

Revealing Parables: A Call to Action within the Doctrine and Covenants

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Figurative language and images communicate in ways that rational arguments cannot. By teaching in parables, Christ ignited his listeners' imaginations and made many difficult ideas comprehensible. Yet at times, Christ also used parables to conceal his message. Expanding on the sentiments Christ expressed in chapter 4 of the Gospel of Mark, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, "When opposition to his message became bitter and intense, the master Teacher chose to present many of the truths of salvation in parables in order to hide his doctrine from those not prepared to receive it. It was not his purpose to cast pearls before swine."¹ The function of parables differs widely within the New Testament. Some are straightforward and require little explanation, while others are indefinite and have been copiously analyzed and debated. Centuries later, Christ again employed parables in the Doctrine and Covenants; however, the camouflage aspect of these parables is absent. This change invokes questions about the audience and the function of parables in the Doctrine and Covenants. How did Christ's latter-day audience differ from that of his day, and how do parables help the Lord communicate with

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his people? While his presentation of parables in the Doctrine and Covenants differs markedly—at times he references them briefly, and at times he offers an extended explanation—each instance reveals the Lord using parables to expand the Saints’ understanding and to call them to action. This article focuses on the seven parables in the Doctrine and Covenants, with a particular emphasis on the three original to the text. By examining the content and form of these parables, we may identify principles of how the Lord works with individuals in addition to the doctrine revealed and the actions required.

The Power of Parables

Parables are a powerful literary device and teaching tool. Greek in origin, the word *parable* derives from a word that means a “comparison or analogy.”² Rather than an abstract discussion about a divine truth, a parable is a brief and often simple narrative designed to convey a moral or religious lesson through comparison to commonplace events.³ The benefits of using parables are many. First, parables often make abstract principles more comprehensible and may convey much quickly. Second, parables are often more memorable than abstract discussions or direct exhortations. They are more likely, as Elder Boyd K. Packer instructed, to live “after the students are out of class” because the commonplace items referenced in the parable will bring the teaching to individuals’ minds when they see the objects in their daily lives.⁴ Third, parables encourage listeners to discover embedded messages. “Parables,” as Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught, “are a call to investigate the truth; to learn more; to inquire into the spiritual realities, which, through them, are but dimly viewed.”⁵ In exerting mental effort to comprehend a parable’s divine message, listeners become active rather than passive recipients and are more likely to remember and put into effect the knowledge received.⁶

Fourth, parables may allow us to see what our current construction of the world keeps us from seeing. Using Søren Kierkegaard’s treatment of indirect communication, New Testament scholar Klyne R. Snodgrass explains how parables, as indirect communication, skirt around individuals’ defenses to confront “what one thinks is reality” and “provide new sets of relations that enable us (or force us) to see in a fresh manner.”⁷ Fifth, the narrative form of parables creates, as Northrop Frye explains, both centripetal and centrifugal meanings, as the structure simultaneously encourages both a closed reading and enables numerous connotations and layers of interpretations.⁸ To

understand the power of parables is to recognize that they can teach, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted, “several different and valuable principles.”⁹ Sixth, as explained in the Bible Dictionary, “the parable conveys to the hearer religious truth exactly in proportion to his faith and intelligence; to the dull and uninspired it is a mere story, ‘seeing they see not,’ while to the instructed and spiritual it reveals the mysteries or secrets of the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰ In teaching with parables, Christ shows great mercy toward his listeners in that he keeps them from obtaining more knowledge than they are ready to receive. For, as we learn in the Doctrine and Covenants, “he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3).

Although many parables in the New Testament reveal and conceal simultaneously, depending on an individual’s spiritual sensitivity, in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord most often takes away this dual potential by explaining the meaning of the parable. The reason for this alteration most likely lies in the listeners. When Christ spoke in the New Testament, he addressed an audience of believers and unbelievers. While his Apostles and disciples were among the multitudes who gathered to hear him speak, there were also Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, elders, lawyers, tax collectors, and many others who scoffed at his words. The parables in the Doctrine and Covenants, however, are addressed exclusively to believers: Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, the elders of Israel, and other members of his restored Church. Consequently, the Lord no longer veils his message to protect those who are not spiritually prepared, but employs parables to help his disciples understand difficult principles, remember them more readily, and excite them to action.

