

TORBAY METHODIST CIRCUIT BIBLE STUDY, 2 MARCH 2014
INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

What is a Parable?

People in the Near East were great story tellers. The Hebrew tradition was rich in the wisdom sayings (*māšāl*). There are numerous examples in the Old Testament and usually nine are listed: the Parable of Nathan to David about the ewe lamb (2 Sam. 12:1–7); the Parable of the Two Brothers and the Avenger of Blood (2 Sam. 14:1–11); The Escaped Prisoner (1 Kings 20:35–40); The Vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7); The Eagles and the Vine (Ezek. 17:2–10); The Lion Whelps (Ezek. 19:2–9); The Vine (Ezek. 19:10–14); The Forest Fire (Ezek. 20:45–49); The Seething Pot (Ezek. 24:3–5). Additionally, Judges 9:7–15 records the story of the trees, and 2 Kings 14:9 contains the story of the thistle and the cedar.

Outside of the world of the Old Testament, in classical rhetoric several literary forms were used including image, metaphor, comparison, parable, illustrative story and allegory. The parable form is not unique to Jesus. Parables are found in classical writings such as those of Homer but Jesus was certainly a master at using parables as a way of teaching. Parables make up about one-third of his recorded sayings (about 40 parables and 20 parabolic statements) and are described both as ‘works of art’ and ‘weapons of warfare’. J. Jeremias (1900-1979) in his book *The Parables of Jesus* (1963) writes, ‘in dealing with the parables we are dealing with a particularly trustworthy tradition, and are brought into immediate relation with Jesus’ (1963:12).

There is a measure of scholarly disagreement as to what constitutes a parable or a parabolic saying. The Greek word for parable (*parabolē*, *para* - alongside; *ballo* – place, literally putting things side by side) and its Hebrew counterpart are both broad terms and can be used for anything from a proverb to an allegory (where every part of the story has a meaning). The word ‘parable’ is used in a variety of ways, for what we might often term a proverb (e.g. Luke 4:23) or a riddle (Mark 3:23) or a simple illustration (Mark 13:28). An ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), often uses the word ‘parable’ for proverb or dark saying. ‘Parable’ is also used for any story with two levels of meaning, from which we get the popular idea that a parable is ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning’.

The New Testament text does not help us to make a fine distinction between the parable and allegory but a parable uses imagery drawn from real life which is readily accessible to everyone. Parables spring from living speech and do not readily conform to literary rules. However, parables are normally stories that are told in the past tense rather than a lesson from contemporary life. The difference between a parable and an allegory is a vague and complex one but, in general terms, in a parable, no significance need be attached to every small detail of the story, whereas an allegory is a more elaborate story in which all or most of the details have their counterparts in application. Jesus interprets what we call ‘the Parable of the Sower’ and ‘Parable of the Weeds’ (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23, 24-30, 36-43) allegorically and the parables of the dragnet (Mt. 13:47–50), the wicked husbandmen (Mk. 12:1–12), the marriage feast (Mt. 22:1–14) and the great supper (Lk. 14:16–24) obviously contain details with allegorical significance but that need not mean that we should interpret every parable that way.

Anyone reading the parables has to address the question, ‘how much of the parable is really significant?’ Are all the details significant or just one or more points? From the 2nd century, the Alexandrian School adopted an allegorizing approach in which every detail is significant and that the meaning and relevance of a parable are to be found in the way it portrays Christian theology. This caused Augustine (354–430) to come up with what to us is a bizarre interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in which Christ is the Good Samaritan, the man is Adam, Jerusalem is the heavenly city from which Adam fell, Jericho is human mortality, the thieves are the devil and his angels, the Priest and the Levite show that the Old Testament ministry is inadequate for salvation, the oil is the comfort of good hope, the animal is the flesh of the incarnation, the inn is the church, and the innkeeper is the apostle Paul! While this approach appears to have nothing in common with Jesus’ intention, it is easy to be drawn, wittingly or unwittingly, into this kind of approach, if only in part. So the readers must beware of drawing their own preconceptions into their interpretation of the parable (a rule, of course, that applies to scripture in general and not just the parables).

