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1

The Interpretation of Parables



What Are Parables?

Commentators and students of the New Testament have debated what sayings of Jesus actually constitute a parable and what sayings do not. Jesus, for example, uses metaphors of a rather extended length to describe various aspects of his work, but these are not usually considered parables. An example is found in John 10:1–16, where Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd and even to the door of the sheepfold.

There are teachings of Jesus which are very short and terse, but they are included among the parables either because the Scriptures specifically call them parables, or because the opening words have the usual form of an introduction to a parable. An example of the former is the description of a mustard seed, which is specifically said to be a parable (Matt. 13:31, 32). An example of the latter is the story of the pearl of great value, which is introduced with the words “The kingdom of heaven is like unto . . .” (Matt. 13:45, 46).

Some commentators have therefore concluded that all metaphors ought really to be called parables. Thus, a book on parables would include such sayings of Jesus as “Ye are the salt of the earth . . .” (Matt. 5:13) and “Ye are the light of the world . . .” (Matt. 5:14–16).

There is a certain element of truth to this assertion. The dividing line between parables and metaphors is not sharp. While some teachings of Jesus are specifically called parables, others, usually included in a book which treats parables, are not so designated. How is one to decide?

In this book, I have followed the usual and most widely accepted list of parables, but have not included other metaphors which some may assume are parables. The decision is admittedly somewhat arbitrary.

trary. Nevertheless, the whole matter brings up a point which needs to be discussed, and which, if understood, will give us valuable clues as to the interpretation of parables.

Figures of Speech

Scripture abounds in figures of speech, which we usually designate by various names: similes, metaphors, types, symbols, parables, and the like. What is common to them all is the fact that they all make comparisons between elements in this present creation in which we live and spiritual realities and truths. A man clothed in the righteousness of Christ is like a tree planted by the riverside (Ps. 1:3). The wicked are like the chaff which is driven away by the wind (v. 4). This is clearly a simile, and it compares things quite familiar to us in this present creation with spiritual and heavenly realities.

Jesus makes use of metaphors when he refers to himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Strikingly, this entire discussion in John 10 is even called a parable (v. 6), though it is rarely treated as such. Jesus uses in his designation of his people the metaphor of light: "Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). But we do not usually consider this to be a parable, either.

The Old Testament abounds in types, and Hebrews reminds us of the frequency of types in Scripture. Jesus is called a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, the king-priest of Jerusalem (Heb. 6:20—Heb. 7:28; Ps. 110:4; Gen. 14:18–20).

The book of Revelation is filled with symbols, such as the white, red, black, and pale [green] horses in Revelation 6:1–8. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the book without having some understanding of the fact, for example, that the color black is a symbol of famine (Zech. 6:2; Jer. 14:2; Lam. 5:10).

The Earthly Pictures the Heavenly

Parables are a part of a seemingly endless use of comparisons in Scripture between earthly things and spiritual realities. The question is how a legitimate and helpful comparison can be made between earthly and heavenly realities. Herein lies a great truth of the works of God.

We must go back to eternity to understand this. God's eternal determination in his counsel included all that takes place on earth and in heaven. But God never intended that heaven and earth would remain the two separate creations that they now are. He determined to glorify himself through Christ in the salvation and redemption of all the elect and of the entire cosmos. This purpose of God is attained when history reaches its conclusion, Christ comes again, and the wicked are eternally punished, while the righteous are brought into the everlasting glory of a new heavens and a new earth. Then heaven and earth shall be one glorious, redeemed creation under Christ its Head.

God never wavered from this purpose, and all he did from the moment he began the creation work until he finishes his work in the age to come is made useful to attain that glorious end when God will be fully glorified in Christ.

The result is that the heavenly is the greater reality. The earthly is created by God to be after the pattern of the heavenly, reflecting the heavenly, bearing the heavenly in it, almost bursting with the heavenly already now. It is something like a young girl with stringy hair, braces on her teeth, gangly and uncoordinated, but with the promise (if one could see it) of becoming a beautiful, poised, and graceful woman. So the earthly has the potential in it of becoming, by the work of Christ, a glorious heavenly creation.

The creation itself bears witness to this. The creation of the sun, moon, and stars was "for signs" (Gen. 1:14). The flood which destroyed the earth was a picture of the final judgment, which shall destroy this present creation (2 Pet. 3:1–13). The rainbow was the symbol of God's covenant with the creation (Gen. 9:16). The earthly pointed to heavenly and spiritual realities in hundreds of ways.

So also Christ could take his names from objects in the creation. He is the Lion of Judah's tribe (Gen. 49:9), the Lily of the Valley and the Rose of Sharon (Song of Sol. 2:1), the Bright and Morning Star (Rev. 22:16), the Sun of Righteousness (Mal 4:2), and more. All these names would be impossible if it were not for the fact that each creature points to Christ himself in all the perfection of his glory.