Parables from the New Testament

Parable of the fig tree. The first parable to appear in the Doctrine and Covenants is the parable of the fig tree. In December 1830, Sidney Rigdon, a former Campbellite preacher, traveled to New York to meet Joseph Smith and inquire of the Lord what role he was to play in building the kingdom. Section 35 is the Lord’s response: here Rigdon learns he was “sent forth, even as John, to prepare the way before [the Lord]” (v. 4)¹¹ and is then called to baptize people into the Church and act as Joseph Smith’s scribe (see vv. 5, 20). The Lord also speaks to Rigdon of the “miracles, signs, and wonders” that he will show “unto all those who believe on [the Lord’s] name” (v. 8)—significant because the possibility of miracles in the latter days had been a point

of contention between Rigdon and Alexander Campbell¹²—and reveals that the “poor and the meek . . . shall learn the parable of the fig-tree, for even now already summer is nigh” (vv. 15–16).

For many, the reference to the parable of the fig tree would have been esoteric, but for Rigdon, it was illuminating. “Often called a ‘walking Bible’ by his peers in the Reformed Baptist Movement,” Rigdon had devoted his life to studying scriptures and the life of Christ;¹³ consequently, Rigdon was undoubtedly well aware of the parable of the fig tree and its reference to the signs of the Second Coming. Thus in referencing a parable, the Lord quickly conveys much to Rigdon. First, the parable effectively sums up the much-anticipated Second Coming of the Lord and possibly strokes Rigdon’s desire to be a part of the work, since he learns the signs are soon to become apparent. Second, the repetition of a parable from the New Testament reinforces that the Lord who speaks to Joseph Smith, and now Rigdon, is not a new Lord, but the same Lord who lived on the earth. Since Rigdon had spent his adult life searching for a restoration of Christ’s Church and judged all truth according to the Bible, he is a particularly fitting recipient of the first parable in the Doctrine and Covenants.¹⁴ Looking at what this parable tells us about how the Lord works with humanity, we see evidence that the Lord knows us as individuals and works with us accordingly. The parable may be seen as a tender mercy given to Rigdon to assure him that he had found Christ’s restored Church.

Parables of the fig tree and ten virgins. Three months later, in March 1831, the parable of the fig tree, accompanied by the parable of the ten virgins, makes another appearance in the Doctrine and Covenants. In what is now section 45, “Jesus reiterates his own sermon from Matthew 24, comments on it, and applies it to Latter-day Saints striving to replicate Enoch’s Zion.”¹⁵ Throughout the revelation, the Lord makes it clear that many truths originally contained within the New Testament are in need of restoration and that these truths will prepare them “for the things to come” (D&C 45:61). Such insights likely motivated and prepared Joseph Smith to fulfill the command he receives at the end of the revelation to commence translating the New Testament, and these insights are an instance of the Lord supplying the motivation before the commandment.

The Olivet Discourse and the parables it contains are prime examples of the Doctrine and Covenants being a space for explanation as the Lord

builds upon his previous teachings and explains their application to Latter-day Saints. With the parable of the fig tree, the Lord shares many of the signs that will precede his coming and directs the Saints to watch for them (see D&C 45:24–46). With the parable of the ten virgins, the Lord provides specific instruction to the Saints on how to be wise rather than foolish as they prepare for his Second Coming:¹⁶ the wise virgins are wise because they “have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide” (v. 57). Through this explanation, the Lord directs the Saints to gain truth and follow the Spirit in order to obtain the wise virgins’ reward, a reward now made explicit in the Doctrine and Covenants: “the earth shall be given unto them for an inheritance; and they shall multiply and wax strong, and their children shall grow up without sin unto salvation” (v. 58). Turning to the form of this parable, we see evidence that the Lord expects Latter-day Saints to be familiar with his teachings in the Bible, because he references rather than recounts the parable. He builds rather than repeats.

Parable of the wheat and tares. The other parable to appear twice in the Doctrine and Covenants is the parable of the wheat and tares (see sections 86 and 101). After Christ gave this parable to the multitude, he explained its meaning to his disciples: he has planted wheat (“children of the kingdom”), but Satan has sown tares (“children of the wicked one”). He allows the two to grow together until the time of harvest (“the end of this world”), “lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them” (Matthew 13:29, 38–40).¹⁷ On December 6, 1832, while Joseph was translating the Bible, he received a revelation explaining the parable of the wheat and tares. This revelation, recorded as Doctrine and Covenants 86, provides further information on how the gospel originally spread (“the apostles were the sowers of the seed” [v. 2]) and how the great apostasy occurred (after the apostles’ deaths, Satan sowed the tares that “choke[d] the wheat and [drove] the church into the wilderness” [v. 3]). The parable also includes additional lines that bring the parable into the latter days—“But behold, in the last days, even now while the Lord is beginning to bring forth the word” (v. 4)—and indicate the Saints are a part of its fulfillment. The parable, as the Prophet Joseph Smith explained, had an “allusion to the setting up of the kingdom” in the Apostles’ time and in the latter days.¹⁸ Consequently, the Lord gave his disciples the information that would help them fulfill their role, and later, as President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, he provided the Latter-day Saints with “a more

