

Interpreting Jesus' Parables Eugene Kimble, Ph.D.

A parable is often a short story (e.g. the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost boy, Luke 15:1-32), or a saying (e.g. "Physician, heal yourself," Luke 4:23) or a simile (e.g., "The Kingdom of God . . . is like [is illustrated by] a mustard seed," Luke 13:18-19) that illustrates a spiritual truth by making a comparison with a well-known experience from everyday life.

I. Understanding Parables.

A. Who is Jesus speaking to, e.g., Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7? Cf. 5:1-2 and 7:28 (discipleship teaching to all who were hearing and following Jesus).

B. What is Jesus' main point?

1. Each parable has one, and only one, central message (Luke 15:1-32).
2. Each parable may have a number of details all of which relate to the central message (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43; Luke 16:19-32).

3. Each parable may have details that have no spiritual significance, but are essential for telling the story. Thus parables are drawn from historical circumstances but usually are not historical narratives. They are story-lessons designed to be mirrors of real life in order to teach a spiritual truth. So, learn which details to keep and which to throw away.

4. Although a parable has only one central message, it may have multiple applications.

5. A parable cannot establish doctrine, but it may illustrate doctrine.

C. Study the context of the parable.

1. Leaven can be evil or good according to the context. The principle is: leaven's power to penetrate the whole, whether like unrebuked personal sin which can infect the entire congregation, (1 Cor. 5:6-8), or like God's Kingdom which eventually will rule over and transform the whole of creation, Matt.13:33.

2. Watch for double allusions: a lion can represent Satan (1 Peter 5:8) or Christ (Rev. 5:5).

3. What is the pearl of great price in Matthew 13:45?

II. Interpreting Jesus' Parables: Look for the topic sentence.

A. At the beginning of the parable. In answering the Pharisee's criticism of His habitually receiving sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2), Jesus gives three stories to make the argument that God loves sinners, seeks them out, and all heaven rejoices when they are found, showing that He is merely doing what His Father does (15:3-25), contrary to the Pharisees who are probably represented in the story by the older son of 15:26-32. The three stories include:

1. (The Lost sheep)- A well-known example from life: A farmer's search for his lost sheep until he finds it and brings it home rejoicing (Luke 15:3-6) is

compared to the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and in this manner finds his way to his heavenly home.

2. (The Lost Coin): A housewife who seeks a lost coin and rejoices with friends when she finds it ((15:8-9) is compared to the spiritual truth of God's loving, seeking, and rejoicing over repentant sinners. (Notice, "In the same way," vv.7, 10).

3. (The Prodigal Son): The Holy Spirit emphasizes His main point (God's love for and joy over repentant sinners) by giving a third parable wherein the illustration shifts from lost sheep and coins to a lost son, Luke 15:11-32.

4. See also, The Parable of the Rich Fool, Luke 12:13-21: the occasion, 12:13-15; the conclusion, 12:21, and The Parable of the Persistent Widow, Luke 18:1-8; the essential point being, that when praying, if you see no sign of the answer you desire, it's easy to become discouraged. Yet, in such times, you are to continue praying and not lose heart, 18:1. If need be, God can tell you when to stop, 2 Cor.12: 8-9.

B. At the end of a parable, (Luke 16:19-31).

1. The principal truth taught: the importance of God's Word, ("But He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead,' "16:31).

2. The rich man and Lazarus parable teaches a number of details that relate to and strengthen the central message: "the authority of the Bible."

a. Death does not end the soul's existence.

b. Immediately after death both saved and lost go to their final destination.

c. There really is agony in hell and comfort in heaven.

d. At death one's eternal destiny is forever set: "A great chasm [between heaven and hell] has been [permanently] fixed [and remains so]." (perfect passive verb).

e. Our duty to practice love and compassion on those in distress.

3. Christ uses this parable to testify to the authority of the Bible by saying that Moses' and the prophets' writings were more authoritative than would be a message to the world by a person who has been raised from the dead (cf. 1 Samuel 28 and 31).

III. Proverbs (sayings).

A. "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die," (1 Cor. 15:32).

1. The reality of God's truth (in particular the resurrection, 15:12-29) influenced Paul to give his all in service to God, (15:30-32a).

2. If God's truth were not factual then why should I (Paul) not live like the unconverted do (v. 32b). That I do not practice verse 32b ("Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die") shows my (Paul's) unswerving faith in the truth of God's Word concerning Christ's literal resurrection from the tomb, 15:12-29.

