

SECTION 19

The Gospels and Parables

Interpreting the Gospels

I. WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

The term *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” Prior to the NT this word normally referred to good news of a political or military victory. ***In the NT*** the word denotes the good news proclaimed about Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15.1) or the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ (Mk. 1.14-15). From this it is easy to see why the early believers referred to the Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the Gospels. But how did the Holy Spirit inspire the authors (often called the evangelists) to present this good news? Correct interpretation in part depends on correct identification of the kind of communication taking place.

1. First and foremost the Gospels are stories.

This is a part of what makes the gospels so powerful. The question is what kind of stories are they?

a. The early church understood the gospels as stories about Jesus from the personal experiences of the apostles.

Justin Martyr (A. D. 100-165) in his First Apology characterized the gospels as the “memoirs” of the apostles. This sounds like the apostles may have been writing biographies of Jesus. But when you read the gospels you immediately notice that they are different than modern biographies.

- *Note ways that the gospels differ from modern biographies.*

b. Unlike most biographies the gospels do not cover the whole of Jesus’ life.

- Note the differences in the gospels presentations of Jesus’ life (*Matthew* and *Luke* jump from the birth and infancy to his adult life, *Mark* focuses a major portion of his gospel on the last week of Jesus’ life. John begins his discussion of the last week of Jesus’ life in chapter 12.)
- There is no serious discussion of his adolescent years, or any people who may have played a major role in his life. We know nothing of his twenties or his relationship with his brothers and sisters.
- The evangelists also devote a rather large amount of space to the final week of Jesus’ life than a typical biography might devote.
 1. Mark 11-16
 2. Matthew 21-28
 3. Luke
 4. John 12-21 (13-19: to the final night of his life through crucifixion and burial)

c. Often the evangelists arrange the material topically rather than chronologically.

- Mark 2.1-3.6; Matthew 8-9 (cf. Matt. 4.17; 5-7)

2. The gospels are really four different versions of the same story.

They present a picture that is complementary rather than contradictory; however, for modern people who have a fixation on chronological strictness, the variety of presentation can cause some folks problems.

- Overhead transparencies of the different arrangement of material in the gospels.
- Overhead in variety of wording in the gospels.

As ancient biographers, the evangelists felt free to paraphrase or summarize what Jesus said and to arrange the events according to a particular theme rather than according to strict chronological sequence. The goal of the evangelist was to faithfully tell the story of Jesus in a relevant and persuasive manner for their readers. They are telling their story in order to teach their readers something about the person and mission of Jesus. The evangelists selected and arranged their material about Christ in order to communicate theological truth to their audience. John wrote that if he had told his readers everything Jesus did and said that all the books in the world could not have contained the information.

CONCLUSION: Where does all of this lead us? While the gospels are biographies about Jesus, much like other ancient biographies, they are also more than ancient biographies. By focusing on Jesus' life and teaching we may describe the gospels accurately as Christological biographies. This brings us to their primary purpose in writing their gospels.

(1) They have selected and arranged material to tell the story of Jesus.

(2) Through the story of Jesus they are saying something very important to their first readers (and to us). Since the Holy Spirit inspired the evangelists in the way he did, we need to adopt a way of reading the gospels that matches the method used by the evangelists.

II. HOW SHOULD WE READ THE GOSPELS?

1. *The Law of Proportions*

- How much material does an evangelist give to a particular scene or section of Jesus' life?
- The Gospel of Luke – Central Section
- The Gospel of John – Upper Room Discourse

2. Reading the Gospels Vertically

- Ask what each section is teaching us about Jesus?
- Ask what the evangelist is seeking to communicate by arranging his material the way he does.

How to read individual stories (perciope)

1. Bombard the text with questions: (see example in Duvall)

- *Who* are the characters?
- *What* is the story line?
- *When* did the event take place?
- *Where* did the event take place?
- *Why* did it take place? (Reason)
- *How did it take place* (Means)

2. Look for interpretative clues provided by the author: Often the evangelist will provide a clue to the passage in an introductory or closing comment.

