tim: I think we are beginning. Here we are. We are starting a new conversation right now in this moment about a new video that we're going to create in the How to Read the Bible series. We are going to talk about how to read the parables.

Tim: The parables of Jesus, specifically.

Jon: Are there any other parables in the Bible?

Tim: Yeah, a lot, as it turns out. We'll talk about the word "parable" in the course of the conversation, but in series, these are going to be about the parables that Jesus told, which as it turns out, are variations of parables in the Hebrew Bible, but usually with the twist, a Jesus twist. So we're focusing on the Gospels and the presentation of Jesus as a teller of parables.

Jon: In the How to Read the Bible series, we've been going through different genres of literature.

Tim: As well as different sections of the Bible kind of simultaneously, doing both.

Jon: Because some sections of the Bible have all sorts of different genres within it. So we talked last about how to read the Gospels, which has a lot of different types of literature in it, I guess.

Tim: It's mostly narrative, but with long speeches, and parables and occasional poems woven in, especially in the Gospel of Luke.

Jon: So parables are a remarkable part of Jesus' life. They have an important role in every gospel account.

Tim: He's a teller of stories that mostly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a little less in John, though in John, he talks a lot and he uses lots of short word pictures, but the longer, more elaborate fictional tales is mostly in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And they're capturing and presenting something that apparently impressed everybody who ever heard Jesus

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teach was that one of the main ways of communicating was through short, creative, fictional stories.

Jon: Now he must not have been the only one who was using this communication device.

Tim: No. As we'll see, there are important precedents in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and in Jewish teachers from the time of Jesus and after him, but his parables have a distinctive stamp because of what they are about. This is to anticipate the conversation that we're about to have. But at the baseline, Jesus as a teller of stories has resonated in the memory of both the people who are with him that we have in the four Gospels but also then it's a feature of Jesus as a teacher that people love throughout history. These parables are beloved to generations of followers of Jesus for millennia now. It's a really cool part of this teaching because it feels very accessible.

Jon: Feels accessible and it allows you to dwell on it and kind of keep mining it right insight in a way that's very rewarding, and they stick with you.

Tim: Yes. I mean, the reason why they were remembered by the people who heard him and why they're in the Gospel narratives is because they were easy to remember. It's exactly why they're easy for us to remember once you hear one. It's kind of hard to forget the main outline of the parable of the Good Samaritan or of the prodigal son - the lost son. Just think of the two trees at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Two trees. That's like a little parable. A bad tree can't produce good fruit and good tree can produce.

Jon: Some of them are really short. They're just kind of like one line.

Tim: The two houses, the one who builds a house in the rock, the one who builds a house on the sand. But then you get long ones like the vineyard managers.

Jon: My 8-year-old asked me today what I'm working on and I said, "We're going to start writing how to read parables." And he said, "What's a parable?" So we could start there.

Tim: Yeah, yes. Well, actually here. We'll give a dictionary definition just because we're just starting with the basics. This is Merriam Webster dictionary, famous American English dictionary. It's also free online, which makes a handy to use. Parable: usually a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.

Jon: Moral attitude or religious principle.

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Tim: Short fictitious story. An illustration. In other words, in this definition, the point of parables is to take something that is unclear or less than clear or maybe not persuasive like a moral attitude, or a religious idea and to make them more understandable, more persuasive. They're explainer stories.

Jon: Totally. That's another reason why I love them.

Tim: Your former life and your current life is to make explainer videos, and this is kind of like the ancient explainer story. That's the Merriam Webster dictionary. They are explainer stories.

Jon: Now, short, fictitious. Fictitious makes sense. They're not real stories. They have to be short to be a parable?

Tim: Oh, usually short.

Jon: Usually short. If they're long, it's no longer a parable. It's now a book.

Tim: Actually, some people make the difference between allegory and parable based on the length and the number of symbolic characters, which makes a certain amount of sense, but we'll talk more about that too.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: I guess that's helpful for how modern English uses the word "parable" now. However, it does beg the question, does this accurately describe what Jesus was accomplishing through his parables.

Jon: Short, yeah. Fictitious, yeah. Stories, mostly.

Tim: Yes, stories. But illustrations.

Jon: Where they're explaining moral attitudes or religious principle.

Tim: Was Jesus trying to explain things and make them more clear by means of the parable?

Jon: Got it.

Tim: You know what's funny is that multiple times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus tells parables, the authors usually note that people didn't understand. That they were puzzled. So if anything...

Jon: And he didn't try to go clear it up.

Tim: Yeah. In fact, Jesus drew attention to the fact that they were less than clear and...

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- Jon: For those who have ears let them hear.
- Tim: ...he even said in one important moment, he said the parables are on purpose not clear.
- Jon: Where did he say that?
- Tim: In Mark 4. We'll read it later on. But for Jesus, they did something other than just make something that's unclear clear. They did something different in Jesus' mind. So this definition actually doesn't set you up well to understand what the parables are about, and why Jesus chose parables. That's actually where I want to be in our conversation is the what and the why of Jesus' parables.
- Jon: Because you could use a short fictitious story for many different reasons
- Tim: Yeah, that's right.
- Jon: And if you're using it to reshape how someone thinks about something, then we think of that as a parable, or maybe even sometimes referred to as an allegory. Generally, you would imagine that you're doing that so that someone is more clear in how they think about it, so that now they understand it with more clarity and precision. But for Jesus, he didn't seem to be preoccupied with that.
- Tim: Yeah, that's right. The parables serve the purpose of his larger mission. The parables are one of the many ways that Jesus accomplished his mission of inaugurating the reign of God, the kingdom of God.
- Jon: Inaugurating the reign of God. That's very...
- Tim: It's very bringing God's heavenly reign into reality here on earth, which for him involved creating a new covenant people among Israel that lived by the true heartbeat of the Creator, that lived by a totally different value system. And the parables were one of the ways that he invited people into that new reality that he was creating.
- Jon: Jesus saw himself as creating a new reality of God's reign. God was taking creations somewhere new and on purpose through Jesus.
- Tim: And creating a new kind of human family, new kind of society around himself. And the parables served a strategic purpose in that mission, alongside his exorcisms and his healings and his symbolic families that he created that would eat the symbolic meals together, celebrating the kingdom arriving. Jesus had a whole package that he was bringing to every town that he went into. And the parables were one of the ways that he brought it about.