B. Part for the whole: "Give us to day our daily bread," (Matt. 6:11). Bread (part) includes money for utilities, clothes, mortgage, transportation, etc (whole).

- IV. Look for the Scriptures' own explanation.
- A. Matthew 13:14-15 explains 13:10-13.
 - B. Matthew 13:36-43 explains 13:24-30.
 - C. Matthew 13:49-50 explains 13:47-48.
 - D. Matthew 6:33 explains God's condition for 6:25-33.
 - E. Matthew 25:1, "Then" ("At that time," NIV), connects 25:1-13 time wise with 24:45-51. Thus both parables refer to the same event: "When the Master comes," 24:46.
 - F. Like the competent Bible teacher He is, Jesus turned the theological question: "Who is my neighbor", (Luke 10:29) into an application question: "Which of the three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robber's hands?" 10:36. The answer, of course, is, "The one who showed mercy toward him," and Jesus' final application is: "Go and do the same," 10:37.
 - G. Negatively speaking, hating one's own life (Luke 14:26) means positively to serve the Lord Jesus Christ whole-heartedly and without reservation, 14:27.
 - H. John 1:12 explains that justifying faith is a receiving faith.
 - I. 2 Timothy 2:12 explains that present perseverance is the condition for future rewards.

V. Understand the historical and cultural material in a parable.

- A. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden," Matt. 5:14. Why were ancient cities easily seen at night?
- B. Who are Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15)? Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 11:20-22)? What disaster overtook them?
- C. What is "hyssop" Ps. 51:7? What is it used for? Ex.12:22; Heb.9:19-22.

VI. Multiple parables that collectively emphasize a theme not explicitly stated (e.g., How the Kingdom Grows, Matt. 13:1-51). Notice again Jesus' neat use of application in Luke 10:29-37, as is usually true in all His parables.

Application of the parable: The way to bring God's living Word, written between 2,000 and 3,500 years ago, into our everyday day life is to find the principle taught, then teach and practice it (cf. Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49; 8:15). In this way we truly live out the Scriptures that say, "For whatsoever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope," Romans 15:4; and "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction upon whom the ends of the ages have come," 1 Corinthians 10:11.

- A. The Kingdom grows by recognizing the importance of:
 1. Careful listening, Matt.13:9,11-17.
 2. Understanding God's Word, 13:19, 23a, 51.
 3. Having a receptive heart, 13:22-23.
 4. Distinguishing between the true and the false, 13:24-30, 36-43.
 5. Exercising patience, 13:28-30, cf. Luke 8:15. Cf. 2 Timothy 2:12.

- B. The Kingdom grows by:
1. Its own inherent power, 13:31-33, Mark 4:26-29.
 2. Faith that God's Kingdom will ultimately prevail, 13:31-33, 41-42.
 3. Our hope for future glorification, 13:43; cf. Rom. 8:18-30; Rev. 22:3-5.
 4. Realizing the priceless value of the Kingdom and giving our all for its success, 13:44-46.
 5. Knowing that there is coming a time of great separation of the good from the bad, 13: 47-50.

C. The Kingdom grows by the faith that no matter what our background God can work in us and speak to men's hearts through us, 13:52.

D. Hindrances to the growth of the Kingdom.

1. Taking a negative attitude toward God's principles in VI, A-C.
2. The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth, 13:22.

VII. Work Sheet: studying the parables in order to apply them to our lives.

A. The parable of the tower builder and the king going to war, Luke 14:28-35.

1. The life-story analyzed to find the main theme or point(s), 14:28-32.

2. The lesson applied to our lives, 14:25-27,32-35.

B. The parable of the unjust steward, Luke 16:1-13.

1. The life-story analyzed to find the main theme or point(s), 16:1-8.

2. The lesson applied to our lives, 16:9-13.

C. The parable of the workers in the vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16.

1. The life-story analyzed to find the main theme or point(s), 20:1-16.

2. The lesson applied to our lives, 20:1-16.

D. The parable of treasures new and old, Matthew 13:52.

1. The life-story analyzed to find the main theme or point(s), 13:52a.

2. The lesson applied to our lives, 13:52b.

E. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value, Matthew 13:44-46.

1. The life-story analyzed to find the main theme, point(s), 13:44a, 45.

2. The lesson applied to our lives, 13:44b, 46.

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