

THE PARABLES: Catching the point

The parables of Jesus are quite familiar and often well known. Yet Mickelsen and others observe that 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 in part it is due to their form - the temptation to allegorize the details and search out many meanings beyond the main point has led many astray.

Parables were an important part of Jesus' teaching. In Scripture, they arise 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).

Bernard Ramm identifies four elements to a Parable:

1. A parable narrates some commonly known "earthly, thing, event, custom, or possible occurrence."
2. Beyond the earthly element is the spiritual lesson or theological truth the parable intends to teach.
3. This earthly element bears an analogical relationship to the spiritual element.
4. Because there are two levels of meaning every parable stands in need of interpretation. (Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 278f)

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." (Ramm, 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 noted. Also the attitudes and spiritual condition of the hearers- were they disciples? Antagonists? etc.? What prompted Jesus to tell it? Are there any clues from the context, the hearers, or an interpretation by the Lord that give indication of its one central lesson? Is there a generalized statement within the parable that may help? What responses did Jesus get from the hearers?

Jesus used the parables to get responses out of his hearers. *"It is told to address and capture the hearers, to bring them up short about their own actions, or to cause them to respond in some way to Jesus and His ministry."* (Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, p. 138). 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 meanings for the various details that allegorization comes about. *"The danger in parabolic teaching at this point is to interpret as meaningful what is drapery."* (Ramm, p. 283)

Mickelsen says: *"Sometimes the generalizing conclusion at the end of a parable referred to only one small aspect of the parable, and sometimes to the main thrust. Furthermore, the application of the parable was sometimes a theme that entered into many aspects of Jesus' teaching. . . . Sometimes what appears to be a conclusion to a parable or to two parables is actually the conclusion to a section in which certain parables are used to enforce the main teaching."* (Mickelsen, p.130,131) Sometimes the generalizing statements may not be giving the main thesis or lesson the parable is intended to teach. The context, the hearers, interpretation- if given, 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? The parables are usually given to illustrate the "Kingdom of God" which was the central idea in Jesus' message. Mk 1:15). *"The parables should be read in the light of the primary thrust of Jesus' message- the breaking in of the reign of God."* (Mickelsen. p.126)

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 . "* (Ramm. p. 980) 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 judgement 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 undergird any doctrines we develop from the parables. This is perhaps best illustrated in the millennial issue. As is already clear - the parables relate to the kingdom, the reign of Christ, and the coming of this reign in its entirety is the question before the various millennial viewpoints. The parables teach that the kingdom has come, continues in this age, and is eschatological in character. *"Convictions about the nature of the kingdom must certainly be built on a broader basis than two or three parables. The parables may be used to bolster millennial convictions, but the entire edifice cannot be made to rest upon them. Millennial views must certainly contain the balance of optimism and pessimism as contained in the parables, as well as the teaching of the parables that the kingdom is established, is progressing and is eschatological."* (Ramm. p.286. 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."