



Profiting From the Parables

Introduction (1)

Read: Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

The parables of Christ are among the most familiar and best loved parts of Holy Scripture. Jesus used these word pictures to illustrate parts of His teaching. They come in all shapes and sizes: short ones, long ones, stand-alone parables, and series of parables. There are comforting parables and challenging parables. There are parables that seem easy to understand and there are parables that seem difficult to understand. All of them are attractive.

Why Are The Parables So Attractive?

There are various reasons why the parables are so attractive to many readers. For one thing, many of them are brief and simple. They use colourful language and examples from daily life. There is the woman who kneads leaven into dough. There is the merchant who sells all his possessions for a pearl of great price. There is the invitation to the wedding. There is the woman sweeping her house, looking for the lost coin. There is the man who builds on the sand. There is the unforgiving debtor. All these scenarios engage the mind and imagination, and we can easily relate to these word pictures.

Another reason the parables are attractive is that they include surprises that impact our minds and emotions. There is the rich fool, who is planning for bigger barns one moment and dead the next. There is the publican who goes to his home justified rather than the self-righteous Pharisee. There is the prodigal son who is welcomed back, while the elder son stands outside of the feast. These surprises help make the stories memorable.

What Are Some Common Threads In The Parables?

The parables are God-centred

Above all else, the parables are centred on God. Many of them touch on the kingdom of heaven, and bring the King of the kingdom, namely God, into view. Many of the parables involve a father, a king, a householder or some other “master,” who helps draw our attention to God as the Lord of all things.

In addition, the purpose of the parables as a whole exalts the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. When Jesus explained why He spoke in parables, He made clear that His parables unveil truth to true disciples, while they hide truth from unbelievers (Matt. 11:25-26). To some, God gives the ability to understand His teaching, whereas to others He hides His truth. In this way as well, then, the parables centre on God.

The parables underscore man’s responsibility

That the parables exalt the sovereignty of God does not mean that they exclude an emphasis on our responsibility. Many of them deal with our responsibility to our Maker and Master. How many don’t involve stewards or tenants? Like them, we have a responsibility to our Master for which we must give account. A number of parables press the duty of watching, because we don’t know the hour of Christ’s return (see e.g., Matt. 24:45-51). Others point to the need to be wise like the builder on the rock (Matt. 7:24), or the five wise virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). Think also of the parable that exposes the excuses that people make for not coming to the great supper (Luke 14:18).

In addition, Christ encourages those who hear the parables to pore over them. We need to be like a householder who brings out of his treasury, things new and old (Matt. 13:51). We have a responsibility busily to mine the parables. This is our responsibility.

Parables highlight the graciousness of the Gospel

Frequently, parables use the picture of a banquet or supper (e.g., Luke 14:16; Matt. 22:2; Luke 15:24). The festiveness of such occasions highlights the theme of grace that runs through many of the parables. In the parable of the great supper, the host invites people freely to come to the supper (Luke 14:16-24). When the first group of invitees does not come, he instructs his servant to invite the poor and disabled. When his house is still not filled, a third invitation goes out to those in the highways and by ways. This same message of grace resounds in the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15).

The theme of grace is illustrated in other parables as well. The publican is justified freely, without the deeds of the law (Luke 18:14). The parable of the barren fig tree is another notable example (Luke 13:6-9). When the fig tree is barren after a prolonged period of labour, one might conclude that further labour is in vain. However, like the husbandman of the parable, God bears long with sinners, showing them patience and longsuffering (Luke 13:6-9).

What Is The Main Purpose Of The Parables?

Often people think of the parables as simple examples or illustrations that help make Jesus' teaching more understandable. The truth of the matter is, however, that the parables both reveal and conceal. They help understanding, but also hide understanding, depending on who you are, and how you stand with respect to the kingdom of God. When His disciples asked Him why He taught in parables, Christ quoted Isaiah 6:9-10, which reads: *"Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed"* (see e.g., Matt. 13:10-17). Christ had not always taught in parables. But when people, especially the leaders, began to reject Him and His teaching, He turned to parables. What Christ is making clear is that the parables are more than just illustrations that make things easier to understand. They hide the truth as much as they reveal it. They reveal it to disciples, but hide it to unbelievers.

