

Parables of Jesus – Introduction

Introduction

1. Today we are starting our new series on the parables of Jesus where over the next three months or so we are going to look at select parables
2. To kick us off, I thought I would start by quoting from someone I certainly would not align with theologically, but I thought her observations about Jesus' and his use of parables was rather profound
3. Her name is Madeleine Boucher and her book, simply titled "The Parables" is over 50 years old
4. In her book, she asserted, and I believe rightly so, that aside from the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, the parables of Jesus are the best known of all of Jesus' words. She then went on to write:

When Jesus preached so strikingly in parables, he did not create a new literary genre. Rather, he made brilliant use of a genre which was already of long tradition and which was familiar to all throughout the Mediterranean world. In Greece and Rome, parables were employed by rhetoricians, politicians and philosophers. Perhaps the most illustrious among those who made use of them were Socrates and Aristotle...In Israel, parables were uttered by prophets and wise women and men. They appear even in the oldest books of the Old Testament. Parables were often used by Jewish rabbis who were contemporaries of Jesus.

The parables which most closely resemble Jesus' are those in the Old Testament and rabbinic literature. These Semitic parables (as distinct from the classical) are no doubt the predecessors of those we find preserved in the Synoptic Gospels. Anyone who compares the parables in the Gospels with those in other sources is led to conclude that Jesus was a master of the genre, perhaps its most brilliant author ever. Even today parables, and in particular those of Jesus, remain among the most beautiful and memorable works in the history of literature.

5. Klyne Snodgrass who wrote one of the most exhaustive commentaries on Jesus' parables wrote that Jesus' parables have been described as works of art and weapons in His conflict with His opponents; they bring delight for some but offense to others. They explain the kingdom, show the character of God, and reveal the expectations God has for humans
6. Jesus was a master at using parables, and this is something that even those outside the Church have agreed upon for the past 2000 years
7. Today is going to be a bit academic but I believe it's necessary to cover a few things to help us in our study:
 - a. We are going to begin by trying to define what a parable is
 - b. We are then going to look at why Jesus taught in parables
 - c. And finally, we're going to briefly address some interpretive challenges and problematic approaches to parables

A. What is a parable?

**In this section we are going to try to define what a parable is, look at the different types of parables, and finally identify some of the characteristics of parables

1. Definition:
 - a. It would be good to start with a definition, but the problem is there's no agreement among Bible scholars on exactly how to define a parable:
 - 1) This is why if you google a phrase like "how many parables did Jesus teach" the results will be all over the place, anywhere from 30 to 50 parables; likewise if you do a google search for all the parables of Jesus, the results will yield different lists

- 2) In his commentary on the parable of Jesus, Klyne Snodgrass wrote that it's difficult to come up with a singular definition because it will either be too narrow and exclude some parables or it will be too broad and imprecise that it is almost useless:
 - a) For instance, some claim that in order for something to be a parable it must have three elements: it must be a story; it must have characters; and it must have a plot
 - b) The problem with such a narrow definition is that the Bible refers to statements Jesus made as parables but they don't include these three elements (Ex. Luke 5:33-39; Mark 3:20-30)
 - c) Others broaden the definition to include any form of illustration or figurative speech—similes, metaphors, word pictures, etc.
 - d) But, this definition seems too broad based on what we see in the Bible
 - 3) It's helpful to look at the Hebrew and Greek words, and how they are used in the OT and NT:
 - a) Hebrew *masal*: one of the meanings is to compare or be similar and it's used over 40 times in the OT in this way to refer to proverbs, riddles, poems, discourse, prophetic utterances, short stories, and similitudes
 - b) Greek *parabole*: it means to place alongside or compare and is used 50 times in the NT in a similar fashion to Hebrew *masal*:
 - Proverb (Luke 4:23): **"And He said to them, 'No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself!'"**
 - Riddle (Mark 3:23): **"And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?'"**
 - Comparison (Matthew 13:33): **"He spoke another parable to them, 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.'"**
 - Simple story (READ Luke 13:6-9)
 - Complex story (Matthew 13:18ff): Parable of the sower
 - b. Proposed definition:
 - 1) It seems to me that based on the Hebrew and Greek words, and what we see in the Bible, the closest we're going to come to a fairly accurate definition is the following
 - 2) A parable is a figure of speech or story specifically designed to illuminate a spiritual truth through the use of comparison
2. Types of Parables:
- a. One way to group parables is by their TOPIC, but this can be a challenge as well because not everyone agrees on how to group or categorize them, and some parables can fit into more than one category:
 - 1) William Boyce groups them into five categories: parables about the kingdom, salvation, wisdom and folly, Christian life, and judgment
 - 2) John MacArthur groups them into nine categories like parables about receiving the Word, the cost of discipleship, justice and grace, neighborly love, justification by faith, etc.
 - 3) Klyne Snodgrass has eight categories like parables about grace and responsibility, lostness, God and prayer, parables about Israel, parables about the present kingdom vs. parables about the future eschatological kingdom, and others

