

Interpreting Parables

Lesson Outline¹

Overview

1. Parables are expanded analogies. They are “comparisons or contrasts *used to explain or convince*. Parables by their very nature seek to make a rhetorical point.”²
2. “The parables of Jesus presuppose the kingdom they seek to disclose. Imagine having only the stories of Jesus and no sense of their referent.”³ The parable of the prodigal son moves us because we know that it illustrates God’s mercy and reception of sinful people and contrasts that reception with a self-righteous attitude toward those who they believe are beneath them (e.g. sinners).⁴
3. 50-100 parables in the Gospels depending on whether you count the same parable across Gospels multiple times or count it as one.
4. About 1/3 of Jesus’ teachings is in parables.

Purpose

1. To illustrate truths
 - Luke 10:25 – Good Samaritan is an answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” That is an invalid question because it implies that some are neighbors, and some are not. Jesus corrects him with a parable showing that we should treat everyone as our neighbor.
2. To conceal truths from those who are hostile.
 - Mark 4:10-12 – To Jesus’ followers, truth has been given. To everyone else, it’s a parable to them. Their already-hard hearts are hardened.
3. To disarm listeners
 - 2 Sam. 12 – Nathan tells a story of a farmer and a lamb in response to David sleeping with Bathsheba.
4. Jesus’ intimate followers receive interpretations and further insights into parables
 - Mark 4:10-12 – followers received secrets into Kingdom.

History of Interpretation

1. Allegorical Interpretation
 - Allegory: Where 1:1 correspondence for each thing (e.g. In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, every character, place, and thing has a symbolic representation)
 - Dominant interpretation throughout church history, but it is extremely misguided.

¹ Much of the following outline is directly dependent on the teaching that I received from Robert Plummer during his hermeneutics class at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Not all quoted material appears in quotations. See also Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 265–77.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 2.

³ Snodgrass, 2.

⁴ Snodgrass, 2.

Allegorical interpretations of the parable of the good Samaritan

Clement of Alexandria

- Good Samaritan = Neighbor = Christ
- Thieves = Rulers of Darkness
- Wounds = Fears, Lusts, Passions, Pains, Deceits
- Wine = Blood of David's Vine
- Oil = Compassion of the Father
- Binding of Wounds = Love, Faith, and Hope

Origen

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem from which he is going = Paradise
- Jericho = this world
- Robbers = hostile influences and enemies such as mentioned in John 10:8
- Wounds = disobedience or sins
- Priests = Law
- Levite = Prophets
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Beast = Body of Christ
- Inn = Church
- Two Denarii = Knowledge of the Father and Son
- Innkeeper = Angels in charge of the church
- Return of the Good Samaritan = Second Coming of Christ

Augustine

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem from which he was going = City of heavenly peace
- Jericho = the moon which signifies our mortality
- Robbers = Devil and his angels
- Stripping him = Taking away his immortality
- Beating him = Persuading him to sin
- Leaving him half-dead = Due to sin he was half-dead spiritually, but half alive due to his knowledge of God
- Priest = Priesthood of Old Testament (Law)
- Levite = Ministry of the Old Testament (Prophets)
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Binding of wounds = Restraint of sin
- Oil = Comfort of good hope
- Wine = Exhortation to spirited work
- Beast = Body of Christ
- Inn = Church
- Two denarii = two commandments of love
- Innkeeper = Apostle Paul
- Return of the Good Samaritan = Christ's Resurrection

Luther

- The man going down to Jericho = Adam and all mankind
- Robbers = Devils who robbed and wounded us
- Priests = Fathers (Noah, Abraham) before Moses
- Levite = Priesthood of the Old Testament
- Good Samaritan = Lord Jesus Christ
- Oil/Wine = Whole gospel from beginning to end
- Oil = Grace
- Wine = Cross the Christian is called to bear
- Beast = Christ the Lord
- Inn = Christianity in the World (Church)
- Innkeeper = Preacher of the Word of God

Archbishop Trench

- Man going down to Jericho = Adam
- Jerusalem = Heavenly city
- Jericho = Profane city, a city under a curse
- Robbers = Devil and his angels
- Stripping him = Stripping him of his original robe of righteousness
- Leaving him half-dead = Mortal, but having a divine spark
- Priest and the Levite = Inability of the Law to Save
- Good Samaritan = Christ
- Binding of Wounds = Sacraments which heal the soul
- Oil = Anointing of the Holy Spirit
- Wine = Blood of Christ's passion
- Walking along the beast = Christ's became poor on our behalf
- Inn = Church
- Two denarii = All gifts and graces, sacraments, powers of healing or remission of sins
- Whatever more you spend = Reward for righteous service

2. Adolf Jülicher and the end of Allegorical Interpretation

- 1888 wrote 2-volume work "The Parable Talks of Jesus" where he rejects concept of allegorical interpretation of Parable
- Weakness was that he made some liberal interpretations like Matt. 25 parables of servants with 3 talents. He says the meaning is that reward is only earned by performance. He doesn't realize that this is part of Jesus' eschatological discourse and is talking about how we'll be accountable on judgment day for what we've been given
- Appreciate that he rejects allegorical interpretation, but he also doesn't allow for the allegorical stock imagery or the few times that Jesus provided allegorical parables such as in Mark 4. He would say that the early church inserted this and that Jesus spoke in pure parables.