How does this work practically? Let's take the parable of the Sower as an example. Here we hear about a Sower whose seed falls on four types of ground. Only one of them ends up bringing forth lasting fruit. How does this parable hide the truth? Well, unbelievers hear this parable and don't understand how it relates to them. Either they fail to get the point at all, or they fail to see themselves in the parable. Perhaps they don't see how their hearts are pictured in the wayside, the stony ground, or the thorny ground. And even if they would, they either don't agree with this portrayal, or they are ignorant of what to do with this truth. They certainly don't take away real advantage from this parable.

In the meantime, the true disciple recognizes that this parable gives a true picture of the natural heart, as well as tendencies in his or her own heart, even after grace. For a believer, this parable really makes things concrete. The problem becomes real and alive. Especially as he examines his heart and life by the teaching of this parable, he realizes the importance of *"taking heed how he hears"* (Luke 8:18). By the Spirit's illuminating power, he does so more and more. He also receives encouragement that the work which the Lord has begun will not fail. Instead, God's Word will cause an abundant harvest in due time.

This is how the parables both reveal and conceal. No matter what parable we look at, we need to keep this purpose in mind. Whoever we are, and wherever we are at, we need to be concerned that the meaning and force of the parable is not lost on us. Instead, we should desire that the parable do its positive work in us.

Questions

1. If you had to choose a favourite parable, which would it be?
2. Jesus often talked about the kingdom of heaven in His parables. Define the Kingdom of heaven. Are we used to talking about the kingdom as much as Christ did?
3. Many people think of the parables almost as sermon illustrations, which simplify a spiritual point for hearers. According to Matthew 13:10-13, is this accurate?
4. A simple believer will understand a parable like an unbelieving scholar never will. Do you agree? How would that work with, for example, the parable of the two builders (Matt. 7:24-27)?
5. Nathan told David a parable in order to convict him of sin (2 Sam 12:1-6). Give an example of how Christ's parables also aimed to convict.

Introduction (2)

"How readest thou?" This is the question Christ asked the lawyer who came to Him (Luke 10:26). When the New Testament mentions lawyers, it is referring to men who were experts in the laws of Moses. We would call them biblical scholars. They had studied the biblical laws for years, if not most of their lives. They were used to these kinds of questions: "What does the law say;" "What does this mean;" "How do you interpret that?"

It is good to ask ourselves whether we are interpreting the word of God rightly. There is such a thing as "wresting" the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16) and "corrupting" the Word of God (2 Cor. 2:17). Sadly, this has happened a lot with the parables of Christ. There have been many wrong and even strange interpretations. Because the imagery of the parables is so rich, many have stretched the meaning of the parables, and despite their learning, biblical scholars have been no less guilty of this.

Reading Wrongly

I once heard of the following interpretation of the parable of the leaven (Matt. 13:33). The parable tells of a woman who took leaven and mixed it into a large amount of dough until the leaven had spread all throughout the dough and leavened it. The interpretation was this: "The woman is a false prophet, or the devil himself. He takes the leaven of error or unrighteousness and brings it into the church, until the whole church is infected with and puffed up by error."

Clearly, this is a wrong interpretation. In the context, our Lord is teaching about the mystery of the kingdom. God's kingdom grows in ways that are mysterious and unexpected. Just as leaven makes bread expand in a way that is hidden to our natural vision, so too the kingdom of heaven grows in a way that can't be traced. It defies all our expectations.

Some in the Early Church and Middle Ages were responsible for skewed interpretations that have persisted till today. Augustine believed that the man who built on the rock was the person who builds his life on the church through his baptism. He also believed that the good Samaritan was Jesus. Jesus takes up Adam, the wounded man, and puts him into the care of the innkeeper, which was Paul, or the catholic church. Just as the good Samaritan entrusted two pennies to the innkeeper, so Christ, according to Augustine, gave the church the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Calvin and others repudiated these far-fetched interpretations.

