

Interpreting the Parables

Syllabus

Course Description: This course will examine the parables of Jesus on several levels. These include: an historical survey of methods of interpretation, including recent developments; a survey of Jesus' teaching methods; parables as genre; and a discussion of principles for interpreting the parables today. Students will be required to interact with and interpret various parables in light of the information gathered in lectures and readings.

Course Objectives:

1. To introduce the student to methods of interpretation used throughout the history of the church, and to understand leading schools of thought regarding the interpretation of parables.
2. To become familiar with the various methods of teaching employed by Jesus during his earthly ministry and the different kinds of parables he taught.
3. To learn and practice methods of interpreting the parables of Jesus.
4. To interact with the message of the parables in the context of class discussion and presentation.

Course Outline

Lesson 1

1. How to Think About Parables

This lesson asks and answers the questions: Why study the parables? What is a parable? Are there examples of parables in parts of the Bible other than the parables of Jesus? What teaching methods did Jesus use and where do parables fit into his methods?

Lesson 2

2. How Have the Parables Been Interpreted in the Past?

This lesson asks and answers the questions: Are there examples of parable interpretation in church history? What are the schools of thought concerning how to interpret parables? What are the different kinds of parables? What is the difference between allegory and allegorizing? What is the current thinking on interpreting parables? Eisegesis or Exegesis?

Lesson 3

3. Principles for Interpreting the Parables of Jesus

This lesson asks and answers the questions: What are the main principles for interpreting the parables of Jesus? How do we recognize clues to interpretation? Are there different types of parables and should they be treated differently by interpreters?

Interpreting the Parabolas

Lesson 4

4. Practical Application in Interpreting Types of Parabolas

This lesson identifies several types of parabolas, divides students into teams, and gives a practicum (actual opportunity) to each to interpret one or more parabolas.

(Order of lessons is subject to change based on progress made in each class period.)

Interpreting the Parables

How to Think About Parables

Introduction: Why Study the Parables?

The parable was a common and effective way of teaching in antiquity used both by sacred and secular writers and teachers. As a method of teaching, or homiletical art-form, it experienced a long development and broad use. Jesus used parables more famously and thus effectively than any teacher of antiquity. They were heard and contemplated by thousands during his life and read by hundreds of millions since his death and resurrection. They were a primary vehicle for his teaching ministry. They taught such truths as the nature of the kingdom of heaven, God's patience and forgiveness, the judgment on the Jewish nation and religious establishment of his day, and religious system. They have timeless appeal as teachers of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, and are the gems of the wisdom teacher par excellence.

What is a Parable?

The term “parable” has a wide number of definitions, as we shall see. This is because in literature and in history, the concept of a parable is much wider than just the parables that Jesus told. There are parables in the Old Testament in addition to the new. While the idea of parables as we think of them is a concept of Semitic literature and culture, there is also such a concept in Hellenistic (Greek) or non-Semitic culture which may differ somewhat. For our purposes we will concentrate on the Biblical use of the terms *mashal* (Hebrew for proverb, parable, riddle, or song) and *parabole* (Greek for parable or to cast alongside).

The simplest and most common definition of a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Quite simply a parable is “a comparison.” That is, a comparison of an earthly concept with a heavenly reality.

Several useful definitions from modern scholarship applied to the parables of Jesus may be useful.

The mid-twentieth century scholar C.H. Dodd employed this definition:

“A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (quoted from Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 34-35).

“The first thing one must note is that not all the sayings we label as parables are of the same kind . . . Because the parables are not all of one kind, one cannot easily lay down rules that will cover them all.

“[T]he story parables function as a means of *calling forth a response* on the part of the hearer. . . 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 . . . They are themselves vehicles

Interpreting the Parables

for the message calling for response to Jesus' invitation and call to discipleship" (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stewart, *How to read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 125-126, 131).

"In church school we frequently teach that a parable is 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' Sometimes a parable is defined as a 'short fictitious story that teaches a moral or religious principle./ The Greek word *parabole* means essentially 'a comparison.' The two most basic forms of comparison are the simile and the metaphor. The difference between the two lies in the fact that whereas a metaphor contains an implied comparison or likeness [You *are* the light of the world] whereas the simile contains a stated likeness [The kingdom of heaven *is like* a grain of mustard seed . . .] . . . Basic to the classical Greek understanding of the idea of a parable is this idea of analogy" (Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, p. 34-35).