3. Dodd and Jeremias – Noting that parables must be interpreted in their first-century life setting

- Said that we need to understand parables as people in 1st-century Palestine would

4. Redaction criticism – How is the parable to be understood in the context of the individual Gospels?

- e.g. Matt 25 part of Jesus' eschatological discourse
- Luke 10:25, Luke writes that Jesus was responding to the question of "Who is my neighbor?" That helps us interpret the parable
- Redaction (editing) criticism (careful study) -- it's a careful study of the editing of the parables.
 - How have Gospel writers edited and grouped this material, introduced it, concluded it to help us understand and interpret these individual parables?
 - Redaction criticism can be heavily speculative. Too much focus on the editing and grouping of the material—especially when it is speculative—can distract and/or lead the reader to miss the meaning of the text.

4 periods

1. Jesus-500 – allegorical exegesis/interpretation dominated
2. 500-1500 – allegorical exegesis continues to dominate and is even furthered (literal, moral, spiritual, and now heavenly meaning)
3. Reformation-modern period – first interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable that does not say the Samaritan was Christ was by John Calvin. Luther also criticized allegorical interpretation (even though he didn't follow this all the time). Reformation was successful in breaking a long tradition of allegorizing the entire Bible. Yet, post reformation, allegory still continued with Jesus' parables
4. 1888-now – allegorical exegesis is almost universally recognized as not being a valid way to interpret parables.

How to detect the presence of allegory:

1. Would *Jesus' audience* have attributed meaning to these details?
 - a. Would imagery be obvious enough to those people (e.g. people today seeing imagery of elephant and donkey talking).
 - b. E.g. Mark 12:1-12 – Man building a tower, winepress, etc. Then read Isaiah 5:1-16. Realize that Jesus' audience knew their OT. Isaiah's text is nearly identical to Mark. God interprets the vineyard in Isaiah as being the house of Israel. Original audience would have heard it this way, and they would have understood that they have been unfaithful stewards.
2. Would the *Evangelist's audience* have attributed meaning to these details?

Suggestions for Interpreting Parables

1. Parables generally teach **one** main point.
 - Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should be content with seeking to understand the *one main point* of the parable. One should not

seek allegorical significance in the details of a parable unless *it is absolutely necessary* (e.g. if Jesus provides level of allegorical explanation, or if the stock imagery is so overwhelmingly obvious that we're drawn to it).

- Craig Blomberg suggests three possible themes of parables:
 1. graciousness of God
 2. demands of discipleship and
 3. danger of disobedience.
- Rob Plummer says that parables may have 1, 2, or all 3 themes.

Stock Imagery in Jesus' Parables⁵

Stock Image	Significance	Example
Father	God	Luke 15:11-32
Master	God	Mark 12:1-11
Judge	God	Luke 18:1-8
Shepherd	God	Matt. 18:12-14
King	God	Matt. 18:23-35
Son	Israel, a follower of God	Luke 15:11-32
Vineyard	Israel	Matt. 21:33-41
Vine	Israel or God's people	John 15:5
Fig Tree	Israel	Mark 11:13
Sheep	God's people	Matt. 25:31-46
Servant	Follower of God	Matt. 25:14-30
Enemy	The devil	Matt. 13:24-30
Harvest	Judgment	Matt. 13:24-30
Wedding Feast	Messianic banquet, the coming age	Matt. 25:1-13

2. Jesus did not teach his parables to 21st-century Christians but to 1st-century Jews. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to understand the situation-in-life in which the parable was uttered.
3. The Evangelists were interested in interpreting the parables for their readers. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to understand the situation-in-life of the Evangelist and his unique understanding of the parable.
 - E.g., In the prodigal son, Luke introduces the parable with information about people muttering about Jesus, and he includes it with other parables. Luke is explaining the parable to us.
4. The parables as uttered by Jesus and recorded by the Evangelists are the Word of God. Therefore, when investigating the parables, one should seek to ascertain what God is saying today through this parable.

⁵ This table is from Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 275.

5. Suggested steps:

- Seek the main point of the parables.
- Seek to understand what Jesus meant.
- Seek to understand what the Evangelist meant.
- Seek to understand what God is teaching us by the parable today.

Rules for arriving at the main point of the parable:

- Who are the two main characters of the parable?
- What occurs in direct discourse/dialogue?
- Who/what gets the most space/press?
- What comes at the end? (The rule of end stress)

E.g. Parable of the treasure in field is not about real estate ethics. It's saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is worth everything.

