

Studying Parables

Our goal in these studies will be to look at the parables of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. In order to accomplish that, it is first important for us to look at what parables are, and understand how we should study them.

What is a Parable?

We can look at the definition of a parable, as taken from the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon:

3850 παραβολή [parabole /par-ab-ol-ay/] n f. From 3846; TDNT 5:744; TDNTA 773; GK 4130; 50 occurrences; AV translates as "parable" 46 times, "figure" twice, "comparison" once, and "proverb" once. 1 a placing of one thing by the side of another, juxtaposition, as of ships in battle. 2 metaph. 2A a comparing, comparison of one thing with another, likeness, similitude. 2B an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated. 2C a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God's kingdom are figuratively portrayed. 2D a parable: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. 3 a pithy and instructive saying, involving some likeness or comparison and having preceptive or admonitory force. 3A an aphorism, a maxim. 4 a proverb. 5 an act by which one exposes himself or his possessions to danger, a venture, a risk.¹

These definitions should help us understand what parables are, and how Jesus intended to use them to teach spiritual messages to His audiences. His parables were truly "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." While that is a catchy way to speak of the parables, it is really more important to understand that these stories that Jesus told were designed in such a way as to lay a phys-

1 Strong, James. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* 1995 : n. pag. Print.

ical or earthly story along side of a spiritual principle. Something that would be easily understood in physical terms could be used to make, or to emphasize a spiritual point. This is why definition #1 above is so important. The rest of the definition is built on this concept.

Elements of a Parable

Parables often have the same general components within them. There are sometimes questions as to whether Jesus is teaching by parable in a particular passage, or if He is relating a factual account. In most cases, that can be determined by looking at the information that is provided by either Jesus Himself, or by the author (in our case, Luke).

Frequently, either Jesus or the author will identify the teaching as a parable. A good example of this can be found in Luke 5:36, where Luke interjects, "Then He spoke a parable to them..." While every parable does not begin the same way, those that do are easily identifiable.

Parables typically refrain from using proper names. We will see, as we continue our study, that when Jesus is speaking a parable He uses generic terminology to identify the characters, and not proper names. This can be illustrated from Luke 15:11, where Jesus begins His teaching with, "A certain man had two sons..." Neither the man, nor the sons are identified by name. This is Jesus' standard practice. This does raise a question in Luke 16:19-31, where Jesus relates the account of the rich man and Lazarus. Some believe this is a parable, as it falls within the context of other parables that Jesus was teaching. Others, like this author, believe that this is a factual account. If it is not a factual account, then it would be the only example of Jesus inserting proper names into His telling of a parable.

Parables use common themes. The themes that reoccur throughout the parables are those that were most familiar to the initial audiences that Jesus was teaching. They would have been able to relate quite easily to the stories that Jesus was telling, even if they could not understand the spiritual applications that He intended for them to make. These themes center on common work that

the people would be involved in, such as agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, and various aspects of raising flocks and herds. Sometimes, these themes can be more difficult for us to understand as our society is often far removed from the agronomy practices of the first century. We may, on occasion, have to first work to understand the “earthly story” before we can begin to understand the “heavenly meaning.” Other themes include examples from interpersonal relationships, such as those found among friends and family members. Watch for these themes, and how Jesus used them to emphasize spiritual teachings.

Parables were intended to mask the meaning of Jesus’ teaching for a time. It may seem almost counterproductive to teach in a manner that hid the spiritual meaning of the teaching from a large portion of the initial audience, but that is exactly what Jesus did. After teaching in a parable at one point, Jesus’ disciples asked Him to tell them the meaning of what He had taught. In response, Jesus said:

And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘Seeing they may not see, And hearing they may not understand.’ (Luke 8:10)

It is interesting for us to study these parables, and understand what Jesus was teaching to His disciples of the first century. The lessons were eventually going to be for all the believers, and so believers today can come to understand the lessons that Jesus was conveying so long ago.

Recommendations for Studying Parables

There are a few things to keep in mind in the process of studying parables. It is important to be diligent to gain the meaning that Jesus intended, and not to read something into His teaching that is not there. This can be difficult when looking at some of the more difficult parables, that have no explanation provided. Here are a few suggestions to help us understand the meaning of any particular parable:

Remember that parables usually intend to teach one main lesson. Sometimes, it is easy to be tricked into believing that some par-

able is teaching more than Jesus really intended for it to teach. When looking at any particular parable, try to discover what one main lesson Jesus was emphasizing to His audience. We sometimes think of this as the “take away” when conveying information today. There may be much more information given, but what is the one “main point”? If you can figure out what that one main point is supposed to be, quite often many of the details fall into place!

Remember that every detail may not mean something in particular. Sometimes, when studying parables, we get so bogged down in trying to figure out what every single detail means, that we end up missing the main point Jesus was teaching! Sometimes, the details that Jesus inserted into the story are there just to enhance the story. Just because something was mentioned by Jesus does not necessarily mean that it has some specific spiritual meaning. The spiritual application will be drawn from the story as a whole, not necessarily broken down into every minute point.

Remember that sometimes the explanations are given. We can learn much from those parables that have an inspired explanation. They can help us to understand how Jesus used parables, and we can apply what we learn from them to the parables that have no explanation given. We also must be cautious that we do not try to insert more into the explanations that are given than the inspired writer does! When we are told what the parable was intended to teach, we should accept that at face value and not look for some deeper, more hidden meaning.

Remember that an accepted meaning cannot contradict other clear Bible passages. Sometimes we may have difficulty understanding the meaning of the parable, but whatever we might think it means cannot be contradictory to passages that are more easily understood. Jesus would not be teaching, for example, that acting immorally is a good thing (the conclusion sometimes drawn from difficult parables like the *Parable of the Unjust Steward* in Luke chapter 16). If our understanding contradicts some clear biblical principle, then we can be confident that it is our understanding that is incomplete or simply wrong.

Remember that we may find more than one plausible explanation. There are times, within the parables, that there is more than one possible explanation that does no harm to the immediate context and which does not violate any other Bible passage. In these cases, we can try to determine which explanation makes the most sense, but we may need to realize that either explanation has validity and can be an acceptable application. We can only do our best in deciphering the intended meaning if no inspired explanation is given!

Conclusion

There are many challenges to studying the parables of Jesus, and yet they are clearly worth the time and effort. Jesus taught extensively using parables (Matthew 13:34), which means that there is a lot that we need to learn from this type of teaching. We do need to be careful in the way that we approach each of the parables, and do the best we can to draw out the meaning that Jesus intended when He spoke them. We need to make sure we learn His meaning, and do not add to what He intended!