Other common observations include the following: Parables usually contain an element of surprise. Parables were oral communication and like a good joke we "get" them. Studying the parables written is a different (though valuable) experience from hearing them spoken. Context – time, place, culture, and audience – are crucial to understanding the parables as they were first given.

So, in the Old Testament the term *mashal*, originally meaning "to be similar or like" is usually translated *parabole* in the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It came to adopt a broad range of meanings. These include: proverb, truth through example, mocking taunt, similitude, fable, dark saying or riddle. This is translated by the Greek word *ainigma* (enigma). This genre is further developed in the literature of the intertestamental period. During and especially after the time of Jesus, parable-like *meshalim* were commonly used. In the rabbinic period (Judaism after 70 A.D.) the parable was a very popular method of teaching.

In the New Testament the word *parabole* is a compound word meaning to put something alongside, or to place side by side. Thus we have the idea of a comparison or figure. Jesus described normal every day events in order to draw a comparison with the spiritual principle or truth he wanted to communicate. As we have seen, Jesus used various kinds of symbolic speech. Parables differ from these in that they are extended metaphors or similes. For convenience, I have divided the parables into four general categories. Not all scholars or commentators (including those mentioned above) use these categories. We will look at alternatives, but we will use these for our purposes. These are: similitudes, parabolic stories (simple parables), illustrative stories, and allegories.

Are there examples of parables in parts of the Bible other than the parables of Jesus?

One of the primary means of poetic and parabolic expression in the Old Testament is known as the *mashal*. This word has broad meaning and can be understood as a "proverb, parable, allegory, byword, taunt, or discourse" (Harris, Archer, Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. I, p. 1258). The songs and wisdom literature of the Old Testament are often expressed in this form. Many of the songs, Psalms, and Proverbs are referred to as a *mashal*.

Interpreting the Parables

Even the riddle is understood under the rubric of *mashal*. For instance, the famous riddle of Samson:

*Out of the eater came something to eat
Out of the strong came something sweet* (Judges 14:14)

Some of these *meshalim* can be considered as parables in the sense we are using the term in this course. One famous example of a *mashal* is Jotham's taunt of Abimelech and the men of Shechem after the murder of Gideon's sons and the anointing of Abimelech as king (Judges 9:7-21). It is a kind of fable rather than a classic parable, but this demonstrates the broad use of the term in the Old Testament context.

When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?' Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'

"Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved — for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against my father's house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative— if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech." And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother (Judges 9:7-21).

One of the clearest uses of the parable, and one most resembling Jesus' use of parables, is Nathan's story of "The Poor Man's Ewe" which he told when confronting David. Those familiar with scripture will be familiar with the circumstantial context:

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up,

Interpreting the Parables

and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (II Samuel 12:1-7a).

What teaching methods did Jesus use and where do parables fit into his methods?

Figures of speech (and other methods)

Robert Stein has given an effective survey of the various methods, especially figures of speech, used by Jesus in his teaching ministry. The following survey is based on his work in the chapter "The Form of Jesus' Teaching", in *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*.

1. Overstatement and Hyperbole

Overstatement is state a truth to the point of exaggeration. We have an examples of this in the gospels.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Matt. 5:29-30).

"In hyperbole the gross exaggeration makes a literal fulfillment impossible." (Stein, p.11).

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt. 23:24)

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matt. 7:3-5).

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6:3-4).

Interpreting the Parables

And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:24-27).

2. Pun

Based on the Aramaic language Jesus probably spoke, the following are puns.

You blind guides, straining out a gnat (galma) and swallowing a camel (gamla)! (Matt. 23:24)

The wind (ruah) blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (ruah) (John 3:8).

3. Simile and Metaphor

A simile is a simple comparison between two unlike things using the connective "like", "as". Some similes are extended and form parables .

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40).

And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you (Luke 17:6).

A similitude is an extended simile and becomes one of the types of parables that Jesus uses.

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything (Mark 4:26-34)

Interpreting the Parables

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable (Matt. 13:33-34).

A metaphor is also a comparison between two essentially unlike things. A simile is an explicit comparison, a metaphor an implicit comparison. "The eye is like a lamp" contra "The eye is a lamp..." (Stein, p.15). Matt. 5:13; 14-16.

You are the salt of the earth . . . (Matt. 5:13)

You are the light of the world . . . (Matt. 5:14).

