PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PARABLES

I. Introduction to Parables

One-third of the teaching of Jesus in the synoptic gospels comes in the form of a parable. “Since parables are concrete stories based on life situations, they seem easier to handle than abstract concepts. Yet, from the viewpoint of the New Testament scholar, the parables present unique difficulties in interpretation” (R.C. Sproul). The purpose of this section is to prepare the interpreter to overcome these obstacles by setting forth specific principles for interpreting parables.

A. The Definition of a Parable (cf pp 27-32 of my dissertation for more)

The word “parable” comes from the Greek preposition para (“beside”) and the Greek verb ballo (“to throw” or “to cast”), so that the root word literally means “to cast beside.” In the telling of a parable, truth from the everyday physical realm is cast alongside truth in the spiritual realm so that the hearer/reader can learn this spiritual truth by analogy to the physical truth he already understands. In this way, a parable is a true-to-life narrative that is designed to illustrate spiritual truth.

PUT SIMPLY: An earthly story with ________________ meaning
(yet, this is too simplistic because it entails so much more!)

A physical story with ________________ meaning

It’s OT counterpart was mashal, which means “similitude” or rendered “discourse” or “oracle” in places like Psalm 78:2.
**Word of warning:** some mention there being “2 levels of meaning” (Duval/Hayes, 259). VERY easy to stray in allegorizing, spiritualizing, making many pts of just “story details” that don’t have a spiritual counterpart; eg: Augustine & Origen

Stanley Ellisen crafted one of the best definitions: “A figurative history, true to life, usually relative to the kingdom” (*Hermeneutics of the Parables*, 62).

### B. The Purpose of Parables

In Matthew 13:10-17, Jesus defined two very different purposes for the telling of parables, depending on the spiritual condition of the hearer.

1. **To _______________ Truth from Those Who Reject**

2. **To _______________ Truth to Those Who Believe**
   
   - **Furthermore:** To call forth a specific _______________

### B. Sine qua non of Parables:

- **Narrative**-in that it contains a sequence of actions
- **True to life**-in that it is within the realm of probability. It may/may not have happened to some specific person in view. For instance, Jesus drew his parabolic illustrations from nature (Mk 4:1ff), familiar customs like leavening bread (Matt 13:33) or marriage (Matt 25:1-13), noted events in history (Lk 19:14), and situations that occasionally arise in real life (Lk 15:11-32; 16:1-9; 18:2-8).
- **Designed**-adapted by the speaker (Christ) with a specific point in view. It is artificial (often a story made up for teaching purposes) rather than historical.
- **Conveying**-in that it represents transference of knowledge from what is true in one sphere to what is likewise true in another sphere. The teller uses the known to teach the unknown.
- **Kingdom**-in that its purpose relates in some way to the development of the kingdom concept which forms the main thrust of the Gospel accounts.

### II. Guidelines for Interpreting Parables

“Parables have been the source of untold blessing in enlightening God’s people concerning spiritual truth. At the same time, parables have been the source of untold confusion in both doctrine and practice in the church” (McQuilkin). For this reason, it is essential for the interpreter to have a clear idea of how to discern the divinely intended meaning of parables.

A. **Understand the historical and cultural _______________ of the parable.**
Perhaps more than any other genre in the Bible, understanding the historical and cultural background of parables is absolutely essential. “Remember that Jesus used illustrations from everyday life that people back then would have immediately understood. If we do not understand their historical background, then we cannot fully grasp the meanings of the parables” (Vlach). “A fishing net, a vineyard, a wedding banquet, oil lamps, talents of money, a fig tree still barren after three years, the value of a single coin to a housewife, the people’s despicable attitude toward tax collectors, the meaning of pounds or minas—understanding these elements sheds light on the significance of the parables and helps make the right transition to the spiritual truth” (Zuck).

B. Determine the specific question/problem/need/situation which ____________ the telling of the parable.

Each of the parables of Jesus was told in a context and was specifically aimed at addressing a particular need, question, problem, or situation. Understanding exactly why Jesus told a given parable when He did will enable the interpreter to discern the main point that Jesus was communicating. As the interpreter seeks to determine the purpose of a given parable, it may be helpful to realize that some parables were told in response to a specific question, a specific request, a specific complaint, or a specific misconception. The purpose of others, however, will need to be gleaned inductively from the larger literary context and/or from the content of the parable itself.