complete interpretation” because “it is to be in these last days that the harvest is gathered and the tares are to be burned.”¹⁹ The extended interpretation and expansion of this parable is an example of how the Lord often provides individuals with only the information pertinent to their role or progression.

The Lord’s explanation of the parable culminates in the revelation of the priesthood’s role in the harvesting of souls: “then ye shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares” (D&C 86:7). Significantly, the Lord has reversed the order of the gathering. First the wheat is gathered and then “the tares are bound in bundles” (v. 7). This reversal shifts the focus from the destruction of the wicked to the gathering of the righteous before the Second Coming, which in turn emphasizes the role Latter-day Saints are to play in gathering the righteous. “The servants of God,” as Joseph Smith explained in regard to this parable, are “to go forth warning the nations.”²⁰ As signaled by the conjunction *therefore*,²¹ the parable is the jumping-off point for an explanation of the role of the priesthood and the Lord’s purpose in preserving the lineage of those who carry it. Because the Lord needs gatherers in the latter days, “the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers” (v. 8), and by gathering the wheat and being “a light unto the Gentiles,” they may be “a savior unto my people Israel” (v. 11). The parable becomes a clarion call, exciting the elders of Israel to fulfill their priesthood responsibility to gather the elect before the Lord’s Second Coming. The Latter-day Saints are now a part of this profound biblical parable.

In a subsequent discourse from Joseph Smith, we see evidence that this revelation on the wheat and tares may have provided the Prophet with understanding on a more personal matter. Joseph received this revelation a mere three days after the excommunication of Jesse Gause, his counselor in the Presidency of the High Priesthood.²² Apostasy by those close to him in leadership positions must have been difficult to understand, and surely Joseph wondered why this occurred. This revelation provides a partial answer, as the Lord assures the Prophet of the wisdom of letting the wheat and tares grow together because the faith of the wheat is currently too “weak” (v. 6). When Joseph later expounded on the parable to the Saints, he explained how Christ’s “disciples would fain have plucked up, or cleansed the Church of [corruptions], if their views had been favored by the Savior.”²³ Joseph, too, likely wished to cleanse the Church of apostates and iniquity, but his expansion on the Lord’s response to his disciples indicates that this parable had taught him

the importance of patience and restraint: “But he, knowing all things, says, Not so. As much as to say, your views are not correct, the Church is in its infancy, and if you take this rash step, you will destroy the wheat, or the Church, with the tares.”²⁴ In studying past revelations, Joseph received direction for the Church and understanding for himself. Joseph’s experience is another example of the inspiration the Lord promises to provide individuals who study his word (see 2 Nephi 32:3).

The Lord’s second reference to the parable of the wheat and tares, in section 101, is much briefer and serves as a quick reminder to the Saints that the time of the parable’s fulfillment is now. By reiterating that the “time of harvest is come” and that the reward of the gathered wheat is “to possess eternal life, and be crowned with celestial glory” (vv. 64–65), the Lord motivates them to follow his counsel. This visual image of harvesting would also reinforce the Saints’ understanding of the Lord’s command to literally “gather together” (v. 67).

Parable of the woman and the unjust judge. Section 101 also contains a new application of the parable of the woman and the unjust judge. In contrast to the Lord’s use of other parables from the New Testament, he recounts this parable in its entirety: “There was in a city a judge which feared not God, neither regarded man. And there was a widow in that city, and she came unto him, saying: Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while, but afterward he said within himself: Though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow troubleth me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me” (vv. 82–84). The identical preface to the parable—“for men ought always to pray and not to faint”—in both the New Testament (Luke 18:1) and Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 101:81) signals to the addressees that they are to listen to the parable for what it may teach them about prayer.²⁵ However, the different explanatory comments that follow reveal that the Lord’s purpose in sharing the parable has changed. The emphasis in Luke is on the nature of God: God is merciful and will answer our prayers. If even an unjust judge will answer a repeated entreaty, surely a just and loving God will; consequently, men may pray in faith. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the emphasis shifts from the unjust judge to the widow. The Lord commands the Latter-day Saints to be like the widow. They are to “importune at the feet of the judge . . . the governor . . . [and] the president” for redress (D&C 101:86–89). Unwariness in seeking justice becomes the parable’s dominant message.²⁶