Medieval interpreters went further than the Alexandrian School by finding multiple meanings in the text. The usual four meanings were the literal meaning; an allegorical meaning relating to Christian theology; a moral meaning giving direction for daily life; and a heavenly meaning indicating something about future life. In contrast, the Antioch School was known for its commonsense approach but its influence was limited when compared to the Alexandrian School and, apart from notable exceptions, most of the church’s efforts at understanding the parables over the centuries involved allegorizing until a new approach was outlined by a German scholar Adolf Jülicher (1867-1938). As a reaction to allegorical interpretations, Jülicher said that a parable of Jesus has only one point of contact between the story and the fact being portrayed. However, some Jesus’ parables were clearly intended to illustrate *several* lessons, as in the parable of the prodigal son, where stress is laid on the joy which God as Father has in forgiving his children, but the nature of repentance and the sin of jealousy and self-righteousness are also explored (Lk. 15:11–32) (Tasker & Marshall, 1996:868). In the last century, C.H. Dodd (1884–1973) and Joachim Jeremias rightly emphasized the historical context in which the parables were originally told. Both Dodd and Jeremias focused on cultural factors to help understand the details of the parables and on the context of Jesus’ original preaching about the kingdom of God. More recently, attention has moved to an attempt to convey the same impact that parables had on the original hearers to today’s hearers. In this thinking, Jesus’ parables are regarded as works of art, with an original meaning and the potential for a series of further possible meanings, the context undoubtedly giving a clue as to the correct application.

Parables in the New Testament

1. In Hebrews, the ritual of the tabernacle (9:9) and the restoration of Isaac (11:19) are called a ‘parable’
2. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matt., Mk., Lk.) parables are used in various senses.
 - a. Figurative saying: image elucidates the reality.
(Matt. 5:14 ‘You are the light of the world’)

b. Metaphor: image used instead of the reality
(Matt. 21:33-46, Israel as the vineyard)

c. Simile: image and reality with comparative adjective
(Matt. 10:16 'wise as serpents')

d. Pure Parable: one principal point of comparison
(Matt. 13:33 kingdom like leaven)

e. Parabolic story: recounted as if historical
(Lk. 18: 2 'There was a certain man')

f. Illustrative stories: a model case (In Luke only)
Lk. 10: 37 'Go and do likewise'. Such stories often end with a bidding or a warning.

g. Allegory: a series of pictures or metaphors
Matt. 22:2-10 The Wedding Banquet (cf. Matt. 13:36).

3. In the fourth gospel (John) there are not parables of the same kind as in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) but there are a number of brief parables which lie almost hidden (e.g. the new birth, the water of life, the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd).

4. Parabolic actions

In OT these include Hosea's marriage, the breaking of the earthen flask (Jer. 19) and the prophet's nakedness (Isa. 20). In the life of Jesus, these include, for example the reception of outcasts, plucking grain on the Sabbath, the cursing of the fig tree and the Last Supper.

The Purpose of the Parables

Jesus taught in parables because they are interesting and exciting. In one of the New Testament's most difficult sayings (Mark 4:10-12), it seems that Jesus also uses parables to keep people from understanding. The Old Testament reference in this passage is from Isaiah (6:9-10). The tension between hearing and not understanding, because of hardness of heart, is a theme that is repeated in the scriptures, not only in Isaiah and the Gospels but also in Acts (Acts 28:26-27). Clearly, the parables contain a message which is primarily eschatological (i.e. about the kingdom of God, repentance and conversion). It seems as if Jesus chose not to hand people truth on a plate perhaps because the truth of God cannot be learned as if it were a series of facts but needs learning in the context of personal commitment. It is an indirect teaching.

Characteristics of the Parables of Jesus ("v3!")

- a. (" ditto) Repetition of central facts (Matt. 20:1-8; 21:33-37)
- b. (v. versus) Contrast (Luke 16:19-20)
- c. (3) Use of three (Luke 10:30-33; 14:18-20)
- d. (!) Big ending (Luke 20:9-16)

Guidelines for Interpreting the Parables

Elwell & Beitzel remark that while interpreting the parables is not easy, certain guidelines can be presented that will avoid past errors and make sane interpretation possible. The following nine guidelines are a summary of their work but some of the more detailed points from the original article are omitted.