- **Parables In Response to Specific Questions**
  - Matthew 9:14:
  - Luke 10:25, 29:

- **Parables In Response to Specific Requests**
  - Luke 11:1:
  - Luke 12:13:

- **Parables In Response to Specific Complaints**
  - Luke 7:39:
  - Luke 15:2:

- **Parables in Response to Specific Misconceptions**
  - Luke 18:9:
  - Luke 19:11:

C. Determine the ____________ meaning of the story in the parable.

A parable is a story that is told for the purpose of illustrating spiritual truth by way of analogy. “Two things, then, are being brought together in a parable—a true-to-life incident and the spiritual truth it is illustrating or illuminating. Therefore to understand the spiritual truth properly, it is essential first to comprehend fully the truth-to-life incident” (Zuck). In
other words, the starting point of the interpreter is simply to determine the earthly/physical meaning of the story in the parable.

D. **Determine the primary points of ______________________ in the parable.**

One of the most important steps in the process of determining the central point of the parable is to determine the specific points of correspondence. This involves taking the main characters/features of the parable and identifying the corresponding points of comparison in the spiritual realm. In other words, it involves answering basic questions like: “What exactly is being represented by such-and-such in the parable?” For example:

- **The Parable of the Two Debtors (Luke 7:40-42)**
  - The Moneylender = God
  - The Debtor Who Owed 500 Denarii = Prostitute
  - The Debtor Who Owed 50 Denarii = Simon

  - The Father = God
  - The Younger Son = The “Sinners” and Tax-gatherers
  - The Older Son = The Scribes and Pharisees

**HINTS FOR INTERPRETATION:**

- **o** Start by determining which parts of the parable are explained in the passage itself. For instance, the significance of the seed and the four soils of the parable in Matthew 13:3-9 is explained later in Matthew 13:18-23. Ignoring these divine interpretations of key aspects of the parable can lead the reader astray. For example, some interpreters have identified the field in the parable of Matthew 13:24-30 as referring to the church, but Jesus Himself identifies it later in Matthew 13:38 as a reference to the world.

- **o** When interpreting the “kingdom parables,” keep in mind that the words “the kingdom is like” are not simply to be taken with the first element in the parable (i.e., a mustard seed, a merchant, or treasure hidden in a field). As Fee and Stuart note, “The expression literally means, ‘It is like this with the kingdom of God…’ Thus the whole parable tells us something about the nature of the kingdom, not just one of the points of reference, or one of the details.”

E. **Recognize that not every __________ in the parable has special significance.**

In the early church, it was common for interpreters to look for the spiritual significance behind every detail of a given parable. This approach led Origen to see the five lamps of the wise virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 as a reference to the five natural senses, and it led Augustine to
identify at least 19 specific details in the parable of the Good Samaritan as having a corresponding referent in the spiritual realm (e.g., the robbers stripping the man coming down from Jericho signified Satan taking away the immortality of Adam).

To search for meaning in every detail, however, is to turn a parable into an allegory. Although the minor details of a parable provide color and interest to the story, they do not carry with them a corresponding spiritual reality that the interpreter must discern. As McQuilkin writes: “Having a central point of emphasis is the chief feature that distinguishes a parable from an allegory. In an allegory a number of significant parallels between the story and spiritual truth are intended. In the case of a parable, it is not legitimate to treat each detail as having spiritual application.”

This does not mean that the details and secondary elements of a parable are irrelevant, and it does not mean that parables never contain sub-points. But it does mean that the primary purpose of a parable is to teach one main point, and that the details in the parable serve to highlight that main idea in the telling of the story. For this reason, the interpreter must be able to distinguish between the main point of the parable and the supporting details.

Understanding the relationship between the two is critical. As Mike Canham notes, ascertaining the main point of the parable provides the interpreter with “a master key for the interpretation of each detail which serves it.” With this key in hand, the interpreter “is anchored within a certain defined area so that he is not so likely to wander off on his own tangents or blind alleys” (Canham). The details of a parable cannot be ignored, but as Robert Stein observes, “The greater danger for most interpreters is to see too much meaning in specific details rather than too little!”

