

An Introduction to Parables

- A. Definition: Lit – “a casting alongside”, a story that teaches a point by illustrating it from a familiar situation from everyday life.
- 1) Proverbs such as Pr 10:26 “*Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, So is the lazy one to those who send him*” are, strictly speaking, parables, but this study will focus on narratives illustrating several points or aspects of a spiritual lesson
 - 2) Parables are found infrequently in the OT, such as Jdg 9:8-15 and 2Sam 12:1-7
 - 3) In the NT, parables are almost always found in the teachings of Jesus
 - a) in Paul’s writings, the body parts as related to the members of the Church (Rom 12:4f; 1Cor 12:12), the grain of wheat (1Cor 15:36-38, 42-44), and the thief in the night (1Th 5:2f), appear incidentally, and could be considered parabolic teaching
 - b) only in Hebrews does the word “parable” occur in the Greek, in 9:9 concerning the Tabernacle as a symbol for the present age and 11:19 of Abraham receiving back Isaac from the dead as a type
 - 4) In the Synoptic Gospels, the term appears 46x, but does not occur at all in John
 - a) a different Greek word, *paroimia* – figure, is used 2x by Christ and once by the disciples – Jn 10:6 (the Shepherd and the sheep) and 16:25-29
 - b) instances that could be considered parables occur in
 - (1) 3:29 – the Bridegroom and His friend
 - (2) 8:35 – the slave and the son
 - (3) 11:9-10 – walking in the night and day
 - (4) 12:24 – the grain of wheat
 - (5) 15:1-7 – the Vine and the branches
 - (6) 16:21 – a woman in labor
 - 5) Since at least one-third of Jesus’ teaching was in parables, an accurate understanding of their purpose and interpretation must be established
- B. Parables were used to hide spiritual truths in obscure language; they also bring out abstract points of reality that are understood only by the initiates – Mk 4:11
- 1) Christ used parables in His instructions to the disciples, as a way of explaining the “mysteries of the Kingdom of God” – cp Mt 18:23-35
 - 2) He used them to refute His opponents’ accusations, as a way to get them to agree with His premise before applying it to them – cp Mt 21:33-45
 - 3) He taught the crowds in parables as a way to motivate Positive Volition to seek the Truth – cp Mt 11:10-16
- C. The Interpretation of Parables
- 1) Faulty interpretations include:
 - a) allegorical – the parable has as many different meanings as interpreters, and may mean different things to different people
 - (1) the details have no specific meaning, and are equally valid in any number of situations
 - (2) the interpretation is limited only by the imagination of the exegete
 - (3) an example would be to apply the Mk 4:8 in such a way as to justify ecclesiastical addition to God’s Word through the “growth of the Church”
 - b) big picture – the details of the parable are unimportant, rather the end of the story is all that matters

- (1) related to allegory, this method seeks to disregard the lessons in favor of a pre-conceived conclusion
 - (2) this method denies the original context in which the parable was given
 - (3) an example is interpreting Mk 4:29 as a giving verse
 - c) unnatural meaning – forcing a meaning into the text that denies the actual events of the parable itself
 - (1) the context in which the parable is given is a key to its interpretation, as in the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24-30) & the fish and the dragnet (Mt 13:47-50)
 - (2) to force an industrial background upon an agricultural metaphor loses the familiarity of the comparison
 - (3) an example would be using Mt 13:33 as investment advice
 - 2) The correct interpretation must adhere to
 - a) the literal hermeneutic – if the speaker uses agricultural metaphors, the key to the parable will be found in agricultural reality
 - b) the single meaning principle – while there might be multiple applications, there will only be one singular lesson intended
 - c) the direct comparison principle – each component of the parable will have a parallel in the spiritual reality
 - d) a distinction between parables and stories – Lk 16:19-31 is not a parable
 - (1) parables do not give specific names
 - (2) the rich man cannot be made to equal Israel, in a position of spiritual “wealth” as the people of God
 - (3) to force Lazarus to equal the Gentiles, in their spiritual poverty, would ignore the fact that dogs were licking his sores (what possible meaning?)
 - (4) the great chasm does not equal separation from the covenant
 - 3) There are often details of a parable that cannot be forced to fit the facts, this does not negate their validity; the overriding principle of interpretation is that the parable is a comparison, not a strict equation – believers will not be held in “containers” in Ph₃ (Mt 13:48)
- D. The Guidelines for Correct Interpretation Include:
- 1) Begin with the immediate context
 - a) what was the occasion for telling the parable? (cp Lk 7:40-47)
 - b) what is the explanation, if one is given? (cp Mk 4:14-20)
 - 2) Identify the central point (cp Mk 4:21-22)
 - 3) Identify irrelevant details (cp Mt 13:48 – “sat down”)
 - 4) Identify relevant details (cp Mk 4:31-32 – the Church)
 - 5) Compare parallel and contrasting passages (cp Mk 4:20 & Lk 8:15)
 - 6) Base any doctrinal statements on clear, literal passages (cp Lk 14:37 cp Js 3:1)