1. *Analyze the parable thoroughly.* Note the characters and movement of the story, its climax, and the repetition of key words or ideas. If it appears in more than one Gospel, do a comparative analysis of the various accounts to note both similarities and differences.
2. *Listen to the parable without any preconceptions as to its form or its meaning.* Attempt to hear the parable as if sitting at the feet of Jesus without knowing the parable, its meaning, and Christian theology. While it is impossible for a modern reader to become a 1st-century Jewish hearer, it is imperative that a parable be interpreted in its original context and in the way its author originally intended it to be understood.
3. *Look for help in the surrounding context but realize that the original context for many of the parables has not been preserved.* Often the parables appear where they do in the Gospels because of the arrangement of the Gospel writers.
4. *Notice features in the parable that reflect the life and thinking of the 1st-century world.* An understanding of cultural and religious factors and an awareness of OT ideas reflected in a parable will greatly assist in its interpretation. Obviously one cannot interpret the parables without some sensitivity to the nature of the life that they reflect.
5. *Note how the parable fits into the purpose and plan of the entire book.* If the parable is present in the other Gospels, note its location and how it has been shaped to fit into the purpose of each Gospel writer.
6. *Determine as explicitly as possible the message of the parable in the teaching of Jesus.* There may be several points that need to be made in a given parable. There may be legitimate secondary features in the parable, but be careful not to push the story too far. One should exercise caution since it is easy to violate a parable's intention. No one would want to suggest that God has tormentors on the basis of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (see Mt 18:34); rather this verse points up the seriousness of the sin and its judgment. However, some people wrongly overemphasize minor features of other parables. If one will interpret the parable as a whole in keeping with its original intention such errors will be minimized.
7. *Note where the teaching of the parable conforms to the teaching of Jesus elsewhere.* Jesus' nonparabolic teaching may provide the key for or strengthen the interpretation of a parable.
8. *Give due emphasis to the 'rule of end stress.'* Usually the climax and the most important part of a parable comes at its conclusion. Consequently, the focus of the interpretation should be there as well. Often the end of the parable will include the theme of reversal. As elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus, his statement on a given topic is often the exact reverse of what others say or expect.
9. *Determine what principles are present in the parable that reveal the nature of God, his kingdom, the way he deals with humanity, or what he expects of humanity.* These principles will be of particular relevance for 20th-century persons, and the parable will remain as one of the most effective means of communicating them to modern society.

The Parables of Jesus

	Luke	Matthew	Mark
New cloth on old coat	5:36	9:16	2:21
New wine in used wineskins	5:37–38	9:17	2:22
Houses on rock and on sand	6:47–49	7:24–27	
The moneylender	7:41–43		
Sower and soils	8:5–8	13:3–8	4:3–8
Lamp under a bowl	8:16; 11:33	5:14–15	4:21–22
The Good Samaritan	10:30–37		
Friend in need	11:5–8		
Rich fool	12:16–21		
Watchful servants	12:35–40		
Faithful servant	12:42–48	24:45–51	
Unfruitful fig tree	13:6–9		
Mustard seed	13:18–19	13:31–32	4:30–32
Yeast	13:20–21	13:33	
Best places at a wedding banquet	14:7–14		
Great banquet and reluctant guests	14:16–24		
Cost of being a disciple	14:28–33		
Lost sheep	15:4–6	18:12–13	
Lost coin	15:8–10		
Lost son	15:11–32		

	Luke	Matthew	Mark
Shrewd manager	16:1–8		
Rich man and Lazarus	16:19–31		
Master and servant	17:7–10		
Persistent widow	18:2–5		
Pharisee and tax collector	18:10–14		
Pounds	19:12–27		
Tenants	20:9–16	21:33–41	12:1–9
Fig tree	21:29–32	24:32–33	13:28–29
Weeds		13:24–30	
Hidden treasure		13:44	
Pearl		13:45–46	
Net		13:47–48	
Unmerciful servant		18:23–34	
Workers in the vineyard		20:1–16	
Two sons		21:28–31	
Wedding banquet and garment		22:2–14	
Ten virgins		25:1–13	
Talents		25:14–30	
Sheep and goats		25:31–36	
Growing seed			4:26–29 ¹

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988:1603)

The aim of an interpreter should be to hear the parables as they were originally intended by Jesus and as his original audience heard them, with all their original vitality. Jesus expected that people would be challenged and changed because they heard his Parables. As we read them we should be expecting the same - not least in our own lives!

Further reading

Dodd, C. H. (1936), *The Parables of the Kingdom*

Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988), Parables, in *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*

Hunter, A. M. (1960), *Interpreting the Parables*

Jeremias, J. (1963), *The Parables of Jesus*

Tasker, R. V. G., & Marshall, I. H. (1996), Parable, in (D. R. W. Wood, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman, Eds) *New Bible dictionary*

A much more recent publication in paperback, which has been well reviewed, is:

Blomberg, C. L., (2012), *Interpreting the Parables* (2nd Edition, IVP, Apollos) £19.99

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