

Parables: What are they Like?

- ◆ *How would you define a parable?*
- ◆ *How is a parable different or similar to each of the following?*
 - a) simile,
 - b) metaphor,
 - c) allegory,
 - d) story or fable,
 - e) or proverb.
- ◆ *What are the essential elements that comprise a parable?*
- ◆ *Do you see common elements in many parables?*
- ◆ Many scholars have suggested that at their core the parables of Jesus are believable. They involve experiences or situations that could happen.¹ In other words, the situations are realistic; for example, animals don't talk in parables. They are not fables or fairy tales.
 - *Is this true? Do you think this is an important element of the parables found in the gospels?*
 - *What do the following parables from Matthew chapter 13 all have in common? Are the situations and experiences realistic? Are there any unbelievable or hyperbolic aspects to this least of parables?*
 - a) The parable of the sower
 - b) The parable of the mustard seed
 - c) The parable of the pearl of great price
 - d) the parable of the treasure in the field
 - The first and most important commonality is that they are all parables about the kingdom of heaven, but there is more to it than that. The parables, of course, deal with believable and even common situations: a farmer, the growth of a plant, etc. However, I see a dramatic hyperbolic component to all of these parables:
 - a) The harvest yield is described in three descending amounts: 100, 60, and 30 fold. What was a typical yield of a good harvest in Palestine during this period? Estimates by scholars vary but a reasonable estimate seems to be between 7.5 to 10 fold, and at the very least the numbers mentioned in the parable seem far beyond a normal good harvest.²
 - ◆ *What do the varying yields (100,60, and 30) mean? Does it suggest we are missing something and the parable in its original form may have had more types of soil?*

¹Huffman, Norman, 1978, Atypical Features of the Parables of Jesus, *Journal of biblical Literature*, 207-220.

²Huffman, Norman, 1978, Atypical Features of the Parables of Jesus, *Journal of biblical Literature*, 207-220.

- ◆ *What is up with the farmer? Why doesn't he confine his sowing to the good seed? Is this another atypical detail or can we assume that the sowing in the other parts of the field is largely accidental?*
- b) The mustard seed does not grow into a tree. It grows into a shrub. Tree seems like a clear case of hyperbole.
- c) This seems like hyperbole to me as well. It is hard to imagine a pearl merchant/pearl combination that would lead to a merchant having to sell everything else to buy a pearl. It is also a tremendously risky action; that's a lot of inventory/liquidity risk. Also, the merchant has just enough from the sell of all his assets to buy the pearl.
- d) The treasure in the field has pretty similar hyperbole to pearl of great price parable. For example, the poor workman also has just enough from his asset sale to buy the field.
- *Why the use of hyperbole? Why would Jesus engage in hyperbole? How does it affect the reader and/or the original hearers of these parables?*
- I think it hints at how we should understand these parables at least in part. The parable deal with everyday experiences and events, and yet at the same time they deal with the miraculous. The mustard seed parable is instructive. It is already one of the most remarkable naturally occurring contrasts (a miracle of sort), but the parable pushes the contrast further. The kingdom of heaven is not like a typical mustard (as miraculous as that is); it is like a mustard seed that turns into a tree.
 - ◆ *Do you think this is an important aspect of spiritual things in general?*
 - ◆ I think so. We experience the spiritual things via everyday experience yet at the same time these every day things can on occasion reveal the miraculous.

Parables: The Old Testament

- ◆ *Are parables used in the Old Testament? Can you think of any examples? Who uses parables in the Old Testament? Who is the audience of the parables in the Old Testament? Can we make in generalizations?*
- ◆ The Greek word for parable is *parabolē*. The Greek root basically means setting side by side, a comparison. Of course, the Old Testament isn't written in Greek, but it was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) long before the gospels were written. In the Septuagint, *parabolē* is used to translate the Hebrew word, *māsāl* in all but two cases. The Hebrew word, *māsāl*, refers to multiple things: proverbs (Ezekiel 18:2-3), taunt (Isaiah 14:3-4), riddle (Ezekiel 17:2-10), or allegory (Ezekiel 24:2-5).³
- ◆ However, maybe the two instances that, at least to me, seem to parallel the parables of Jesus the best are the following:
 - 2 Samuel 12:1-4
 - Isaiah 5:1-7

³Metzger, Bruce M. (Editor) and Michael David Coogan (Editor), 1993, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, 567-570.

Why Use Parables?

- ◆ Read Matthew 13:10-17:

(10) And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? (11) He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. (12) For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. (13) Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. (14) And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith,

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;
and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

(15) For this people's heart is waxed gross,
and their ears are dull of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest at any time they should see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and should understand with their heart,
and should be converted,
and I should heal them.

