

Tell Me a Story

New Oxford American Dictionary defines *parable* as “a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson.” Parables are used as tools of prophecy and teaching throughout scripture, most notably by Christ.



Matthew 13

¹...Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁰The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” ¹¹He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.... ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.”

Discuss (or think about):

- If you had been part of the crowd that day and heard this story—with no further explanation—what do you think your response to it would have been?
- If you had never figured out the exact correlation of the different seeds to different spiritual states (as Christ explains it to the disciples in Matthew 13:18-23) would the story have still had an impact on you?
- Why would Jesus communicate differently to people who did not have “the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” than he would to the disciples?

Even the disciples who had “eyes to see and ears to hear” still struggled to understand the parables and needed further clarification from Christ.

Mark 4

³⁴He did not say anything to [the people] without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

But sometimes the parables hit their mark:

Matthew 21:

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them.

Discuss (or think about):

- What made the meaning of some parables more obvious than others? Was it just a function of being “in the know” about what Christ was preaching, or was it something about the stories as well?

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Sometimes Christ's parables are very short, even just a sentence long, and are more illustrative than narrative. But others, like the Parable of the Two Sons/Lost Son (Matthew 21/Luke 15), are complete stories with a structured plot and characters.

Parables are certainly more allegorical (containing direct symbolic meanings) than most narrative literature. But any good story works like a parable. In his essay, "On Stories," C. S. Lewis wrote: "To be stories at all they must be series of events: but it must be understood that this series—the *plot*, as we call it—is only really a net whereby to catch something else": the larger meaning, or theme (p. 18).



Lewis was a great lover—and writer—of good stories. He particularly loved fairy tales and other children's stories, believing "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty." (p. 15) In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim wrote:

The delight we experience when we allow ourselves to respond to a fairy tale, the enchantment we feel, comes not from the psychological meaning of a tale (although this contributes to it) but from its literary qualities—the tale itself as a work of art. The fairy tale could not have its psychological impact...were it not first and foremost a work of art. (p. 12)

Thus, even if we never consciously consider the deeper meaning—or, because of our lack of knowledge or experience, are even *unable* to perceive the meaning—we can still be impacted by the story.

Discuss (or think about):

- Share about a story—book, film, etc.—that had a profound impact on you. What was it about the story that you remember responding to? Was it the plot? A particular character? Or were you aware of the underlying themes and their value to you at that time? Do you think you'd have the same experience if you re-experienced that story today?
- How might a story's ability to impact us, even outside of our awareness of its deeper themes, influence the types of stories we choose to experience?

Try this:

Read a story from the Old Testament (perhaps the book of Ruth or the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17). Enjoy it first as a story—don't worry about the "message" or personal application yet. Who are the characters? What do they do, and what happens to them (the plot)? What makes the story enjoyable to read—or painful, or confusing, or whatever your emotional response is to it? After first appreciating the "art" of the story, then ask what its deeper meaning might be. What can you learn from the actions of the characters? Is there a conflict in the story? If so, who (or what) is it between, and why? What happens to resolve the conflict, and how is it resolved? What are the symbols in the story, and to what ideas do they point? Try to summarize the story and its meaning in one sentence. Now do the same exercise with one of Christ's longer parables (perhaps The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 or The Good Samaritan in Luke 10). Try to "forget what you know" about the parable's spiritual meaning and focus first on it as a story. Are any new nuances revealed when you experience it as a story—as art—rather than as teaching?

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Reread a favorite children's or young adult's book or story. Good children's literature, as C. S. Lewis suggested, is the best possible combination of story and meaning. Children won't tolerate a dull story—yet exposure to good stories is vital to a child's emotional development. In rereading the story as an adult, do you identify with different characters? Did you remember the plot differently? Do you see levels of meaning that you wouldn't have noticed as a child? If the book has pictures, how does the addition of another artistic element impact your experience of it?

Books for children and young adults that merit adult reading (or rereading):

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle (winner of the Newberry Prize; first in a series of young adult books with subtle Christian themes)

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak (rent the movie, and see how the book was successfully—or, you might think, unsuccessfully—adapted into a radically different form)

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest and P. J. Lynch (a great NYC immigration story with beautiful illustrations that add immeasurably to the book)

And...could we be Redeemer and not suggest the Narnia books and Rings Trilogy?

Cited:

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Print.

Lewis, C. S. "On Stories." *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. Ed. Walter Hooper. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1966. Print.