- Lk. 14.7
- Matt. 5.1-2
- Matt. 19.30: The Rich Young Ruler – “The first will be last and the last will be first.”
- Mark 7.1-23 (v. 19: declared all food clean)
- John 20.8-9 (“still did not understand from the scriptures . . .”)
- Mark 4: Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him? A form critical designation known as a pronouncement story.

3. Look for repeated words or concepts in a passage.

- John 15: Abide/fruit
- Matt. 23: Woe
- Matt. 5: You have heard it was said . . .but I say to you
- Matt. 6: Do not worry
- Luke 12.22-34; Do not worry

4. Observe places where the story shifts to direct discourse

- Matt. 17.5 – Where God speaks directly to the disciples. The question is what are they to listen to him about. Notice that the transfiguration follows his passion prediction.
- Mk. 4.35-39: Notice how the direct discourse tells the story in a nutshell (4.35, 38, 39, 40, 41)
- Although it is in a different genre, notice the majority of direct discourse in the Parable of the Prodigal son is between the father and the older brother.
- In the story of the transfiguration the direct discourse is God speaking to Peter.

Reading a series of stories: *Look for connections between passages.*

What is the gospel writer trying to do by the way he strings together a series of stories?

- **Mark 1** – A day in the life of Jesus – Why the crowds are flocking to him and a summary incident on his first tour of Galilee.
- **Mark 2.1-3.6:** Why would anyone want to kill someone that can do all Jesus does?
- Lets search for a connection between what occurs in Mark 4.35-41 and the following passages.
 - Mark 4.35-41: Jesus exerts his power over the sea
 - Mark 5.1-20: Jesus casts out a legion of demons, restores a man to his right mind, and sends him out as a faithful disciple.
 - Mark 5.21-43: The twofold miracle story of Jesus healing a woman with an issue of blood and raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Notice the combined emphasis on desperation and faith.
 - In this passage we see that because they did not have faith in Jesus they rejected him and he did not perform many miracles (sermon on what to do when the crowd turns against you)
 - The connections between these stories: The difficulties of life – life threatening situations, satanic attack, disease, and death of a loved one. Jesus is sovereign over hostile forces. People in the first century are not that different than we are in many ways and we both have fears and difficulties that upset life. We should trust Christ in the midst of life's difficulties.

1. Mark 4.35-41 – Encountering Storms
2. Mark 5.1-20 –
3. Mark 5.21-43
4. Mark 6.1-6 – When the Crowd Turns Against you

- Luke 1-3: Jesus and John the Baptist – this is an example of interchange
- Luke 4: Genealogy and Jesus' Temptation
- Matt. 8-9: Jesus' power (cf. Matt. 4.17ff)
- Mark 4-5: Jesus' word: Listen to him – nature, demons, sickness, death
- Lk. 8: Jesus heals the woman with the issue of blood and raises Jairus' daughter (Believe/faith)
- Luke 10.25-37 – Luke 10.38-42-Luke 11.1-13
 - 10.25-37: We see that the principle for love for one's neighbor should transcend all human boundaries such as nationality, race, religion, or economic status
 - 10.38-42: Here we discover the principle that doing good things is no substitute for sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to His word.
 - Jesus' teaches about how to communicate with God through prayer (11.1-4). This is followed by a parable on prayer (11.5-8) and an exhortation to pray (11.9-13).

MARK 8.22-26: *An example of how this helps in the interpretation of a difficult passage.*

1. *Taken by itself this is a very strange passage. Why does Jesus only heal the man partially at first? Why does Jesus ask the man if he can see anything? Does Jesus know or not know that the man can see? Why can the man only see partially? Lets examine the surrounding passages to see if there is any connection and if they can help us to interpret this passage.*

