

The Parables



Of Jesus

Eternal Truths From
Earthly Stories

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The Parables Of Jesus



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Lesson 1 – General Introduction

Overview

“An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

Such is the reply given most often when someone is asked to define “parable.” Although basically correct, let’s try to give a little more detailed answer.

“Parable” is an anglicized form of the Greek word *parabole* (para-bow-LAY). It is derived from a Greek verb meaning “to place beside; to cast along side of” [*Thayer’s Lexicon, pg. 479*]. Mr. Thayer goes on to say, “A narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God’s kingdom, are figuratively portrayed...” [*ibid*].

Mr. Vine states a parable is “...a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson...it is also used of a short saying or proverb” [*Vines Expository Dictionary Of N.T. Words, pg. 840*].

A parable is a story which places one thing beside another for the purposes of teaching or explaining. It is a comparison where the “unknown” (*the heavenly or spiritual*) is placed along side the “known” (*the earthly or physical*). This method of teaching allows one to grasp and accept the “unknown” because one already understands the “known.”

Though similar in design, parables differ from proverbs. Proverbs are usually pithy (concise) statements whose meaning is almost immediately understood. Parables, on the other hand, tend to be longer and more involved with meanings not so easily seen. Also, parables are not myths or fables. Myths (legends or “folklore”) are fanciful tales that are interesting to consider, but they defy reality and can only peak the imagination. The details in parables are not “unreal.” Parables are entirely believable because they speak of familiar, real-life situations common people understand.

Neither is a parable an allegory. Allegories are symbolic stories that use comparisons to teach a specific lesson. While that sounds like a parable, there is one major difference. Every detail in an allegory has meaning...such is not the case in a parable. The best Biblical example of an allegory is Gal. 4:21-31. Every detail Paul gives (*Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, Mt. Sinai, etc.*) is significant. It is wrong to make all parable details meaningful...some only help to “fill out the story.” The Lord’s choice of “5 virgins” (Mt. 25), “3 measures of meal” (Mt. 13), or traveling from “Jerusalem to Jericho” (Lk. 10) have no intrinsic value.

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"Parabole" occurs 50 times in the N.T. It is found only twice outside the gospels: **Heb. 9:9 & 11:19**. The other 48 references are in the Synoptic Gospels. When studying the parables, one will also find the "list" to be wide-ranging. Different authors consider some of Jesus' teachings to be "parables" while others do not. We can say for certain that *"parabole"* does not occur in **John**. As a result, many understand this to mean the Holy Spirit did not inspire John to mention any of Jesus' parables. Yet, some consider Jesus' discourse on the "True Shepherd" in **Jn. 10** to be a "parable." The vast majority are found in **Matthew & Luke**. We find only 9 parables in **Mark**, of which only 2 are not in **Matthew** or **Luke**. This should come as no surprise...the 2nd gospel focuses more on Jesus' actions than on His words.

Some writers go so far as to classify the Lord's parables into categories. While that may be somewhat simplistic, we can benefit from such efforts. For example, we learn the parables did not always have the same learning objective. Consider one writer's suggestive categories:

- ◆ **Teaching Parables** => the Lord's work in training His disciples
 - Parables on the nature of the kingdom; rewards for faithful labor in the kingdom
- ◆ **Evangelistic Parables** => God's concern for lost sinners
 - Parables emphasizing forgiveness; the tragedy of being unforgiving
- ◆ **Prophetic Parables** => a definite theme of judgment
 - Parables emphasizing failure to obey God; the certain final judgment all men face

Why Parables?

Jesus came to reveal His Father's will to lost men. Ordinarily, one would think He would have always spoken straight-forward so that all would understand. Yet, that is not how the Son of God taught.

The Lord's disciples even asked Jesus why He spoke in parables (**Mt. 13:10**). The Lord's answer to this question reveals why He adopted this method of teaching that often left His hearers puzzled.

- ◆ Teaching in parables was a fulfillment of prophecy (**Mt. 13:34-35**)
- ◆ Utilizing parables was a way to reveal the hearts of His listeners (**Mt. 13:11-16**)

Thus, parables reflect the general truth about gospel preaching & teaching. Though a powerful word (**Rom. 1:16; Heb. 4:12**), it will *never* compel a man against his will. The word of God will always do 1 of 2 things: it will either draw an interested & humble man in, or it will drive a prejudiced & proud man away. When one hears the word of God (*especially a parable*), he will be the better or the worse for it. Remember the old saying... *"The same sun that melts the butter hardens the clay."* However, that distinction will be made by the student and his heart, not by the teacher nor his method of teaching.