4. Proverb

A short, meaningful statement intended to teach a more profound truth in a memorable fashion.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:14b).

Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it (Luke 18:17).

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

So the last will be first, and the first last (Matt. 20:16).

5. Riddle and Paradox

A riddle is a wisdom saying with a concealed meaning.

And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day (Mark 2:19-20).

"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands'" (Mark 14:58).

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matt. 11:11).

Paradox is apparent contradiction.

But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44).

Interpreting the Parables

For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light . . . For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away (Mark 4:22; 25).

6. A Fortiori and the Use of Questions

A fortiori (with strength) is a type of argument in which the conclusion follows with greater logical necessity.

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:9-11).

It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household (Matthew 10:25).

Questions,

And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4).

Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me" (Mark 11:28).

7. Figurative Actions

And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them (Mark 6:11).

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1-4).

Stein's list is more extensive, but this shortened list of categories and definitions should prove helpful for our purposes.

Interpreting the Parables

Did the Rabbis use Parables?

In their book *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Three Centuries of the Christian Era*, Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston cite 115 parables from the Mishnah and the Midrashim from the period prior to 220 A.D. – that corresponding to the church fathers and the time of Jesus.

They summarize the structural characteristics of rabbinical parables as follows:

1. Illustrand, or the point to be illustrated
2. Introductory formula
3. The parable proper (the so-called picture half, or story part, of the whole unit)
4. Application, usually introduced by the Hebrew word *kak* (even so; likewise) or another linking word.
5. Scriptural quotation, often introduced by the formula, “as it is said” or “as it is written.” (*They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Three Centuries of the Christian Era*, Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, p. 99)

I think their most significant observation about the difference between Jesus’ use of parables and that of the rabbis is summarized in this paragraph:

If a really striking difference between the parables of the Rabbis and those of Jesus is to be sought, it must be sought in this contrast between the purposes for which they were used: while the rabbinical parables seek to reinforce conventional values, those of Jesus tend to undermine or invert them. The parables of the Rabbis seek to resolve perplexities, those of Jesus create them. The parables of the Rabbis intend to make life and thought smoother, but those of Jesus make them harder. It is the upsetting quality of the typical gospel parable that provides the clearest contrast with that of the rabbinic literature. Jesus the parabler was a subversive” (McArthur and Johnston, p. 114).

Glossary

Hyperbole: Hyperbole is the use of gross exaggeration which makes a literal fulfillment impossible.

Mashal: The Hebrew word has broad meaning and can be understood as a “proverb, parable, allegory, byword, taunt, riddle, or discourse.

Metaphor: A metaphor is an implicit comparison between two essentially unlike things (You are the light of the world).

Overstatement: Overstatement is to state a truth to the point of exaggeration.

Interpreting the Parables

Parable: The simplest and most common definition of a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” *Parabole* means to cast alongside. Therefore, a parable is a comparison. That is, a comparison of an earthly concept with a heavenly reality. C.H. Dodd defined a parable as “A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

Proverb: A short, pithy or meaningful statement intended to teach a more profound truth in a memorable fashion.

Simile: A simile is an explicit comparison between two unlike things (The Kingdom of heaven is like . . .).

Similitude: An extended simile often used as a comparison or parable. One of the parable types.

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Interpreting the Parables

How Have the Parables Been Interpreted in the Past?

Are there examples of parable interpretation in church history?

The study of historical methods of Biblical interpretation is an important branch of church history and historical theology. The church in differing ages and sometimes by virtue of its regional location approached the scriptures using different methods or schools. Methodology plays a great role in interpreting all scripture. This is especially so in interpreting the parables.

In the early and medieval church a method of interpretation known as the allegorical method was very prominent. We see this method used in interpreting the parables as in other scriptures as well. Early and medieval interpreters used three or four distinct levels of interpretation. Origen taught that scripture had a literal (body), moral (soul), and spiritual (spirit) sense. Medieval commentators added anagogical, relating the eschatological or “end-time” and heavenly significance of a passage (e.g. Jerusalem's fourfold meaning -- literal city, soul, church, heaven). Calvin and Luther departed from the four-fold methodology, but allegorizing continued to be in vogue after the reformers. Archbishop R.C. Trench in *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (1841) continued in and revived the allegorical interpretation (Stein, p. 50).