2. *Read the previous and following passage.*

3. *What connections exist between the three passages?*

- All three passages are basically dialogues.
- In all three scenes Jesus asks a question.
- In the first and the third pericopes Jesus' dialogue is primarily with the disciples. In the second it is with the blind man. Thus, two dialogues bracket the second dialogue with the disciples.
- The middle episode mentions "the village" twice (* .23, 26). The third episode mentions "villages" (8.27).
- Jesus ends the blind-man pericope (8.22-26) by forbidding him to go back into the village. Jesus ends the third pericope by forbidding the disciples to tell anyone about him (8.27-30).
- The middle passage revolves around terms related to seeing (i.e. blind, eyes, seeing, saw, sight, etc: v. 22, 23, 23, 23, 24, 24, 24, 25, 25, 25, 25). In light of the number of terms related to seeing in the blind-man passage, it is interesting to note similar terms used in reference to the disciples in the first passage (8.14-21). This repetition to seeing between the first two scenes is obviously an important connection between them. **In 8.17:** "Do you still not see?" and **in 8.18:** "Do you have eyes but fail to see?"
- Note that seeing in the blind-man passage relates to physical seeing, however, in the first passage it is used figuratively. It carries the idea of understanding (cf. 8.21).
- In light of Peter's comment in 8.29 it seems that he is seeing, but not clearly when we read about his rebuke of Jesus.

One interpretation is that he will not see clearly until the second touch of the resurrection.

This helps us understand that the second passage is an "acted parable." It provides a real-life example of what was happening in the disciples in regards to their understanding of who Jesus is.

3. *Reading the Gospels Horizontally*

To think horizontally means that when studying a pericope in any one Gospel, one should be aware of the parallels in the other Gospels. The purpose is not to fill out the story for preaching. We should preach each passage on its own for this is how the Holy Spirit inspired the Gospels. The purpose is to give us an appreciation for the distinctives in each Gospel.

- Luke 4/Matt. 4
- Jn. 18: Jesus' arrest
- Crucifixion Scenes in Gospels – (esp. Mark/Luke/Jn)
- Casting out of demon from little boy after transfiguration

Normally when we preach a passage from a Gospel we should not seek to import much information from another passage. God inspired each Gospel in its present form. That is, each evangelist under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit included what the Spirit wanted him to include and the author omitted what the Holy Spirit wanted him to omit. However, at times it can be helpful to compare one passage with another. This enables us to get a fuller picture of the event.

BLOMBERG: Applying the Gospels

Several important principles come into play when applying Jesus' teaching to our own day that was originally spoken to the disciples,

1. *One needs to distinguish what is explicitly directed only to the Twelve.*
2. *One must distinguish situation-specific commands to the Twelve that were revoked later in the Gospels*
3. *One must observe what may never have been explicitly limited to the Twelve, nor formally revoked, but could not be followed by Christians living in later generations.*
4. *We should be alert to metaphors or other figures of speech not meant to be taken literally.*
5. *Understanding the historical background often proves crucial in determining how literally to apply one of Jesus' commands.*
6. *Individual teachings of Jesus are often embedded in larger sermons or discourses that contain seemingly contradictory teachings.* (In these instances, legitimate application must take both strands of teaching into account.)

The Interpretation of Parables

Definition of “parable”:

The Purpose of parables:

History of Interpretation

(1) Allegorical Interpretation

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Clement of Alexandria

- **Good Samaritan = Neighbor = Christ**
- **Thieves = Rulers of Darkness**
- **Wounds = Fears, Lusts, Passions, Pains, Deceits**
- **Wine = Blood of David's Vine**
- **Oil = Compassion of the Father**
- **Binding of Wounds = Love, Faith, and Hope**

Origen

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem from which he is going = Paradise
- Jericho = this world
- Robbers = hostile influences and enemies such as mentioned in John 10:8
- Wounds = disobedience or sins
- Priests = Law
- Levite = Prophets
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Beast = Body of Christ
- Inn = Church
- Two Denarii = Knowledge of the Father and Son

- Innkeeper = Angels in charge of the church
- Return of the Good Samaritan = Second Coming of Christ