The lesson of a parable is not always immediately evident. Gaining the intended understanding may require that we devote some time and thought to it. Yet, that same little story that sends the haughty one away laughing smugly as he rejects the teaching (**cp. 1 Cor. 1:18-25**) also brings the humble one back asking questions and wanting to learn more. That is the true indicator of what kind of heart we have when we are exposed to the word of God. It shows how much we desire to know the will of our Creator.

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Setting & Context Of The Parables

While we cannot examine all the Lord's parables in this class, it will be helpful to have some contextual and chronological understanding of the ones we have selected. Knowing when, where, and under what circumstances Jesus told a parable obviously helps us gain the intended lesson He had in mind when the parable was spoken. We do this by breaking down the Lord's earthly ministry into its 3 1-year components. Consider the summary offered below...

- ◆ The 1st Year → *"The Year Of Obscurity"*

Jesus is widely unknown. Yes, He taught great lessons (*the woman at the well – Jn. 4*) and performed great deeds (*water to wine at Cana – Jn. 2*). But as a whole, the Lord's initial year of public preaching did not garner as much attention as the following 2 years.

- ◆ The 2nd Year → *"The Year Of Popularity"*

Jesus' popularity begins to soar. The people became more familiar with Him as they saw His miracles & heard Him teach. His "fame began to spread" (Mk. 1:28). It was during this year He preached the *"Sermon On The Mount"* (Mt. 5-7). He also performed more miracles than the previous year (*casting out a demon in the synagogue & curing Peter's mother-in-law – Lk. 4; raising a widow's son in Nain – Lk. 7*).

Because of His increased popularity, Jesus was forced to withdraw from Galilee 4 times to avoid the growing swell of the people to make Him King before His time.

Though becoming more popular with the people, Jesus was also becoming more of a threat to the Jews. It is on this point one can see (*"sense"*) a shift in the tenor of Jesus' teaching. This set the stage for the 3rd & final year of public teaching.

- ◆ The 3rd Year → *"The Year Of Adversity"*

Jesus spent this year largely in opposition to the Jews...the last 6 months were especially more open. There were countless & continual attacks from the scribes & Pharisees. Their hatred increasing, the Jews successfully plotted & executed their murderous scheme.

During this final year, one finds numerous examples of some of Jesus' more pointed teaching (*the Pharisees' complaint re: Jesus' disciples – Mt. 15; the Pharisees reject Jesus healing the blind man – Jn. 9-10; the Pharisees accuse Jesus of healing by power of Beelzebul – Lk. 11*). Many of the people (*even some of His disciples*) stopped following Him because they realized He was not going to be the kind of leader they wanted (Jn. 6:22-68).

All this had an impact on how Jesus taught. As false allusions grew (*the people*) and opposition intensified (*the Jews*), the Lord had to adapt His teaching methods. One way this is seen is in His increased use of parables. As best as we can tell, Jesus told no parables during His 1st year. The initial parables were told toward the end of the 2nd year...the *Parable Of The Two Debtors* (Lk. 7) and the group of 7 parables on the nature of the kingdom told by the Sea of Galilee (Mt. 13).

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Suggestions For Our Studies

These illustrative little stories naturally fall into 3 general components:

- (a) Some historical occasion producing the parable
- (b) The narrative story or parable itself
- (c) The principle lesson to be learned or reinforced

If one is truly interested in “digging up the secret gems” of the parables, there are certain rules or principles that must be faithfully followed. We suggest you follow these as you come prepared for class. We will adhere to them as we present each lesson in class. (*The “list” below is a summary compiled from material by Paul Earnhart.*)

- ♦ ***Study The Parable In Its Historical Context***
 - As with any Bible study, context always rules the text
 - Clues for proper understanding should always be sought in the surrounding text
- ♦ ***Look For The Principle Truth The Parable Teaches***
 - Most parables were intended to make only 1 point...not to be “doctrinal dissertations”
 - Secondary lessons can be learned, but only after the main lesson is determined
- ♦ ***Don’t Try To Make A Parable “Walk On All Fours”***
 - Parable details may be significant, but all won’t be...some just “add color to the story”
 - Do not give special emphasis to a detail unless the context demands it
- ♦ ***Don’t Try To Establish Doctrinal Principles Solely By A Parable***
 - Parables illustrate doctrinal points more than they declare them
 - These illustrations are to be viewed more like “windows” than as “foundational stones”
- ♦ ***Most importantly, Always Make Personal Application Of A Parable***
 - “Am I doing what Jesus commands...Am I guilty of what Jesus condemns?”
 - “What changes in my life & thinking does this parable demand of me?”
 - “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Mk. 4:9, 23)