In bringing a different element to the forefront, Christ teaches an important lesson for understanding parables in general: parables can and should take on different meanings at various times for various people. The narrative aspect of parables gives them a flexibility that allows each individual to discover many principles and applications within them; consequently, studying with the Spirit allows us to discover how we may beneficially apply a parable to ourselves. Expanding on this idea, Elder Oaks explained that “scripture is not limited to what it meant when it was written but may also include what that scripture means to a reader today. Even more, scripture reading may also lead to current revelation on whatever else the Lord wishes to communicate to the reader at that time.”²⁷

Outside of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith further demonstrated parables’ multiple meanings when under inspiration he interpreted the parables in Matthew 13 to apply to the restored Church and its members. Joseph taught that the Book of Mormon and the restored Church of Jesus Christ are more specific fulfillments of the grain of mustard seed that becomes a great tree, that the Three Witnesses may be seen as the leaven in the parable of the kingdom of heaven and leaven, and that individual Saints are fulfilling the parables of the treasure in a field and of the merchant and the pearl as they sell all that they have in order to gather to Zion and be a part of God’s kingdom.²⁸ Joseph’s inspired interpretations of these parables demonstrate the advisability of placing ourselves within the parable. Are we a part of the fulfillment of the merchant and the pearl? Are we devoting all that we have and are to obtaining the kingdom of God? In applying the parables to ourselves, we may gain knowledge and strength.

Parables Original to the Doctrine and Covenants

Parable of the twelve sons. The Lord gave the first parable original to the Doctrine and Covenants to Joseph Smith at Fayette, New York, during the third general conference of the Church on January 2, 1831. The Church was almost nine months old, and Joseph Smith had recently received a revelation that the Saints were to gather to Ohio (see D&C 37). According to John Whitmer’s account of the conference, at the congregation’s request, “the Seer [Joseph Smith] enquired of the Lord in the presence of the whole congregation” for further information concerning the matter and received the revelation recorded as Doctrine and Covenants 38.²⁹ The Lord tells the Saints that

the “commandment” to move to Ohio is for their “salvation” (v. 16). Like he did with the children of Israel, the Lord covenants to give to them “a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 18); however, to qualify for this inheritance, they must seek it with all their hearts, follow his voice, teach one another, esteem their brother as themselves, and practice virtue and holiness before the Lord (see vv. 19–24). The instruction that “every man esteem his brother as himself” (v. 24) becomes the dominant requirement as the Lord repeats the phrase, offers a parable to illustrate his point, and then concludes the parable by telling them to “be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (v. 27).

To help the Saints understand what it means to “esteem his brother as himself” and why the Lord requires this of his Saints, the Lord shares the following parable: “For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there—and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just?” (v. 26). The parable’s family imagery is powerful because at the same time that it is accessible and clear-cut, it also holds multiple messages for the Saints. First, the image of a father and his sons encapsulates God’s relationship to the Saints: he is a loving father who cares for all his children and is just in his rewards. Second, the parable emphasizes the familial relationship members of the Church enter into when they are baptized. Third, placed between a preface that announces the message of the story, “let every man esteem his brother as himself” (v. 24), and the conclusion that explains the consequence of not heeding this counsel, “if ye are not one ye are not mine” (v. 27), the parable makes a clear call to the Saints: they are to be unified and help the Lord fulfill his promise to be irrespective of persons. Fourth, the Saints learn from the imagery that they cannot be one and esteem their brethren as themselves as long as there are rich and poor among them.

For the Saints at the time, the parable was preparatory: it gave them specific instruction on how they should regard and treat one another so it would be easier for them to accept and live the law (see D&C 42), part of which was the law of consecration, which the Lord promised to give them once they gathered in Ohio. Here is further evidence of the Lord leading and teaching his people “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). Studying the history of the Saints, however, reveals the difficult time they had following the parable’s counsel. In a later revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord repeats

the parable and states that the Apostles have failed to follow its counsel: "In consequence of their covetous desires, in that they have not dealt equally with each other in the division of the moneys which came into their hands."³⁰ The repetition and direct application of this parable to the Twelve reminds us that the parables have specific as well as universal applications. The Saints' failure to live the teachings of this parable also resulted in their failure to build Zion. As the Lord told the Saints after they were driven from Jackson County, they were "not united according to the union required by the law of the celestial kingdom; and Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom" (D&C 105:4–5); consequently, the redemption of Zion must wait.