Augustine

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem from which he was going = City of heavenly peace
- Jericho = the moon which signifies our mortality
- Robbers = Devil and his angels
- Stripping him = Taking away his immortality
- Beating him = Persuading him to sin
- Leaving him half-dead = Due to sin he was half-dead spiritually, but half alive due to his knowledge of God
- Priest = Priesthood of Old Testament (Law)
- Levite = Ministry of the Old Testament (Prophets)
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Binding of wounds = Restraint of sin
- Oil = Comfort of good hope
- Wine = Exhortation to spirited work
- Beast = Body of Christ
- Inn = Church
- Two denarii = two commandments of love
- Innkeeper = Apostle Paul
- Return of the Good Samaritan = Christ's Resurrection

Luther

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam and all mankind
- Robbers = Devils who robbed and wounded us
- Priests = Fathers (Noah, Abraham) before Moses
- Levite = Priesthood of the Old Testament
- Good Samaritan = Lord Jesus Christ
- Oil/Wine = Whole gospel from beginning to end
- Oil = Grace
- Wine = Cross the Christian is called to bear
- Beast = Christ the Lord
- Inn = Christianity in the World (Church)
- Innkeeper = Preacher of the Word of God

Archbishop Trench

- Man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem = Heavenly city
- Jericho = Profane city, a city under a curse
- Robbers = Devil and his angels

- Stripping him = Stripping him of his original robe of righteousness
- Leaving him half-dead = Mortal, but having a divine spark
- Priest and the Levite = Inability of the Law to Save
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Binding of Wounds = Sacraments which heal the soul
- Oil = Anointing of the Holy Spirit
- Wine = Blood of Christ's passion
- Walking along the beast = Christ's became poor on our behalf
- Inn = Church
- Two denarii = All gifts and graces, sacraments, powers of healing or remission of sins
- Whatever more you spend = Reward for righteous service

(2) Adolf Jülicher and the end of Allegorical Interpretation

(3) Dodd and Jeremias – Noting the first century life-setting

(4) Redaction Criticism – How is the parable to be understood in the context of the individual Gospels?

Parables (Continued)

4 periods

Jesus-500

500-1500

Reformation-modern period

1888 – now

- (1) Parables generally teach one main point. Therefore, when investigating the parables one should be content with seeking to understand the one main point of the parable. One should not seek allegorical significance in the details of a parable unless it is absolutely necessary.

- (2) Jesus did not teach his parables to twentieth-century Christians but to first-century Jews. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to understand the situation-in-life in which the parable was uttered.

- (3) The Evangelists were interested in interpreting the parables for their readers. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to understand the situation-in-life of the Evangelist and his unique understanding of the parable.

- (4) The parables as uttered by Jesus and recorded by the Evangelists are the Word of God. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to ascertain what God is saying today through this parable.
 1. Seek the Main Point of the Parables
 2. Seek to Understand what Jesus Meant
 3. Seek to Understand what the Evangelist meant
 4. Seek to Understand what God is teaching us by the parable today.

Rules for arriving at the main point of the parable:

1. Who are the two main characters (of the parable)?
2. What comes at the end? (the rule of end stress)
3. What occurs in direct discourse?
4. Who/What gets the most press?

How to Detect the Presence of Allegory:

1. Would Jesus audience have attributed meaning to these details?
2. Would the Evangelist's audience have attributed meaning to these details?

The History of the Interpretation of Parables

I. THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS (TO 540)

- Irenaeus (ca. 130-200)
- Tertullian (ca. 160-220)
- Origen (ca. 185-224) - The “Threefold” Sense of Scripture
- Augustine (ca. 354-430) – The Parable of the Good Samaritan
- Chrysostom (ca. 347-407)

II. THE MIDDLE AGES (540-1500)

- A fourth sense is added to Origen’s threefold sense of scripture – Anagogical

III. THE REFORMATION AND POST-REFORMATION PERIOD (1500-1888)

- Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64)
- Archbishop R. C. Trench – *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (1841)

IV. THE MODERN PERIOD (1888 TO PRESENT)

- Adolf Julicher (1888) – Showed how parables differed from allegories.
- C. H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom*) (1935)
- Redaction criticism – Hans Conzelmann and Willi Marxsen (mid-1950's)

PARABLE

A parable has been called an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The word 'parable' is derived from the Greek *parabolē*, meaning "to throw alongside or "putting things side by side." Mark Bailey defines a parable as "a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truths usually relative to God's Kingdom program."

