

Using Parables Evangelistically

“If you want to expound the Savior’s heart, you’ve got to preach the parables, but the task can be daunting because a tsunami of scholarship, perhaps the most extensive in the vast ocean of New Testament studies, has confused and frightened many preachers” Jeffrey Arthurs

The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that if they continue, we shall know nothing at all about it. Mark Twain

Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint at it in our lives. Walter Wink

A parable is a ‘picture that becomes a mirror and then a window” Warren Wiersbe

Where we are going

- ❖ **What are parables and why did Jesus use them?**
- ❖ **Some introductory thoughts on interpreting parables**
- ❖ **Some thoughts on communicating the meaning and dynamic of the parables using a worked example**

What are parables and why did Jesus use them?

What do you make of the following:

Luke 4:23; Mark 3:23; Matthew 13:33; Luke 6:39

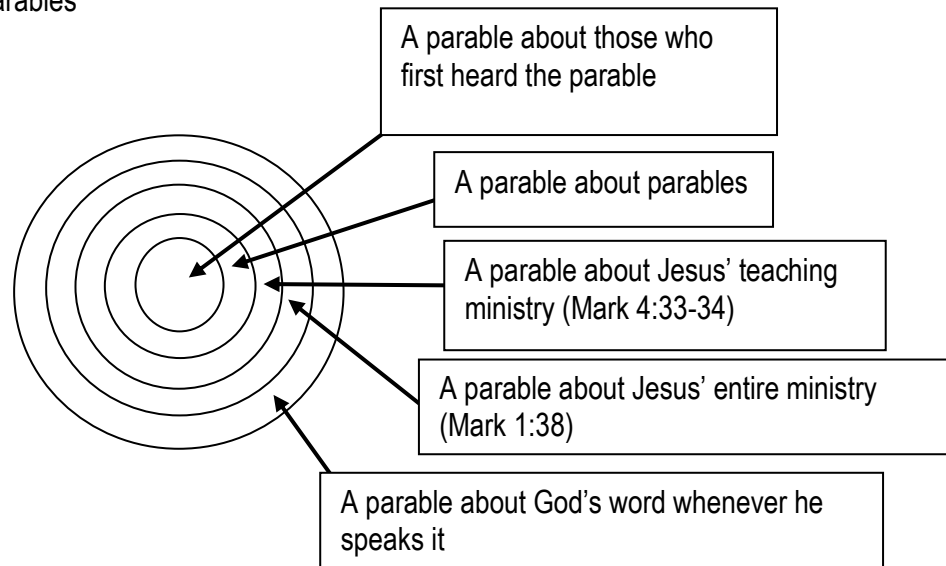
Luke 13:6-9 cf. Luke 15:1-32

What about Luke 16:1ff? Is this a parable? Why? Why not?

Identifying parables – so what?

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- Mark 4:33-34
- Mark 4

A parable about parables



After Vern Poythress

1. Parables as illustrations?

e.g. Mark 4:26-29

2. Parables as allegories?

What do you make of Irenaeus interpretation of Matthew 20:1-16 the parable of the vineyard labourers

Also by the parable of the workmen who were sent into the vineyard at different periods of the day, one and the same God is declared(1) as having called some in the beginning, when the world was first created; but others afterwards, and others during the intermediate period, others after a long lapse of time, and others again in the end of lime; so that there are many workmen in their generations, but only one householder who calls them together. For there is but one vineyard, since there is also but one righteousness, and one dispensator, for there is one Spirit of God who arranges all things; and in like manner is there one hire, for they all received a penny each man, having [stamped upon it] the royal image and superscription, the knowledge of the Son of God, which is immortality. And therefore He began by giving the hire to those [who were engaged] last, because in the last times, when 'the Lord was revealed He presented Himself to all [as their reward]. Against heresies book IV, 36:7

Allegorical interpretation of the parables persisted/dominated for 19 centuries - why?

1. Almost everyone recognises that there is some sort of symbolic meaning to Jesus teaching in the parables – whether that is allegorical depends largely on your definition of terms.