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Jon: That's interesting way to think about it. Package. Jesus, he'd be in a town with new people and he would do miracles, he would tell parables, and he would eat meals. All of these things were to help people begin to appreciate and understand that God's kingdom, God's way of ruling and bringing order to the world...something fundamentally was shaking up.

Tim: Yeah, that it had arrived in him. And to understand the nature of life among this new kingdom people. The parables invite you into a new view of reality. One of the most significant things about the parables is Jesus is often taking a commonsense idea that he does share with his hearers, but he'll twist it and tweak it and turn it upside down. The parables are full of surprises, which is why they're so memorable.

Here's the basic point. The parables are one of the many ways that Jesus launched his mission of announcing and bringing into reality the reign and rule of God among a new kind of people. And when we see the parables in that context, I think so many things pop in what they are, what they do, and what they're trying to communicate.

Jon: Cool.

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Tim: Let's first do the thought experiment that will kind of get us into a way to approach the parables.

Jon: Great. I love thought experiments.

Tim: So let's try to imagine that you're a Jewish farmer.

Jon: Oh, boy.

Tim: Give me a name. What's the name of our farmer?

Jon: A good Jewish name?

Tim: Moshe?

Jon: Moshe, sure.

Tim: Moshe. All right. Moshe and his wife Elisabeth. So, Moshe and Elisabeth, you're farmers on your ancestral land up in Galilee, say in the 1st Century.

Jon: 1st century Galilee.

Tim: Up in the hills, they look down on the lake of Galilee. Small town, but from your hillside you can see for other small towns because it's like a

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huge, gigantic amphitheater. The hills around the lake of Galilee, gigantic amphitheater. Not like you can yell to the people on the other side, but you can see the other side. Maybe 10 miles away and that kind of thing. Everything's close-knit family ties.

Jon: You've had this land for generations.

Tim: Right, this land for generations. Over 1000 years, you people have been inhabiting this land. Since the time of Joshua...

Jon: So you didn't go to exile in...

Tim: Oh, yeah, there's exile and then we're back and resettling. That's true. That was a long interruption. This is the land God promised Abraham, our ancestors lived here. And we've been living here now for at least the last three centuries or so uninterrupted since the return from the exile. Your life is dominated by the fields, and by family and by synagogue. And in all of those contexts, you are singing the Psalms, you grew up and you tell your kids the stories of the prophets and the stories of kings of Israel - the stories of the Scriptures. This is your media. This is what you do at night. You sing and tell the stories.

Jon: You're doing it at home with the family. You're doing it at synagogue.

Tim: Shema style. "When you get up, when you lay down, when you walk, when you go out, when you go in." That kind of thing. What's the story about? The story is about how the God who gave your family this land is not just the God of your tribe, but the creator of all he chose your family to be the vehicle of his work among the nations to bring blessing to the nations. But there's this strange thing where this paradox or this problem in your family story because God gave our family this land. And what our ancestors did was turn away from this God, we're unfaithful to him. So we gave them over to exile and he allowed these foreign nations to come oppress and take over the land.

That started with Assyria up around the lake of Galilee. The Lake of Galilee was the first section of the Promised Land taken over and annexed by the Assyrian Empire in the seven hundreds. And then just remember the cycle of empires after that: Babylon, Persia, Greece, whole thing.

Jon: You've seen a number of power brokers come through.

Tim: That's right. And in your day now, the Romans. They're everywhere.

Jon: They're like in your little town too?

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Tim: At least the tax collectors are and the soldiers that protects their tax collector booth. So yeah, when you like harvest your wheat, you have to go take a whole wagon load of it down. That's not for your use or to sell, but you have to go take it to the tax collector checkpoint.

Jon: And you were not happy about that.

Tim: No, no, it's excessive. All your cousins have actually had to sell their land because of the tax burdens. And so they have to work their own land, but now as slaves to some Roman landowner who lives in Tiberius or somewhere else.

Jon: And the tax collectors have a reputation of always being on the up and up.

Tim: They add a little, little bit of extra...What do you call that?

Jon: The service fee?

Tim: Yeah, service fee. Like when you buy anything online.

Jon: Yeah. You're like, "What is this \$20 service fee?"

Tim: Yeah, totally. That's what Matthew the tax collector used to charge before he followed Jesus. So for the last 40 years, you've been living under Roman occupation. You live in a militarized zone. Taxes keep going up.

Jon: Wait, before Rome was officially in charge, it was who?

Tim: Let's say this is right near the birth of Jesus around 4 BC or something. So 160 years ago, the Maccabees took over and made a free Israelite state in the land that lasted about 100 years.

Jon: And they took it over from?

Tim: They took it over from the Syrians. The guy named Antiochus Epiphanes ticked everybody off way too much.

Jon: The little horn?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Daniel. So by the time the Maccabean state had internally imploded from assassinations, and coups, and all these plots, people trying to take each other over, the state had become so weak that when the Romans arrived on the scene, they scooped it right up, and they established a puppet king - a guy who was just ready and waiting, a half Jewish half Edomite named Herod the Great.

Jon: He wasn't Roman at all?