And so the metaphors, similes, parables, symbols, and types of Scripture are made possible. God himself is compared to a rock higher than we are (Ps. 61:2) and to an eagle in the care of its young (Deut.

32:11). It is well put in the following quotation from M. S. Terry's *Biblical Hermeneutics*:

But it is not solely in the scarcity of words that we are to find the origin of figurative language. The natural operations of the human mind prompt men to trace analogies and make comparisons . . . So much of our knowledge is acquired through the senses, that all our abstract ideas and our spiritual language have a material basis . . .

And more than this. May we not safely affirm that the analogies traceable between the natural and spiritual worlds are parts of a divine harmony which it is the noblest mental exercise to discover and unfold? In his chapter, "On Teaching by Parables," Trench has the following profound observations: "It is not merely that these analogies assist to make the truth intelligible, or, if intelligible before, present it more vividly to the mind, which is all that some will allow them. Their power lies deeper than this, in the harmony unconsciously felt by all men, and by deeper minds continually recognized and plainly perceived, between the natural and spiritual worlds, so that analogies from the first are felt to be something more than illustrations, happily but yet arbitrarily chosen. They are arguments, and may be alleged as witnesses; the world of nature being throughout a witness for the world of spirit, proceeding from the same hand, growing out of the same root, and being constituted for that very end. All lovers of truth readily acknowledge these mysterious harmonies, and the force of arguments derived from them. To them the things on earth are copies of the things in heaven. They know that the earthly tabernacle is made after the pattern of things seen in the mount (Ex. 25:40; 1 Chron. 28:11, 12); and the question suggested by the angel in Milton is often forced upon their meditations:

What if earth
Be but the shadow of heaven and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?"¹

All Scripture's metaphors and similes, parables and symbols, are rooted in this spiritual analogy between things earthly and heavenly. It

is no wonder, then, that the lines we draw between the different kinds of analogies are not always the lines Scripture draws. We want very much to categorize things, and every aspect of Scripture must have its own pigeonhole where it neatly fits. But for the most part *we* make the pigeonholes, and Scripture will not always be forced into pigeonholes of our creation.

Metaphors tend to slide into parables, and similes often become types. The lines between the categories blur, for when all is said and done, all the earthly points us to the heavenly. Not only is this true of Scripture's own figures of speech; to the discerning child of God who has his eyes heavenward during the years of his pilgrimage, the chrysalis hiding the transformation of an ugly worm into a beautiful moth is a picture of the grave through which the believer passes and in which his body is transformed to the likeness of the body of Christ. All things in creation are, after all, done in parables.

Parables and the Kingdom

The comparisons which Jesus makes in his parables between the earthly and the heavenly vary in some minor ways. In some parables we are told that this word of Jesus is indeed a parable; in others we are not told this. In some parables this formula is used: "The kingdom of heaven is . . ."; in others this formula is not used. In some instances the main point of the comparison is taken from the creation itself, as in the parable of the four kinds of soil (Matt. 13:3–9); in others the comparison is between various institutions in society and heavenly realities, as in the parable of the king's wedding feast (Matt. 22:1–14). In still others the comparison concentrates on human activities to which there is a parallel in the spiritual activities of the kingdom of heaven. This is true, for example, in the parable of the unfaithful steward (Luke 16:1–12).

Whatever may be the differences, however, the comparisons are always between elements in this earthly creation and spiritual and heavenly realities of the kingdom of heaven. That is the kingdom established in the blood of the cross of which Christ is King under God. It is realized fully at the end of time when all the kingdoms of this world are destroyed.

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The parables, therefore, are God's way of showing us that we are spiritually stupid, almost completely incapable of understanding heavenly things, and in need of all the assistance God can give to help us in this important enterprise of learning about the kingdom of heaven. God uses illustrations from our world of senses in much the same way that a kindergarten teacher uses a picture book to make ideas clear to little children. Parables are a gift of God's picture book to us.

Although every parable does not specifically say that the Lord was making a comparison between earth and heaven, we may safely conclude that this is always the case. The doctrine of the kingdom of heaven was a central theme in the teaching of the Lord. He came, we are told, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 9:35). His life from the moment of his incarnation to his ascension into heaven was lived for the purpose of establishing the kingdom of heaven. His instruction was devoted to teaching his followers all about the kingdom of heaven. His miracles were signs of his work in realizing the kingdom of heaven. The Lord was intent on giving his people all the information concerning the kingdom which was possible for him to give; and he earnestly desired that they understand the kingdom as clearly as was possible.

This necessity of understanding the kingdom was all the more urgent in light of the fact that the disciples constantly were thinking about the kingdom in earthly terms. They envisioned the work of Christ as directed towards the restoration of the ancient kingdom of David and Solomon. In that kingdom they expected a high place, and they were frequently bickering about who was to be greatest in that kingdom.