A parable therefore, is a form of teaching which presents the listener with interesting illustrations from which can be drawn moral and spiritual truths; often it is designed to inculcate a single truth or answer a single question. The parable was an appropriate form of communication for bringing to men the message of the kingdom of God, since its function is to jolt them into seeing things in a new way. D.A. Carson has written, "[P]arables...in Jesus' hands were often meant to shock and 'interpret' the hearer to himself, as much as to be interpreted by the hearer..." They are means of enlightenment and persuasion, intended to bring the hearers to the point of decision.

It is impossible always to draw a clear-cut distinction between parable and allegory in the stories told by Jesus; some of his stories were clearly intended to illustrate several lessons, as in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32). The parables must be understood in their original historical settings within the ministry and teaching of Jesus.

Parables are distinguished from other literary figures in that they are narrative in form but figurative in meaning. Parables use both similes and metaphors to make their analogies. Jesus utilized parables to motivate hearers to make proper spiritual decisions. To Jesus' original audiences the parables both revealed and concealed new truths regarding God's kingdom. Those who rightly responded were called disciples and to them it was granted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom. The same truth was concealed from those who, because of hardened hearts, were unreceptive to the message of Jesus.

The exposition of the parables for today must be based on as careful an understanding of what Jesus meant by the parables as is possible; otherwise we fall back into the error of regarding them as illustrations of general truths. The parables were meant to force people to decide about their attitude to Jesus and his message and thus to bring them into a new relationship with Him and the Kingdom of God.

Roy Zuck suggests nine kinds of occasions or purposes that led to Jesus' parables: parables in answer to questions, parables in answer to requests, parables in answer to complaints, parables given with a stated purpose, parables of the kingdom given because of Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah, parables following an exhortation or principle, parables that illustrate a situation, and parables with the purpose implied not stated.

Bob Stein suggests asking seven questions to help identify the main point of a parable.

1. What terms are repeated in the parable? Which are not?

2. Upon what does the parable dwell, i.e., to what or to whom does the parable devote the most space?
3. What is the main contrast found in the parable?
4. What comes at the end of the parable?
5. What is spoken in direct discourse in the parable?
6. What characters appear in the parable? Which are the least important? Which are the two most important characters? (Usually a parable focuses on two characters to establish its main point.)
7. How would you have told the parable? If Jesus told it differently, does this reveal anything?

Craig Blomberg seeks to synthesis our understanding of Jesus' parables under four major ideas:

1. Jesus clearly has three main topics of interest: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship and the dangers of disobedience.
2. The central theme uniting all of the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. It is both present and future. It includes both a reign and a realm. It involves both personal transformation and social reform.
3. The teaching of the parables raises the question of Jesus' identity. Who is the one who, by his teaching, can claim to forgive sins, pronounce God's blessing on social outcasts and declare that final judgment will be based on the responses people make to him? Christological claims are concealed in the parables. They are not as direct as in some other strands of the Gospel tradition, but they are present nevertheless.
4. Jesus' parables include implicit claims to deity. Jesus associates himself with authority figures in his parables which obviously stand for the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. His audiences must decide whether to accept these claims and worship him or reject them as misguided or even blasphemous. But Jesus' parables leave no neutral ground for casual interest or idle curiosity. They sharply divided their original audiences into disciples and opponents. They must continue to function in the same way today.

Jesus' parables are unique. The parables of other teachers can to some extent be separated from the teachers themselves, but Jesus and his parables are inseparable. To fail to understand him is to fail to understand his parables.

Mark Bailey, "Guidelines for Interesting Jesus Parables," *BibSac* (Jan.-Mar., 1998), 29-38.

Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 326-27.

D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 139.

I. Howard Marshall and R.V.G. Tasker, "Parable," *New Bible Dictionary*, 867-869.

Bob Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables*, 56.