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- Tim: No, no. He's a Semitic tribal chieftain who strategize his way to the top. And he became friends with the Roman powers. The point is, is you're on your own land, you have a compromised leader who doesn't represent your interests, and you have Roman militarization everywhere. Taxes are heavy, people are going into debt, people being sold into slavery.
- Jon: How would that work? I can't afford the taxes, so I go into debt?
- Tim: Yeah, that's right.
- Jon: I harvest my field, I sell off the harvest. Now, I've got a bunch of coin...
- Tim: Yeah, that's right. But it's not enough to pay your taxes and what provides for your family.
- Jon: I see. So I need certain amount of that to just pay for my family through the year...
- Tim: And to keep the business going.
- Jon: And to plant the field for the next year. And then the Romans are saying, "Hey, I need a chunk of that and you don't have any more left." And they're like, "Well, I need it." And so the only way to pay them is to sell more.
- Tim: Sell your land or sell yourself. Again, I'm trying to highlight features that are going to come up in the parables of Jesus. Debt slavery, selling land, acquiring land, working as a manager of someone else's land. This is life in Galilee. Dreams of finding treasure. And of course, just farming. Fig trees, olive trees, fruit wheat, harvest time, seed time.
- Jon: And some food preparation parables?
- Tim: Yeah, that's right. And then just the day of baking bread, sweeping your house, looking for lost coins that you dropped. This is life and it's hard. I mean, it's hard. There are many regions of the world that are like this. They're occupied zones by an imperial power. There's a lot of poverty. This is part of the human story. But however, fueled by the hope of the scriptural story that you were raised on, your people have hope that God's gonna send a ruler, do something, do what Isaiah did. He's going to come back and dwell in the temple in Zion and kick out the bad guys. He's going to send a king.
- Jon: What do you mean what Isaiah did?
- Tim: Oh, sorry, what Isaiah said. Isaiah the prophet said, "The messengers of good news." Isaiah 40. "Behold your God he comes with power, his arm

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do bring justice but with his other arm he gathers in the little lambs and holds them close to his chest." You live by that hope. A hope for a king.

Jon: So you'd have your own king, which means you're free from the Romans. And also it would be a time of plenty, because...

Tim: Abundance.

Jon: There'd be abundance.

Tim: The new Eden.

Jon: So two things that they're struggling with: one, occupation two; there's a lot of poverty. Their scriptures are hoping for a time where those going.

Tim: That's right. God's presence comes back among us. When the temple is recognized as the home of the Creator God, and all Israel and all nations see it as the capital of the world.

Jon: That's even like a bigger step, which is not like, Are we free and have plenty. But the whole world recognizes...

Tim: That Israel's God is the true.

Jon: The God of the universe.

Tim: Inspired by that hope, there are movements of Jews who have chosen to rebel. They go hide up in the hills and perform raids. Guerrilla raids.

Jon: What are they called?

Tim: Later, in a few decades, they'll come to be called the daggers. Sounds like a gang name. The Sicarii. The daggers or the zealots. Because like Phineas and like Elijah, they were full of violence zeal, passion for Israel's God to be honored among the nations. Actually, you know of a couple of your second cousins who have gone missing. And all last you heard that they were seen running up into the caves and...

Jon: They want a revolution.

Tim: They want the kingdom of God. Their slogan is "the kingdom of God now."

Jon: Really? Wow.

Tim: Well, I'm imagining.

Jon: Okay.

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Tim: But they're kingdom of God movement. It's interesting. One movement was led by a guy named Simon bar Giora, and they actually went out to the Jordan River to reenact the crossing of the Jordan River by Joshua. They thought they were going to bring the new Israel.

Jon: It's like a theatrical way to start.

Tim: Yeah. And you just heard recently there's a guy named John the Baptizer, who down by the river doing the same thing, but it's different. He's actually calling people to repent from all the years of unfaithfulness to Israel's God. He's not a military leader, but that other guy was. And they both seem to go down to the Jordan river where Joshua lead the people into the land.

Jon: It's an important place.

Tim: This is all happening. But then you've heard that there's this new guy, an itinerant prophet and teacher to ring like the rural villages around Galilee, and he is announcing that God's rule and reign is arriving in Israel here now. And you've heard stories that he can heal the blind, that there are people tortured by evil, and Jesus has freed them. There was a guy living in a graveyard who would mutilate himself and last was seen, he's got a job fishing down at the lake and he's healthy now. I mean, you hear about this.

And then you're bringing in a load of wheat, and you hear, "That guy's in town. He's just down the road. His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Let's go hear him." You say to your farm man, you say to Moshe. So you go down here and there's a big crowd. You can barely see him. You can hear he's teaching, and this is what you hear him say. This is from Mark 4:26. "And Jesus was saying, the kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed on the soil, and he goes to bed at night, and then gets up by day, and the seeds sprouting and growing. How? He, himself doesn't know. The soil just produces crops by itself. First, the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. And then when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come."

Jon: Puts in the sickle.

Tim: Like starts cutting it down. That's what the kingdom of God is like.

Jon: "You just described my year. That's what I do all year. If that's the kingdom of God, that's my job.

Tim: That's right. Explainer story.