Parable of the laborers in the field. Two years later, in December 1832, Joseph and a group of nine high priests received the next parable original to the Doctrine and Covenants, as part of what has come to be known as the Olive Leaf Discourse (D&C 88). In the middle of this glorious expansive revelation about light, glory, and sanctifying oneself to enter God's presence is the parable of the lord who sends his servants into the field and visits them in turn. At the lord's visit, each servant is "made glad with the light of the countenance of his lord" (v. 56). The Lord provides the key to understanding this parable when he concludes by likening it to his many "kingdoms, and the inhabitants thereof" (v. 61). Joseph Smith, and by extension the Saints, had learned of God's numerous worlds inhabited with his children in June 1830 while translating the Bible (see Moses 1:27–29). Two and a half years later, the Lord used this parable to reveal that he visits each of these worlds "in their several times and seasons."³¹

This new and profound truth may have been difficult for some to understand; as Elder Orson Pratt noted, the Lord "gave it as a parable, in order to assist our weak comprehensions."³² Elder Pratt's statement recognizes that parables are often a tool for making difficult ideas comprehensible. The Lord teaches to the understanding of his listeners when he takes an allusive concept about God's many creations and renders it as a simple story about a lord and his many servants working in the field. Consequently, the parable is an example of the principle Nephi taught that the Lord "speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3). Notwithstanding the ease with which the early Saints would likely have comprehended the parable, a significant dissonance does exist between the lived

experience of the early Saints and the servants within the story. In particular, the democratic spirit of the United States is at odds with the gladness that each servant experiences as his lord visits him.

Scholars of Christ's parables in the New Testament have repeatedly noted how the details of his parables "are closely related to the listener's home, family, occupation, folkways, and customs";³³ however, the same cannot be as readily said of the parables original to the Doctrine and Covenants, because the Lord continues to use biblical and Middle Eastern rather than American imagery. References to robes, olive trees, lords, and servants distance the parables from the daily lives of the Lord's American audience. Since parables are powerful to a large degree because they draw on the familiar, one must consider the effect of using biblical language. What does the Lord accomplish with this approach, and what would be lost if he used imagery more in line with the Saints' everyday experience?

In keeping biblical imagery, the Lord promotes a serious study of the parables, displays a unity of message with his past and present teachings, and encourages the Saints to hold countercultural values. Since many of the Saints had been raised reading the Bible and learning the teachings of Christ, they were familiar with many biblical symbols and the importance of searching for spiritual truths within this imagery; consequently, biblical imagery within the Doctrine and Covenants signaled to the Saints to approach these teachings in a like manner. Using biblical and Middle Eastern imagery also connects the parables to those Christ uttered during his mortal ministry and, as D. Kelly Ogden has argued, shows the world that the Lord is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (2 Nephi 29:9).³⁴ Returning to the parable of the laborer in the fields, the symbolically laden relationship of a nobleman and his servants, though not one most Saints could relate to, was particularly important to maintain because it highlights Christ's royal status as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Through this parable, and this relationship in particular, the Lord encourages the Saints to place the Christian idea of submission to God above the American idea of freedom and democracy. By emphasizing the joy they will feel in his presence, the Lord motivates the Saints to submit willingly to heavenly authority and to look forward to the day when the Lord will be their king. Thus the parable becomes directive as well as informative.

Parable of the nobleman and the tower. The Lord gave the last parable original to the Doctrine and Covenants after the mobs forced the Saints to flee

Jackson County. From Joseph's letter to the Saints on December 10, 1833, we see a clear picture of his grief and confusion. He bemoans the suffering of the Saints and admits he does not know "why God hath suffered so great a calamity to come upon Zion; or what the great moving cause of this great affliction is[,] and again, by what means he will return her back to her inheritance with songs of everlasting Joy upon her head."³⁵ Disheartened and confused, Joseph sought inspiration from God. A week later he received a revelation that explained why Zion fell and how it will be redeemed (see D&C 101).