Symbolism is inescapable because

- a. Jesus' first listeners, the gospel's first readers and subsequent gospel readers hear Jesus' words filtered through inherited archetypes.

Biblically inherited symbols e.g. Yahweh as the owner of the vineyard.

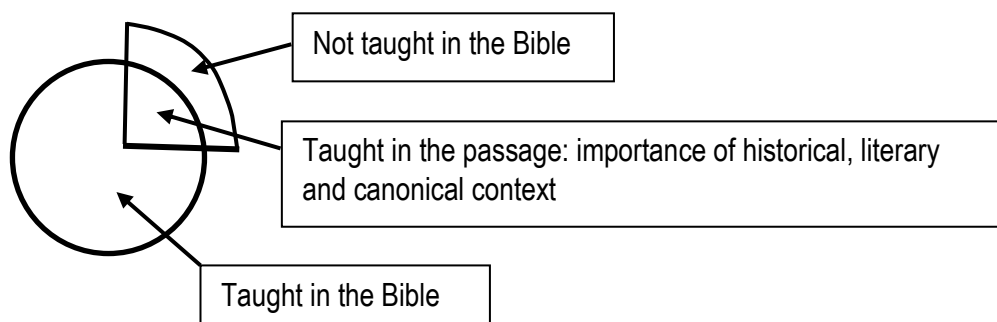
- b. The parables are repeatedly set up as communicating something about the Kingdom of God e.g. Mark 4:26
 - c. Jesus himself interpreted two of his parables in an allegorical way (Matthew 13:18-23; 36-43)
 - d. “Allegorical interpretations [of the Bible] are very difficult to avoid for a believer who wishes to apply the truth of Scripture to his or her life. One already senses this concern in the writings of Philo, who argued that there was no real point in reading about Abraham’s journeys unless they refer to spiritual journeys in which we too participate” Moisés Silva
2. A (mis-)understanding of what Jesus’ meant by the ‘secrets’ of the kingdom of God being hidden from some people, Mark 4:10-12
 3. View of the unity of scripture.

Augustine’s views was that ‘because a figure may have several meanings, it may be interpreted in a way that the author did not intend, but which accords with what can be found in other parts of scripture’. Augustine believed that the Holy Spirit had already provided for this possibility, and legitimized such handling of the text. Any possible meaning which a text can have is legitimate, whether the author realized it or not. Augustine argued that truth could be apprehended at many different levels, and it was wrong to limit a biblical text to only one meaning” Gerald Bray

The key principle was that “the clearer parts of Scripture must be used to interpret the more obscure parts. This meant that the teaching of Jesus and the apostles about his life and death could be applied to the parables.” Gerald Bray

How do you differentiate between the literal and the figurative:

“And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever then is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative” Augustine ‘On Christian Doctrine’ 3.10



After Michael You

4. Influence of Greek philosophy?

“The power of allegory has been differently felt in different ages, as it is differently felt at any one time by diverse nations. Analogy, allegory, metaphor – by what boundaries are these separated the one from the other? What is true or false, correct or incorrect, as an analogy or an allegory? What arguments must be assigned to either? We should at least be prepared with an answer to these questions, before we venture to sit in judgment on any individual case?” J.B.Lightfoot

Is allegory dead and buried?

A question of definition

Allegory – point by point correspondence of details in text for something else (often de-historicised) ?

Or

Allegory – correspondence of certain details in the text for something else where the correspondence is controlled by

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In other words there is a recognition of a distinction between

- Context specific symbolism

Immediate context specific symbolism e.g. where the older son represents the Pharisees and the scribes in Luke 15

Canonical context specific symbolism e.g. the “fatted calf that is slain,...is an evocative biblical archetype with connotations of honor, hospitality, and extravagant celebration” Ryken (e.g. Genesis 18:7; 1 Samuel 18:24)

- Culture specific symbolism e.g. in Luke 15

Where shoes represent the status accorded to a son since slaves went about barefoot.

Depending on where you fall on your definition of allegory depends whether you think the parables are allegorical e.g.

