

Introduction: We began our study of the Parables of Jesus with the important example of the parable of the Two Builders. This parable reminds us how vital it is that we build our spiritual life on a sturdy foundation which can withstand the storms of life, the final storm of mortal death, and will go with us into eternal life with God. There is only one foundation which meets those requirements. That is the Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings. In this lesson we will look more generally at parables and how they are used in Scripture.

What Makes a Parable a “Parable”? The Greek word is “*parabolee*.” “Para” means beside. “Ballo” means to cast or throw. Thus, parable means to cast beside or place alongside. In most of Jesus’ parables He places various concrete incidents, objects, or persons, or situations alongside some theological principle or new idea to clarify the principle or make the new idea clear.

While most of Jesus’ parables are designed to make things clearer to those who hear, the seven Kingdom Parables in Matthew 13 are an exception. These particular parables were taught in a form which temporarily, but deliberately, concealed the details of the kingdom from casual listeners. Understanding the kingdom parables, requires understanding that the kingdom Jesus was talking about would for a time be a kingdom in which Christ rules in the hearts of believers. At the time Jesus was giving the parables, that kingdom was in process of being formed. It would take full form and be firmly established when Christ’s salvation work was completed (i.e., after Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension). At that point, the seven parables would become more easily understood. Meanwhile, the 7 parables were explained to Jesus’ immediate followers.

We can summarize the general nature of Jesus’ parables by saying parables are a vivid form of communication Jesus used to teach new ideas through comparison of unfamiliar spiritual truths with lifelike situations and familiar imagery all His hearers would understand. Jesus was dealing with a situation in which understanding of God, His righteousness, and His requirements on mankind were broadly misunderstood. Jesus used parables to redirect people’s thought into fresh patterns revealing God’s truth and truth about God.

I, personally, think of parable as a verbal picture somewhat analogous to a cartoon. A cartoon is constructed of a few simple lines sketching a caricature of a situation. The caricature often conveys a striking message difficult to achieve any other way. Jesus does that with a few words in parabolic form. The points He makes are unmistakable, vivid, and important.

Uniqueness of the Parables of Jesus: Parables have been used in communication far, far back in history. But the parables of Jesus have a unique place in that history. The way He used brief parabolic stories to make people think, or to make a question sharper, or to clarify the answer to a question, appears to have no parallel in any culture. That is remarkable given Jesus lived in a society which thrived on the telling of stories. The simplicity, clarity, and enduring challenge of Jesus' parables is a triumph in the art of communication.

The history of the importance and meaning of Jesus' parables is complex. Christians today likely understand Jesus' parables as brief stories, based on recognizable features of daily life, always including something unexpected that demands an evaluation or response by the hearers.

The paralleling the "unexpected" with the "familiar" is a tactic which bumps thoughts out of well-worn paths into a new pattern. This enables a persuasive change in thinking. Jesus' parables are often aimed at creating conditions to cause a person to look at their personal responsibilities in new ways. This was important to the strategy of encouraging fresh thinking about God and His requirements.

Parables Useful to All Teachers: Understanding abstract concepts is essential. How do you convey that understanding? Every teacher knows that you must use concrete examples of abstract concepts in the learning process. Think of the way we teach our young children.

Lou Ann and I are blessed with 5 great grandsons, the oldest is not quite 5, the youngest not quite 1. How do we teach them? Probably the most powerful technique is "show and tell." "Show and tell" is much like a parable, and it works for teaching many concepts.

In biblical learning, difficult spiritual and theological concepts come to life when taught by comparison to concrete, earthly things. The "new and difficult" is then understood by analogy with "things already understood."

Parables are extremely effective as a teaching method. They make truth concrete, easily remembered, interesting, and personally discoverable. Jesus frequently used parables in his teaching, telling an earthly story to give meaning to a heavenly truth or to clarify a tricky concept.

Parables Illustrate but Don't Declare Doctrine: Parables can be used very effectively to illustrate doctrine and bring it to life. But parables are never used to establish doctrine. Illustrate doctrine with parables, but never try to draw doctrine from a parable.

Jesus used vivid familiar every-day imagery to teach new truths and bring new insight. It is interesting that He often responded to questions by teaching a parable.

Categories of NT Parables: There are many parables in the NT. Several schemes for categorizing NT parables have been devised. One useful set of categories is (1.) true (or factual), (2.) story, and (3.) illustrative parables.

Factual parables use familiar illustrations everyone recognizes as being true to life. Those hearing Jesus teach in parables would have known about seed growing (Mk4:26-29), yeast working in a batch of dough (Mt 13:33), children playing games (Mt 11:16-19; Lk 7:31,32), a sheep that strays away from the flock (Mt 18:12-14), and what happens when a woman loses a coin in her house (Lk 15:8-10). These parables begin with self-evident truths portraying either nature or human life and are usually related in the present tense.

