

PREACHING THE PARABLES

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DEFINITION AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

What is a parable?

If you look in popular level guidebooks, there certainly seem to be many ways to describe or even define parables. Rather than getting bogged down in a comparative study of definitions, here is a somewhat simple definition as a starting point: a parable is a simple and usually narrative story, grounded in the real world, and used to provoke the audience on a spiritual (or moral) matter or even to make a spiritual (or moral) point. Let's look at some of the parts of this definition:

- *'usually narrative story'*: Parables in the gospels are narratives and we should use our narrative tools (e.g. setting, character, plot).
- *'grounded in the real world'*: Hence, parables are different than myth or fantasy. These are stories that could really happen in history as it is understood by the first-century audience.
- *'used to provoke the audience'*: Parables are not necessarily used to reveal knowledge (see 'why' below), but have multiple purposes. Nevertheless, a parable almost always demands a new thought, perspective, or action.

Two other things are important. First, parables are a sub-genre of Wisdom Literature. That is, parables fit in the Wisdom Literature genre because they tend to be analogical, they tend to be short asides for the purpose of illustrating, and they tend to deal with the more theoretical side of the Christian religion. Second, in the gospels, we are dealing with Jesus's parables. This means that they are not simple metaphors, but rather they carry the authoritative voice of Jesus Christ. As such, they are important.

Why does Jesus use parables?

We learn from Matthew 13:10-17 (cf. Mark 4:10-12) that the purpose is both to reveal mysteries or help some understand and to confound or frustrate others. Jesus cites Isaiah 6:9-10 (Isaiah's call to a difficult ministry of the Word by God) in support of his use of parables. Later in the same chapter, Matthew reinforces this two-fold agenda. In 13:34-35, Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2, in which God chooses some and chooses against others.

Why are parables hard for us?

There are several reasons. They frustrate and confound some. Of course, this means they will not be easy for everyone else. They are foreign. That is, we are not necessarily familiar with a first-century agrarian Middle Eastern context. Of course, we also just don't like the obvious, main points of them a lot of the time. They challenge us when we do understand and our sin nature will always fight against us. One of the most difficult aspects of the parables is the question of singular meaning or multiple meanings. What about allegory? Should we allegorize the parables? What's the difference between analogy and allegory? The question is this: how far do we go?

PRINCIPLE

The principle for studying parables is simple enough: *the Key to teaching a parable is understanding Jesus's purpose in telling the parable.* The point is intention. We get caught up in making connections, finding correspondences, and lose sight of Jesus's intention in delivering the parable.

A SIMPLE METHOD FOR STUDYING PARABLES

If you look in commentaries on the parables or other exegetical handbooks, you'll find that there are several ways of going about studying the parables.¹ I would like to propose a somewhat simplified methodology that will undoubtedly bear some resemblance to some, but that still works somewhat independently. There are four steps:

1. Understand the cultural context.

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This is the part where we tackle the problem of parables being foreign. We need to understand all of the little cultural details that prevent us from really making sense of the parable. A good Bible dictionary will probably help you answer most of the questions (and is probably better than commentaries, as commentaries almost always have an interpretive agenda). We need to be careful here, though. It is easy to get lost in the details and lose sight of which details are important and which are not. Remember, these are simple stories that were meant to give understanding to 'some of the people.' Those lines were not drawn according to professional or socio-economic lines. So, the parables were not likely to include esoteric knowledge, specialized to a single profession or social class concern. Rather, they would need to be comprehensible for a variety of people. This means, we want to work according simple cultural translations of basic concepts.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35):

Let's take a look at an example. The good Samaritan is a familiar parable. We typically apply it in the context of 'mercy ministry.' We turn to this parable to exhort our congregants to serve in the homeless shelter, in disaster relief, or in some other charitable fashion. But is this the point that Jesus is trying to make? Our first step is to look at the cultural context.

What do we need to know about to make sense of this parable?

