

An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus

DEFINITION OF THE TERM

- CLASSIC DEFINITION: *An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.*
- LITERAL DEFINITION: *One thing thrown down beside another (Greek – paraballein).*

Keep in mind that Jesus was not the originator of parables. Parables are used also to make moral points by many, including ancient philosophers. Those parables do not have the same heavenly meaning or heavenly authority (cf. Matthew 7:28-29) as the parables taught by Jesus, nor were Jesus' parables for the purpose of moralizing (THIS IS CRITICAL).

Matthew 7:28-29 (ESV) *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

JESUS' USE OF PARABLES

- One third of the teachings of Jesus contained in the four Gospels is by way of parable.
- All of Jesus' parables used aspects of life with which the people were familiar (3/5 used money).
- Primarily, the parables are instructive, not directive, in nature. They teach rather than command.
- Any problem in receiving the instruction lies with the hearer, not the message or messenger.
- Jesus Himself is the key that unlocks the message of each parable.

The parables confront the hearers with the challenge to take a position concerning Jesus, i.e. "Who is He?" "Where is He from?" "What is His purpose?". That Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Savior is the key that unlocks the parables.

For those who reject Him as the Son of God and Savior of the world, the parables serve an almost judging function (cf. Matthew 13:10-15).

Matthew 13:10-15 (ESV) *Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (11) And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (12) For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (13) This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not*

see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (14) Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ""You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." (15) For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'

UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLES

Because of differences in culture and perspectives, there is some difficulty in grasping the various aspects of the parables, including the intended meanings. There are several points to remember that will help us to “hear” the instruction that is intended.

- **Consider the source:** We tend first to find ourselves in the parables. While we should eventually strive to understand the parable’s application to our lives, first and foremost the parables are meant to convey to us *heavenly meanings*. Therefore, try to understand instead what God (Jesus) is saying about Himself first, and then us (e.g. *The Prodigal Son*, *The Lost Sheep*, *The Lost Coin*).
- **Consider the audience:** Are they scribes and Pharisees, the disciples, or the general public? Are they coming with specific errors in understanding or specific needs (e.g.)?
- **Consider the cultural idiosyncrasies:** Unless you understand the *earthly* aspects of the story, parts of the *heavenly meaning* may be lost (e.g. *The Unforgiving Servant*).
- **Consider the context:** Many of the parables were spoken as replies to questions or statements directed to Jesus – in some cases as direct responses against false teaching. In these cases, the parables become answers to the questions or replies to the statements. How does the parable answer the questions or statements or error (e.g. *The Good Samaritan*)?
- **Consider the response and counter response:** The people to whom Jesus spoke the parables often understood the message better than we do, since they lived in the societal aspects Jesus borrowed from to relay His message or a portion of the message (e.g. *The Wicked Tenants*). It also happens that Jesus makes a counter response that helps to understand the parable (e.g. *The Two Debtors*).

WHAT TO AVOID

There are two mistakes commonly made in attempting to understand the parables. These mistakes have lead to some often bizarre interpretations. Watch for these as you attempt to understand the parables.

- **Avoid the temptation to allegorize:** Not everything in every parable is intended to have an exact correlative (e.g. *The Unjust Judge*). Not everything spoken of in the parable is meant to make a doctrinal point (e.g. *The Ten Virgins*).
- **Avoid tangents:** For the most part, Jesus makes one main point in each parable. There may be aspects to this main point, but the one point remains the main point (e.g. *The Sower and the Seed*).

This, of course, does not mean you should avoid applying the message specifically to you and to your circumstances (e.g. *The Good Samaritan*).

UNDERSTANDING THE “KINGDOM”

In many of the parables, Jesus introduces the parable by referring to “*the kingdom of heaven*” or “*the kingdom of God*.” Essentially, all the parables have to do with this kingdom. It is therefore important that we understand what this kingdom is and what it is not.

- **What *the kingdom of God/heaven* IS:** Christ’s ruling activity in the heart of man through the Gospel. It includes such things as mercy and forgiveness, faith and trust, commitment and obedience.
- **What *the kingdom of God/heaven* IS NOT :** a visible, earthly kingdom; heaven itself; Judgment Day. The latter two may be referred to in specific parables, but are never the focus of the message of any parable (e.g. *The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus*).

OTHER HELPS

While the following requires more work, one should consider them in trying to understand the messages of the parables.

- **Parallel accounts:** Some of the parables are found with additional detail in one or more of the other Gospels. Checking cross references or Gospel harmonies will be valuable.
- **Parallel passages:** The Apostles were entrusted with the teachings and were to teach them (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). Look for the essence of the message in the writings of the Apostles (i.e. the epistles).
- **Parable Names:** Keep in mind that the names associated with the parables are not given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and may therefore sometimes distract from the message (e.g. *The Prodigal Son*).
- **Other references:** Especially when attempting to understand the cultural differences, other reference materials may prove beneficial. Some bibles include tables of weight and measurement, maps and direction, currency conversion chart, etc. There are also books that explain some practices and

customs with which we are otherwise unfamiliar. All of these may prove beneficial to understanding of the *earthly story* aspect of the parables, but even then the spiritual aspect comes through even without such advantages.

- **Pray without ceasing:** “*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.*” (Psalm 127:1) As noted above, Jesus’ parables primarily have an instructive purpose, or, we might say, a constructive purpose. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit and the dwelling place of God. Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand—there isn’t one without the other.
- **Remember that *you* are in the kingdom of God:** The parables teach us about how Christ is ruling us. As such, they do show us what it means to be living under His gracious rule and how His rule will affect our lives.