

Another interesting verse is *John 3:14*. Why would John bring up the story from *Numbers 21:5–9*? There are other examples (such as Moses' intercession after the people worshipped the golden calf in *Exodus 32:31–32*) Jesus could have alluded to if the point was to show His intercession for us. Why mention the snakes?

One reason might be that Jesus' death heals our spirits from the poison of Satan. But there is also the point that the snakes were sent when Israel detested the bread they had been given. *Numbers 21:5* says **our souls detest this worthless food**. Perhaps John, commenting to his readers, chose to reference a story where the Israelites detested the bread they had been given just as the Jews had rejected Christ, a point John states explicitly in *John 1:11*.

The depiction of eating Jesus' flesh (*John 6:53*) and the symbolism in communion attain greater meaning when we see Jesus giving us the bread we eat — the Word of God internalized = the Holy Spirit. Compare this to Jesus' statement against the Pharisees in *John 5:38* and *8:37*. I will describe another way to understand Christ's words at the Last Supper in chapter 11.

This linkage also gives extra meaning to Christ's retort when His disciples come to Him in *Matthew 14:16* asking him to send the masses away so they could get food: **They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat**. These disciples would later give the Holy Spirit, and hence God's Word, to those who believe.

Misreading Parables

John captures Jesus' teachings in abstract dialogues. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, homages to the expansion of God's kingdom are seen in Jesus' parables.

We'll talk later how we 21st-century types pillage the Old Testament prophecies, taking those we like while leaving unrespected the treasure trove lying between Isaiah and Malachi. We perpetrate the same crime with Christ's parables. We read them as though Christ is talking directly to us Western, modern Christians and rip away what we want. This philosophy essentially assumes Jesus did not care about the 1st-century Jews He spoke to. We simply cannot read the words Jesus spoke to the Jews and interpret them within the framework of a Christian philosophy 1900 years in the making. Jesus came to save **the lost sheep of the house of Israel**, and His disciples only ministered to Judah for nearly a decade after His death. Any interpretation of His parables that does not consider His Jewish audience shows an arrogance beyond simple ethnocentrism.

I'll give four examples of misconstrued parables from the book of Luke. Others can be found in Matthew and Mark. Keep in mind the context — the Jews were God's people. Christ is heralding not only the reunification of Judah and Israel as foretold in the prophets (e.g., *Jeremiah 3:18*; *Ezekiel 37:19*; and *Hosea 1:11*), but the inclusion of all people into God's nation (e.g., *Isaiah 11:10–12*).

Modern Christians understandably have a hard time reading the gospels in this context because the idea of God's Word and special grace being available to only one nation seems foreign. However, it certainly wasn't foreign to the Jews. Their entire culture was based on being God's special people, blessed with the Law that separated them from the Gentiles.

There were two problems with this arrangement. First, God wanted the whole world to have the blessing of the Word. The second is that the Jews had not done much with the gifts they had been given. They had failed to be a light to the nations. Instead of the nations looking upon them and deciding the Living God was worth following, Judah's hypocrisy and backsliding had caused them to become a **curse among the nations**, as described in *Zechariah 13:8*.

The Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son

Luke 15 contains three parables about the lost. In the first a shepherd goes looking for one sheep even though it means leaving 99 others behind. In the second a woman turns her house upside down looking for a lost coin without paying any mind to the nine she has in safe keeping. In the third a son asks for his inheritance early and leaves home. He squanders his wealth and ends up serving foreigners in another land. Coming to his senses, he returns home, whereupon the father throws him a party. The son's older brother is upset with his father because he has worked obediently without reward for years.

Keep in mind that these parables all teach the same thing, as indicated by the concluding lines of each (see verses 7, 10, and 32 of *Luke 15*).

Common Interpretations

Christians take all sorts of things from these parables. Most people take away things they want to hear. The teachings that are read into the stories are not necessarily incorrect; they just have little to do with the parables' intent.

For example, these parables are not about how God pursues us — the younger son was not pursued. Nor are they about how God "will always take you back" — the lost coin and the lost sheep did nothing to be found.

When you put a modern gospel spin on them, it gets worse. Things go hay-wire when you try to make The Prodigal Son a parable meant to teach salvation by grace. I've read commentators make a huge deal about how the son wanted to come back and work for his father, but his father wouldn't let him, as though Jesus' point is that you cannot work for what God wants to give. This interpretation should be dismissed out of hand as it expands one fragment to dominate the rest. In addition, there are four more explicit problems:

- This nuance would be meaningless to the Jews and Luke's readers, and he makes no effort to emphasize the point.
- This teaching does not show up in the other two parables.
- The between the father and the older son does not support this message. The father does not dismiss his son's toil: **everything I have is yours.**
- Such a teaching rather violently opposes other scripture (e.g., *John 6:27*).