At the heart of the revelation is the parable of the nobleman and the olive trees, which signifies the "troubles and eventual redemption of Zion."³⁶ Sidney B. Sperry summed up well the common interpretation of the parable:

The nobleman is the Lord, whose choice land in His vineyard is Zion in Missouri. The places where the Saints live in Zion are the olive trees. The servants are the Latter-day Saint settlers, and the watchmen are their officers in the Church. While yet building in Zion, they become at variance with each other and do not build the tower or Temple whose site had been dedicated as early as August 3, 1831. Had they built it as directed, it would have been a spiritual refuge for them, for from it the Lord's watchmen could have seen by revelation the movements of the enemy from afar. This foreknowledge would have saved them and their hard work when the enemy made his assault. But the Saints in Missouri were slothful, lax, and asleep. The enemy came, and the Missouri persecutions were the result.³⁷

This most extensive parable in the Doctrine and Covenants is the culminating example of how the Lord uses parables to reveal knowledge and provide direction to his Saints, because in it he reveals the Saints to themselves. At this time, many of the Saints in Zion were not obeying the law of consecration. Elder Orson Pratt explained how the Saints "had imbibed the notions which had prevailed among the people of the whole earth. . . . The notions . . . were that every man must be for himself, every family for themselves, and they must labor with their might, mind and strength to gain all they possibly could gain. . . . These traditions had been instilled into our minds, and we were too full of covetousness and of false notions about property to carry out the law of God."³⁸ Pratt's explanation for the Saints' failure indicates the dueling ideas that many of the Saints were attempting to harmonize. Because these ideas of

property and work were an integral part of their culture and mentality, many Saints may not have recognized how far they were from obeying the Lord's commandment to be one (see D&C 38:27). The Lord's method of using a parable would then be particularly effective because it would help them see their own weaknesses by viewing them in someone else.³⁹ The servants in the story did not build the tower and keep "the commandments of their lord," because "they were at variance with one another" (D&C 101:50), and the Saints in Zion "polluted their inheritances" and did not build the temple because there were "jarrings, and contentions, and envyings, and strifes, and lustful and covetous desires among them" (v. 6). Notably, the Saints lived out this third parable because they did not follow the counsel within the first parable original to the Doctrine and Covenants that "every man esteem his brother as himself" (D&C 38:24).

The parable's preface, however, indicates that the focus of the parable is not on past mistakes but on future action: "I will show unto you a parable, that you may know my will concerning the redemption of Zion" (D&C 101:43). Behind this preface is one of the great truths of how the Lord works with individuals: he helps us see our faults, but he also shows us a way to overcome them and return to the path of discipleship. This principle can be seen throughout the scriptures, perhaps most strikingly in the linking of the Fall and the Atonement throughout the Book of Mormon. As Robert L. Millet has observed, the Atonement and the Fall are a "package deal," and one does not appear without the other in the Book of Mormon.⁴⁰ In this revelation, the Lord illustrates this principle in both the parable and his opening statement to the Saints. For even as he begins the revelation by informing them they have been "cast out from the land of their inheritance . . . in consequence of their transgressions" (vv. 1–2), he immediately tempers this chastening by assuring, "Yet I will own them, and they shall be mine in that day when I shall come to make up my jewels" (v. 3). All is not lost, the Saints who endure this chastening will be better for it, and Zion will be redeemed. We can all take great comfort in the knowledge that the Lord is more interested in helping us change and overcome our weaknesses than in dwelling on our past sins and mistakes.

The second part of the parable encourages the Saints to move forward and take an active role in securing Zion. Just as the lord of the vineyard commands one of his servants to "take all the strength of mine house . . . and

redeem my vineyard” (vv. 55–56), the Lord is preparing the Saints for the revelation that will soon come, the revelation to organize Zion’s Camp. Two months later, the anticipated revelation came when the Lord revealed “that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., is the man to whom I likened the servant” (D&C 103:21) and then commanded him to gather the brethren “together unto the land of Zion” (v. 22). In a highly accessible way, the parable illustrates how the Saints have misused their agency in the past and more importantly how they may now use their agency to regain Zion. Again, a parable in the Doctrine and Covenants reveals the Lord’s recommended path and then motivates and calls the Saints to walk it.⁴¹