- 4) With this in mind, it might be best to not focus on the exact number of categories or the names of the categories, and instead just recognize that parables often share themes or topics with one another (for instance, there are a number of parables that relate to the kingdom of God; there are others that focus on being ready for Jesus' return)
- b. Another way to group parables is by their FORM and FUNCTION—in other words how they are structured and what purpose they serve (Courtesy of Klyne Snodgrass):
 - 1) Similitudes: these are extended similes, and their purpose is to show how one thing is like another (Matthew 13:47): **"The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind."**
 - 2) Interrogative Parables: these are similitudes (extended similes) but in the form of a question (Matthew 11:16): **"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces, who call out to the other children"**
 - 3) Narrative Parables: these are stories with one or more characters and a plot and their purpose is to either convey a moral or spiritual truth or provide an example of the kind of person to imitate or avoid imitating; examples would be the Good Samaritan, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and Tax Collector who go into the temple to pray
 - 4) Judicial Parables: these are a form of narrative parable but the intended purpose is to elicit self-condemnation on the part of the listener; a great Old Testament example is the parable of the ewe lamb the Prophet Nathan told to David when he confronted him over his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah; a New Testament example is the parable of the wicked tenants that Jesus used to chastise the Pharisees (Matthew 21:33-45)
 - 5) "How Much More" parables: these contrast human actions with God's actions like Luke 11:11-13 (READ)
3. Characteristics of Parables (also courtesy of Klyne Snodgrass):
 - a. #1: They are brief and often terse or to the point: use no more words than necessary
 - b. #2: They are simple, generally focusing on a single topic, and when characters are involved, there are usually only a few; the plots are also extremely basic
 - c. #3: They are fictional examples taken from everyday life
 - d. #4: They are engaging, often requiring the listener or reader to listen intently and sometimes even to pass judgement
 - e. #5: They often contain elements of contrast and even reversal; for instance, a tax collector who's righteous but a Pharisee who is unrighteous, or the Good Samaritan who helped the wounded traveler when the priest and Levite didn't
 - f. #6: The crucial part of narrative parables is usually at the end, like the punchline of a joke
 - g. #7: They are told within a context: Jesus told parables to support His teaching so parables have to be interpreted in light of that teaching
 - h. #8: They are theocentric meaning that they seek to change behavior and make disciples by telling about God and His kingdom

B. Why did Jesus speak in parables?
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1. When we look at Jesus' use of parables there are two patterns that develop over time:
 - a. The first pattern is a change in how often Jesus used parables:
 - 1) This becomes more obvious when you read through a harmony of the Gospels

