

How To Study The Parables of Jesus

1. Introduction

- Read Luke 10:25-37

- One fanciful interpretation of it is as follows :

The man going down = Adam

Jerusalem = the heavenly city, paradise from which Adam fell

Jericho = the moon, signifies Adam's mortality

robbers = Devil and his angels

Stripped him = of his immortality

leaving him half dead= Adam is half dead, dead spiritually but alive physically

the Priest and the Levite = Old Testament priesthood and ministry

the Samaritan = is said to mean the Guardian and therefore Christ himself is meant

bandaged his wounds = binding the restraint of sin

oil = comfort of good hope

wine = exhortation to be of fervent in spirit

donkey (beast) = the flesh of Christ's incarnation

inn = the church

the next day = the day after resurrection

two silver coins= promise of this life and the life to come

innkeeper = Paul

- What is technically wrong with this kind of interpretation? It is an allegorical interpretation.

- The aim of this study to learn how to rightly interpret parables.

2. What is a Parable?

- Definition : ***They are mostly earthly stories which teach a heavenly truth regarding the kingdom of God, with a call for response.***

* *Mostly* stories - because the genre called parable covers more than just stories or what we call parables in English.

Explanation : The Aramaic word Jesus used - "*methal*" - which got translated as "*parabole*" in Greek was used for a whole range of figures of speech in the riddle/puzzle/parable category.

Example :

- Proper Parable - The Parable of the Good Samaritan
- Similitude - "You are the salt of the earth"
- Epigram - "Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?"

- This study is mainly focused on interpreting what is called proper parables.

3. Interpreting Proper Parables

- Keep in mind how parables functioned for the original audience. The story had certain details where the hearers could identify with themselves and their experiences. These points are called ***the points of reference***. Points of reference informs the hearer of ***ordinary expectations*** for the course of the story. All parables have an ***unexpected twist at the end*** which is what gives the story that forcefulness or

punch. Unless one knows these points of reference, one would completely miss this punch. This is what troubles most of today's readers. Therefore the first thing to do in interpreting a parable is to identify points of reference in it. The **context** of the parable would give us the audience to whom the parable was told and would also thus inform us what are those points of reference in a parable.

- Only these points of reference need to be interpreted to translate the meaning of the parable from the story world to our real world. If every detail in the story is considered as a point of reference and a corresponding interpretation is given for it in the real world, we have allegorized the parable.

- The interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan, we saw at the beginning is a good example of what is wrong with allegorization. (i) It presses every detail of the story to be a point of reference and interprets it. and (ii) The interpretive key is not textual. **So when is our interpretation an allegory ? (i) Without any warrant from the text, we assume every detail of the story is to be interpreted and thus interprets them all. (ii) We interpret it using a key which is not warranted by the text.**

- This does not mean every detail of a story need not be interpreted. When Jesus interpreted the parable of the sower in Matt.13 he interpreted every detail of the story. However we need to remember we are interpreters and not authors. He was the author of the story and thus had that liberty to say what He meant with each detail. We can do such things only if the text explicitly warrants it. Also the hermeneutical key with which we interpret should also be warranted by the text.

- In some cases, the key may not be explicitly stated in the text, however the immediate context would give us one. Take for example the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the hermeneutical key by which we say the father is God and the lost son is the repentant sinner, is not coming straight from the text of the parable, but is informed by the immediate literary context of the two preceding parables on the same theme and the historical setting in which Jesus said it.

- After having identified the points of reference, the expected end assumed by the hearers and the twist in light of the context, we should determine the **main point** of the parable. The main point of the parable would also be the response the parable is calling forth its hearers to make. Identifying this **intended response** would help us determine the main point of the story. This is not always easy but requires much reading and re-reading of the text, meditating it in light of both the historical and literary context of the parable.

- It is possible for the parable to have the same points of reference, the same expectations from its hearers, the same twist and yet a different main point based on the context. Compare the parable of the lost sheep in Matt.18:12-14 (security for wandering believers) and in Luke15 (salvation for worldly unbelievers). In other words, do not study parables in isolation. Study them in their particular context - both historical and literary.

- The intended response called forth by the parable or the main point is what is still true for us today. In other words, this is what God is saying to us today.

Exercise : Luke 10:25-37

Points of reference : the person who needs mercy, the person who showed mercy.

Expected end of the original hearer: Pharisee, being self-righteous expected to be commended as the

merciful one among all other classes of the Jewish society.

The shocking twist or punch: Pharisee is not even mentioned in the story and plus a Samaritan, whom he hates, turns out to be the merciful one. Pharisees looked down on Samaritans, who too were their “neighbours”. What a Pharisee would have never done to a Samaritan, the Samaritan in the story of Jesus does to a Jew. This exposes the pride and lack of love of the Pharisee towards his neighbour. Otherwise who would get offended by a story where a needy man is helped by someone?

Intended response: Stop asking this question “Who is your neighbour?”, for everyone whom you come across as needing mercy is your neighbour.

Helpful Suggestions

- Don't build a doctrine or theology on peripheral aspects of a parable.
- If the basic skeleton of the parable has been identified, try to retell the parable in contemporary dress to feel the punch of the parable. It would greatly help to see the response it is calling forth.

4. Why did Jesus teach in parables? (Matt. 13:10-17)

What it does not mean? It does not mean all those who are outside the kingdom will not understand anything of the parables for it is so hidden and obscure that some allegorical interpretation is needed.

What does it mean? The parables can be heard, interpreted and understood by anyone, but the spiritual understanding and fruit of faith it is intended to produce would only be given to true believers. For the unbeliever, though he understands it intellectually, he does not spiritually benefit from it. Thus in this sense, on the one hand it blesses believers and hardens the unbelievers. This is a mark of the whole ministry of Jesus - he was heard and understood in the earthly sense by all, but was believed and received by the elect only; while the others rejected and even went onto crucify him. This mysterious aspect of His ministry is particularly true of His parabolic ministry.

- Bottom line : *“We see in this text and we know in our hearts that our believing is not a choice on our part but is a revelation that is given. This is grace. We did not choose God. We did not reason in all our brilliance and decide that faith in God was an acceptable risk to take. We did not earn favor with God by our great faith and goodness and God-centered hearts and lives. Rather, we were dead in our sins and God made us alive through Christ Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. For no reason other than mysterious grace we have been granted to understand the divine secret of the gospel even in the midst of God’s just judgment on all of the world. If it were our choice it would not be divine revelation. For those who understand this, the only response can be praise and thanksgiving. Any response less than this fails to understand what the gospel is and the function of the parables”¹*

- In other words, if we are of the believing, then the parables of Jesus are aimed at our praise!

¹ Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington, “Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables in the First Gospel”, SBTS Journal of Theology, 13/3 (Fall 2009), pg.19.