It was not only the ancient church that mishandled the parables, however. Modern theologians have also twisted them. For example, Karl Barth, a modern theologian, believed that the prodigal son was a picture of Christ. In His incarnation, Christ left the Father's house and went into the far country or this world. Of course, this is bizarre and leads to a host of unorthodox ideas. How could

it be said that Christ “wasted his substance with riotous living?” How could Christ ever have said: “I have sinned against heaven and before thee”? And so we could go on.

I once read another case of a bizarre interpretation, this time of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Someone argued that this parable supposedly shows the evils of capitalism. The creditor was cruel and unjust and exploited the poor man who hid his talent, and helped the rich get only richer. A child can understand that this interpretation goes entirely against the grain of the message Christ intended to convey.

Reading Restrictedly

To avoid mishandling the parables, some people have insisted we look for only one point per parable and no more. This was a common view for the last one hundred years, especially among scholars. How does this work practically? We’re told that we should leave all the details to the side and decide on the one lesson that comes forth from the whole. For example, some say that the parable of the Sower does not really teach about all sort of different responses to the Word of God. Instead, the only valid point is that the Word of God will eventually be fruitful, no matter what it might look like at first.

Though it is a good exercise to begin looking for the main point of a parable, most parables don’t fit this rigid method. Sometimes Christ Himself explains a parable with a number of points. After He spoke the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-9), Christ gave at least four lessons coming out of that parable (see Luke 16:10-13). Christ gave four lessons from the parable of the Sower, one for each soil (Matt. 13:19-23).

Likewise, the parable of the prodigal son clearly makes at least two major points, one for each of the sons. If there were only one lesson in that parable, why would there be any attention given to the elder son? Or if the lesson lies with the elder son, why does the parable give so much attention to the repentance of the younger son?

Reading Rightly

There is one thing that we can take away from this common solution. It is that we need to resist the temptation to go where the parable itself does not take us. But that also means that we should go, as much as we can, to all the places where the parable does take us. Practically, this means that if a parable makes three points, we should find those three points. If it makes only a single point, we should find that one point.

How can you do that? How do you make sure you neither under-read or over-read the parables?

First of all, pay attention to the context. This means that you look at how the parable relates to what precedes and follows it. The three parables of Luke 15 come on the heels of the murmuring of the Pharisees that Jesus sits and eats with sinners (Luke 15:2). The Parable of the good Samaritan is the answer to the question of the lawyer: “*Who is my neighbor?*” (Luke 10:10) the Parable of the great supper follows the statement of a bystander: “*Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*” (Luke 14:15). In each of these cases, the context helps immensely in getting at the meaning of the parables.

Secondly, pay attention to the ending. Often, Christ will give a key to the interpretation of the parable in the conclusion of the parable. He concludes the parable of the Pharisee and publican with these words: “*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*” (Luke 18:14). Likewise, Christ ends the parable of the Ten Virgins with these telling words: “*Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh*” (Matt. 25:13). The ending gives us firm guidance where to seek the meaning of the parable.

Thirdly, pay attention to the characters. Often, each character or group of characters represents a point or a message. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) has a point for each

of the three main characters: the rich man, Lazarus, and the five brothers. From the rich man we learn that a good life in this world is no indication of a good life in the hereafter. From Lazarus we learn the corresponding lessons: though a believer might live in poverty here, he will be comforted in the next life. Finally, the point that comes to us regarding the rich man's brothers is that the Scriptures are sufficient unto salvation. Of course, more could be said about these points, but these are the three basic lines emerging from this parable.

Finally, be sober and Scriptural. A good caution always when handling Scripture is to rein in our imagination, and be sure we do not go against the clear teaching of Scripture elsewhere. We should watch against being overly inventive and subtle.

Questions

1. Why should we be concerned that we interpret Scripture rightly? How would we answer someone who said: *"Scripture is like a deep well. As long as you don't say something heretical, it doesn't really matter what you draw out of a passage."*
2. What's attractive about the common solution to the problem of interpreting the parables? Why is it not necessarily the best solutions?
3. Read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). What might be a wrong interpretation of one or other details in the parable? Do you agree that there are three main points to this parable?
4. Read Matthew 13:24-30. How many main points or lessons does this parable contain? Check your answer in Matthew 13:37-43.

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