

### Introduction to the Parables

#### The Purpose of Parables

Parables can be challenging to interpret. We use the word, “parable” broadly as a category of several different types of sayings, some with one or more purposes depending on how and when they are used. The word “parable” literally means to throw alongside. Jesus would throw parables alongside His teaching to bring a point home to the audience, or use them in response to questions.

A parable is a saying that is sometimes meant to illustrate an elaborate process and sometimes meant to teach a specific point, but always meant to provoke a response. We cannot study parables without considering what Jesus had to say about the reason behind His use of parables. Read this discussion in Matthew 13:1-23 and answer the following questions.

What distinction did parables draw between the saved and the lost (see verses 10-12)?

Are parables meant to be confusing or is there something else going on (see verses 13-15)?

Does Jesus want us to understand parables? (see verses 16-23)

Later in Matthew 13, Jesus speaks more parables and Matthew inserts an explanatory note in verses 34-35 when he says, “All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.” In this passage, Matthew quotes from Psalm 78:2. Read Psalm 78:1-4 and also Matthew 13:51-52. What is Jesus trying to do by speaking in parables?

***It is therefore our aim to properly understand and apply the parables of Jesus Christ.***

# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

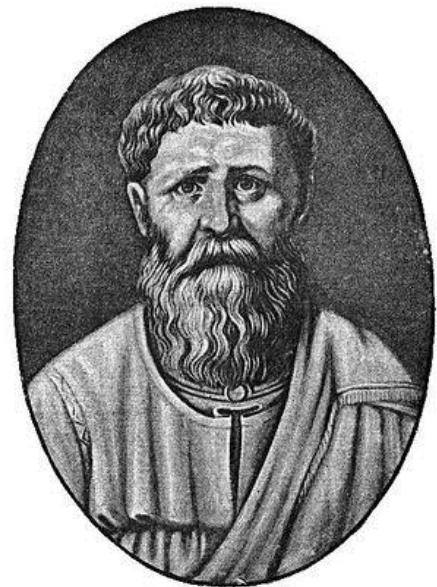
## Lesson Eight – The Parables: Do You Get the Point?

### Parables... What Not to Do

Before we go further, it would be good to look at an example of errors that are commonly made when interpreting parables. In Matthew 13:18-23 and 36-43, Jesus explains the points of reference for the parable of the sower and the parable of the tares. Jesus gave us these points of reference explicitly, showing that in this case the parable functioned as an allegory (a story that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning). Not all parables are the same though. We'll look at this more in a second. For now, consider the interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30-35), by Saint Augustine, a noted Catholic scholar whose writings are respected by many. I am not trying to discredit all of Augustine's writings by this example, but am showing an extreme example of misinterpretation that can occur by respected scholars. He tries to assign meaning to the various concepts of this parable with disastrous consequences.

### Interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan by Augustine

*"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the gospel."<sup>1</sup>*



While his interpretation is interesting, it is clearly far-fetched and completely misses the whole point of the parable and the context of its use. We can learn a valuable lesson here.

***Don't try to make a parable do more than Jesus intended for it to do!***

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II, 19 –slightly abridged as cited in Dodd, C.H., *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961), pg. 1-2.

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### The Nature of the Parables

#### **The Variety of Kinds**

Not all parables are created equally, meaning they can take on different literary forms and can be told for different purposes. Parables cannot be lumped together as we define them because such a treatment will result in misinterpretation. As the authors of our source book said, “Because the parables are not all of one kind, one cannot necessarily lay down rules that will cover them all.”<sup>2</sup> Some parables are even used in more than one way. Let’s start by identifying some of the basic types of parables.

#### A True Parable –

*Examples include:* the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep (both instances), the Prodigal Son, the Great Supper, the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Ten Virgins

#### A Similitude –

*Examples include:* the leaven, the sower, and the mustard seed.

#### Metaphors and Similes –

*Examples of metaphors include:* You are the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13)

*Examples of similes include:* Every teacher of the law is like the owner of a house (Matt 13:52)

#### An Epigram –

*Examples include:* Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? (Matt. 7:16)

#### **How the Parables Function**

In a strange way parables are like jokes, if you understand the points of reference you will laugh (if it is a good joke). If you don’t, it will leave you hanging. In the same way, understanding the points of reference in a parable will provoke a response from you and that is precisely what Jesus meant to do. He wanted His audience to respond. Perhaps it was a response of self-examination, humility, repentance, joy, or decision. Consider the following parable.

**Luke 9:62** – *“But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’”*

How does this affect you as you read it?

Now consider this equivalent parable I conceived.

*“No one who drives while staring in the rearview mirror is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

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<sup>2</sup> How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Fourth Edition, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, p157

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Do you have a different response? Why?

*Our goal in studying the parables is to catch the full force of that initial rendering of the parable and translate that truth to our life and to those we minister to.*

### The Exegesis of Parables (What did they mean back then?)

#### **Finding the Points of Reference**

One of the first things we must do with a parable is to put it into its context (if possible). Some parables are given without a specific context, however many are fitted to an occasion. For example, read the parable of the moneylender in Luke 7:41-42 without reading the context. What does this parable appear to address?

Now let's read this parable in its full context. Read Luke 7:36-50. There are three important points of reference in the parable: the moneylender and the two debtors. Identify each of them.

The moneylender –

The debtor who owed 500 denarii –

The debtor who owed 50 denarii –

Understand that Simon's treatment of Jesus was insulting in Eastern culture. Failing to wash His feet is similar to not offering to take a guest's coat. Jesus was not a welcome guest in Simon's home, but perhaps more of a spectacle or subject of interest. Recognizing the immediate context and the significant points of reference, what is the dual purpose of this parable? Consider the audience.