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- Jon: You're like, "This guy, Jesus is not as interesting as I thought he would be."
- Tim: "Oh, wait, he's speaking again. What's he saying? What's he saying." "How well should we imagine the kingdom of God? To what can we compare it? It's like a mustard seed that is sown upon the soil. Even though it's smaller than all other seeds, yet when it is sound, it grows and becomes larger than all the garden plants. It forms huge branches so that birds in the air can nest under a shade."
- Jon: It creates more questions than answers in a way. Especially if you're really actively waiting for the kingdom of God.
- Tim: That's right. The kingdom of God isn't some abstract ideal. It's not a religious principle in the Merriam Webster dictionary definition. It's not a moral attitude.
- Jon: It's waiting for something very real to happen in human history - very geopolitical event.
- Tim: Yeah, that's right.
- Jon: You're anticipating this, and if you're really invested in it, you may be moved out into the hillside to the leader rebellion. You're still not that invested. You're still working in the fields. You're trying to figure it out. You want it to come. Jesus comes and he's talking about the kingdom, and you're like, "What does he have to say?"
- Tim: You're like, "What does he have to say? I want to understand what he means by the kingdom of God is here."
- Jon: And the kingdom is like a man who farms and it's like a seed that grows. Small seed that becomes a large tree big and birds can you hang out in it.
- Tim: Let's imagine the reactions of Moshe. What's he going to tell Elisabeth when he gets home that night?
- Jon: Well, he'll remember the story. He'll remember exactly...it won't be like one of those 3-point sermons you go home and you're like, "Okay, what was point two again?"
- Tim: Yeah, sure. They're very simple.
- Jon: He'll be able to tell her, "This is exactly what he said. He told this story."
- Tim: "He said the kingdom of God is like me - like a farmer who waits for the crop that grows and then he harvests it."

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- Jon: "He described how it grows, and rays comes out."
- Tim: Stage by stage. As you're telling it back to Elisabeth, Moshe, you remember, "Oh, yeah, it was interesting he said this detail that the farmer doesn't himself know how it grows. It just grows in its own time and way in kind of a mysterious way. Then all of a sudden, it's ready."
- Jon: Yeah, that does jump out the mystery.
- Tim: "What did he mean? Sometimes I wish the harvest would grow a little more quickly. Sometimes I wish it would not go so quick because I have to time it with my other fields then."
- Jon: And also, "Who cares that I don't know how it works like?"
- Tim: It works.
- Jon: If you're a 1st Century farmer, I don't think you're sitting around agonizing about why. Or well, maybe you are. Maybe like because some years it doesn't grow as well. So you're like, "Man, I wish I understood this more so I can make sure my next harvest is really great. But who knows?"
- Tim: The mustard seed story is about this contrast of small to great. He emphasizes it's like a little seed that's tiny, but then it becomes huge. So it's tiny, and you wouldn't think that a huge thing would come from it, but then a huge thing does come. And then that's both similar and different to a guy who sows seed and then it grows, but it grows at a pace and in a way that's mysterious. But it eventually does come to completion.
So at this point, if you're Moshe, you could just be like, "I don't have time for this." She's like, "This guy's weird."
- Jon: What's his wife's name again?
- Tim: Elisabeth.
- Jon: Elisabeth. She's just like, "What does it mean? Let's go clean up the barn."
- Tim: "Yamiyah, who I was there standing next to him, he said, this guy's crazy. I think maybe he's right." But then here's the other thing. You're Moshe, you grew up on the Hebrew Scriptures, and you remember Isaiah 55, which God compares His word, the word that promises the new Exodus in the freedom of the new covenant and the new creation for our people. Isaiah said that God's word is like a seed. That when he sows it in the ground, it grows a plant and does not return to Him empty. And you

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also remember that strange dream that Daniel had about a big tree that the birds of the air nested in its branches. But that was Babylon. But then you remember that Daniel said that that tree would get cut down and replaced by the kingdom of God. "Wow. This Jesus guy, maybe he's not crazy."

Jon: "Maybe he's been meditating on Hebrew Scriptures."

Tim: "Maybe these are like little encoded Hebrew Bible parables. Maybe they're a little condensed stories that for those who will get the time to ponder it, he's actually saying something really profound but in a concealed way. Because that's my little imaginative experiment.

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Jon: So Moshe, now as he farms, he's thinking about these and he's thinking about Isaiah, thinking about God's Word as a seed.

Tim: God's Word about the new Exodus and the new kingdom of God that would come after exile. You're right.

Jon: And so as he thinks about these, he's thinking, "Yes, the kingdom of God, this thing I'm waiting for, this geopolitical moment in human history where I'm no longer under Roman occupation, but also seems that there's going to be a new type of abundance, a new type of human heart and new type of all these things, this thing, it starts really small. There's something about it that's small and surprisingly small, but it's going to become great. Also, how it grows, I'm not going to understand. How it's going to come to be, Jesus wants me to appreciate.

Tim: The guy goes to bed gets up day after day after day and it's just slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly developing until it's ready. And it will be ready. Maybe this Jesus is onto something. God's sure taking a sweet time. Maybe Jesus is telling us something about the long time that we've been waiting and the God's ways and timeline might be very different than our ways and timeline. I think if that guy Jesus of Nazareth comes back, I think I'm going to go back. That's it.

Jesus would call Moshe, somebody who has ears to hear. Because someone who doesn't have ears to hear will just be like, "I don't have time for this. This guy's crazy." And that's how many people responded to Jesus. But then there were other people who were impressed that there was something here with this man and that the signs and wonders he performed, and the teachings and his parables gave them a new way of thinking about what they thought they knew. And so they kept going back and they have questions. There you go.

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Let's go back to the Merriam Webster definition. Are the parables in that context, are they functioning as explainers of moral attitudes or religious ideals? Kind of. They are inviting the listener in to experience this little narrative world in a way that will give new understanding, a new insight. But they're very different than the videos we try and create, which is to really make things as clear as it can.

Jon: Yes. Right. It strikes me that the communication style of Jesus is one that leads to asking more questions, it leads to trying to use your imagination in new ways. Versus a style in which just, "Let me tell you what you need to understand." A more to kind of didactic. Just like, "Let me give you the answers."

Tim: When a guy comes up to Jesus and says, "Hey, I want to be one of your disciples. I will follow you," and in Luke 9, Jesus says, "You know, foxes have holes and birds fly in the air, you know, they have nests, but the Son of Man doesn't have anywhere to lay down his head." That's his response.

Jon: You're like, "Is that a yes or no?"