Another issue is Jesus' total focus on repentance. That is the moral given at the end of the first two parables . . . **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.** There is no mention of faith, sacrifice, or Judgment.

It should be obvious that this parable is not a direct call to prodigal sons if we look at the moral again. Jesus says the point of the parable is that God is pleased when people repent. Why would people who hate God care about that? If you are the type of person who is compelled to do something purely because it pleases God, chances are you not a lost sheep!

There's a more direct reason why we know these parables are not about bringing prodigal sons home. Interpretations that focus on how God takes back anyone often fail to explain the emphasis placed on the dialogue between the father and the older son. This is a grievous error because generally the concluding content of a parable is the most important. Any interpretation of the prodigal son parable that focuses on the younger son is doomed from the beginning.

More Accurate Interpretation

If we fully take into consideration Jesus' Jewish audience, it's much easier to identify what these parables are getting at.

Let's take a deeper look at the prodigal son. He is an ungrateful son who essentially desires his father dead. The younger son wants nothing to do with his father except to have his inheritance. The rebellious youth shows no interest in abiding by his father's rules. His dissolute living causes him to lose everything he had been given, things he had not worked for himself, and he ends up serving

foreigners in another land because of it. Jesus specifies he tended **pigs**, indicating that the boy served the Gentiles after losing everything.

This is all a neon sign pointing to one conclusion: *The younger son is Israel!*

David united all 12 original tribes of Israel. When Solomon (his son) sinned, God ripped the 10 northern tribes from him. These 10 tribes became known as Israel while the land of the lower 2 tribes was known as Judah.

Israel fell away when their rulers forced idolatry upon them. God had given them all the land they had, and they began worshipping golden statues. Soon they were overtaken and enslaved by Assyria. They intermingled with Assyrians and other races. Their descendants were the Samaritans the Jews despised. They were worse than mere Gentiles. They were viewed as traitors (*as were the tax collectors in the preamble to these parables: Luke 15:1–2!*).

Thus, Israel matches up strikingly with the younger son. They had been given everything by God, refused to follow the Law, lost everything due to their ungodly behavior, and eventually were enslaved by Gentiles. Repeatedly Israel's unfaithfulness is referred to as **harlotry**,² and how does the older son refer to the younger? He says he has **devoured your assets with prostitutes**. Samaritans were hated by Jews who saw themselves as the righteous people in God's house and had no interest in reaching out to their fellow sons of Jacob.³

This parable is a slap in the face to the Pharisees who felt entitled to hate their sinful brothers. Jesus is describing how a son who truly desired the joy of his father would heartily welcome the son back. The Jews should not begrudge their foolish brother reentry into God's household, which this parable foreshadows. (Israel later came to symbolize all Gentile nations.)

Jesus is extending the point He made in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where He said the Jews had to consider even the Samaritans as their neighbors.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19–31*) tells the story of a rich man and Lazarus, a beggar, who both die. The rich man is taken to Hades and Lazarus is taken to **Abraham's bosom**. The rich man looks up from Hades, sees Abraham, and asks him to send Lazarus to **dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in great pain in this fire**.

²*Jeremiah 3:8–9* is but one example of this.

³Speaking of sons of Jacob, there is yet another parallel between the sons in the parable and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah when we consider Jacob's literal sons, but it takes a bit to explain.

Abraham tells him this is impossible because a **great chasm has been fixed between us** and mentions how earlier in his life the rich man had the **good things** while Lazarus had the **bad things**. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his **father's house** to warn them **so they do not come into this place of torment**. Abraham tells him it will do no good because his five brothers would not believe him.

Common Interpretations

Modern Christians immediately turn this into a discussion of faith in Christ, as it foreshadows Christ's own rising from the dead and the Jews' response. While there is certainly something to this, the "faith in Christ" indicated by this parable would not be the kind of faith or belief we normally think of.

Christians also use this parable to emphasize the torments of hell and how they can happen immediately after death. Conversely, they claim people can go immediately to paradise with God after death.⁴

The problem is that none of the above makes any sense when you understand Christ's point here. If you take this parable as a discussion of heaven and hell, you might as well also say that people go to heaven if they are poor and all rich people go to hell. As L. Ray Smith⁵ has pointed out, the parable does not say one good thing about Lazarus at all. It certainly does not claim he had any faith.

Indeed, nothing in the parable refers to belief in Christ. When the rich man speaks of sending Lazarus to his brothers, he does not want them to "believe." He asks Lazarus to tell them to **repent**. The discussion of belief in *Luke 16:31* refers to convincing the brothers of the danger to those who do not do God's will.

Hades and Hell

The final reason we cannot take this parable as having anything to do with heaven and hell is that it *isn't about hell*. The word used is Hades. It is just the place of the dead. Linguistically the word means "unseen."