Examples from the Patristic Age

Here are three representative examples of parable interpretation from the Patristic Age. The first is from Tertullian of Carthage (d. ca. 220) and spotlights his interpretation of the Prodigal Son. The second is Origen (d. 254) the famous biblical scholar and theologian from the capital of Hellenistic learning and culture, Alexandria in Egypt. We look briefly at his interpretation of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The third is from Augustine of Hippo, also in North Africa, and his interpretation of The Good Samaritan.

Tertullian allegorized the parable of the prodigal son as follows: the elder son represents the Jew who is envious of God's offer of salvation to the Gentile; the father is God; the younger son is the Christian; the inheritance is the wisdom and the natural ability to know God which man possesses as his birthright; the citizen in the far country is the devil; the swine are the demons; the robe is the sonship lost by Adam through his transgression; the ring is Christian baptism; the feast is the Lord's Supper; and the fatted calf slain for the prodigal is the Savior at the Lord's Supper (Stein, p. 46).

In Origen's interpretation of the Laborers in the Vineyard,

Origen believes that the first shift of workers signifies the generations from creation to Noah; the second, those from Noah to Abraham; the third, those from Abraham to Moses; the fourth, those from Moses to Joshua; the fifth, those up to the time of Christ. The householder is God, while the Penny represents salvation (Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus; A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*, p. 17).

Interpreting the Parables

Here is Augustine's interpretation of the Good Samaritan:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho = Adam
Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace from which Adam fell
Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality
thieves = the devil and his angels
stripped him = namely, of his immortality
beat him = persuading him to sin
and left him half-dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he is half-dead
the priest and Levite = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament
The Samaritan = is said to mean Guardian; therefore Christ himself is meant
bound his wounds = means binding the restraint of sin
oil = comfort of good hope
wine = exhortation to work with fervent spirit
beast = the flesh of Christ's incarnation
inn = the church
the morrow = after the resurrection
two-pence = promise of this life and the life to come
innkeeper = Paul

As novel and interesting as all of this might be, one can be sure that it is not what Jesus intended. After all, the context clearly calls for an understanding of human relationships ("Who is my neighbor?"), not divine to human; and there is no reason to think that Jesus would *predict* the church and Paul in this obtuse fashion (Fee and Stuart, p. 124).

As you can see allegorizing was a prominent feature of interpretation in the patristic era of the church.

Medieval Interpretation

Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome (d. 605), who is viewed as a bridge to the medieval era also practiced the allegorical method of interpretation as did the Venerable Bede (d. 735). It was late medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas who began to turn the tide against the wide popularity of the allegorical method of interpretation. "Aquinas emphasized the literal sense of Scripture, and minimized the allegorical so that with him allegorization neared its end as a viable and meaningful method of biblical exegesis" (Kissinger, p. 41).

Developments During the Reformation

The great reformer Martin Luther rejected the use allegorizing interpretation of the Scriptures. "In his methodology of scriptural exegesis, Luther was a staunch advocate of the historical or literal approach in contrast with the allegorical or spiritual of the patristic and medieval periods . . . one might characterize Luther's approach to Scripture as historical-Christological. One must

Interpreting the Parables

begin with the plain and literal sense and pursue it as far as possible before considering any hidden or symbolic meanings” (Kissinger, p. 44,45).

The reformer John Calvin also followed a non-allegorizing method of interpreting the parables:

As for Calvin’s parabolic interpretation, there is an absence of allegorizing and a lucidity which seeks to go immediately to the central point of the parable. This procedure is quite evident in his reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Like an arrow heading straight for its mark, Calvin declares, “the chief aim is to show that neighborliness which obliges us to do our duty by each other is not restricted to friends and relations but open to the whole human race.” He continues by castigating those who have allegorized the parable . . . (Kissinger, p.48).

The trend during the Reformation was away from the allegorizing method.

What are some of the modern schools of thought concerning how to interpret parables?

19th and 20th century developments.

Adolph Julicher in *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1910) challenged the concept that the parables were primarily allegories and should be so interpreted. He initiated the idea that parables are marked by a *tertium comparationis* or a single point of comparison. He insisted that parables were comparisons not extended allegories. This was a breakthrough in the method of interpreting parables. All modern studies of the parables build on Julicher’s foundation, however, contemporary critics (see below) feel that Julicher erred in completely discounting the allegorical nature of parables.

