



STORIES WITH A PURPOSE

Unlocking the Parables of Jesus

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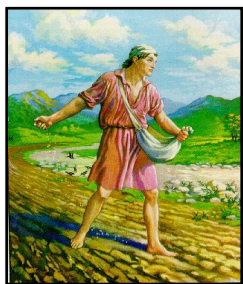


LESSON 1: GETTING STARTED

I. How to Understand Parables

A. A parable is a made-up story that teaches a Kingdom truth.

The term for parable is from the Greek word *paraballo*. The term means to place by the side of something. In other words, a parable is where Jesus has taken a picture of the real world to picture something that is true in the spiritual world. Another way to state this is that a spiritual reality is placed next to a picture of the real world.



A parable is not an allegory. An allegory may be limited to one line where the meaning is clearly contained within the phrase itself. Parables are not allegories because the

meaning of the parable is dependent upon information outside of itself, and a parable does not confuse the imaginary world with the real world.

A parable is not a fable. There are no trees and rocks speaking and this is not Alice in wonderland or the Wizard of Oz. A parable is not a riddle. Though a few parables pose a challenge to the interpreter, Jesus was not trying to trick his listeners.

To begin a study of Jesus' parables it is essential that the interpreter keep in mind certain hermeneutical (interpretation) principles. These principles will aid the student in avoiding faulty interpretations or from misrepresenting the intention of Jesus' words.

B. Why did Jesus speak in parables?

- To reveal truths to his followers (Matt. 13:10-11, 16).
- To *conceal* truths from his adversaries (Matt. 13:10-11, 13-15).

C. How do parables help me?

- They give me visual images that are easy to remember.
- They grab my attention in a special way.
- They stimulate my thinking about biblical truths.
- They were intending to evoke a response.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Parables

A. Three pitfalls to avoid

Pitfall No. 1: interpreting parables apart from what precedes and follows them.

Pitfall No. 2: seeking to find some spiritual truth in every little detail.

Pitfall No. 3: neglecting to respond to them.

B. Know the context and occasion of the parable

Jesus did not just teach parables at random. Many of the parables plainly state the occasion for their existence. For example:

Luke 14:7 declares that the reason for this parable was because of people seeking seats of honor.

Luke 15:1-2 shows that the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son all stem from the fact that the pharisees and scribes grumbled at Christ's eating with sinners.

The interpreter should note that three parables are used by Christ on multiple occasions. The parable of the lost sheep is found in Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:1-7. The Matthew text follows the rejection of the little children by the disciples, while the Luke text follows the complaining of the Pharisees about Jesus befriending sinners. The parables of the mustard seed and leaven are found in Luke 13:10-21 and then in Matthew 13:31-33 and Mark 4:30-32. The Luke text follows the healing of the crippled woman, while the Matthew and Mark texts are Christ speaking from the boat.

In both cases you should note that although the occasion is different, the intent of the parable is the same in both instances.

C. See the parts in light of the whole



All the parts must always be seen in light of the big picture.

In the parable of the prodigal son all the secondary props should be viewed underneath the umbrella of God's rejoicing love over the repentant sinner. This is not to say that the secondary props are useless, but they are there only to add to the main picture painted by the Lord. The secondary lessons should always be viewed within the scope of the primary lesson.

D. Don't get bogged down in the secondary props

If the main scope of the parable is not affected by the meaning of a secondary prop, then do not force a meaning into the secondary prop. For example, the phrase in Matthew 13:25 "but while everyone was sleeping" is not to be interpreted as "soul sleep."

In the parable of the vine-growers from Mark 12, uncovering the identity of the wall is not mandatory in understanding the main lesson. Jesus in interpreting the Sower and the seed did not identify every object in the parable. The wall is a secondary prop and is not part of the parable's intended meaning.

But do pay attention to specific identifications such as the "Son of Man" or the "Kingdom of Heaven" which are clearly stated and are key to understanding the context of what Jesus was explaining

III. Four Steps to Interpreting Parables

A. Discover the setting (historical, cultural) of the parable.

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B. Discover the need that prompted the parable.

The Matthew text follows the rejection of the little children by the disciples, while the Luke text follows the complaining of the Pharisees about Jesus befriending sinners. The parables of the mustard seed and leaven are found in Luke 13:10-21 and then in Matthew 13:31-33 and Mark 4:30-32. The Luke text follows the healing of the crippled woman, while the Matthew and Mark texts are Christ speaking from the boat. In both cases the student should note that although the occasion is different, the intent of the parable is the same in both instances.

C. List the main elements of the parable.

In the case of the parable of the Sower the elements include the Sower himself, the types of soils, and what happened to each of the seeds.

D. State the central truth of the parable.

This is usually given at the end of the parable. Knowledge of the occasion will greatly aid in determining the main lesson of the parable. This is not to say that there may not be additional lessons in a parable, but to keep from abusing the text,

all things must be kept in line with the main scope of the parable. The interpreter must make a distinction between what older interpreters would call the “body and the soul” of the parable or the “shell versus the marrow.”

Do not get lost in the details. The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7) is not a model for pastoral theology. In other words, a pastor is not to ignore his flock and chase after one potential convert. The main scope of the parable is to declare that God the Father revealed in God the Son loves to love sinners over and against the opinions and practice of the Pharisees.

IV. Exercise: The Parable of the Talents (Matt. 24:14-30)

Instructions: Follow the “Four Steps to Interpreting Parables” for this exercise.

Matthew 24:14-30: "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.

15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. 17 So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money

19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' 21 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

22 "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' 23 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

24 "Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

26 "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. 28 "So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the

one who has ten bags. 29 For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Mat 25:14-30 NIV)

A. Describe the setting of this parable

B. What was the need that prompted this parable? (Hint: See Matt. 24:3)

C. List the main elements of this parable.

D. What is the central truth of this parable?