E.g. Parable of the ten virgins and lamps is not a lesson about not sharing with someone in need. The point is to be ready at all times for when the Lord comes. Being prepared is living in faithful obedience to him.

E.g. Luke 16:1 – Parable of shrewd steward does not teach us to be dishonest in business. This is a striking end to the story is to make a major point: Do we see judgment coming, and are we prepared for it? This earthly man saw earthly judgment coming, and he prepared for it. Are we preparing for final judgment?

Practice Question #1:

In Matthew, chapter 13, we read:

⁴⁴ The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Give some guidelines or suggestions for interpreting this parable accurately. Tie your discussion directly to the parable above.

Answer:

To understand the parable above, we should interpret it under the following guidelines along with examining the authorial/editorial comment, the ending of the parable, and the parable's context.

1. Seek to understand the parable's main point. Parables generally have just one meaning.
 - a. The point of the parable is to show that the kingdom of heaven is infinitely more valuable and precious than anything we can conceive in this world. We understand this by examining the ending, "... then in his joy went and sold all

he had and bought that field." That language reveals that we should joyfully give up all worldly possessions and pleasures for the sake of the entering and eternally dwelling in the kingdom of heaven.

2. Seek to understand what Jesus is teaching with the parable.
 - a. Jesus uses this parable to explain the abstract concept of the kingdom of heaven in concrete terms that his disciples can understand. When he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus gives us a tremendous clue into what he is teaching. This authorial comment straightforwardly signals that Jesus is about to describe the kingdom of heaven. Jesus uses a simile to describe the Kingdom as a "treasure," which provides an image that Jesus' audience would easily understand. Jesus then uses the language in the 2nd sentence to shock his disciples with a memorable teaching. He says that the "treasure" of the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that it is not only worth selling all earthly possessions for, but that they should also take joy in doing so.
3. Seek to understand what the Evangelist is teaching with the parable.
 - a. The Evangelist places this parable in the context of other parables that teach about the kingdom of heaven. Doing so provides us with multiple examples of how the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that we should joyfully surrender anything on earth that prevents us from attaining it. Matthew's repetition of this theme via multiple parables reinforces the meaning he is seeking to convey in the text.
4. Seek to understand what God is teaching us with parable today.
 - a. God's teaching through the parable rings just as true today as it did to the 1st-century Jews. Many of us have far more possessions than Jesus' disciples did. Many modern cultures are also obsessed with the notion that materialism and wealth bring happiness. The second sentence in the parable, however, refutes this idea. We learn that the kingdom of heaven is more valuable than all earthly pleasures not only from a material perspective, but also from an emotional standpoint. The description of the man selling his possessions in "his joy" demonstrates that the kingdom of heaven and eternity with God will bring true happiness that infinitely exceeds our worldly conception of joy.

Practice Question #2:

Read and interpret Luke 15:11-32 (hint: this is a rare example of a parable having more than one main point). Discuss the significance (i.e. how readers should respond) of this parable. Follow the four steps listed in question #1 to help you interpret the parable.

Example of how to teach others to interpret parables:

In Matthew, chapter 13, we read:

³¹ [Jesus] told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

Guidelines or suggestions for interpreting this parable accurately:

To interpret parables, we must remember that they generally have only one meaning. To arrive at that meaning, we should seek to understand what Jesus meant, what the evangelist meant, and what God is teaching us today through this parable.

We should also try to understand the meaning of this parable by completing this statement, “I, Matthew, have included this parable in order to ...” Lastly, we should examine the context, ending of the parable, authorial comments or summaries, specific meaning of words, figurative language, thematic statements, the amount of “press” dedicated to a topic, and how authoritative the speaker is.

In this passage, since Jesus is the speaker, we know that the parable is authoritative. From verse 31, we learn that the passage is about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus then uses figurative language (a simile as evidenced by the word “like”) to describe the kingdom of heaven. Jesus does not mean that the kingdom is literally a seed or plant. Jesus uses the figurative language to teach how the kingdom of heaven will grow (v. 32).

To further understand the parable’s meaning, we must examine its context. If we look at the passages immediately before and after these verses, we will be able to determine Jesus’ audience (who is “them” in verse 31?). We should also be able to determine why Matthew included this parable and why he placed it in this specific spot in his Gospel. The immediate context will help us determine why Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven here (is he responding to a question, is he correcting someone, etc.?) and what he has said elsewhere about the subject.

These two verses do not contain comments or summaries from Matthew, nor do they include thematic statements. These elements may be present in the verses before/after vv. 31-32, however. If these statements are present in the context, they will also help the reader accurately interpret the meaning of the parable.

References

Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*. 40 Questions Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010.

Snodgrass, Klyne. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Second edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.