C.H. Dodd in *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935) emphasized "realized eschatology". He rejected the idea that the parables and teachings of Jesus were simply outstanding moral lessons and instructions on how to live – a point emphasized by Julicher. Rather, the parables expressed the conviction that the kingdom of heaven was present or "realized" and was being established in the present time through Jesus' ministry. He also believed that the church used Jesus' parables to address their own situations and problems, thus changing their focus. Therefore Dodd believed that the parables as written may not be reliable records of what and in what circumstances Jesus actually taught. (I, personally, do not embrace this view).

Joachim Jeremias in *The Parables of Jesus* (1958) contended that the focus of many of the parables was a conflict motif. They were spoken as a defense or vindication of the gospel before the opponents of Jesus' ministry. Jeremias emphasizes the study of the geographical, historical, and cultural background in his analysis of the parables. This approach is embraced in this study as part of the necessity of understanding the context when interpreting the parables.

G.V. Jones in *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (1964) approaches the parables as art forms. The parables are artistic expressions which set forth in timeless fashion the relationship between God and man.

Interpreting the Parables

Eta Linneman in *Jesus of the Parables* (1966) says that the parables are parables of conflict and are told in order to gain agreement from his opponents. She emphasized the relationship between parable and hearer, reader and narrator. She describes the parable as a "language event" which states a situation in a new light and establishes a possibility for a new understanding. This forces the listener to a decision. Thus, her approach is existential. She uses a device called "interlocking" which involves a concession to the "other side" by the speaker or narrator and establishes a possibility for new understanding. This new understanding, if accepted, results in a "change of existence."

Dan O. Via in *The Parables* (1967) speaks of the parables as language event and work of art. He rejects the "one point of comparison" approach as being too restrictive. In this observation or method of dealing with the parables he is a link to most modern interpreters who are reviving the idea that parables, properly understood, may have numerous allegorical elements. We will look at them later.

What is the current thinking on how to interpret parables?

Coming Full Circle?

The most recent developments in the study of the Parables is the concession that there are allegorical elements in many of the parables. And these should be recognized. While this is not exactly a revival of the early or medieval practice of allegorizing, it does recognize the fact that many parables are allegories or have allegorical elements.

Kenneth Bailey in *Poet and Peasant* (1976) and *Through Peasant Eyes* (1980) makes a new contribution advancing our understanding of the parables. A resident of the Middle East for over twenty years, he emphasizes understanding the parables poetic (artistic) structure and cultural setting, that is, the Middle Eastern peasant culture.

Craig Blomberg in *Interpreting the Parables* (1990) makes a fundamental paradigm shift in understanding the parables. His thesis is threefold: 1) The parable as they stand in the gospel are much more allegorical than is usually acknowledged by the modern schools of thought; 2) The parables are fairly uniformly allegorical in nature, and they are likely to be either more entirely authentic than the consensus admits or much more inauthentic; 3) Many parables probably make more than one main point. In fact, he states that the majority of the parables make three main points. Blomberg also points out that whenever Jesus interprets his own parables, he uses an allegorical method to do so.

What is the difference between allegory and allegorizing?

We benefit from Blomberg's work in this area and adopt the definitions he employs. It is important to define our terms and realize there is a difference between an allegory, which is a story form or art form and which is intended to be interpreted as such and the practice of allegorizing, which is the process of interpreting materials as allegories which were not

Interpreting the Parables

originally told or intended to be understood as allegories. So Blomberg, drawing on the research of Hans-Josef Klauck, defines our terms as follows:

An allegory is "a rhetorical device applicable to many literary genres which gives a symbolic dimension to a text." Allegorizing, on the other hand "ascribes to a text hidden, often anachronistic meanings which its author never intended." Allegorization is "the . . . expansion and embellishment of a text which originally was already an allegory in simpler form."

Klauck accepts that the parables are allegories and sometimes went through allegorization but should never be allegorized (as in the method of interpretation of the church fathers).

So Blomberg rejects anachronistic allegorizing (that is assigning allegorical meanings never intended by the author or speaker), but does not reject the idea that parables contain allegorical elements. (Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 44).

What are the different kinds of parables?

For our purposes we create four categories of parables. While these categories are not necessarily inspired but constructed for our own use, they have value as a guide to help us consider how to understand the parables.

Similitude: As we learned in the last lesson, a simile uses the word like or as to create an implied comparison of one thing with another. Thus a direct comparison is created. A similitude is more extensive than a simile and tells a brief story as in the case of the Pearl of Great Price or The treasure Hidden in the Field in Matt. 13: 44-46.