- *Samaritan:* Why is this designation important? (separation and tension with Judeans, goes back to tribal rivalry in Israel, separate Samaritan Torah...with upward of 6000 differences – maintain that they have preserved pre-exilic religion and Judaism is post-exilic evolution)
- *Levite AND priest:* What is the difference? Is this important? Not all Levites are priests, but some priests are Levites. Some Levites served the temple in other ways (e.g. carrying the tabernacle around). Importantly, the Levites were not given land in the great dispersal. Rather, they (including priests) live off the tithes (or mercy) of other Jews.

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne. Blomberg, Craig. Stuart & Fee. Etc.

- *two denarii*: how much is this? Currency valuation differs. The best we can do is two ‘day’s wages’ (Matthew 20:2, John 12:5).

2. Understand the circumstantial context (i.e. the circumstances of the setting of the parable).

Circumstantial context means the narrative brackets on either side of the parable. It’s the setting in which Jesus is telling the parable. There are two major questions you always want ask. First, to whom is Jesus talking? And second, what is the prompting activity, question, or topic of conversation that inspires Jesus to tell the parable? Sometimes this is not in the narrative brackets, but in the wider literary context (see below).

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-29, 36-37)

What happens in the leading narrative bracket? A lawyer (who) has asked him a question (what). The question is about eternal life (a desirable prize to be sure). Interestingly, *inherit* is literally ‘come into possession according to the law’ (the Greek root is the same as that for *lawyer* and *law*). Jesus answers with a question about the Law, which makes sense given the question. So, the topic of conversation is the legal route to gaining eternal life. Jesus commends the man for correctly summarizing the law and then challenges him to do it. The man, apparently looking for some kind of technicality, asks about how to define his neighbor. He seems to be under the impression that ‘loving his neighbor’ is an achievable goal and that he simply needs to identify his neighbor.

Importantly, the lawyer desires to “justify himself” (v. 29). What does that mean? Literary context might help.

3. Understand the (wider) literary context.

This step gets to the overall usefulness of literary context in the gospels. The authors/editors of the gospels have not just thrown their texts together haphazardly. Rather, they have arranged their materials in specific ways to make both specific and broader points. For the parables, we want to look for a few different things in the context:

- *groups of parables*: Is this parable part of a group? What do all the parables in the group have in common? How are they different? Examples include Mark 4/Matthew 13, Matthew 24-25 (a pair of parables in the heart of an eschatological discourse), and Luke 15.
- *nearby associated teaching*: Does this parable follow a connected teaching point by Jesus or precede (i.e. set up) a teaching point? Has the prompting topic for the parable come up previously in the gospel? Is it going to come up again?
- *characters*: How has the person (or group of people) to whom Jesus is talking been portrayed in the gospel so far? How will they be portrayed? Have any of the characters actually in the parable had real life counterparts in the gospel? The question of ‘who?’ is always important in the parables.
- *intertextual (or really intercanonical) connections*: Does this parable textually connect (through quotation or allusion) to an Old Testament event or text? A key example is Luke 20:9-18 is built on Isaiah 5 and quotes Psalm 118:22.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:21-24, etc.)

There is a teaching block in Luke 10:21-24 which reinforces that the parables are meant to harden some hearts. This is a strange time to remind the reader of this function of the parables if the following parable is a positive and honest question with a hopeful response from Jesus. In the teaching block, the thing that makes a critical difference is the revelatory decision of Jesus.

How do lawyers usually appear in Luke? They are always opponents of Jesus with a special ability to be self-justifying (cf. 7:30, 11:45-46, 11:52, 14:3). Specifically, when it came to the baptism of John, the people already declared God *just* in 7:29 while the lawyers opposed it in John 7:30. Luke has already described their opposition to God.

4. Identify the central concept.

This is the final step. What is the point of the parable and how does it relate to Jesus's purpose in telling the parable. There are a few good ways of getting a head start. One big, easy clue is to look for a purpose statement. Sometimes Jesus or the Evangelist actually comes right out and tells you the point. Examples include the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1), the parable of the Pharisee and the tax Collector (Luke 18:9), the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20/Matthew 13:1-23) and the parable of the uprooted plants (Matthew 15:10-20).