“**Warning:** the parable could be classified as one of the MANY forms of figurative language utilized in the Bible. This is because it will use real truth in the realm of nature or human life to illustrate, teach, and give perspective to the truth being expressed therein. The similitude from nature, human relationships, and customs is used simply as a teaching technique. There is some variation in its usage, as it refers to an abbreviated simile (a comparison using *like* or *as*) or an extended story. It is different in form from an allegory, which is also used for illustrative purposes. But what separates it from an allegory is that it makes a *comparison* from nature, human objects, or human experiences to something not that it becomes such. In an allegory, the item becomes or acts like another (see John’s usage of Jesus as the Shepherd (Jn 10:1-16) and Vine (Jn 15:1-6).

**A CALL FOR BALANCE:**
F. Seek to determine the one _________ _________ of the parable.

The primary goal of the interpreter is to discern the main point that was communicated through the parable. Oftentimes this main idea is clear and obvious from a simple, straightforward reading of the parable. Other times, however, it can be more difficult to determine this overarching truth. In the process of seeking to discover the main point, the interpreter should pay close attention to certain key elements of the parable:

- **The Situation Addressed by the Parable**
  Virtually all parables have a clear historical occasion that gave rise to the telling of the story. If the interpreter can pinpoint the question/problem/ need/situation being addressed (see B above), this will lead him to the main point of the parable:

  - Matthew 9:14:
  - Luke 10:25, 29:
  - Luke 11:1:
  - Luke 12:13:
  - Luke 7:39:
  - Luke 15:2:
  - Luke 18:9:
  - Luke 19:11:

- **The Stated Purpose of the Parable**
  Sometimes the interpreter will find that the purpose of the parable is stated explicitly in the passage itself (Luke 18:1). Other times the purpose is stated implicitly and can be found by identifying an exhortation or principle that accompanies the telling of the parable.

  - Luke 18:1:
  - Matthew 18:10:
  - Matthew 22:14:
  - Matthew 24:44:
  - Matthew 25:13:
  - Mark 13:33, 37:
  - Luke 11:9-10:
The Final Element of the Parable

The emphasis of the parable can often be found at the very end, in the final element of the story. This is sometimes referred to as the principle of “end stress.” As Stein writes: “It is based on the fact that good storytelling builds up and focuses interest on the conclusion of the story. A good mystery holds the reader in suspense until the very end when everything is explained and becomes clear…. In a similar way a parable focuses its emphasis and point on the end of the story.” By paying close attention to this final element of the parable, the interpreter is often led to discern the main point of the story.

- The sending of the “only son” in Matthew 21:33-40
- The seed falling on the good soil in Matthew 13:3-9
- The final slave being judged harshly in Matthew 25:14-30
- The last of the three travelers being compassionate in Luke 10:30-36
- The last of those invited to the banquet actually coming in Matt 22:2-14

An Unexpected Twist in the Story

Like many good stories, the parables of Jesus often include an unexpected turn of events in the plot. They do so to make a point. As Henry Virkler explains, “Frequently the unexpected shock appears for the purpose of catching the listeners’ attention and forcing them to reconsider their perspective.” For this reason, identifying this unexpected turn of events often helps the interpreter determine the main point of the parable as a whole.

- The man who worked only one hour receives the same wages as those who worked all day (Matt 20:1-16).
- The father runs to meet the prodigal son and even gives him a banquet (Luke 15:11-32).
- A Samaritan expresses more kindness and compassion than religious leaders in Israel (Luke 10:25-37).
- The tax-gatherer goes home from the temple justified rather than the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14).
- Everyone invited to a banquet refuse the invitation (Matt 22:3), but the poor and crippled attend (Luke 14:15-24).
For Further Study:
“The Parables: Do You Get the Point?” in Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, 149-62.

For homework:
Interpret the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24 or the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8 according to the interpretive principles explained in this lesson.

Since Jesus’ favorite topic was the kingdom of God, read one or both of the articles above to greatly enhance your understanding of the Gospels.