Parabolic Story or Simple Parable: In these parables, Jesus tells a story drawn from the common (often agrarian) experience of his listeners. The parable of The Barren Fig Tree and the parable of The Great Feast are examples of parabolic story. Most parables fit into this category.

Illustrative Stories: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) are examples of this type of parable. Jesus created examples from things that could have happened in his time. These stories are told to illustrate a specific point or points. We see them especially in Luke's gospel. They differ from simple parabolic stories in that the character are more carefully developed. These two types of parables may overlap, but are useful for our purposes. The difference is more a matter of degree than of kind.

True Allegories: The Greek word *allegoria* means "to say something else." Each element or character in the story is representative of something else in real life. Usually it is not stated what the something else is. It is left to the listener to comprehend. True allegory must be distinguished from allegorizing which treat non-allegorical elements of scripture as though they were allegories -- a common error of the patristic era and middle ages. The Vine and the Branches (John 15: 1-8), the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants (Mark 12:1-11), and the Parable of the Sower and the Seed (Luke 8:3ff) are either allegories, or have clearly allegorical elements.

Interpreting the Parables

Jesus did not tell parables to entertain but to elicit a response. Gordon Fee compares the parables to jokes, they "catch" us, we "get" them. The need to interpret them sometimes robs them of their "punch." Many people had difficulty understanding Jesus' parables, it seems. He said to his disciples "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables"(Mark 4:13). He often ended a parable with the saying "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." We are told that "the common people heard him gladly"(Mark 11:37). Everyone could understand Jesus' stories on the simple level, but it seems that many had difficulty grasping their intended significance. Some, regardless of age, economic standing or education were able to "hear," others, regardless of the same were not. Jesus sought a response from those who had ears to hear.

Parables speak profoundly and clearly to "plain folks." Wisdom teachers throughout the biblical age used them to instruct. We do well to dwell on the parables, and even to tell some of our own as illustrations of Biblical truth.

Eisegesis or Exegesis?

Two terms come into play when we speak of Bible interpretation: exegesis and hermeneutics. In his book *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, Gordon Fee defines these two terms in the following way:

The term "exegesis" . . . refers to the historical investigation into the meaning of the Biblical text. Exegesis, therefore, answers the question , What *did* the Biblical author *mean*? It has to do both with what he said (the content itself) and why he said it at any given point (the literary context). Furthermore exegesis has to do with intentionality: What did the author *intend* his original readers to understand?

Historically, the broader term for the science of interpretation, which included exegesis, was hermeneutics. . . I have chosen to limit any use of this term to [the] more restricted use of 'application' (Fee, p. 21).

In other words hermeneutics attempts to interpret or establish the meaning or application of the Biblical text for today's reader or hearer. My contention is that proper exegesis – an understanding of a text in its cultural and historical context -- is crucial for proper application of the teachings of the Bible in our day. This is true of the parables as it is of all scripture.

In a similar vein, Douglas Stuart writes in *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*, "An exegesis is a thorough analytical study of a biblical passage done so as to arrive at a useful interpretation of the passage. Exegesis is a theological task, not a mystical one (Stuart,p. 15).

The term *exegesis* comes from a Greek compound denoting the concept of "bringing out the essence or meaning of a thing." When we exegete scripture we are trying to get at its true meaning. *Eisegesis*, on the other hand, is from a Greek compound meaning to inject into the essence of a thing. That is, one who eisegetes scripture is simply reading his or her own ideas or meaning into it. That is, we make it conform to our ideas, rather than having our ideas conform

Interpreting the Parables

to the original meaning of scripture. This is important in all Bible reading. And it is important as we take on the task of interpreting the parables.

Glossary

Allegorization: "The . . . expansion and embellishment of a text which originally was already an allegory in simpler form."

Allegorize: Allegorizing, on the other hand "ascribes to a text hidden, often anachronistic meanings which its author never intended."

Allegory: An allegory is "a rhetorical device applicable to many literary genres which gives a symbolic dimension to a text." The Greek word *allegoria* means "to say something else." Each element or character in the story is representative of something else in real life.

Craig Blomberg: Author of *Interpreting the Parables* (1990). He represents the current thinking on how to understand the parables of Jesus. He allows for several points of comparison in most parables and acknowledges the presence of allegorical elements in many parables.