Tim: Totally. That's a little parable. So a narrative about a guy that has nowhere to go to bed but the animals do. It's not direct. Direct would be, "Listen, I don't know. You should count the count. I don't have anywhere to stay. Do you know what you're signing up for?" That's direct. Parables are anything but a direct form of communication. Yes. It's just worth letting that sink in that one of Jesus's favored modes of communication.

Jon: It's a very patient way to communicate. Because if you're kind of like, "Okay, I'm a parent or something," and it's like, "I need my kids understand this right now. Cut to the chase. This is the way you need to operate in the world. This is what you need to understand. This is what you need to do." That's right.

Tim: We take baths at least every other day because you'll smell if you don't.

Jon: "You have to clean up your room. It doesn't get to stay in perpetual disorder. Go clean it." And you would think the God of the universe would just want to...

Tim: I love it when you begin a sentence. You do it occasionally. "Be more direct."

Jon: "Be more direct. Tell me what I need to know. There's a lot at stake here." Right?

Tim: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

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Jon: But instead it's like, "Let me patiently and kind of playfully bring you along on this imaginative journey."

Tim: The parables on the surface seem like the most simple kind of teaching of Jesus. Because they're a little explainer stories, and I can kind of get the main idea pretty quickly. But there's way more going on here.

First of all, what you're highlighting, why would Jesus choose this very subtle, non-direct form of communication as one of the main ways that he communicates what the kingdom of God is like? I'm putting it upfront as one of main points because I want to keep coming back to it because I think it's really powerful and significant. Because, as Moshe, little figure in our parable, as he goes back to town more and hears Jesus more and more, he also begins to observe Jesus' behavior. His signs and wonders how he invites all these really suspect people to eat meals together. A tax collector? The guy who took my taxes last year? Matthew? He goes to Matthew's house and he invites prostitutes. And then there's a couple of Pharisees, and then about the fisherman and they all eat together. Like it's all fine? It's so weird."

But then you hear him tell a parable about how two guys owed somebody a bunch of money. One guy 50, one guy 5,000. And Jesus said, "Yeah, which one will be more grateful if they have their debt forgiven?" And you're like, "Oh." The parables were a way that Jesus offered commentary on the rest of the kingdom of God package that he was bringing about.

Scholar N.T. Wright has become well known to me because he's written and said it in multiple contexts. But the parables were prompted by Jesus' need to explain what he was saying and doing with the rest of his mission. In other words, what Jesus was saying and doing prompted questions and the parables our response to address those questions. Why does this man eat with sinners and tax collectors? Why does he heal on the Sabbath? Why does he spend so much time with undesirable people? And the parables are necessary as these explainers but what they do is invite the person to investigate more. They do that as much as they make anything clear.

Jon: Do you imagine that Jesus would have longer conversations around these with people who had ears to hear? I mean, we've got the example where a bunch of people didn't understand a parable, the parable of the sower, and then Jesus explains it to his disciples. If I was around, obviously I would want to just sit across from Jesus and just start quizzing him. You know, just start asking him questions. That's right. If he just responded with a parable, then I'd be like, "Okay, let's talk about that parable." And

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then ask him questions about the parable and just keep going. But in the gospels, we kind of get like, "Here's a parable," and then let's move on.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. There's more than one occasion where people approached, asked what he meant, but it does seem that the function of them as puzzling and inviting is a part of their purpose. That you have to work for it. And that was why he taught in this way was it forced his audience to work for it.

Jon: And your other point is then that he taught in this way because the way he lived and his teachings created a lot of questions that he thought were best answered through parables.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. That's a better way of saying it than I did a couple of minutes ago.

Jon: I'm repeating what I think I heard you say.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Let me kind of summarize our focus.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: Jesus' whole mission to Israel, what he said he was about was preaching, announcing, proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God. That's his main theme. He's talking about it all the time.

Jon: And it's the thing I'm going for, hoping for,

Tim: That's right.

Jon: What does he mean it's happening?

Tim: Sometimes he talked about it directly. Most often he taught about through parables and then he also symbolized it or manifested the arrival of God's reign through his healings and exorcisms. That's what he said. "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom is really among you." That's what he said. He's creating these new types of family communities calling them brothers and sisters and they're not blood relatives. They're all Israelites, but they're not blood relatives. And many of them are outcasts.

"They all start sharing their stuff and eating meals together like a family would. In fact, one time I heard him say that his mother and sisters and brothers aren't his blood family, but at these groups, they mix. Can't believe he said something that's crazy."

Jon: Throwing family upside down.

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Tim: And so the parables aren't simply a kind of neat, clever way that Jesus taught moral, ethical truths. They're not simply a way that he taught systematic theology through symbols. They are an expression in the service of his announcement of the kingdom of God. That's the main point to make here. The focal point, often the topic and theme of almost all of them is the arrival of God's kingdom.

And this is different than how when I started following Jesus and reading the Bible, when I started attending church in my 20s and hearing people teach on the parables, I remember, the way I would hear them taught, at least in church settings, was often either that they were teaching you to do something, to act in a certain way, a moral lesson, or as a kind of theology essay in symbols or allegory. So a parable about somebody crying out to a guy sleeping in his house and then the guy wakes up and this going to help him help the guy crying outside.

Jon: I know that parable.

Tim: It's a parable about prayer. Jesus teaches about prayer. And then all of a sudden I remember the sermon, where we started talking about God's sovereignty and human free will.

Jon: I see.

Tim: And I'm just like, "Wow, okay."

Jon: Well, because these parables will create theological questions.

Tim: Yes, they do.

Jon: Or you're saying that their purpose isn't to teach theological statement - they're ideas?

Tim: Let's just get concrete. Let's get some examples. The parable of a Good Samaritan. It's one of the most famous stories of Jesus.

Jon: That one specifically feels like, yeah, there's a moral theological agenda to that parable.