But the kingdom that Christ came to establish was and is a *heavenly* kingdom. It is a kingdom the final realm of which will include the entire creation of God, both heaven and earth; but heaven and earth will be constituted as one creation when all that is earthly is transformed into the heavenly.

We must insist on this, for many in our day want only an earthly kingdom, whether that be a kingdom established in Palestine for the Jews or a kingdom worldwide in which Christianity shall prevail throughout the earth. Such earthly kingdoms are in direct conflict with

the Lord's own insistence that he is speaking of the kingdom of heaven; and those who teach such an earthly kingdom lead God's people astray.

The kingdom is established in the blood of the cross of Christ, for it is a kingdom of absolute righteousness from which all sin is banished. It is a kingdom over which Christ rules from his position of authority at God's right hand, but in the name of God and for God's glory. It is a kingdom the riches of which are synonymous with the blessings of salvation, and it is a kingdom the blessedness of which is covenant fellowship with God. The citizens of this kingdom are the elect of God, chosen from eternity in God's counsel, redeemed through the blood of the cross, and translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's eternal Son.

The entire history of the world is for the purpose of realizing that kingdom. In the midst of this present world, the citizens of the kingdom are called to walk. They are made citizens by grace. They are called to testify to the truth of this kingdom, the truth of righteousness in Christ alone, the truth of God's own glory, the truth of the victory of Christ over sin and death, and the truth that they shall inherit the kingdom.

That God's people may properly represent the kingdom, it is essential that they understand its true nature. Hence Christ gives to his people all the assistance they need to have a proper conception of the kingdom. It is as if Christ is saying to his people, "The understanding of this kingdom which you must represent is not so difficult if you will but look about you. The entire history of this earth must serve the establishment of this kingdom. And so you are going to find a lot of things in creation and in human events which give you a picture of the kingdom and help you to understand that which is essentially spiritual and which you are unable to see with your eyes." The kingdom of heaven is a farmer who sows his seed, a king who makes a wedding feast for his son, a dragnet used in fishing. . . . But the warning is not to identify these things with the kingdom itself; the kingdom is only like these things. The heavenly is reflected in the earthly.

And so there are certain rules which are to be followed in the interpretation of parables. They will help us to look at Jesus' parables properly and to understand them as he intended them to be understood.

Explaining a Parable in Its Context

Although not every parable was spoken in a particular context, many were. The parable of the friend at midnight was occasioned by a request of the disciples that the Lord teach them to pray. The trilogy of parables in Luke 15 was occasioned by the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus consorted with publicans and sinners, and even—horror of all horrors—ate with them. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus was told by the Lord to illustrate the awful end to which covetousness brings a man.

It is important that when there is such a specific occasion, this occasion be recognized and taken into account in the interpretation of the parable. A clear example of the application of this rule is found in the three parables recorded in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The occasion for these parables is stated in the first two verses: "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."

Three things about this significant introduction have a bearing on the reason why Jesus spoke these three parables. In the first place, those most despised by the leaders of the Jews came to Jesus to hear him. In other words, these lowly and despised people were the ones that found in Jesus a Savior who would bring peace to their troubled souls.

In the second place, the leaders of the people were deeply offended by the lowly and despised coming to Jesus, and they were highly critical of Jesus for allowing this. One can almost hear their sneering remarks to each other: "He receives sinners. And would you believe it? He even eats with them." This criticism arose out of their own smug self-righteousness. They were confident that they kept the law, even went beyond the precepts of the law to do more good than was required of them, and thus they despised publicans and sinners—and Jesus for consorting with them.

In the third place, it is quite obvious that this very criticism of the Lord became the justification for their rejection of him. So it was with Simon the Pharisee, who concluded that Jesus could not be a prophet because he allowed a public prostitute to touch him (Luke 7:39). These Pharisees were persuaded as well that Christ could not be the Messiah

he claimed to be, because sinners and publicans came to him, and he received them.

What effect does this occasion have on the interpretation of the parables?

For one thing, it determines the basic meaning of the entire trilogy. Jesus tells these parables to illustrate this: the fact that sinners come to him is precisely the proof that he is the Messiah. The proof of his claim to be the Messiah rests in Christ's fellowship with sinners because Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:13), for the Son of man is come to seek and to save those that are lost (Matt. 15:24; Luke 19:10).

Secondly, this occasion helps us to determine that not only are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son pictures of the elect sinner who knows that he is lost and needs Christ; but the ninety-nine sheep, the nine coins not lost, and the elder brother are all pictures of the Pharisees and scribes who needed no repentance.

Determining the Main Truth

Another rule of the interpretation of parables is the need to determine the one main truth that the parable sets forth. Each parable has just one main thought, one teaching, one point concerning the kingdom of heaven.