Conclusion

Through parables, the Saints of Joseph Smith’s day heard the Lord calling them to action. The Lord directs them from the fig tree to look for the signs of the Second Coming; from the ten virgins to receive truth and take the Holy Spirit for their guide; from the wheat and tares to gather the righteous to the Church; from the woman and unjust judge to seek redress for their confiscated property; from the man with twelve sons to be one; from the laborers in the field to look forward to Christ’s reign; and from the nobleman and the tower to focus on redeeming rather than losing Zion. This, however, is not all the guidance contained within these parables, nor are these Saints the only individuals to receive counsel from them. The focus of this paper has been on the Lord’s directions to these early Latter-day Saints and what the forms of the parables teach us about his workings with mankind, but this exploration covers only a part of what these parables contain.⁴² The majesty of these parables lies in the narrative form that allows them to contain multiple meanings and applications. From them we may learn principles of obedience, preparedness, patience, forgiveness, reliance, unity, justice, mercy, and sanctification, which enable us to walk the path of discipleship and become more like our Savior. In their universality, parables contain an invitation to study and receive direction for our lives and are an integral part of what Elder Neal A. Maxwell has referred to as “the inexhaustible gospel.”⁴³

Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 1, *The Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 283.

2. Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1979), xi.

3. How parables should be defined, classified, and interpreted has been rigorously debated. The definition I offer works well for the parables discussed in this paper, but as Klyne R. Snodgrass reminds us, “Every parable must be approached in its own right and not assumed to look like or function like other parables.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 7. Scholars often classify parables into three types: “figurative sayings, similitudes, and parables proper,” but much melting and overlap occurs. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935), 18. For more information on these debates and an overview of the trends in interpreting parables, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 4–15; Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 11–28; and Kissinger, *Parables of Jesus*, xi–xvi.

4. Boyd K. Packer, “Principles of Teaching and Learning,” *Ensign*, June 2007, 86.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, vol. 2, *From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 245.

6. C. H. Dodd, a well-respected New Testament scholar, explains how parables leave “the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” *Parables of the Kingdom*, 16.

7. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 8.

8. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), 61.

9. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 34.

10. Bible Dictionary, “Parables,” 740–41.

11. Rigdon had fulfilled this role unaware during his nearly dozen years as a successful Reformed Baptist preacher and particularly with his Mentor congregation in the Kirtland area, who largely followed his leadership and joined the Church. F. Mark McKiernan writes, “Rigdon’s conversion and the missionary aftermath which followed transformed Mormonism from a sect of about a hundred members to one which was a major threat to Protestantism in the Western Reserve.” *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado, 1971), 36. For an explanation of how the Reformed Baptist Movement prepared people to join the Church, see Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 61.

12. See McKiernan, *Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness*, 35; and Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 52–53.

13. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 73.

14. Unfortunately, we do not have Rigdon’s thoughts about this first revelation directed to him—quite possibly because his relative burned a 1,500-page manuscript upon his death (see McKiernan, *Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness*, 171). However, we can

safely conjecture a limited response based on what we do know about Rigdon. As Van Wagoner writes, “A biblical scholar with a reputation for erudition, he was more learned, better read, and more steeped in biblical interpretation than any other early Mormon.” *Sidney Rigdon*, 73.

15. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour Through Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 154.

16. In biblical scholarship, this parable has generally been understood to encourage people to be ready and prepared for either Christ’s Second Coming or the coming of God to judge Israel (for more information, see Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 174; and Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 511, 513–14, 518), but what the Doctrine and Covenants adds is specific understanding of how this is to be accomplished.

17. Many interpretations and questions abound about this parable in biblical scholarship. Snodgrass writes, “Both the traditional and modern critical approaches see the parable as a call to patience or as a warning about judgment for the church.” *Stories with Intent*, 199. He then proceeds to explain how he and others have discounted this interpretation in favor of the following interpretation: “Its primary teaching is that the kingdom is present despite the presence of evil *and* that evil will be dealt with at the judgment.” *Stories with Intent*, 212; emphasis in original. The explanation of this parable in the Doctrine and Covenants supports both of these readings but then shifts the focus to the end of the world and the priesthood’s role in the gathering process. For more information on interpretations and questions about this parable, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 198–214.

18. *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Alma P. Burton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 257.

19. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1953), 1:353.

20. *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 261.

21. Steven Harper has also pointed out that the Lord develops his point through four consecutive *therefores*. Harper, *Making Sense*, 308.

22. “While the ms history does not note it, Jesse Gause, Joseph Smith’s (1st?) Counselor in the Presidency of the High Priesthood, was excommunicated on December 3rd.” Note 31 from Annotated History of the Church, vol. 1, chap. 21 [September 1832–December 1832], Book of Abraham Project, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/History/HTMLHistory/v1c21history.html>.