Tim: That's right. But what is it? What is the agenda? A guy walks up to Jesus and says, "What's the most important command in the Torah? And what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says, "Follow the Torah, do the Ten Commandments, and love your neighbor as yourself." And then the guy wanting to quiz and try and humiliate Jesus says, "And who is my neighbor? Define neighbor Jesus."

Jon: Well, you think he had bad motives?

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Tim: It says, "Wishing to justify himself in front of the crowd, he says to Jesus, 'who is my neighbor?'"

Jon: Because obviously, I don't love everyone. Because there's got to be a boundary line there somewhere, so just tell me where it is.

Tim: That's right. So Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and the most important line is the last line where he tells a story. "There was a guy hurt on the side of the road. A priest walks by and does nothing. A Levi walks by, does nothing. The most religious symbolic people in your world walk by and do nothing. And then the most hateful, despised person who's not even part of your tribe, Good Samaritan walks by and he helps this guy in a really generous way. And then Jesus says, "Which one of these three was the neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"

So, note that little twist there. What the guy's question was, who is my neighbor?" Do you see what he's doing here? He's turning the whole thing upside down.

Jon: His question is, who do I have to love or not love? So who's my neighbor? And Jesus in his answer, his answer isn't, let me help you figure out who your neighbor is? But who in this story acted like a neighbor.

Tim: Yeah. Who was the neighbor? Oh, the person that you hate is actually the most moral person that you know.

Jon: In that story.

Tim: And your tribe that you assume is good is actually the most apathetic. The Levite and the priest. He's not actually answering the guy's question; he is exposing a deep contradiction in this guy's religious culture. And so the person that he needs to learn to love is the person that he's trying to exclude by the question. Who is my neighbor? Surely not somebody like Samaritan.

Jon: They're out, right?

Tim: Yeah. The guy doesn't even say in answer to Jesus' question. Jesus says, "Which one became the neighbor?" He can't even say the word Samaritan. The guy just says, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." And you're like, "Wait, go do what?" "Go be like a Samaritan, basically. Go be a Samaritan," which was an insult in his day.

Jon: Wow.

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- Tim: So is this a moral lesson that Jesus is teaching?
- Jon: It is, but it's more than that.
- Tim: Exactly. Exactly. It's not a neat illustration of a moral attitude as the dictionary says. This parable is a subversive tool to offer social commentary on tribalism and racism. My point is, is this isn't a moralistic tale. Like my kids perpetually don't, whatever, clean up their dishes after dinner, and then you tell a story about Johnny who never cleaned up his dishes and then like, I don't know if something terrible happens to him.
- Jon: Or like Peter and the Wolf.
- Tim: Peter and the Wolf. There you go. Thank you.
- Jon: I love telling my kids stories like that because they do help them rethink about the way they live.
- Tim: A boy who says there's a wolf outside...
- Jon: Is that the right, Peter and the Wolf or is it just The Boy Who Cried Wolf?
- Tim: Oh, The Boy Who Cried Wolf. Thank you. Yeah, that's right.
- Jon: Two times he pretends a wolf's coming, and the third time no one believes him, and the wolf really did come. That sticks with the kids.
- Tim: Yeah, it does.
- Jon: So don't lie. It was a moral lesson: tell the truth so people will take you seriously. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that. Even this story with the Good Samaritan has that kind of in it. But you're saying the purpose is bigger than that. And it's bigger in what way again?
- Tim: Well, the guy saying, "Who is my neighbor?" what this guy is trying to do is limit to the circle of those to whom I show generous love. Because we all know, of course, there are people who are not worthy of my generous love. It's the assumption underneath the question. Why would he need to clarify?
- Jon: What if my boys came up to me and said, "Why do I have to tell the truth?" So then I tell them that parable or that story. That seems similar.
- Tim: It's different in that Jesus isn't actually answering his question. He's addressing an unspoken assumption about the world, unspoken assumption that this guy has about himself and his tribe, and then he critiques that.

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- Jon: I see.
- Tim: He critiques the assumption underneath the question. In which case it is still an illustrative story, but it doesn't work in a straightforward way. It works in an indirect way. So you need a parable about the parable. That's actually fairly clear on itself I think. This guy assumes there are some people who really have loved, some people who are not. That's clearly what this law in the Torah means. And Jesus critiques this guy's assumption by means of the parable. He doesn't answer his question directly, who is my neighbor?
- [00:51:37]
- Tim: Going back to that dictionary definition, by a dictionary definition, a short fictional tale that illustrates a moral attitude or religious idea, this parable is actually working in a way that's more sophisticated than that.
- Jon: You're saying a parable isn't just, "Hey, have this moral attitude or just think this way theologically." A parable goes deeper...
- Tim: Jesus' parables usually go deeper and they twist things. They turn things on their heads.
- Jon: So that it doesn't just answer one question. They kind of reframes the whole thing.
- Tim: That's right. Here's another well-known example. The parable of the talents in Matthew 25. This is about the kingdom of heaven is like a guy who goes on a journey. The slaves who manage land for him, he gives one of them five units of money; another one, two; another one, one unit. You know the story? Fairly famous. Fairly famous. So the guy was five goes and earns five more, the guy was two earns two more, and the guy was one buries it in the ground. Master comes back and he stoked on the guys who made profit. The one who hide the one on the ground, he's angry at. And so, he says, you wicked lazy slave.
- Jon: And the guy said, "I did it cause I was scared of you."
- Tim: Exactly. "I thought you're a harsh man so I hid your talent in the ground. Here's your talent back." And he says, "You wicked lazy slave. You ought to at least have put my money with the bank of their day to gain some interest. Take him away, give his talent to the one with ten, and throw that slave into outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth."
- Jon: Intense.

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Tim: Oh, okay. So what's happening here? Is this parable about salvation? Is this a parable about how God is going to hold people accountable after they die?

Jon: Yeah, that's where my mind goes.