C.H. Dodd ; Interpreted the parables as expressions of "realized eschatology." That is they confirmed that the kingdom of heaven arrived with Jesus' ministry and are more than simple moral lessons.

Eisegesis: This term is from a Greek compound meaning to inject or read into the essence of a thing. Thus, it means to read one's own ideas into a text.

Exegesis: The term *exegesis* comes from a Greek compound denoting the concept of "bringing out the essence or meaning of a thing." Thus, to draw out the true meaning of a text.

Joachim Jeremias: In *The Parables of Jesus* (1958) contended that the focus of many of the parables was a conflict motif. He emphasizes the study of the geographical, historical, and cultural background in his analysis of the parables

Adolph Julicher: Adolph Julicher in *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1910) challenged the concept that the parables were primarily allegories and should be so interpreted. He initiated the idea that parables are marked by a *tertium comparationis* or a single point of comparison.

Tertium comparationis: Latin for "point of comparison" and reflects the idea popularized by Julicher that each parable is making one central or main point and should be interpreted that way.

Interpreting the Parables

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Interpreting the Parables

Principles for Interpreting the Parables of Jesus

What are the main principles for interpreting the parables of Jesus?

What principles should we use in interpreting the parables? First, we must realize that it is often the *context* of a passage of scripture that tells us much about its meaning. This is true of the parables. We must ask, “What is the situation that caused Jesus to tell this story?” Sometimes the context will give us the answer. For instance, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we know that Jesus wanted to answer a man’s question about the meaning of loving one’s neighbor. So we must interpret the parable as an answer to that question.

In the parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), also called The Lost Son, context is critical to correct interpretation. The religious leaders were upset because Jesus was receiving and eating with sinners. This was considered an offense against the religious customs of Jesus’ day. Jesus then told three stories to help everyone understand why he was doing this.

First, he told the story of a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to find one lost sheep. Then he told a story about a woman who went to great trouble to find a valuable coin she had lost. Then he told of a son who after leaving home fell into hunger and poverty because of his own foolish and sinful behavior. When he returned home his father received him back with great joy. In all three parables those who had lost something – the shepherd, the woman, and the father all were overjoyed to receive back what was lost. In this way Jesus was making a comparison with a heavenly truth. Heaven rejoices when one sinner repents. In the third story the older brother of the returning, sinful son is very unhappy. The *context* tells us that the grumbling religious leaders were like this older brother. God was glad to receive repentant sinners, as these leaders should have been. But instead, they simply criticized Jesus who was doing God’s will.

This same chapter (Luke 15) shows us a second principle of interpreting the parables: *If in the text the author of the gospel or Jesus himself gives an interpretation, then that is the correct interpretation.* Another understanding is neither needed nor helpful.

The author of the gospel, Luke, tells us *why* Jesus told these parables – because the religious leaders were complaining. Jesus himself offers a brief interpretation of the first two parables: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7), and “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). The third parable (The Lost Son) simply expands this theme and includes a reference to the Pharisees’ attitude.

A third principle of interpretation is that *normally parables are making a primary point of comparison.* Remember, the word parable means to place side by side. That is, to compare one thing with another. Often then, a parable has one main point of comparison. It is important to find out what spiritual truth is revealed through comparison with the earthly example given in the parable.

Interpreting the Parables

A fourth principle is: *the type of parable may determine the method of interpretation.* Though parables tend to have one main point of comparison, some parables *actually are* allegories and need to be interpreted as allegories – that is, there is more than one point of comparison.

We have indicated above that there are four main types of parables. Learning to recognize the different types of parables helps us to know which method should be used in interpretation.

We must also *consider what it meant for the first hearers.*

If we follow these simple rules we will be effective interpreters of the parables: 1) study the context; 2) look for Jesus' or the author's interpretation; 3) find the main point or points of comparison; 4) recognize the type of parable; 5) consider what it meant to the first hearers.

How do we recognize clues to interpretation?