(16) But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. (17) For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

- ◆ ***Why speakest thou unto them in parables?***

- The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the crowd (including the disciples) in parables. Jesus answers,

(11) He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

- *First, who are the two groups? Who are the disciples being contrasted with in these verses? Is the backdrop of chapter 12 important?*

- ***Why speakest thou unto them in parables?***

a) *No more goodstuff*

- ◆ Jesus is no longer teaching the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to the crowd because the crowd has rejected Him and his message. Instead, he teaches the crowd parables. He accepts that the crowd has rejected the higher message, and imparts what wisdom he can to the crowd.
- ◆ *What do you think of this possibility? Is there anything in the narrative that seems to contradict this possibility?*
- ◆ There are certainly elements that are consistent with this idea. In chapter 12, the pharisees give Jesus a hard time. They try to trick him and condemn him. They ask

for signs after he has already given them many. He condemns them explicitly and at the end of the chapter he defines clearly who and isn't part of his family. Finally, there seems to be a clear change in teaching style. For example, the Sermon on the Mount isn't primarily parables; it has far more direct discourse. However, this preceding explanation doesn't seem to fit with the nature of the parables. All of the parables in this chapter are about the kingdom of heaven. To me it seems like every parable reveals the mysteries of the kingdom.

- ◆ *Is there anything else in the text of chapter 13 that suggests that the parables are indeed the "goodstuff?"*
 - ◆ I think verses 34-35 make it clear that the parables are the goodstuff:
 - (34) All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: (35) That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.
 - ◆ In some sense there could be truth to the example even though it isn't entirely consistent with the text. In response to the actions of the crowd, Jesus is now using a sup-optimal teaching style. Maybe he would prefer to use a mix of direct and parabolic discourse.
- b) *The parables are the good stuff, but only the disciple understand the true message*
- ◆ The parables are the good stuff; they do teach the true message of Jesus, but only the disciple understand the message. The message is kept from the crowd which at the very least has people in it who have explicitly reject the message of Jesus. Only the family of Jesus (Matthew 12: 46-50) understands the parables.
 - ◆ *What do you think of this possibility? Is there anything in the narrative that seems to contradict this possibility?*
 - ◆ This seems like a fairly natural way to read these scriptures. Parable by their very nature have multiple meanings and maybe it allows those outside the community to gain moral and ethical insight but the Christian community (the family of Jesus) gain deep spiritual insight. This explanation I think is right from the perspective that the parable teach the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (as we discussed in part a)), but I can't buy into this explanation completely. My biggest problem with this is that the disciples don't understand the parables throughout chapter 13. The Savior provides interpretation and explanation throughout. In terms of understanding the parables before an explicit interpretation, they seem clueless.
 - ◆ *What makes the disciples different than the crowd?*
- c) *The parables are the good stuff, no-one understands, but its the reaction that matters*
- ◆ The parables do teach the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but neither the disciples or the crowd understand the message when they first hear it. Why sets the disciple (or brother and sisters of Christ) apart is there response to the parables.
 - ◆ *What do you think of this possibility? Is it possible that the important thing is the reaction of disciples relative to the reaction of the crowd when each hears the parables?*

- ◆ I think I favor this explanation. The disciples don't "hear" the parable when they listen to the initial sermon. In verse 13, Jesus outlines the crowd's problem in more detail: "they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." Now notice the language the Savior uses when he interprets the parable for the disciples in verse 18:

(18) Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.

It is not until verse 18 that the disciple actually hear the parable. *What enables or allows them to hear the parable?* The disciples aren't passive. They wonder what it means. They ponder what it means. They seek and ask Jesus what it means. This is why they are spiritually rewarded.

- ◆ *Do you think there is a lesson in these verses for us? Does this hint at how we should approach the scriptures?*

Does the Scripture Fit?

- ◆ My favored hypothesis is that, "The parables are the good stuff, no-one understands, but it's the reaction that matters."
- ◆ A test of this hypothesis, I think, comes from the scripture quoted by Jesus in verse 14-15 (the scripture itself is a quotation of the Greek Septuagint: Isaiah 6:9-10):

(14) And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias [Isaiah], which saith,

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;
and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

(15) For this people's heart is waxed gross,
and their ears are dull of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed;

lest at any time they should see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and should understand with their heart,
and should be converted,
and I should heal them.

- ◆ *Is the scripture consistent with my favored hypothesis?*
- ◆ *Why can the people described by Isaiah listen but never understand? What might it mean that their heart is grown dull?*
- ◆ The imagery is of hardening of hearts. This seems very consistent to me. The disciples showed their humility and the desire to know the mysteries of the kingdom by seeking understanding. The rest of the crowd did not. To me that is what separates the two. The disciples questioned and sought to understand in humility. The reward was the ability to hear.

Other Purposes of Parables

- ◆ Verses 10-18 focus on the reason for parables in terms of the immediate context: why parables were taught to the crowd. *What about a wider context? Might the use of the parables have been important for other reasons?*
- ◆ The gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) even using conservative estimates were written many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Conservative estimates would probably locate the writing of Mark and Matthew some 20 or 30 years after the death of Jesus. *Does this backdrop hint at another important reason for the use of parables?*
- ◆ Parables are much easier to remember than normal discourse. Many of the sayings of Jesus were probably initially preserved orally. Parables are going to be remembered better and possibly passed down more accurately. Think about this Sunday school class; I do a lot of analysis and exegesis, but I would be surprised if that is what you remember best; you probably remember some of the stories, that I tell only infrequently, the best.
- ◆ *Any other reasons?*
- ◆ Parables can be used to disarm their listeners. The truth gets past the hardened exterior or resistance. For example, think about the parable the Nathan tells David after the whole Bathsheba and Uriah thing.