

Parables

A simple definition of a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Parables are stories told using situations or actions that are very familiar to the hearers in order to illustrate a spiritual truth.

Parables are not allegories. An allegory is a story, often involving imagery or symbolism or fantasy, and many of the details of the story have some figurative meaning. A parable, on the other hand, uses common, everyday situations, and usually is intended to make a single main point or illustrate a particular principle.

The most common mistake in interpreting parables is trying to allegorize the details instead of focusing on the main point. Zuck (p. 216) summarizes Augustine’s extravagant view of the parable of the Good Samaritan:

The man who fell into the hands of robbers is Adam. Jerusalem is heaven, and Jericho signifies man’s mortality. The robbers are the devil and his angels who stripped man of his immortality. In beating him they persuaded him to sin, and in leaving him half dead the devil and his angels have left man in a condition in which he has some knowledge of God but is yet oppressed by sin. The priest represents the law, and the Levite represents the Prophets. The Good Samaritan is Christ who, in bandaging the man’s wounds, seeks to restrain sin. Oil is hope and wine is a fervent spirit. The man’s donkey is Jesus’ incarnation, and the man being placed on a donkey pictures his belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the church. The next day pictures the Lord’s resurrection, the two coins represent either the two precepts of love or this life and the life to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.

While we may not usually go to this extreme, we still need to understand interpreting parables to avoid errors.

The Setting

Parables almost always came in response to a question or complaint or particular situation. Understanding the original intent of the parable depends a lot on understanding the question or circumstance that prompted the parable. Zuck lists several examples of occasions for parables:

- Parables in answer to questions (Matthew 9:14)
- Parables in answer to requests (Luke 11:5-8)
- Parables in answer to complaints (Luke 7:40-43)
- Parables given with a stated purpose (Luke 18:1)
- Parables following an exhortation or principle (Mark 13:33-37)

The Interpretation

Once we understand the setting that prompted the parable, Ramm (p. 283) offers several principles for understanding the parable:

- Determine the one central truth the parable is attempting to teach. This will usually relate to the question or situation that prompted the parable. “The typical parable presents one single point of comparison. The details are not intended to have independent significance. *Don’t make a parable walk on all fours.*” (Emphasis in the original.)
- Determine how much of the parable is interpreted by the Lord Himself. Jesus sometimes explains the meaning in more detail to His disciples, such as the soils in Matthew 13:18, ff.
- Determine whether there are any clues in the context concerning the parable’s meaning. The three parables in Luke 15 may contain common or contrasting elements to the same situation.

Sometimes Jesus explained the details of a parable, like the soils and the seed (Mark 4), but more often the details just provide an interesting setting for the main point. They are, as Zuck says, “elements needed to complete the story and to put it in its proper cultural setting” (p. 216).

Too much emphasis on the details of a parable can cause us to miss (or at least under emphasize) the main point of the teaching. Perhaps the most common problem is “true but inaccurate” interpretation. It may be

true that we should always have hope and a fervent spirit, but Augustine's oil and wine allegorizing in the quotation above really has nothing to do with the meaning of the parable. We need to be diligent in all of Scripture, but especially parables, to avoid "true but inaccurate" interpretation. The question is not, "Does that sound good?" but rather, "Is that what the text is teaching?"

The Purpose

It is sometimes suggested that Jesus used parables to simplify His message for his uneducated audience. But Jesus Himself made it clear that parables were His "method of teaching the *responsive* disciple. The truth taught in a parable is veiled and so is a test of a person's spiritual responsiveness of whether he has the spiritual intention to follow through and learn its meaning" (Ramm, p.277-278).

Mickelsen (p. 216) describes Jesus' use of parables, especially in response to the Pharisees: "For people with this mind-set, the parable could clarify nothing. And for those who were under the influence of such people, the parables would appear as obscure riddles. Hauck declares: 'The parable may be fruitless because an individual lacks the spiritual power to grasp the kernel; it may also be fruitless because the revelation about God which the parable contains is rejected.'"

With this in mind, we need to let parables remind us of our absolute need for God the Holy Spirit to enable our understanding. With any part of Scripture, and especially parables, interpretation is not just a matter of applying the right exegetical technique. We always need to be reminded of our dependence on Him to give us "ears to hear and eyes to see".

Matthew 13:11-17

¹¹Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. ¹²"For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. ¹³"Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴"In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
¹⁵ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'

¹⁶"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. ¹⁷"For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.

Mark 4:10-12

¹⁰As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, *began* asking Him *about* the parables. ¹¹And 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, ¹²so 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."

Luke 8:8-10

⁸"Other *seed* fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great." As He said these things, He would call out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

⁹His disciples *began* questioning Him as to what this parable meant. ¹⁰And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest *it is* in parables, so that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.