Another thing for which you might want to look is a designation as a 'kingdom parable.' That designation sets an important limit on how to understand the parable. For example, the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:31-32) is not about any growth, but kingdom growth.

The Good Samaritan

If we have understood the various contexts correctly, it seems that the point of the parable of the good Samaritan was to demonstrate to the lawyer that he is not able to keep the whole law. It is particularly telling that if the man has correctly understood Jesus (as seems to be the case in 10:36-37), then he is supposed to be like the Samaritan. That is Jesus's invitation. As such, the way we typically apply this parable—with respect to mercy ministry—is not necessarily wrong, but it also seems to not be the central point. Jesus's purpose was to show this man the futility of his self-justification.

This method can be summarized in a picture:

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SOME FINAL WARNINGS

There are a lot of ways to interpret parables badly. Most of them stem from the difficulty we already mentioned on whether or not to allegorize. Allegory was a common way to read parables in the early church and middle ages. It bears some likeness to what we would call theological interpretation today. But, nevertheless, it works against a historical-critical way of exegeting the parables. For example, Augustine famously interpreted the parable of the good Samaritan.²

- a certain man = Adam
- went down from Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell

² Augustine, *Enarationes in Psalmos* 118, 121 and 125, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.30.31ff, *Sermo* 299.

- to Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality
- was attacked by thieves = the devil and his demons
- who stripped him = namely, of his immortality
- and beat him = by persuading him to sin
- and left him half dead = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he is half dead
- along come a priest = the priesthood of the Old Testament (Law)
- and a Levite = the ministry of the Old Testament (Prophets)
- and eventually a Samaritan = which is said to mean Guardian, therefore Christ himself is meant
- who bound his wounds = which means binding the restraint of sin
- pouring oil = comfort of good hope
- and wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
- then set him on his animal = the flesh of Christ's incarnation
- and took him to an inn = the church
- gave the innkeeper two denarii = promise of this life and the life to come
- told the innkeeper 'I'll pay more when I come back' = after the Resurrection
- and by the way, the innkeeper = Paul

While an elegant reading, to be sure, it is not a possible understanding that the first audience could have had. And it certainly communicates a very different message than the circumstantial and wider literary contexts would suggest. As a result, Augustine does something very different with the parable than what Jesus was doing with. As those called to preach and teach the Word of God, it is important that we restrain ourselves to what the author (human and Holy Spirit) is doing with the text. So, here are two diagnostic questions to help you restrain yourself:

1. Is this interpretation of the parable consistent with the rest of Scripture?
2. Is the connection historically defensible? That is, could Jesus have intended his immediate audience in history to understand the connection you are drawing? Is it a possible connection?

EXAMPLES AND EXERCISES

Here are some good examples to see this methodology at work:

- parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
- parable of the minas (Luke 19:11-27)

EXERCISES

Here are some good exercises to practice using the methodology:

- parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)
- parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
- parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)
- parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12)
- parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14)

Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)

1. *Understand the cultural context.*

How does day-laborer system work?

How much is a denarius? day's wage (Matthew 20:2, John 12:5)

2. *Understand the circumstantial context.*

The parable is told to disciples who had just witnessed something about material wealth (rich young man). Peter asked a question about the material benefits of following Jesus, who reconfigures kingdom economics. Jesus makes the point that thrones in heaven will be given to all, but ends with last-first statement in 19:30-30 (cf. the end of our parable, 20:16). So, the point seems to be that the means of gaining heavenly rewards is different than the means of gaining earthly rewards (humility). Begrudging those who come to follow Jesus after you a full reward is a human, works-based reversion to earthly economics.

3. *Understand the literary context.*

The rich young man encounter feeds the circumstantial context. The teaching statement in 19:13-15 is also provocative as it puts the disciples in the position of possibly presenting some from following Jesus. The passion prediction in 20:17-19 confirms Jesus's example of full humility. The mother's request in 20:20-28 confirms that the lesson is not deeply understood just yet.

4. *Identify the central concept.*