

THE PARABLES: CATCHING THE POINT

The parables of Jesus are quite familiar and often well known. Yet they are perhaps the most abused and misinterpreted portions of Scripture. In part this is due to their purpose and nature. Parables are extended metaphors or similes. They are according to the Lord's own teaching intended to reveal the Kingdom to some while obscuring it for others. But due to their form - the temptation to allegorize the details and search out many meanings beyond the main point has led many astray. Both the importance and difficulty of understanding the Parables can be seen from the number of volumes currently available on their interpretation.

A parable has been defined as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." They are extended *Similes* that Jesus used to illustrate his message. They would lead the listeners along till they accepted the validity of the earthly picture, then "set the hook" to catch them on the spiritual truth as well. Either they caught the point or the point caught them! Just as Nathan did with David in 2 Samuel 12.

Parables were an important part of Jesus' teaching. In Scripture, they arose out of growing opposition to the Lord. The teachers of the Law were attributing his works and words to Satan. (Mark 3:20f) It was this negative, opposing response that prompted the use of Parables. Jesus said to his disciples when asked about the parables: "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, ever hearing but not understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven." (Mk 4:11,12; Lk 8: 9,10; Matt 13:10-17.) Parables were intended to teach the response disciple ("he who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Lk 8:8), while hiding the truth from the unresponsive heart and "so aid in the hardening of their heart as they continuously rebelled against God." (Hence the quote from Isaiah 6).

A parable can be compared with other similar forms. "A parable differs from a fable in that it is neither trivial nor fantastic; from the myth in that the parable is not a creation of popular folklore; from the allegory which finds meaning at many points in the narrative; and from such figures of speech as simile or metaphor, though in a qualified sense as the parable is a sort of metaphor or simile." (Bernard Ramm. Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p.976) "The parable differs from the fable, by moving in a spiritual world, and never transgressing the actual order of natural things - from the myth, because in that there is an unconscious blending of the deeper meaning with the outward symbol, the two remaining separate in the parable - from the proverb, inasmuch as it is longer carried out, and not merely accidentally, but necessarily figurative - from the allegory, by comparing one thing with another, and not transferring, as in the allegory, the properties of one to the other." (Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord, p. 5)

There are 30 main parables in the Gospels - the most are recorded by Luke, the least by John. It is clear that Jesus told them more than once, and sometimes used the same parable to teach different lessons. In studying them, it is important to compare parallel accounts and examine carefully the contexts in which they were given. The local color needs to be uncovered and the parable and its various details understood. Old Testament allusions should be carefully noted.

Especially pay attention to the attitudes and spiritual condition of the hearers - were they disciples? Antagonists? etc.? What prompted Jesus to tell it to them? Are there any clues from the context, the hearers, or an further interpretation by the Lord that give indication of its one central lesson? Is there a generalized statement within the parable that may help? Jesus primarily used his parables to get responses out of his hearers. So be sure and look for who would have been "caught" by the parable, and how.

A caution must be made at this point. Perhaps the most important principle concerning the interpretation of a parable is that the focus should be on the main point and not on the details. It is in the seeking out of a multitude of meanings for various details that the main misuse of parables comes about - allegorizing them. Modern scholarship has rejected allegorical interpretation because there was never a consensus as to what the details represent.

Sometimes even a generalizing statement may not be giving the main thesis or lesson the parable is intended to teach. The context, the hearers and their cultural points of reference, any interpretation - if given by Jesus -- all these should be used to establish the one main point of comparison between the earthly and spiritual elements.

It is here that we must put all the parables in their context in the basic teachings of the Lord. "To adequately understand the parables,, we need to understand them in their relationship to Christology and the Kingdom of God." We must ask how does this parable relate to Christ? To His Word? A teaching mission? Many of the parables are given to illustrate the "Kingdom of God" which was the central idea in Jesus' message. (Mk 1:15). Bernard Ramm says: "Christ came preaching a gospel of the kingdom and announcing a kingdom was at hand. Many of the parables directly state that they are about the kingdom, and others not specifically stated cannot be divorced from the kingdom. Adequate interpretation of the parables must now be based upon an understanding of the kingdom of God and the relationship of Jesus Christ and His gospel to that kingdom ." Whether dealing with the nature of the kingdom, salvation, obedience, rejection, etc., the parables relate to the rule of Jesus Christ which has come, is continuing and is yet to come. Jesus used the Kingdom Parables to announce the "already" aspect of the Kingdom's coming and to stress the urgency of the hour. Both judgment and salvation are "near at hand".

It is also important to stress one more important principle. We must be careful to not base a doctrine on a parable alone. The didactic portions of Scripture must under gird any doctrines we develop from the parables. Certainly there is balance in allowing all the parables, indeed all the scriptures, speak to us as we formulate our doctrine, rather than pitting this passage against that to establish our own view points.

"He who has ears to hear - let him hear."