Fee & Stuart: “The parables are not *allegories* – even if at times they have what appear to us to be allegorical features”

Leland Ryken: “Are the parables allegorical? Yes – they are. Despite all that some (though not all) biblical scholars have said to the contrary, the parables fit any standard literary definition of allegory...The essential feature of allegory is that of double meaning: a detail in the story also stands for something else. If the term allegory has the wrong connotations because it smacks of the arbitrary and frivolous allegorizing that prevailed in the Middle Ages, we can use the synonym symbol. It is as simple as that”

C20th onwards – the legacy of Adolf Jülicher.

A question of presuppositions

In large measure the debates around the interpretation of the parables have been (unsurprisingly) shaped by fundamental presuppositions about revelation: do you approach the Scriptures with a hermeneutic of suspicion or a hermeneutic of trust?

An aside – an overview of Biblical criticism!

3. Parables as persuasive, sometimes subversive stories that demand a response from the listener/reader

a. Different types of parables

Distinction between

◆ similitudes (an extended simile) e.g. Matthew 13:31-32

◆ stories

What controls on interpreting the symbolism?

b. The function of parables (after Carson)

1. Illustrations

2. Open ended stories c.f. modernist propositions

3. To hide from the non-elect (Mark 4:11-12)

4. To communicate, and in so doing to sift

→ So what's going on in Mark 4?

→ What does Jesus mean by the secrets of the Kingdom of God being given?

The secrets of the Kingdom of God are given: secrets = mysteries in Greek (μυστήριον) 27/28x in NT

In NT this is almost always bound up with things hidden in the past in scripture but now disclosed in the ministry of Christ. "Jesus is claiming that he is bringing things together that have been known in the scriptures but not put together because of our blindness" Carson

So the parables seem to have a sifting function – hardening those who are resisting, bringing perception and understanding to those who will submit to Jesus.

→ What's the difference between seeing and perceiving, hearing and understanding?

Problem: parables are at many levels simple stories, how is it then that people don't understand them?

Mark 12:12

Problem seems less at the level of cognition, and more at the level of volition. People seem to understand the provocative claims of the parables but are not prepared to accept them.

“For Mark Jesus’ speaking in parables is not a riddle as such. What is perplexing is the behaviour that it calls forth – that man can see salvation personified and nevertheless not come to conversion and belief” Craig Blomberg

So important to reflect on the function of the parables:

‘the parables possess a strong persuasive element. They were addressed to specific audiences and designed to move listeners to a response. The parables are invitations and even traps designed to elicit a response’ Ryken

Fee & Stuart draw a distinction between the shorter parabolic sayings and ‘the story parables’.

“The story parables function as a means of *calling forth a response* on the part of the hearer. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan’s words, the parable itself is the message. It is told to address and capture the hearers, to bring them up short about their own actions, or to cause them to respond in some way to respond to Jesus and His ministry. It is this ‘call for response’ nature of the parable that causes our great dilemma in interpreting them. For in some ways to interpret a parable is to destroy what it was originally. It is like interpreting a joke. The whole point of a joke and what makes it funny is that the hearer has an immediacy with it as it is being told. It is funny to the hearer precisely because he get ‘caught,’ as it were. But it can only ‘catch’ him if he understands the points of reference in the joke. If you have to interpret the joke by explaining the points of reference, it no longer catches the hearer and therefore usually fails to capture the same quality of laughter. When the joke is interpreted, it can be understood all right, and may still be funny (at least one understand what one should have laughed at) but it ceases to have the same impact. Thus it no longer *functions* in the same way”

“Jesus’ preaching deliberately led people, at first gently but then inexorably, to a point of decision – either to follow or to reject him, and from this perspective those who rejected him did not really understand either who he was or what were the consequences of their actions” Blomberg

“The Kingdom of God comes into the midst and throws a man into the crisis of decision, and yet by its veiled form the Word of the Kingdom holds man at arm’s length away in order to give him time for personal decision” T.F.Torrance

