

Introduction to the Parables

Interpreting the parables of Jesus

Matthew 13:1-43

Introduction

Much of what Jesus said in the New Testament is in the form of parables. Although they can be somewhat complex and at times difficult to understand, it is imperative that we as His body seek to understand parables and interpret them accurately. First, let's define our terms, then move on to understand why Jesus used parables, and then focus most of our attention on how we accurately interpret and apply the parables.

What are parables?

Parables are a form of narrative that uses figurative language to illustrate a main point. Most parables tend to focus on one main point, while a few may include more than one message. Many of the parables are actually given to teach, refute, or to answer a question directed at Jesus by the disciples, the crowd, or the Pharisees and teachers of the law. *Luke 15:1-7*

As well, parables can function as a type of allegory. An allegory is a form of writing that seems to represent a specific idea, but inevitably reveals a fuller meaning, particularly a spiritual one. *Matthew 13:3-9 & Matthew 13:18-23*

Likewise, parables can also function as similes. A simile is a form of language that compares two things by using the word "like." Many of the Kingdom of God parables function as similes. *Matthew 13:31-33*

Lastly, parables may also function as a metaphor. A metaphor is an analogy that defines a particular idea or object by comparing it to something else. *Matthew 13:36-39*

What was Jesus' purpose in using parables?

Jesus seems to imply that he speaks in parables for two main reasons:

- 1) To obscure his message as only His disciples and true followers can understand, while others are simply unable. *Matthew 13:10-17 & Luke 8:1-15*
- 2) To fulfill prophecy as written in *Isaiah 6:9-10* and *Psalms 78:2*. *Matthew 13:13-15 & Matthew 13:34-35*

How do we accurately interpret parables?

There are a few skills we must employ in order to accurately interpret the parables and understand them correctly. Notice I didn't say we must master these skills. The fact is, no one has mastered them, but we must be willing to work at them and apply them as we study the parables.

- 1) It is imperative that we **understand the context** of each parable. Who is Jesus speaking to, who is around Him at the time, in what setting does the parable take place, what is He speaking about, what was he speaking about in the immediate context before and after the parable in question, is there a continuing theme or is this a completely new idea, is there an explanation to the parable, etc. Understanding the context will give us the foundation we need to start accurately interpreting the parable. *Matthew 21:23-46*

- 2) After fully understanding the context of the parable, we should be able to accurately **interpret its meaning**. This means that we define the point(s) of the parable and the message Jesus intended the hearer or in our case the reader to yield. *Matthew 21:23-46*

However, there are a few things to consider when interpreting the meaning of the parables. First, we should always be careful to note what *is* addressed in the parable and what *is not* addressed in the parable. This means that we preserve only what was intended and do not add anything to the meaning. *Luke 15:11-32*

Secondly, we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Like any other passage, we must seek to identify other teaching passages that may address the same topic and culminate a broad understanding by pulling in the larger context. *Luke 8:1-15, Matthew 18:1-14, & Romans 8:37-39*

And lastly, we must always seek to interpret the more obscure passages with the clear ones, and this includes the parables. This will strengthen our understanding of what other more clear passages say about a given topic. *Luke 15 & Romans 3:21-24, Luke 16:1-15 & Colossians 3:1-4*

How do we accurately apply parables?

Once we have gained an accurate interpretation of a parable, how do we then apply it to our lives today? Since the parables are teaching passages, and regardless of whether they simply teach us something new about God, His kingdom, or Jesus or they encourage us to put something into practice, we need to define what we are called to apply. So, in order to apply the parables accurately, we must fully understand the parable, who it is addressing, and how we are to apply its meaning.

- 1) We must **identify the audience** that is addressed in the parable which will enable an accurate understanding of whether or not the audience includes the church today. *Matthew 22:1-14, Matthew 28:16-20 & 2 Corinthians 5:18-21*
- 2) After identifying who the parable addresses, we must understand how we are to **apply the meaning** of a given parable. If the parable is truly a teaching passage, and it is clear that the message applies to believers and the church today, then just like any teaching in Scripture, we are called to apply it to our lives in every way. Practically, we must constantly study the parables and pray that God would open our minds to understand them and apply them as we live out our lives as believers. *Luke 17:5-10 & James 4:7-10, Luke 18:1-8 & 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Conclusion

Parables are a key part of Scripture. It is no surprise that it will take time and effort to accurately interpret them in order ultimately to glorify our God. In our discussion, we have defined what a parable is, why Jesus used them, and how we can accurately interpret and apply them. So hopefully, we are well equipped to handle this portion of Scripture well and use these guidelines to further our understanding of God's Word and apply it with all that we are. As well, this information should be a building block to subsequent talks as we seek to interpret and apply specific parables. So take time to test out what we've discussed as we handle individual parables.