It is the Greek equivalent of sheol, the Hebrew word for where *all* people were assumed to go when they die. For example, the prophet Samuel is raised *up* from the pit in *1st Samuel 28:3–15*. Samuel was a righteous prophet of God,

⁴Even Jesus did not ascend immediately to the Father, as shown in *John 20:17*. Whether *Luke 23:43* argues differently depends on what word order and punctuation you use.

⁵I don't agree with much of what Smith says, but he must be given credit for relentlessly seeking biblical truth. I am indebted to him for much of the material in this section.

yet he was still in Hades. Peter makes the same remark about David still being there in *Acts 2:29*.

The Jews' theology regarding the afterlife had changed greatly over the years. One popular idea was (and still is) that people are purified through fire for a time after death. After the soul is smelted, it can move on.

When Jesus wants to talk about eternal torment, He doesn't use the word Hades. He uses the word Gehenna, which is properly translated as hell in most Bibles. Hades is a symbol for separation from the land of the living. Christ Himself was in Hades for a time while dead. That is why we read in *Acts 2:27–31* of His soul not being allowed to **remain** in Hades.

Hades and Death are themselves thrown into **the lake of fire** in *Revelation 20:14* after the souls of the dead have been taken from them, symbolizing the defeat of Death (see *1st Corinthians 15:26*).

More Accurate Interpretation

This parable is not about the Judgment at all. The parable foreshadows the transfer of God's grace from the Jews to the Gentiles.

The rich man represents Judah. They have enjoyed God's blessings, the Word, the Bread of Life, but they have not done much to help other nations. He has **five brothers** (Judah had 5 brothers). Abraham calls him **child**, and we are told they **have Moses and the prophets**. Jesus goes out of His way to say he wore fine **purple** clothing, which symbolized royalty. Judah was considered the ruling tribe for all Israel (see *Genesis 49:10*).

Lazarus represents the Gentiles. He is begging with the **dogs**, a common epithet for the Gentiles (*Mark 7:27–28*). The beggar's name must be important; in what other parable is such information given? The Hebrew version of "Lazarus" is Eliezer, the name of Abraham's steward (*Genesis 15:2*) who was to inherit everything Abraham had, but ended up getting nothing after Isaac's birth.

Notice where Lazarus is: at the rich man's **gate**. Gentiles who held the central doctrine of Judaism — God is One — and kept the seven Noahide Laws were called **Geirei toshav**: Proselytes at the gate. They were not Jews and had refused circumcision, but they were considered more righteous than those Gentiles who had not abandoned idolatry. They did not have to keep the entire Law, and *the Jewish leaders were not required to give them financial aid* (unlike full proselytes who were qualified for such support). They could worship in the courts of the Gentiles, but could not cross the *gate* between that court and the temple. Speaking of which, the clothing the rich man wore was fine linen, the same type of material specified for Judah's priests.

The **good things** discussed here do not refer to eternal life or bliss. These men represent whole nations, and the **good things** Abraham speaks of refers to what Jesus' Jewish listeners thought of as good — God's favor and providence. Notably, the text of *Luke 11:13* places **the Holy Spirit** in parallel to **good gifts**.

Jesus speaks of a cosmic switch where Abraham's natural children find themselves on the wrong side of the Jordan, the river separating the promised land from the godless nations. The Greek word in the last part of *Luke 16:26* is the word for crossing water. It's no accident that just before this parable, Jesus says:

The law and the prophets were in force until John, since then the good news of the kingdom of God has been proclaimed, and everyone is urged to enter it (*Luke 16:16*).

This gives us a better idea of what aspect of the gospel Luke wanted to emphasize. Paul's gospel revolved about the removal of the Mosaic law as a barrier to the Gentiles. Luke was a protégé of Paul, so we are not surprised to find Luke emphasizing that feature. Jesus is saying that up until John the Baptist, the Law was a dividing wall between Israel and those who were not part of God's people. But now the removal of this partition is declared, and all people are urged to know God and be known to God.

Of course, I cannot stop myself from pointing out that Jesus immediately (*Luke 16:17*) clarifies that God's commandments are in no way abrogated by the removal of this division — **But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to become void.**

The Gospel of Paul

No treatment of the Gentile's advent into the kingdom is complete without a discussion of Paul. The next chapter is devoted to him, but here I want to stress simply how much he saw the entry of the Gentiles *as* the gospel. We 21st-century Gentiles can hardly understand the importance this message had to Paul, a conservative Jew who was **entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter was to the circumcised** (*Galatians 2:7*).

Imagine you have a place of command in Judaism, a religion whose adherents hold themselves as God's chosen people and use the term "unrighteous" to refer to anyone outside the covenant. You're attacking the disciples of a heretical Rabbi causing trouble within the religion, and all of a sudden you receive a vision that turns your world upside down. The heretic whose followers you are persecuting not only turns out to be righteous, but is in fact the Messiah. That