The first requirement for understanding Jesus' teaching is a receptive heart. Often, Jesus concluded his teaching with the words, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." In this way he indicated that only the spiritually receptive can understand his teaching. Today, it is important for the readers of Jesus' parables to have an open heart in order to grasp the meaning of Jesus' words. The teachings of Jesus and of the entire Bible, in fact, are unique. They have been given by revelation of the Holy Spirit. Unlike other literature, understanding requires more than knowledge of grammar and syntax. Rather, communion with the Spirit of Christ is also required. Happily, this can be attained by all who truly desire it. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me, I will not cast out" (John 6:37). The apostle Paul teaches us that no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (I Cor. 2: 11-12). These gifts include the ability to understand the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus often interpreted his own parables for his hearers. So, in addition to being spiritually receptive it is necessary to look for Jesus' own explanation of his parables. Jesus interprets his parables in two ways. *Sometimes he concluded his parable with a short saying or proverb which summarized the intention of the parable.* Some of the proverbs which Jesus used to summarize his parables were, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first;" "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted;" "Whoever is faithful in little will be faithful also in much;" or, "To whom much is given of him will much be required." Jesus often used these and other sayings to conclude his parables. So it is important to recognize when these sayings conclude a parable. They are a key to understanding them.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a good example of this principle. Luke, the author, gives his explanation of the purpose of the parable, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable . . ." (Luke 18:9). Then Jesus concludes the parable with his own explanation, a short instructive saying, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v.14). Thus Jesus shows the necessity for humility in our relationship with God and our view of

Interpreting the Parables

others. Both the author and Jesus interpret the meaning of the parable for us. Another interpretation is neither necessary nor correct.

In like manner, Jesus interprets the parable of the talents with a proverb, “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” ((Matt. 25:29). In this way Jesus shows the primary focus of the parable – the use and misuse of God-given opportunities and gifts carries its own rewards and judgments. To use what God has placed at our disposal results in increased blessing. To waste those opportunities brings judgment and loss.

In both of these parables Jesus offers his own interpretation through the use of a short instructive saying or proverb in the conclusion. Not all parables conclude in this way. Sometimes Jesus offers interpretation of his parables in another way – through a detailed explanation, usually given in the presence of his disciples. For instance, he does this with the parable of The Sower and the Seed and the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Weeds).

So, Sometimes Jesus interprets his parables for us and sometimes the author interprets the parable for us – or at least gives clues to the correct understanding. Jesus does this through a proverb or a detailed explanation to his disciples. When we read the parables we do well to search for Jesus own explanation or the author’s explanation of the parable. Then we don’t need to invent another. The most important tool for understanding the parables is a heart open to the work of the Holy Spirit who first inspired those words.

The exegetical questions:

The final tool we want to look at for effective interpretation of the parables – and all scripture – is what are know as the exegetical questions. These are questions we should ask of every biblical text to elicit the actual meaning and message of any given passage.

Here they are in brief form:

What did this mean to the first hearers?

What did it mean to the first readers?

Does the author have some special intention in including this material in this way at this place?

Does it relate somehow to the theme of the context or the overall theme of the particular gospel?

Answering these questions is an extremely helpful exercise in getting to the root meaning of any passage – including the parables.

Application:

How does this apply to the life of the individual? Believer or unbeliever.

How does this apply to the church? Local or Universal.

How does this apply to society at large?

Interpreting the Parables

Glossary

Author's Interpretation: When the author of the gospel makes a statement explain the purpose of the parable or clarifying the question it is intended to address.

Context: The verses or chapters immediately preceding or following a passage of scripture. Context may illuminate themes or relationships which help explain the meaning of a given text.

Exegetical Questions: Questions designed to clarify the meaning of a passage for the original hearers and readers and to assist which understanding the meaning of the passage then and now.

Jesus Interpretation: Particularly in the parables, when Jesus specifically explains the meaning of a parable through use of a proverb or more detailed explanation.

Proverb: A short instructive saying designed to teach a moral or spiritual truth in a few words.

Rules for Interpretation: 1) study the context; 2) look for Jesus' or the author's interpretation; 3) find the main point or points of comparison; 4) recognize the type of parable; 5) consider what it meant to the first hearers.

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Interpreting the Parables

Interpreting the Parables Worksheet

Work with your team members to answer the following questions and create a “sermonette” based on the answers:

Exegetical Questions:

- 1) What is the context of this parable?

- 2) Does Jesus or the author offer an interpretation? What is it?

- 3) Is there a main point or points of comparison?

- 4) What is the type of parable?

- 5) Did anything in the parable have a special meaning to the first hearers?

Application:

How does this apply to the life of the individual whether believer or unbeliever?

How does this apply to the church whether local or universal.

How does this apply to society at large?