

Interpretation...Do you get the point? (J. Carl Laney)

What Is a Parable?

The word *parable* comes from the Greek word *parabollo*, which means "to compare" and denotes placing one thing beside another to make a comparison. There are approximately 70 parables or parabolic illustrations in the Gospels.

I once asked John McArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Panorama City, Calif., what was the key to his expository ministry. "Pictures," he said. "The truth must be set in pictures that can be readily understood and applied."

Jesus used parables in precisely this way. He taught the truth about an unfamiliar subject by making a comparison to something with which his listeners were already familiar.

Someone has defined parables as "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." More precisely, they are true-to-life stories intended to teach some spiritual truth by analogy. Parables are stories, but they are stories that have a significant lesson.

The Problem with Parables

Parables have a history of abuse. Gordon Fee, professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has said that "the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to Revelation."

In the early history of the church, parables were subjected to the excesses of allegorism. Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan reflects this extreme approach.

He interpreted the traveler on the road to Jericho to represent Adam, the thieves to represent the devil and his angels, the priest and Levite to represent the ministry of the Old Covenant, the Samaritan to represent Christ, the inn to represent the church, and the innkeeper to represent Paul. all that - and more - in one parable!

Reaction against such speculative readings led to a second abuse of the parables. In their aversion to allegory, many interpreters denied any further meaning beyond the one single point of the parable. Yet Jesus himself made several significant points of comparison in the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23) and the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43).

A more balanced approach lies between these two extremes. While all parables teach truth by comparison, some use more extended and detailed comparison than others.

Therefore, a good rule of thumb is to recognize multiple points of analogy when there is solid evidence for them, but to avoid speculation otherwise. Where Jesus has explained a parable, providing commentary on the various points, you can be assured that those details are significant and that Jesus has given us their proper interpretation.

The context of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), for example, suggests multiple points of analogy. The reference to the hypocritical attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (15:2) suggests they may be represented in the parable by the self-righteous older brother. The father certainly illustrates God's attitude toward sinners, and the prodigal son, the consequences of sin and the nature of true repentance. Yet these secondary lessons are all found under the umbrella of the major truth: God loves and seeks sinners.

The Purpose of Parables

Jesus began speaking in parables during his Galilean ministry after being rejected by the Jewish leaders (Matt 12:22-37). This rejection by the religious establishment set the nation on its course of rejecting the Messiah.

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Jesus used parables in addressing mixed crowds made up of friends and enemies, those responding to his messianic claims and those rejecting them.

In Matthew 13:10-17, Jesus explained that the parables reveal truth to the responsive, yet at the same time conceal truth from those rejecting him. Quoting Isaiah 6:9,10, Jesus said that people who reject him "will be ever hearing but never understand." Unbelievers will be confirmed in their unbelief, yet spared greater accountability before God because they are prevented from receiving further light.

The parable also issued a powerful call for a decision concerning the person of Christ. Jesus spoke the parable of the rejected son (Matt. 21:33-41) in the hearing of certain religious leaders who were rejecting him. In that parable, Jesus warned of the judgment to befall those who reject God's Messiah. He then explained the parable, and "they knew he was talking about them" (v.45). This was an opportunity for those leaders to repent and believe, but they did not. Finally, the parables helped perpetuate Jesus' teaching. The simple stories captured listeners' interest and imagination. Being so memorable, these mental "visual aids" could easily be passed on to others by Jesus' disciples.

Interpretation of Parables

As illustrations of spiritual truth, the parables were clearly understood by Jesus' followers in the first century. But those of us who are separated from the original context of the parables by 6,000 miles and 2,000 years need to develop a method of interpretation to help bridge the historical, geographical, and cultural gap.

1. *Recover the original setting.*

Explore the context and circumstances surrounding the parable. Discover whom Jesus was addressing when he spoke the parable: disciples, enemies, or both.

Jesus taught the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) to Peter and the other disciples who were concerned over what reward they would receive for following him (19:27). The lesson, therefore, is intended for disciples and is focused on the subject of rewards.

2. *Discover the problem of the parable.*

The parables dealt with certain problems or questions. If you don't know the problem that Jesus intended to deal with, you won't recognize the answer. You can usually find the problem in the parable's context, usually the preceding verses. As you survey the historical context, ask yourself, "Why did Jesus speak this parable?"