One final word, while this parable has symbolism, it isn't an allegory. In an allegory, every part of the parable would have a symbolic meaning (50 denarii and 500 denarii). That doesn't fit with the context of the parable and jumping off in that direction can lead to unfounded misinterpretations.

#### **Identifying the Audience**

Remember, when we do "exegesis" we are trying to understand what the passage meant to its original audience. This is a necessary first step in translating the message to us today. If you noticed in the last example, knowing the audience gave the parable clarity. There are three steps to follow when you know the context in which a parable was given.

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- (1) Read the parable repeatedly, making yourself very familiar with it;
- (2) Identify the points of reference that would be recognized by the original audience (this usually requires cultural/historical study); and
- (3) Try to determine how the original hearers would identify with this story and therefore what they would have heard.

Let's look at an example. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one that must be understood in the context of the audience to appreciate its meaning. Read Luke 10:25-37 and consider the following cultural/historical points.

- The Pharisees were generally at odds with the priests and Levites, who often were Sadducees. They could be likened to Republicans and Democrats, battling for control of the Jewish Sanhedrin.
- The Pharisees (or other Jews for that matter) did not regard the Samaritans with favor. In fact, they had nothing to do with them (John 4:9).
- Pharisees took pride in giving to the poor (Matthew 6:2).

Put yourself in the position of the Pharisee. How would you have felt as you heard this parable unfold?

What did Jesus do to the Pharisee's question?

What was the point of this parable?

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. This parable is often used in various ways, some making the prodigal son a backslidden Christian, others a sinner. How does Jesus use this parable? Go back to the beginning of Luke 15 and consider the context and read the two other parables between the context and the beginning of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

***Jesus' use of the parable should guide our usage as well.***

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### What about “Multi-Use” Parables?

As we read from gospel to gospel, we will sometimes find the same parable used in different ways. Consider the parable of the Lost Sheep found in Luke 15:3-7 and Matthew 18:12-14. What is the point of the parable in Luke 15:3-7? (Don't forget to look at the context and audience).

What is the point of the parable in Matthew 18:12-14?

How can we reconcile both uses of the same parable?

Sometimes you will encounter parables that don't have a clear context. Remember the purpose of parables is to reach out and vividly touch the audience. Keep reading through the parable until you understand the points of reference and who would be touched by the parable. Then you will start to discern a likely audience and its proper usage.

### The Parables of the Kingdom

The principles we have already learned about parables apply to the Kingdom parables too. They were more than illustrations. They taught and carried a punch. They have some points of reference and were spoken to a specific audience, often potential disciples.<sup>3</sup> There are a couple of points that are unique to Kingdom parables.

- (1) The Kingdom is often to be viewed as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the parable rather than a specific point of reference.

As we've studied, we should try to identify the points of reference in the parable. With the Kingdom parable, you face a unique challenge because you may miss the point if you limit the Kingdom to one point of reference in the parable. The entire parable is about the Kingdom, not just one facet.

Read the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32. Is the Kingdom of Heaven the mustard seed? Is it more? Why or why not?

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<sup>3</sup> I say potential disciples because many of the crowds Jesus preached to were a mix of saved and lost individuals.

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What seems to be the point of the parable?

- (2) A Kingdom parable should be understood \_\_\_\_\_ other Kingdom parables spoken in the same context.

Matthew 13 is an excellent example of this principle at work. The parable of the mustard seed was not spoken in isolation. Which other parables were spoken in this chapter?

Look for a progressive theme of revelation that Jesus gives as He strings the parables together. They are meant to work together and build upon one another.

### The Hermeneutical Question (Applying them today)

Once we have discovered the meaning (and feeling) of the parables in the days of Christ, we must apply them to our own life and those we minister to. We have to translate the truth into our own culture and context. Remember, Paul became all things to all men in order that he might win them to Christ.

It might be useful to rewrite a parable for today. Chapter Eight of, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, provides an updated version of the Good Samaritan.<sup>4</sup> I used it as a starting point and made additional revisions to fit our local culture in Anchorage, Alaska and our congregation.

In mid-summer, a family of disheveled and dirty-looking individuals was stranded by the side of the Seward Highway in Anchorage on a Sunday morning. They were in obvious distress. The mother was sitting on a tattered suitcase, hair uncombed, clothes in disarray, with a glazed look to her eyes, holding a smelly, poorly clad, crying baby. The father was unshaved, dressed in old Carharts, the look of despair as he tried to corral two other youngsters. Beside them was a run-down old car that had obviously just given up the ghost.

Down the road came a car driven by a local Catholic priest; he was on his way to church. And though the father of the family waved frantically, the priest could not hold up his congregation, so he acted as if he didn't see them.

Soon came another car, and again the father waved furiously. But the car was driven by a local politician, and he was late for a committee meeting. He too acted as if he did not see them, and kept his eyes straight on the road ahead of him.

The next car that came by was driven by an outspoken local atheist, who sponsored the recent same-sex marriage initiative. When he saw the family's distress, he took them into his own car. After

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<sup>4</sup> How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Fourth Edition, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, p166.

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inquiring as to their need, he took them to a local motel, where he paid for a week's lodging while the father found work. He also paid for the father to rent a car so that he could look for work and gave the mother cash for food and new clothes.

Which one of these individuals was a neighbor to this family?

How did this rendering of the Good Samaritan affect you?

You may have differing opinions on how I bridged the parable of the Good Samaritan to today. What are your thoughts? What would you do differently and why?