Some introductory thoughts on interpreting parables

1. Think about the story

- ◆ Concrete c.f. abstract
- ◆ Parables as folk stories

Simple but engaging because of

- i. Archetypes – image, plot motif or character that recurs throughout literature and is part of the reader’s total literary experience
 - ii. Satire
- Ali Ferzat

iii. Cracks in realism

“Many of the parables contain a crack in the realism – some element that does not fit and that therefore teases us into seeing more in the parable than the literal level.” e.g. the ridiculous excuses of invited wedding guests; an employer who pays all the workers the same; a merchant who sells everything for a single pearl.” Leland Ryken

iv. Shocking reversals

e.g. parable of Pharisee and tax collector

v. Plot, suspense, characters

2. Think about the symbolism

◆ Context specific symbolism

◆ Culture specific symbolism

Literary lessons from Shrek

“The Oriental storyteller has a ‘grand piano’ on which he plays. The piano is built of the attitudes, relationships, responses, and value judgments that are known and stylized in Middle Eastern peasant society. Everybody knows how everybody is expected to act in any given situation. The storyteller interrupts the established pattern of behaviour to introduce his irony, his surprises, his humour, and his climaxes. If we are not attuned to those same attitudes, relationships, responses and value judgements, we do not hear the music of the piano. With the parables, the music of this ‘piano’ contains significant aspects of the theology that called the story into being” Kenneth Bailey

The danger of cultural naivety

The problem of cultural separation

3. Determine the theme(s) of the parable

“The main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation, and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters. The triadic structure of most of Jesus’ narrative parables may make three points, though some will probably make only one or two” Craig Blomberg

e.g. Luke 15:11-32

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4. Application of theme(s)

- ◆ Then
 - i. to Jesus' first listeners (identity specified, implied, unspecified)
 - ii. to the gospel writer's first readers
- ◆ Now

Communicating the meaning and dynamic of the parables a worked example

Luke 18:9-14

1. Thinking about the story
2. Thinking about the symbolism
3. Determining the theme

Some thoughts on communicating the meaning and dynamic of the parables using a worked example

a. Way in?

Exploring the form

Raising the theme

b. How much looking over your shoulder do you need to do?

Assuming scriptural realities – appealing to suppressed truth (God is there Romans 1:19-20, and our guilt is real – Romans 2:14-15)

Vs.

Deconstructing defeater belief

Does genre impact how much looking over your shoulder you need to do?

When our minds are engaged in the flow of the plot and our feelings are bound to the characters, the values of the story begin to infiltrate our hearts. In contrast, defence mechanisms snap to attention when someone begins. "You are mistaken. Let me prove it to you". We know that they are arguing, trying to change us (and none of us likes that!), but when someone begins, "Once upon a time," we relax and yield to the form of the genre. The ideas expressed in that form enter the heart with little interrogation. Rhetorician William Kirkwood comments, "By ostensibly describing what and how, not why....[narrative is] not really susceptible to ordinary methods of analysis and refutation. Thus storytelling can briefly override auditors' immediate defences and introduce views of life that would otherwise have been rejected before they could prompt self-examination in listeners" J. Arthurs

c. 'Don't be afraid to make a point'

"Parables may be more than ideas, but they're not less. Don't be afraid to explain, summarize and make points." Arthurs

Jesus: Luke 18:14

Luke: Luke 18:9

d. 'Don't be afraid NOT to make a point'

The power of leaving things unsaid

"How much land does a man need" Tolstoy

"The problem with too many teachings is that when they are over, they're over" Rob Bell

e. Illustrations and cultural bridges

f. Light and shade

Some books I have found helpful

Jeffrey Arthurs	Preaching with variety
Kenneth Bailey	Poet & Peasant
Kenneth Bailey	Through Peasant eyes
Gerald Bray	Biblical interpretation past and present
Craig Blomberg	Interpreting the parables
Craig Blomberg	Preaching the parables
Leland Ryken	Words of delight: a literary introduction to the Bible
Moisés Silva	Has the Church misread the Bible?
Fee & Stuart	How to read the Bible for all it's worth