23. *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 258.

24. *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 258.

25. The inclusion of this preface is significant within the context of biblical scholarship because scholars have generally concurred that it is a Lukan introduction. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 455. That Christ repeats this preface when he shares the parable with Joseph Smith suggests otherwise, or at the very least, it affirms that Christ sanctioned this introduction to his parable. Similarly, a large debate surrounds the explanations attributed to Christ in the New Testament for the parable of the woman and the unjust judge and the parable of the wheat and tares. Many prominent scholars of

Jesus' parables, such as C. H. Dodd, believe that these explanations were not original to Christ but were added by the authors of the Gospels or their sources. See Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 184; and Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 455–57. The Doctrine and Covenants may offer insight into these debates. The explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 86 would affirm that Christ did offer the explanation recorded in Matthew 13 to his disciples. The explanation of the parable of the woman and unjust judge from Luke 18, however, is missing in Doctrine and Covenants 101, and a different one is in its place. I would argue that the inclusion of a different explanation of the parable does not indicate that Jesus did not offer the explanation recorded in Luke but rather that his reason for sharing the parable has changed.

26. Interestingly, many scholars who exclude the explanation and limit their interpretation of the parable to the parable itself conclude that the parable is about seeking justice. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 454, for an overview of a few of these interpretations.

27. Dallin H Oaks, "Scripture Reading and Revelation," *Ensign*, January 1995, 8.

28. *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 258–60.

29. John Whitmer, "Book of John Whitmer," 3. Note 1 from Annotated History of the Church, vol. 1, chapter 13 [January 1831–February 1831], Book of Abraham Project, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/History/HTMLHistory/v1c13history.html>.

30. Revelation, Kirtland, Ohio, November 3, 1835; handwriting of Warren Parrish; in Joseph Smith, Journal, September 1835–April 1836, 17–19, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperDetails/revelation-3-november-1835>.

31. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe*, vol. 1, *Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 415, further explains "John Taylor quoted, and thereby sanctioned, a statement from the *Times and Seasons* that the twelve kingdoms in the above parable 'are governed by the same rules, and [are] destined to the same honor.'" In referring to this parable, Elder Taylor said, "It is further stated in this section [of the Doctrine and Covenants]: 'Therefore, unto this parable will I liken all these kingdoms, and the inhabitants thereof; every kingdom in its hour, and in its time, and in its season; even according to the decree which God hath made.'"

32. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 17:331.

33. Melvin R. Brooks, *Parables of the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 4.

34. D. Kelly Ogden, "Biblical Language and Imagery in the Doctrine and Covenants," *Doctrine and Covenants, A Book of Answers*, ed. Leon R. Hartshorn, Dennis A. Wright, and Craig J. Ostler (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 189.

35. Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to all Saints in Independence, Missouri, 10 December 1833, Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, in handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, 70–75, Church History Library, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperDetails/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-others-10-december-1833?tm=expanded&dm=image-and-text&zm=zoom-right&p=2&s=&sm=none>.

36. Chapter heading to D&C 101.

37. Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 521–22.

38. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:5.

39. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “How to Read a Parable,” *Ensign*, September 1974, 58. “The parable is a teaching method recognizing the fact that one sees his own weaknesses better by viewing others who display the same weaknesses.” Perhaps the best example of this is found in the Old Testament when Nathan tells David the parable of the ewe lamb to help him recognize the horrible sin he has committed by taking Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and deliberately arranging to have Uriah sent to his death (see 2 Samuel 12:1–6).

40. Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 27.

41. The parable also helped the Saints understand the importance of temples. In the parable, the servants begin to lay the foundation of the tower but then question “what need hath my lord of this tower” (D&C 101:47). They believe that the money might be better used if “given to the exchangers” because they see “no need” for a tower at this time (v. 49). The same was true of Saints in Jackson County who made no effort to build the temple beyond marking the foundation site and instead put their resources into other projects because they did not comprehend the importance of temples and temple covenants in 1833. A temple would not be dedicated in this dispensation until 1836; consequently, in 1833, the Saints had little understanding of how temples and temple covenants would bless their lives. Through the parable, the Lord teaches the Saints that the temple is key to their safety.

42. Charles Swift, for instance, has written about the major themes that become apparent in D&C 101 when the section is studied with a literary approach. “The Literary Power of the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 28–30.

43. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Inexhaustible Gospel,” *Ensign*, April 1993, 71.