An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus

A study of the parables of Jesus is critical to a proper understanding of His earthly ministry. One-third of the spoken ministry of Jesus was in the form of parables. Parables take up thirty-five percent of the entire content of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The Deciphering

A brief history of interpretation is helpful for a proper study of Jesus’ parables. Throughout most of church history, the parables of Jesus have been interpreted as allegories, that is, interpreters assumed that the individual characters or objects in the parables stood for something other than themselves—spiritual counterparts that enabled the story to be read at more than one level. However, the allegorizing often got out of hand. One famous example is the interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan by St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo. According to him, the wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city from which Adam fell; Jericho is the moon; the thieves are the devil who deprives Adam of immortality; the priest and the Levite are the OT law which could save no one; the Samaritan is Christ; the animal is the incarnation; the inn is the church; the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul; and the two denarii are the two commandments of love or the promise of this life and that which is to come.

For nearly nineteen centuries this approach persisted. There were a few notable exceptions in church history such as Chrysostom, Aquinas, and Calvin who favored a more restrained approach. The problem with this approach was two-fold. First, rarely did two people agree on what every detail in the passage represented. Second, many of the meanings attributed to details in the parables were clearly anachronistic. That is, they reflected understandings of Christian doctrine which dated from a time later than Jesus’ own ministry. About the turn of the century, the liberal German scholar Adolph Julicher single-handedly demolished the allegorical interpretation of parables. Julicher and later Joachim Jeremias (1950–1970) developed a new method of parable interpretation. They established the two well-entrenched principles of parable interpretation of the twentieth century: 1) the parables of Jesus are not allegories, and 2) each parable makes one main point. These two points became canon law for parable interpretation. While all today reject the sweeping and anachronistic allegorizing of parables, recently several excellent scholars have proposed that the parables are allegories and that they most often have several points. They would define an allegory as “a manner of speaking in which two or more levels of meaning are intended.” What they call for is a limited allegorical interpretation where not every element of the story stands for something other than itself and where the interpretation is one that would have been intelligible to a first-century Jewish audience. Meaning should only be assigned to the details of the parable that Jesus’ original audience could be expected to discern.

I agree with this view for two main reasons. First, for eighteen centuries the church interpreted the parables as allegories. While they certainly went too far, it seems arrogant for the church in the twentieth century to jettison eighteen centuries of interpretation. Second, and most importantly, the only two recorded parables that Jesus interpreted, the parable of the soils (Matt
13:3–23) and the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43), were interpreted by Jesus as allegories. If we want to know how to interpret the parables, Jesus Himself has given us the key in Matt 13.

**The Definition**

The Greek word *parable* is used fifty times in the NT and except for Heb 9:9 and 11:19 all the occurrences are in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). It means “to place beside or throw alongside.” It refers to putting things side by side, or a comparison. Parables are succinct comparison stories where what is familiar (known) is thrown alongside the unfamiliar (unknown) to reveal spiritual truths.

Here are a few helpful definitions of a parable:

- “An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”
- “Surprising stories and word pictures drawn from the familiar, that powerfully reveal to us the unfamiliar” (Mohler).
- “Ingeniously simple word pictures with profound spiritual lessons” (MacArthur).
- “A pithy story designed to illustrate a truth using familiar images or experiences” (Swindoll).

Parables serve as both mirrors and windows. “As mirrors, they help us see ourselves. They reveal our lives as they really are. As windows, the help us see life and God” (Wiersbe).

**The Description**

Several characteristics of Jesus’ parables are helpful to understand.

1. The parables of Jesus typically omit unnecessary details and descriptions. They are short stories with not one unnecessary word. They are long stories made short.
2. The parables are usually taken from everyday life but are not necessarily realistic.
3. Parables tend to be brief and symmetrical.
4. Parables often have a triadic structure (3 main characters) including an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates.
5. Many parables are “monarchic,” that is, they have one main character who is a king, master, father, ruler, or judge who symbolizes God.
6. Some divide the parables into categories or classifications based on their teaching and content: nature parables, work and wages, weddings and festive occasions, lost and found, judgment parables, etc. The teaching and subject matter in the parables reveal that Jesus was fully acquainted with all aspects of human life: building, shepherding, business and finance, farming, vineyards, management and labor relations, judges and courts, Pharisees, tax collectors, weddings, etc.

**The Design**

Jesus did not invent parables. There are both Greek and Hebrew antecedents, but there is no evidence of anyone prior to Jesus using parables as consistently, creatively, and effectively as he did. It’s been said that “Jesus did not invent parables; he merely perfected the art.” The only OT parable that is a true parallel to the parables of Jesus is Nathan’s parable of the poor man and his lamb (2 Sam 12:1–10).

The parables of Jesus are three-fold in purpose. The first purpose is to *appeal*. Parables were spoken by Jesus to catch the imagination of the hearers—to capture their attention. Jesus
employed vivid images such as a farmer sowing seed, a lost coin, and a landowner paying his workers.

The other two purposes for Jesus’ parables are opposites. Parables simultaneously reveal and conceal. They act as a kind of filter that sifts out the spiritual condition of the hearers, dividing them into two worlds—seekers and scoffers. Parables reveal and teach those who are committed to Jesus, but they conceal or hide the truth from those who close their minds and harden their hearts (Matt 13:10–17; Mark 4:10–12; Luke 8:10). They are riddles to them. Parables come as grace and judgment. The same sun that melts the ice also hardens the clay.

The intent of Mark 4:10–12 is clear. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of the Word, and the issue is how people hear and respond to the Word. Jesus taught the crowds and His teaching called for a response. Where people responded, additional teaching was given. Where people’s hearts were hardened, truth was concealed. The quote from Isaiah 6:9–10 was not an indication that God does not want to forgive people but a blunt statement expressing the inevitable. People would hear but not really understand.

The Directives

Here are a few helpful guidelines that enhance understanding of the parables.

1. Analyze the sequence, structure, and wording of the parable, including any parallels in the other Gospels.

2. Pay special attention to cultural and historical features in the parable. Take into account the first-century Jewish background of Jesus’ ministry. The major obstacle in the way of our understanding is that we are chronologically, socially, politically, and religiously distant from Jesus.

3. Every detail in the parable should not be pressed for meaning. Be sensitive to what is significant and indispensable to the overall meaning. Many of the details are added to enhance the story. The more prominent or central a feature is the more likely it is to be significant.

4. Note the context of the parable. Parables are often triggered by a question.

5. Pay special attention to the end of the parable. The rule of “end stress” recognizes that the most important part of the parable is the conclusion where the parable creeps up on you, punches you in the stomach, and requires a decision or forces the hearer to reverse his or her way of thinking. As Al Mohler says, “The parables are like hand grenades, Jesus took them out and set them before his hearers. Then . . . he pulled the pin out. Listen carefully, because the parable explodes. If you miss the blast of the story, you have missed the power of the parable.”

6. The central focus of the parables is the coming of the kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required. The parables cover many subjects related to discipleship in view of the coming of the kingdom: growth, prayer, neighborliness, judgment, commitment, salvation, money and possessions, rewards, pride, preparedness for His coming, forgiveness, etc.