The three parables in Luke 15 - the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son - are all designed to answer the question, "What is God's attitude towards sinners?" The Pharisees and scribes had condemned Jesus, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (v. 2). These parables show God's attitude toward sinners in contrast with the Pharisees'. While the Pharisees hated lost sinners, Jesus showed that God loves sinners and actively seeks the lost.

3. *Understand the cultural background.*

Parables teach truth by transference. Jesus used something in the known realm to teach a spiritual truth in the unknown realm. Therefore, interpreting the parable depends on understanding the "known" illustration. Jesus' first-century Jewish listeners commonly understood his cultural references. But people today often need to do some background research.

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A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia serves well for background study. For most city dwellers, the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30) elicits the question, "What are tares?"

A quick look in a comprehensive Bible dictionary reveals that tares are weeds that resemble wheat and were often used as chicken feed. Allowed to grow to maturity, tares could be distinguished from the wheat and separated at harvest. The parable reveals that there will be false, counterfeit movements in the kingdom of God that will be indistinguishable from true followers of Christ until "harvest" (judgment). The cultural background is crucial to this interpretation.

4. *Determine the central truth.*

The parables are generally intended to teach one central truth. You see evidence for this as you explore the setting of each parable and discover the question that needs to be answered. By understanding the correspondence between the known and unknown, you can determine the parable's central truth.

Even in situations in which Jesus explained a number of the elements in the parable (see Matt 13:36-39), there is still one major question being answered and one central truth being taught. The details that Jesus explained lay further groundwork for the central lesson.

The parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13:31,32) is one of my favorites. The context suggests that Jesus was dealing with a question raised in the disciples' minds by his rejection by the Jewish leaders: "In light of its insignificant beginnings, has the kingdom any potential for growth?"

Jesus answered by making a comparison with the smallest of the seeds planted in Galilean gardens, but one with great potential for growth. The black mustard seed is smaller than a speck of sand, but I have seen mustard plants in Israel grow 10 to 12 feet tall!"

Because Old Testament law regards many birds as unclean (Lev 11:13-19), many commentators have suggested that the birds in the branches of the mustard tree symbolize evil. They interpret this to mean that there will be evil in the kingdom.

Whether there will be evil in the kingdom or not, the parable of the mustard seed was not intended to answer that question. To make lessons of minute details in the parables is to read into them something that Jesus did not clearly intend. The birds in the mustard tree branches simply illustrate the extent of the growth and give realism to the picture.

5. *Recognize the kingdom message of many parables.*

Nine parables in Matthew begin with "The kingdom of heaven is like...." We must understand that Jesus was referring to the form of God's kingdom that exists between Christ's rejection and his acceptance by his people Israel.

The kingdom parables don't focus on the millennial kingdom that will be established at Christ's second coming, but on the spiritual kingdom of this present age. This is the kingdom rule of Christ in the hearts of those who know and love him. So in many parables, Jesus taught "mysteries of the kingdom," truths not previously revealed in the Old Testament prophecies about God's kingdom program.

Applying the Parables

The most important question to ask about the parables is, "How do we decide what is to be applied?" The parables are not simply to be interpreted and understood, but acted upon.

Three questions can help us decide how to apply the parables:

First, *"Is there a truth to learn?"* The parables cover many themes: Christ's coming, God's judgment, and the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the leaven, for example, has taught me that the kingdom will grow through an internal dynamic, not some outward organization. Recognizing that truth has helped determine my approach to ministry.

Second, *"Is there an attitude to develop?"* The parables touch upon such characteristics as anxiety (Mark 4:26-29), joy (Matt 13:44), diligence (Matt 25:14-30), compassion (Luke 7:41,42), and one's attitude toward the lost (Luke 15:1-7). The parables reveal the attitudes and character qualities that Christ would have his disciples cultivate.

Third, *"Is there something I should do?"* Jesus specifically applied that parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35) to the disciples. As the unforgiving servant was judged, "so shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v.35 NASB).

Jesus immediately applied the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8) by commending persistence in prayer as a means of securing the Father's resources (vv.9,10). And the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) illustrates how to love one's neighbor: not by word, but by deed.

Did you get the point of the parable? Jesus drove the lesson home with these words: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).