

Parable and explanation? (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

It is hard to square the Jesus of Matthew 13:36–43 with the Jesus of verses 24–30.

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July 17, 2026

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“No explanations in the church,” reads a famous sign outside a historic church in Jerusalem. Did Jesus really explain the meaning of parables in the way Matthew writes it in the second half of this reading? Or were explanations like this added later?

Throughout the gospels, Jesus seems less interested in explanations and more in complications, so it is hard to square the Jesus of Matthew 13:36–43 with the Jesus of verses 24–30, or of the rest of Matthew, for that matter. I was taught to read the Bible through the overarching story of God’s salvation; in other words, through the lens of God’s love, not God’s wrath. Through that lens, it is interesting to note that in this passage, it is in the explanation, not the parable itself, in which there is a fiery furnace and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Most humans do not like stories with unresolved endings or ambiguity of any kind. Perhaps Matthew and other church leaders did not think it was safe or desirable that a parable be left open for anyone to interpret or that readers be left with feelings of confusion or uncertainty. Christians of all stripes are guilty of this; no one should think they are immune to assigning meaning or tying up loose ends to make a story, biblical or otherwise, into a neater lesson or package than it really is.

We could all stand to practice sitting with some mystery and discomfort, considering parables less as secret messages and more like koan, zen sayings meant to train the mind away from rationality. Consider preaching this week’s parables as a series of koan, words to write on an index card and tape to your bathroom mirror to read every day for a week while you are brushing your teeth, to see how the meaning opens and reveals itself. Or if not as a koan, then from a hermeneutic of suspicion, preaching and wondering aloud whether Jesus’ voice of explanation speaks in the same voice as the Jesus we have met elsewhere in the gospels and in our faith life.

That being said, I heard a preacher give a sermon on a passage like this in which he declared, “Jesus probably never even said this!” He was suggesting this same hermeneutic of suspicion that I am, but I’m not sure we can so casually throw out passages of scripture we don’t like. We have inherited all of scripture from our ancestors in the faith, and, like them, we can’t truly know what Jesus said or didn’t say, who he was or who he wasn’t, except through the Holy Spirit. We can engage with texts with love and humility, seeking to know better the God and the church who we are in relationship with through these holy words and phrases, which have been translated and interpreted over and over, and under, around, and through, over many centuries.

The gospel, it seems to me, is not so much an explanation as a complication. Still, it is a complexity that sends us back to the simple mystery of the love of God for us in Christ, a love which “surpasses knowledge, so that we

may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19)—not the fullness of knowing and explaining.