Tim: I've definitely heard that. And then that creates all kinds of theological challenges for like, "Wait, so is that a kind of salvation where your eternal destiny and bliss or torment is based off of how productive you are? And so how does that square with idea of grace and it's all a gift and it's not something that you earn for?"

Notice what we've done. We've taken the story and we've plugged it into a whole other story about salvation and the end of your life. And what we're neglecting is the actual narrative context that Matthew has provided. This is the story Jesus is telling as he rides into Jerusalem, reenacting the return of the God of Israel to Jerusalem after his long time away in Israel's exile. And Jesus goes to the temple and announces that its leaders have squandered their opportunity to lead the people of Israel and that he's taken over.

On the narrative context that Matthew has provided us, it seems like the story is actually told from the perspective of the master returning. That Jesus returning to Jerusalem is like the master returning to his land. And then all of a sudden, every element of the parable shifts. Again, it's commentary on what Jesus is doing to bring the kingdom of God.

Jon: The parables are commentary on what Jesus is doing on the kingdom of God.

Tim: Correct. Background of that. So they're not primarily just moralistic tails telling you what could be a good person, but they do often address ethical values. But what was his announcement of the kingdom of God, except that this is life in a whole new upside-down ethical value set, where the last are first and the first are last?

Parables that we often think are about morals are actually usually about the new value system of the kingdom of God. And parables that we often make about systematic theology are a form of commentary on what's happening in the actual story in the gospels themselves.

Jon: I want to make sure I understand those two points.

Tim: Yes. And this is it. We can land the plane with the main point I want to make in this first conversation.

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Jon: Jesus' parables are often thought about as moral stories - how do you live in the right way?

Tim: I think the dictionary definition, it's an illustration of moral attitudes or religious ideas.

Jon: And that's a really easy one because there are moral ideas in all of these parables.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Totally.

Jon: But your point is Jesus wasn't telling these so that you can have the right moral ideals primarily. His primary was so that you understood what he was doing and what he meant that the kingdom of God was arriving with him. He wanted you to change the way you thought about that, so he's using parables. And since the kingdom of God has an ethical component to it...

Jon: That's right. It's about the renewal of the human heart.

Jon: ...then, of course, there's a moral element to it. But that's because it's about the kingdom.

Tim: Correct. The value system taught by many of Jesus' parables is trying to help us imagine the upside-down value system of the kingdom.

Jon: And the reason why that's an important distinction to make is?

Tim: Well, I think it's because, for me, it's important in that in our culture and in Christian culture at large Jesus is often presented as a moral teacher or a teacher of kind of abstract moral truths that you can just pick up from the first century and plop right down here. And with the parables, it really feels that way because they have a universal quality to them. Short stories.

So what we need to do is honor the actual context in which Jesus told the parables and the reason why he told them, which was to explain the thing that he was creating and bringing about, and the new moral world that the kingdom of God involved. That one is more of a tweaking. It's intuitive. Many of them are about moral worldviews and ethics, and it's saying, putting them in a narrative context.

Jon: And then the second point you're making is that one of our inclinations as moderns is to try to systematize the way that God works and the way that God works in human history and make it really clean and clear. So almost find the laws of God and of the universe.

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Tim: Or think of it this way. We take them out of their narrative context in the gospels and we plug them into a whole Bible theology context. These are clearly symbolic stories, right? The master going on a journey and all that. There are symbols. But for whom? Who do the symbols correspond to?

Jon: And so if there are symbols because Jesus wants you to create a really robust systematic theology, but he doesn't want to just give you all the answers, he wants you to work for them, in that way, they're symbols, then you're going to be reading these parables through a certain lens and asking questions of them. And your example is, you read the story of the owner coming back who had given this money to his servants to work with, and you're thinking, "okay, what's the theological thing that I'm supposed to learn from this?"

Tim: What narrative are these symbols describing?

Jon: And one of your theological grades is, well, I want to know how do I get to heaven when I die? So maybe this parable is telling me...

Tim: I mean, I think this was announcing the kingdom of heaven, so that must be about how I get to heaven after I die. Maybe this parable is about that. It's actually intuitive how you get there.

Jon: It's very intuitive to get there. And when you do that, then you start asking questions of the parables and finding answers that Jesus didn't intend.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: Jesus told these stories, these parables in a context for a reason. And the context and the reason is that he saw the kingdom of God was coming and it has come through him. And he wants people to wrestle with that and understand that.

Tim: The parables are a commentary on what Jesus was actually doing in the narratives, why he tells them.

Jon: In that way, parables are completely unique to Jesus in the way we're talking about. I don't know, they seem that way because there's a lot of people who use fictitious stories to explain things or to help you imaginatively shape the way you see the world. But what's unique to Jesus is he saw something fundamentally changing about what was happening in human history through him, and he wanted you to understand that. And there's not very many people who communicate for that reason. I mean, I'm trying to think, like, most teachers aren't thinking, "Everything's changing because of it me."

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- Tim: That's right. Like a Sunday school teacher at church or in kid's ministry is telling stories about Jesus and then they think up other little clever parables or word pictures.
- Jon: And they might you use vegetables or something.
- Tim: What Jesus is doing is walking into the room and saying, history changes today. I am the kingdom of God in your midst and here's what it's like. Then he tells us a story about seed.
- Jon: You've never been to a class where a teacher talks like that. You've never gone to like history class and the teacher is like, "Human history that's changing in my midst. Now, let me start to tell you how to think about history."
- Tim: In that case, the teacher is talking about something else and trying to explain it. In the parables, Jesus is talking about himself.
- Jon: He's talking about him and what's happened about him.
- Tim: And trying to explain and give people handles and to make them work for their understanding of who he is and what he's doing.
- Jon: And that's the difference between a moral teacher and a revolutionary, I guess or like moral teacher and a...
- Tim: Actually, this is great. Tom Wright has a good way of summarizing what we're talking about. This is from his book called "Simply Jesus." It's a chapter on the parables. He says, "As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories..."
- Jon: Like he's a politician?
- Tim: He's using the word campaign there suggestively, but it's true. He was traveling around announcing the arrival of something that he said he was bringing into being. That's campaigning. "As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories. They were, for the most part, not simply illustrations that is preacher's tricks to decorate an abstract thought or complicated teaching. If anything, they were the opposite. Jesus' stories are designed to tease, to clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God's kingdom in garb that would leave the listeners wondering trying to think it out. They were stories that eventually caused Israel's leaders to decode his rich message in such a way as to frame a charge against him either of blasphemy, sedition or leading the people astray."
- Jon: Sedation.