The second type, story parables, on the other hand, do not rely on obvious truth or generally accepted custom to capture one's attention. They typically focus on some unusual event which might have happened in the past. Truth is conveyed through the imagined events. The truth of the events as factual historicity is not an issue.

Jesus' story parables include a farmer sowing wheat and then discovering an enemy had sown weeds on the same field (Mt 13:24-30), a rich man whose manager cheated him (Lk 16:1-9), and a widow whose repeated pleas led a judge to administer justice (Lk 18:1-8).

In the third type, illustrative parables, truth is taught by example. This is done by focusing directly on the character and conduct of an individual. Several illustrative parables appear in Luke's Gospel. There are examples to be imitated, and examples to be avoided. Illustrative parables include the good

Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37); the rich fool (Lk 12:16-21); the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31); and the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14).

Parables in the OT: In the OT parables were used only to a minor extent. Isaiah used a vineyard illustration to explain the judgment which was about to befall Judah. Nathan used a parable to cause David to acknowledge and repent his sin with Bathsheba.

In the first and second centuries after Christ, Jewish rabbinical literature frequently used parables to explain the Law or a doctrine, but unlike Jesus, they did not use them to teach new truths. The content and construction of their parables is inferior to those of Jesus.

Parables of Jesus: The parables of our Lord Jesus are unlike any others, either in composition or in the way he used them in his teaching. There are 38 of His parables recorded in the first three gospels.

- Of these 29 appear in only one gospel.

- 3 are twice repeated:

- (1.) House on the Rock (Mt 7, Lk 6)

- (2.) Yeast (Mt 13, Lk 13)

- (3.) Lost Sheep (Mt 18, Lk 15)

- 6 are 3 times repeated:

- (1.) New Cloth (Mt 9, Mk 2, Lk 5)

- (2.) New Wine/Old Wineskins (Mt 9, Mk 2, Lk 5)

- (3.) Fig Tree (Mt 24, Mk 13, Lk 21)

- (4.) Mustard Seed (Mt 13, Mk 4, Lk 13)

- (5.) Sower (Mt 13, Mk 4, Lk 8)

- (6.) Wicked Tenants (Mt 21, Mk 12, Lk 20)

- There are no parables in the Gospel of John. There is the allegory of the vine and branches, and the allegory of the good shepherd.

Effectiveness of Parables in Jesus' Teaching Ministry: We have Jesus' own assessment of the value of His parables. All three Synoptic Gospels say Jesus' disciples asked him directly about His use of parables in teaching. Their concern seems to have been raised in the face of rising hostility from religious authorities. (Mt 12-13; Mk 3-4; Lk 7-8). Perhaps the disciples are somewhat frustrated because they fear Jesus is not explaining Himself as clearly to the opposing religious authorities as He does to His followers.

The response of Jesus is to remind that when Isaiah was called to be a prophet, he was warned there would be deep frustrations as he prophesized, because Israel "*will listen but never understand, see but never perceive*" (Mk 4:8; Lk 8:10; Mt 13:13-15).

Jesus disciples are among those who do "see and understand" (Mt 13:16), yet their understanding is not complete. There were always people listening to Jesus who would never understand.

Jesus' appears to say He teaches using parables because there is, and always will be, opposition to the preaching of God's word, and that the indirect style of teaching parables presents truth in a way that meets that challenge.

Proverbs, Allegories, and Fables: Parables are sometimes confused with proverbs, allegories, and fables. A parable is designed to teach spiritual truth by comparison with familiar things and situations true to nature and to man.

Proverbs can be thought of as short, concentrated parables. Proverbs have a long history as a means to transmit wisdom in a form easily remembered. The Book of Proverbs in the OT is well-known and well-loved.

In an allegory all details – people, events, and things – are understood to represent something other than their own reality. Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan is an allegory. The "true vine" and the "good shepherd" imagery of John's Gospel are allegorical.

Fables are pure fiction designed to teach maxims like prudential morality, industry, caution, and foresight. Fables often use talking trees and animals, reasoning beasts, and other things not found in nature. Fables can be used to convey God's truth. C.S. Lewis and others are masters at doing just that. C.S. Lewis's Tales of Narnia are amazing presentations of God's truth using all the delightful aspects of fables.

Responsibilities: We have three responsibilities regarding God's truth whenever and wherever we encounter it. That of course includes parables. Believers are to learn the truth, to live the truth, and to share the truth.

■ Some simple guidelines for studying parables include:

(1.) Pray for the Holy Spirit's illumination. It is He who guided the positioning of parables in Scripture.

(2.) Always study parables in context.

(3.) Ask why a particular parable is introduced at its particular place in the text?

(4.) What type of parable is it? What principle truth is taught?

(5.) Don't force interpretation of details. Interpretation of details is for allegories.

(6.) Remember, parables illustrate doctrine but never declare doctrine.

What's Next: Why is it that two people hear the gospel, and one becomes a true believer, while the other rejects it?