

TO HIS DISCIPLES HE EXPLAINED EVERYTHING

Mark 4:33-34 (NASB)

³³ “With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it;

³⁴ and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”

“The main thing about money, Bud, is that it makes you do things you don’t want to do.”

—HAL HOLBROOK’S CHARACTER, LOU MANNHEIM, IN THE FILM *WALL STREET*

Have you ever wondered how you’re going to pay the next bill? Worried about a job promotion? Felt the world is unfair in economic rewards? Envied a neighbor or a celebrity who seems to have it all? Been indecisive about how to invest your savings wisely? Been moved by the desperate poverty in your nation’s cities or in poorer countries?

These are all economic questions, everyday examples of things that concern people around the world. If you have had such thoughts and wondered what your work and economic life as a Christian means, then this teaching is for you. It won’t provide you with all the answers, but reading the reflections that make up this teaching will enable you to think more deeply on economic issues from a faith perspective.

Now you could just figure that the simple answer is to give everything up, walk out the door, and follow Jesus—as in the troubling story in the Bible about the young man who asks Jesus what he must do to achieve salvation, and Jesus tells him to go and sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. This is quite different from how Jesus called the Twelve. To them, he just said, “**Follow me!**”

What was Jesus playing at, testing this fellow to give up everything? The young man tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments and asks what he still lacks. In [Matthew 19:21](#), we read that Jesus said to him: “**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**” The young man finds this very difficult, so he disappears once more into the crowd. At first glance, the answer the young man gets from Jesus seems to be an unworldly demand. How can he give up all he has and simply follow?

This story is often cited as the ultimate response to economics—a Christian ideal. Yet we wonder what would happen if Jesus were speaking to us today in our complex economic world. How can we give up all we have and simply follow? To answer this question we have to understand what Jesus was really saying to the young man, as well as the application of that message to our own lives.

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The general point Jesus is making is that wealth stands between people and discipleship. The particular point for this young man was for him to give up all he had—not just wealth, but family and friends—and simply follow Jesus to become a disciple.

When the young man asks, “**What good thing must I do to get eternal life?**” he crystallizes the paradox of material life. He asks the wrong question, for he is confronted by Jesus, who is the way of salvation. In asking the wrong question he is also answering it, drawing from Jesus the response to give up all he has and to follow him. Because his wealth and materialistic view of life blind him from seeing who Jesus truly is, the impossibility of the demand is immediately apparent to him. Faced with this, the young man disappears back into the crowd.

How often do *we* disappear into the crowd? Is it simplistic to think that Jesus, speaking to us today through this story, wants us to give up all we have? We know Jesus commands us to follow him, but what this means for us will vary according to our specific situation. Today, the economic world is complex. *This does not excuse us from what true discipleship means, nor does it mean we lose sight of the simple command to follow Jesus.* In many ways, our problems—facing debts or striving to provide for our children—are the same worries of the first followers. Jesus approached the first hearers of his word with many parables about such worries: concerns about work, debts, and daily needs. He used these stories to reveal the kingdom of heaven and his promises for those who choose to follow him.

Jesus used everyday examples in his parables because this met with his listeners’ experience. A number of “economic parables” have been collected in the following teachings. Some would contend that these parables are just allegories. But I believe we will discover that these parables have much to reveal to us in a world dominated by free enterprise and globalization.

As we begin to examine these economic parables, first we have to understand what parables are and why Jesus used them. We need to start by looking closely at the images and words Jesus used in order to understand what he was saying then and what he is saying to us today. Language today is often technical, and we are swamped with jargon and acronyms. Language can be used to exclude *or* include people. We can use jargon to draw people in or shut people out. When relating to people of other cultures and languages, we can speak our own language and make life even more difficult for them, or we can attempt to use their language to show compassion and respect.

For instance, the world of music has its own language, whether from the classical period of the symphony and opera or the popular music of hip-hop, house, garage, and other categories of sounds that are pumped out of our radios or iPods today. The church has its own language, replete with terms like *sin*, *grace*, and *forgiveness*. These terms mean something to those of us in the community of faith but are understood differently outside the church—and they are perhaps increasingly not properly understood at all.

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The word *parable* is one of these words rooted in the community of faith. It is an Anglicized version of the New Testament Greek word *parabole*, which means the putting of one thing alongside another for comparison or illustration. The word is also linked to the Old Testament Hebrew word *meshal*, which has a number of illustrative uses.

We usually think of a parable as an extended story or illustration, yet it can be as simple as a single sentence of wisdom, an ethical maxim, or a proverb. The word has other meanings in the Hebrew, such as an oracle or discourse or even a riddle. Jesus used many such expressions in his teaching, ranging from the proverb, “Physician, heal yourself!” to full-blown stories like most of the parables we will discover together in this book.

Jesus took an intriguing approach to using parables, as we learn in [Mark 4:10–13](#):

Mark 4:10-13 (NASB)

¹⁰ “As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.

¹¹ And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,

¹² so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN.”

¹³ And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?”

Jesus employed everyday language and images in his parables to talk about God, the kingdom of God, and the life of faith. Jesus doesn’t just use the term “**the kingdom of God**” and expect his hearers to understand right away. He says, “**The kingdom of God is like ...**” and then adds the image of a farmer sowing seed, a pearl, a mustard seed, and other tangible objects or everyday images.

In this way Jesus could get people’s attention or make it easier for people to understand difficult things. The parables contained the grain of truth—“**the word**”—but the message was wrapped in a story of camouflage because the full impact was not intended for all hearers, as we see in Jesus’ quotation of the **prophet Isaiah** in the passage in [Mark 4](#). The full meaning was for those who had understood and were saved by “**the word.**” The same remains true for us today because Scripture is “**the Word of God.**”