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Tim: Sedition means betraying your country. "Whatever the parables are, they are not as children are sometimes taught in Sunday school earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Rather, they are expressions of Jesus' shocking announcement that God's kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven." I should have just read that at the beginning of this conversation."

Jon: That's great.

Tim: Just this shift in perspective has been so valuable to me in rediscovering these stories and paying close attention to the narrative context that the gospel authors have put them in and trying to imagine the purpose of these stories in the moments when they come in Jesus' mission. And what you'll notice is that Jesus' parables actually become more and more provocative, more and more anger-inducing the closer he gets to Jerusalem.

And actually, he gets clearer the closer he gets to Jerusalem. The one that I just said about the talents, not long after this, he tells the one about the vineyard owners. "A guy I planted a vineyard, he gave it to managers..."

Jon: The build the tower one?

Tim: Yeah. "And then he sent servants to go collect the fruit and they killed him. And I just say when the religious leaders heard him say this, they knew he was talking about them, and so they set in motion a plan to kill him." It's almost as if he becomes more direct the closer he gets to the confrontation in Jerusalem because that was the kingdom of God moment in Jerusalem. We'll get there. Anyway.

This is the main point. The parables are about the kingdom of God arriving in Jesus in the actual story that the gospels are telling.

Jon: They're not about the kingdom of God in some abstract sense of there is a way to live that is good or that God will is going to take control in my life and in the world around me?

Tim: Here's the thing. This perspective is not trying to take the parables away from us as giving wisdom or truth. It's about how we get them to speak to us.

Jon: It's where do you start. Because what I'm realizing is even if the place you get is how then do I think about the world? How do I live in the world? You'll get to that place. But you need to start by thinking about how is Jesus using these and what did they mean to him and the people he was talking to. In terms of his, as Tom Wright says, his campaigning that the kingdom of God was happening, I think that's a good point.

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Because I don't read the parables and sit and think, "How's this explaining what Jesus was up to?"

Tim: Here's the difference. The difference is instead of reading a parable and saying, "How is this about me and my relationship to God?" it's reversing it and saying, "How is this about Jesus and his inauguration of God's kingdom. And if I'm a part of God's kingdom too, because I'm joining the Jesus movement, then this teaches me something about the new world and the new value set of God's kingdom that I'm a part of. And that's how it then starts to speak to me. But it's not about me. It's about Jesus." Maybe that's our shorthand for it.

Jon: I think that's what it is.

Tim: We often assume. I think in the video, we could frame it. One of the ways that make Jesus' parables often difficult to understand is we assume that they're immediately about us. Maybe that's not the most helpful way to frame it. But the intuition is right.

Jon: The intuition is there must be something here for me. And that's correct. But the other intuition, which is this must be some just moral teaching, if that's all it simply is, then I'm going to start digging around and trying to attach meaning to it that would be not taking into account what Jesus was doing with this parable.

Tim: Yeah. Or decoding the symbols in an incorrect way or in light of later theological ideas that I'm going to get from writings that were written way after Jesus.

Jon: One of the things that's been helping me with the parables in the last few years I think is similar, is acknowledging that these parables are Jewish parables and they're spoken to Jewish people. Because a lot of the parables, I feel like if I strip them out of that context, I start to let them mean things that they didn't intend to mean. So that helps me bring them to their actual context. But what you're saying is it's not simply that. It's that Jesus...

Tim: That is true. That's actually the next topic of our conversation.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: But even bigger than that, they're inaugurating the kingdom of God through Jesus on a global level, but starting in Israel. And that's the main context. But both of those things are trying to help me re-center on what's the context of these parables.

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Tim: That's right. That's right. Our first kind of perspective shift is that the parables of Jesus are offering a commentary on what he was doing and saying in his campaign to inaugurate the kingdom of God. They are first and foremost about him and what he was doing. And if I'm going to understand how they speak to me, it's going to be the same way that I read the gospels in general. They're about Jesus and that's how they're about me. That's the first main point.

The next main point you just brought up sweet that the parables are all riffing off of and developing, but often in symbols the core storyline of the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus said that he was bringing to its fulfillment. That's what we should talk about next.

Jon: Great. Thanks for listening to this episode of the BibleProject podcast. This episode is part of our How to Read the Bible series and our video on how to read the parables is up. You can find it at the bibleproject.com or youtube.com/thebibleproject. It's called How to Read the Parables. There are many other videos in this series of how to read the Bible along with other podcast conversations. Next week we'll continue to discuss the parables of Jesus. We'll dive into how Jesus used the parables to link himself with the Jewish prophets beforehand.

Tim: Jesus, through the parables is presenting himself as repeating and renewing both the warnings of judgment and the warnings of hope from the Hebrew prophets. So that's another primary context for them. And here particularly, it's his role as the minority prophet going to a new Pharaoh, that is the leaders of Israel and his message is cryptic parables that pardon as much as they eliminate. And that's how Jesus understood his role to Israel.

Jon: Today's episode was produced by Dan Gummel. Our theme music is from the band Tents. We're a crowdfunded nonprofit in Portland, Oregon, and we make free resources that show the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. You could find everything we do at bibleproject.com.

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