I know of only three exceptions to this rule. The first is in the parable of the lost son. The last part of the parable of the lost son, in which the cranky and critical elder brother lodges his complaints against his brother, is a separate development of the theme carried in all three parables recorded in Luke 15: the joy of the angels and saints at a sinner's repentance. The elder brother is a startling illustration of the grumpy and supercilious Pharisees who, by way of contrast, demonstrate what the joy of the church ought to be when a sinner is saved.

The second exception is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The first part deals with the punishment for the sin of covetousness; the latter part deals with the question of the sufficiency of the gospel. They are treated separately also in this book.

The third exception is the parable of the king's wedding feast. The parable speaks of the wedding itself and of the man without a wedding garment.

The main thought of a parable must be determined by a consideration of the reason why Jesus taught it. The occasion for a parable will guide us into its main teaching. The main thought can also be determined by a reading and rereading of the parable. This must be done in such a way that the words sink into one's soul. It is always helpful to try to picture in one's mind the circumstances described: to see in the mind's eye the Lord standing in the presence of a multitude at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and to hear him speak the words, "Behold a sower went forth to sow . . ."

This main thought of the parable must be so sharply defined in one's mind that he can state the thought in one proposition. I have tried to do this in the title to each parable at the beginning of its explanation. In this way the precise point of analogy can be determined, and the truth concerning the kingdom of heaven which Jesus is demonstrating can be understood.

Identifying the Important Elements

The parables are usually cast into the form of brief stories. It lies in the nature of a story, told to illustrate some point, that some elements in the story are incidental to the point being made, and are included only for the story's sake. The story itself would be incomplete without these elements.

Thus one faces the task of separating the pertinent and relevant elements in the story from the incidental elements. An example of this can be found in the parable of the pleading widow found in Luke 18:1–8. The fact that both the judge spoken of and the widow who sought redress from him lived in a city, and even lived in the same city, is irrelevant to the point Jesus is making. The same is true of the fact that the elder brother was working when his wayward brother returned (Luke 15:25). And to conclude from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that it is possible for people in heaven and in hell to converse with each other would be a sad and disturbing conclusion.

There are especially two guiding principles for determining what is important for the interpretation of a parable. The first is that the relevant element in the parable must contribute to the main idea which Je-

sus is illustrating. The lost sheep surely contributes to the main point that Jesus has come to seek and to save that which was lost. Who can deny it?

The second principle is that the element, generally speaking, ought to have a spiritual significance found elsewhere in Scripture. This is a particular application of the rule that Scripture interprets Scripture. God's people are called sheep in other places in Scripture; so they are also in Luke 15. The reference in Luke 16:1–12 to the unjust "steward" is explained by references elsewhere in Scripture to citizens of the kingdom of heaven as stewards in the house of their Lord. A candle is literally a picture of the Word of God in Psalm 119:105. It was a figure with which the Jews were familiar and one that could be effectively used by the Lord in the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15.

Sometimes there is a possibility of difference of opinion on this score. Commentators argue about whether the lamps and oil in the parable of the ten virgins have special meaning. But if an analogy can be found in other parts of Scripture (the Word of God is surely called a lamp in Psalm 119:105, and the Holy Spirit is likened to oil when officebearers were anointed with oil), one is safe in making the analogy also in the parable. But to go out on one's own and soar on the wings of one's imagination leads to bizarre and unfruitful explanations which have no other purpose than to extol the dexterity of someone's mental agility.

Having determined the relevant elements in the parable, one must demonstrate how these elements contribute to the main theme. This is crucial, for the main theme of a parable is developed along the lines of the various pertinent elements. If we pay careful attention to this rule, the parable will unfold in rich ideas.

Developing the Concepts

The final task, perhaps the most difficult, is to develop the main idea in the parable. This development will be, of course, in keeping with the rule that Scripture interprets Scripture. When one who studies the parables seeks to determine the implications of Jesus' description of his people as lost sheep, he must seek from Scripture such passages as Isaiah 53:6 and 1 Peter 2:25 to learn what it means that Scripture refers

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to God's people as sheep. One question that needs answering is, Why are sheep an apt and fitting description of God's people? Scripture itself will provide the answers.

To develop the concepts is important in every parable. For example, why is Jesus called the Shepherd of his sheep in Luke 15 and many other parts of Scripture? What does this mean? What is important about this? What does Psalm 23 say about it?

There is more. One must answer the question, How does Jesus, the Shepherd of his sheep, actually seek and save them? What work of our Lord is being described when the shepherd in the parable goes out to look for the one sheep which has wandered away? Only by answering these questions will the parable demonstrate to us important truths concerning the kingdom of heaven as Christ came to establish it.

Following these rules, being willing to spend time studying the parables, letting the words of Jesus speak to our own souls—these things will show us the marvelous truths set forth, and they will reveal to us “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”