

## 1) INTRODUCTION

1) Jesus said and did many things in the gospels. He healed the sick. He performed exorcisms (mental healing). He socialized with all kinds of people, many of them from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak (“He welcomes ‘sinners’ and eats with them”). He performed miracles such as the stilling of the storm and the feeding of thousands. He got into conflicts with the religious authorities over God’s will and the proper interpretation of the law. Jesus performed different actions that had prophetic meaning (e.g. overturning the table of the money changers in the temple). He called disciples and spoke about the judgment and renewal of Israel and its mission to the world. He went to Jerusalem, anticipating his arrest and death. He appeared to the disciples in risen form and promised: 1) his Spirit, the Holy Spirit would come upon them as spiritual power and feed them with the courage, hope and inner transformation they needed to live out the love of Christ as his hands feet and heart in the world, and 2) he would return again to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

But Jesus’ also taught and his method of teaching included a genre of story-telling called parables. To understand the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and to understand the God he revealed and embodied, we must understand Jesus’ parables.

What are parables? Parables are short narrative fictions that seek to make us evaluate our lives. They also teach a moral lesson. The word parable comes from the Greek *parabole* (“to set alongside”) with roots in the Hebrew *machal* (to be like). They talk about something (in Jesus’ case - the kingdom of God) using metaphorical descriptions and comparisons. The examples and illustrations used in the parables depict everyday life in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, but with a twist. They are realistic about life in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, yet offer strange twists and exaggerations that contradict everyday experience. They are intended to challenge people at a profound level. They are also, often, open-ended. No single interpretation is possible. Some parables are given an interpretation. Others are not. But for those “who have ears to hear” the message ought to be clear. We shall see.

2) The parables of Jesus are found in 3 of the 4 gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke. John tells the story using other means by which Jesus taught. The gospel of Mark was the first to be written (70 AD). It contains some parables. Matthew (85 AD) and Luke (90 AD) include the parables in Mark, but also include parables not contained in Mark. Some of the parables appear in both Matthew and Luke, and some appear only in Matthew, while others only in Luke. Also, the same parable, or virtually the same one, can appear in different situations in different gospels. This also suggests that the parables, or versions of them, may have been told repeatedly in different situations.

3) All the parables are intended to answer one key question: "What is the kingdom of God like? The parables offer 4 basic answers.

- 1) The Kingdom of God is not in our control.
- 2) The Kingdom of God shows up where we least expect it.
- 3) The Kingdom of God disrupts business as usual.
- 4) The Kingdom of God is the rule of justice and forgiveness.

Answer 1) is very much the focus of the parables in Mark. Answers 2) - 4) are the focus of parables in Matthew and Luke. As we study the individual parables we will see their meaning in greater detail. The goal of the parables is to elicit a response from the hearers. If this is what the kingdom of God is like, how will you respond in your life? The parables are not about other people. They are about each of us.

4) There are different emphases and perspectives in each of the gospels. This reflects the time and place of their writing, and the context which defines some of the issues.

MARK: This gospel was written about 70 AD, just after the Romans destroy Jerusalem and the temple. This is also just after the reign of emperor Nero who started a real persecution of Christians. Thus, Mark emphasizes the reality of suffering that is part of the Christian life. To call yourself a Christian is to invite such suffering into your life. Mark's Jesus is one who walks the road of persecution and suffering to the end, trusting God all the way. God's presence is not manifest in overt ways. But Christians should trust that God is in control even if the world and our lives are out of control all too often. God can bring about redemption even in the face of horrible suffering, failure and loss. So Christians are to have faith in God even if things look terribly bleak. God is truly the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

The disciples in Mark are also given us as examples of failure. Like them, we too fail to trust God when the going gets tough. Thus, even though Jesus performs amazing miracles and calls them to trust God, they have difficulty doing this. When he tells them to trust God even though he will be rejected and crucified, they refuse to listen and it's no surprise they will scatter and flee when he is arrested. But God will raise Jesus up, and through this action will open up redemptive possibilities for all people. This is the good news, especially to those facing suffering and persecution in their lives. Jesus walks with us to the end, and he experiences the utter depths of loneliness and desolation. But as we seek to trust God through it all, God will raise us up again and again, until we feast with God in glory.

**MATTHEW:** This gospel refers not to the kingdom of God but the kingdom of heaven. This reflects its highly Jewish context in that God's name is not used directly. In this gospel Jesus is locked in intense conflict with the religious authorities, especially the Pharisees. The emphasis is on inward righteousness rather than outward righteousness. Following the law is a matter of the heart much more than a matter of following outward practices. God is the one on whom the Christian is called to depend. God is sovereign and will provide all our needs if we trust God.

Jesus is depicted as the new and greater Moses. He gives a long 'sermon on the mount' (like Moses receiving the 10 commandments on mount Sinai) where he provides his understanding of the commandments/law of God. The gospel also structures Jesus' teaching in 5 sections (5-7, 13, 18, 19, 24-25) paralleling the 5 books traditionally ascribed to Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Matthew's gospel also includes an emphasis on God's judgment as well as God's grace and forgiveness, and in Matthew we encounter the description of hell as "the weeping and gnashing of teeth." This gives us a sense of Matthew's context as one of intense conflict between Christian and Jew. Those who should most fear hell are those who think they are righteous, look down judgmentally on others and are presumptuous about their preferred status with God.

**LUKE:** This gospel is part 1 of a 2-part story (part 2 is the Acts of the Apostles). It emphasizes that with Jesus a new age has dawned, an age of the Spirit which brings about unrestricted expressions of God's grace in peoples' lives. God's grace is good news for all, including those who are outside traditional Israel (namely, gentiles). The kingdom of God will include non-Jews (like Samaritans, as well as those with no Jewish blood whatsoever). It includes women as well as men, and Luke emphasizes the role of women in Jesus' ministry. It includes the social outcasts, the disabled and people with sinful pasts. The Holy Spirit opens up ways to God for all and Luke emphasizes the compassion of God for good and evil alike.

But God's action should elicit a response from those who are exposed to it. Luke contains many stories of repentance and conversion. Repentance means a change of direction, living before God rather than away from God. Faith is also about perseverance. Luke's context is a gentile one, with many alternative faith options. A Christian must persevere in their trust in God as Jesus reveals God. The life of a Christian is a life of prayer and Luke's gospel depicts Jesus praying more than any other. This gospel has special concern for the poor and social outcast, and it is especially condemnatory of the rich and those who have the wrong attitude toward material possessions. Finally, Luke's gospel emphasizes the experience of joy, when God fills a person's soul with the good news of love and the presence of the Spirit.

And so, even though there are parables in all 3 gospels, depending on which gospel the parable is in, it will reflect something of the gospel's emphasis.

FOR NEXT WEEK: Read the 6 key parables of Mark: 4, 12: 1-11, 13: 28-29, 13: 34-36