- 2) Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8 occur at about the halfway point in Jesus' public ministry (1.5 years in) and we see a drastic increase in the number of recorded parables at these chapters and beyond
 - 3) Approximately 1/3 of Jesus' parables recorded in the Gospels occur in the first half of His public ministry, with the remaining 2/3 occurring in the second half of His public ministry
 - 4) So it appears Jesus began to use parables more frequently as His public ministry progressed, and this correlated with the increasing opposition He faced, especially by the religious leaders
- b. The second pattern is a change in the complexity of the parables Jesus used:
- 1) The first parables recorded in the Gospels are found in Matthew 5 and 6 and notice how simple they are; they are short, to the point, and wouldn't have required any explanation to first century Jews (READ Matthew 5:13-16 and 6:19-21)
 - 2) However, as we read through Matthew 6-12 which was in the first half of Jesus' public ministry, the list of parables starts to include those which are more complex, including stories with characters and plots, and but even these would have been fairly simple to understand by those who genuinely listened and tried to understand:
 - Wise Man Who Built His House Upon a Rock
 - Money Lender with Two Debtors
 - 3) However, as we get into Matthew 13 and the second half of Jesus' ministry, we begin to see significantly more complexity to the parables, and the meaning of the parables isn't so simple to discern
 - 4) So, just as Jesus began to use parables more frequently during the second half of His public ministry, He also began to use parables which were much more complex and harder to understand:
 - Parable of the Sower (or Soil)
 - Wheat and the Tares
- c. Both of these patterns are reflected in something Matthew wrote in Matthew 13:34-36 (READ):
- 1) The first thing we see here is Matthew's comment that Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables and did not speak to them without a parable; we know that Jesus spoke to the crowds without parables earlier in his ministry (for instance the beatitudes) so Matthew is highlighting a change in the FREQUENCY (how often) Jesus spoke in parables; from this point on He no longer spoke to the crowds without using parables
 - 2) The second thing we see is that for the first time the disciples had to ask Jesus to explain one of His parables; this reveals a change in COMPLEXITY of the parables Jesus used; many needed to be explained in order to be understood properly
 - 3) These two patterns directly relate to why Jesus spoke in parables
2. Fortunately, we don't have to speculate on why Jesus used parables because He answered that question Himself (READ Matthew 13:10-17):
- a. At this point in His ministry, Jesus spoke differently to the crowds than He did His disciples; notice that the disciples questioned Him saying (10), **"Why do You speak to THEM in parables?"**
 - b. Jesus' answer was direct and to the point:
 - 1) God had chosen to reveal His mysteries to the disciples but not to the crowds (READ 11)

- 2) So, Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables:
 - a) This discussion is recorded by both Matthew and Luke, and each focuses on a slightly different nuance regarding Jesus' answer for speaking in parables
 - b) Matthew indicates Jesus spoke in parables BECAUSE the crowds had become hard of hearing and seeing (11): **"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"**
 - c) However, Luke indicates Jesus spoke to them in parables to PREVENT them from understanding (Luke 8:10): **"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"**
 - d) Both of these are true: Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables because they had become hard of hearing and did not seek to understand, and in order to prevent them from understanding unless they sought to understand
- 3) This was not as much a statement of fact as it was a judgment against the crowds, and Israel as a whole; it wasn't that they could not see, hear or understand, but that they refused to just as Isaiah prophesied (READ 14-15)
- 4) But, the disciples were different (16): their eyes could still see and their ears could still hear
- c. So, there was a two-fold purpose in Jesus' use of parables: it **CONCEALED** the truth from some but **REVEALED** the truth to others:
 - 1) For those with hard hearts, like most of the crowds and the religious leaders, He spoke in parables to **CONCEAL** the truth
 - 2) However, to those who's hearts were not hard and who were willing to listen and accept the truth, He spoke in parables to **REVEAL** the truth through comparisons and explanations
 - 3) We see this contrast in Mark 4 which is Mark's recording of the same account we just read in Matthew 13, after Jesus spoke the parable of the sower to the crowds:
 - a) Mark 4:9-13 (READ)
 - b) Mark 4:33-34 (READ)

<h3>C. Interpretive Challenges and Problematic Approaches</h3>
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1. Ignoring the surrounding context: parables draw their meaning from the context and teaching surrounding them and if we ignore this we will misinterpret and/or misapply the parable
2. Ignoring the cultural divide: parables are real life examples taken from the 1st century culture; we have to understand that culture and the examples to properly interpret the parables (e.g. understanding the marriage customs will help us interpret the parable of the ten virgins, and understanding the agricultural and master-slave relationships will help us interpret parables involving those elements and characters)
3. Making too much of the minor details: parables generally have one, maybe two, central points and not every detail contains a spiritual truth (e.g. Augustine's allegorizing every individual detail)
4. Using parables as the basis of doctrine: parables should never be used as the basis for theology, but rather serve to help us understand the doctrines taught more plainly by Jesus (e.g. Dustin's example of the parable of the sower being used to claim evangelism will only be 25% effective)

5. Some modern-day pastors and teachers eschew didactic or expository teaching/preaching falsely claiming that Jesus only taught in parables and stories so we should to; their teaching/preaching focuses mainly on narration, illustration, and storytelling; however, parables only made up about 35% of Jesus' teaching; the majority of His teaching was didactic and He used the parables to support that teaching