

Parables

PRINCIPLES FOR PROPER INTERPRETATION

To begin a study in the parables it is essential that the interpreter keep in mind certain hermeneutical principles. These principles will aid the student in avoiding faulty interpretations or from misrepresenting the intention of Jesus' words.

The first issue to be addressed is, what is a parable? A parable is not a fable. There are no trees and rocks speaking and this is not Alice in wonderland or the Wizard of Oz. A parable is not a riddle. Though a few parables pose a challenge to the interpreter, Jesus was not trying to trick his listeners. A parable is not an allegory. An allegory may be limited to one line where the meaning is clearly contained within the phrase itself. Parables are not allegories for the meaning of the parable is dependent upon information outside of itself, and a parable does not confuse the imaginary world with the real world.

The term for parable is from the Greek word *παραβαλλω* (paraballo). The term means to place by the side of something. In other words a parable is where Jesus has taken a picture of the real world to picture something that is true in the spiritual world. Another way to state this is that a spiritual reality is placed next to a picture of the real world.

A second question to be asked is, why did Jesus teach in parable form? This change in His teaching style was clearly noted by the disciples. This does not mean that Jesus had not used parabolic material prior to their notice, but that His teaching became predominately parabolic some time into His public ministry. From the historical narratives in the gospel the parables come after a period of time when the teaching of Jesus was very clear, plain and direct. The mounting opposition to His claims prompted this manner of instruction. One could call this the practical cause of His teaching in Parables. This pattern can be followed in the gospel of Mark, comparing the first four chapters with the introduction of parables in chapter five.

However, in Matthew 13:10-17 Jesus gives us a deeper more profound reason for His switching strictly to the parabolic method in His public ministry. This reason is two-fold. First it was to conceal the truth. Those who did not possess spiritual delight in the words and person of Christ, would not understand (vs. 12b-15). Second, to those who did have a Holy Spirit desire for truth and the glory of God more understanding would be given (vs. 11-12a). The parables acted as a test for spiritual reality. Those who had no desire for God-glorifying truth would turn away, while those who possessed that passion would seek the meaning of His words. The parables were never used by Jesus to make truth more simple to understand. Even the disciples needed constant clarification when it came to the parabolic method (Mark 4:10, Matthew 13:36).

The third question that must be asked is, what are the hermeneutical principles for correctly interpreting parables. This study will limit the number of principles to five. These principles are drawn from Jesus' interpretation of the sower and the seed parable. There are 33 parables, 17 unique to Luke, 10 to Matthew, 1 to Mark, 3 shared in all three synoptic, and 2 shared between Matthew and Luke alone.

1. Know the occasion of the parable.

Jesus did not just teach a parable at random. Many of the parables plainly state the occasion for their existence. Luke 14:7 declares that the reason for this parable was because of people seeking seats of honor. Luke 15:1-2 shows that the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son all stem from the fact that the Pharisees and scribes grumbled at Christ's eating with sinners. The student should note that three parables are

used by Christ on two separate occasions. The parable of the lost sheep is found in Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:1-7. The Matthew text follows the rejection of the little children by the disciples, while the Luke text follows the complaining of the Pharisees about Jesus befriending sinners. The parables of the mustard seed and leaven are found in Luke 13:10-21 and then in Matthew 13:31-33 and Mark 4:30-32. The Luke text follows the healing of the crippled woman, while the Matthew and Mark text are Christ speaking from the boat. In both cases the student should note that although the occasion is different, the intent of the parable is the same in both instances.

2. Determine the main scope or point of the parable.

Knowledge of the occasion will greatly aid in determining the main lesson of the parable. This is not to say that there may not be secondary lessons in a parable, but to keep from abusing the text, all things must be kept in line with the main scope of the parable. The student must make a distinction between what older interpreters would call the body and the soul of the parable or the shell versus the marrow. Parables are not meant to show examples of character nor do they necessarily recommend certain kinds of behavior, such as usury (Matt. 25:14-29), but rather cite the instance to illustrate the main point. Do not get lost in the details. The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7) is not a model for pastoral theology. The pastor does not ignore his flock to chase one potential convert. The main scope of the parable is to declare that God the Father revealed in God the Son loves to love sinners over and against the opinions and practice of the Pharisees.

3. See the parts in light of the whole.

All the parts must always be seen in light of the big picture. In the parable of the prodigal son all the secondary props should be viewed underneath the umbrella of God's rejoicing love over the repentant sinner. This is not to say that the secondary props are useless, but they are there only to add to the main picture painted by the Lord. The point of Matthew 13:25 is not that the elders are to always, every minute of the day, be at the church facility lest Satan come in. The secondary lessons should always be viewed within the scope of the primary lesson.

4. Do not get bogged down in the secondary props.

If the main scope of the parable is not affected by the determination of the meaning of a secondary prop, then do not sweat it out trying to uncover the hidden, secret meaning. The parable of the wheat and the tares is not a mystery without determining what kind of sleep the Lord was referring to in vs. 25. (Is this slothful Christians, unregenerate man, or is this soul sleep?) In the parable of the vine-growers from Mark 12, uncovering the identity of the tower is not mandatory in understanding the main lesson. Jesus in interpreting the sower and the seed did not identify every object in the parable. But do pay attention to specific identifications such as the "Son of Man" or the "Kingdom of Heaven" which are clearly stated, and are key to the best interpretation.

5. Never build a doctrine solely on a parable.

A parable may reflect a clearly taught doctrine from another portion of Scripture, but should never be the main text in formulating a doctrine. A false doctrine that one could draw from the prodigal son is that salvation is primarily based upon our repentance and God sits as an impotent sovereign waiting for wayward Children to come home.

Note: Some of the information in this brief synopsis was gleaned from Milton Terry's *Biblical Hermeneutics* and from Patrick Fairbairn's *Scriptural Interpretation*.