

Preaching the Parables of Jesus

Don J. McMinn

“The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels”, states Dodd (p. 1). How important our study of the parables appears when we realize that more than one-third of the recorded teaching of Jesus was in parables (Percentage of parabolic teaching in the four Gospel sources is as follows: Mark: 16%; Q: 29%; M: 43%; L: 52%. Thus the average is 35%). Matthew wrote: “All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable he spake not unto them” (Mt. 13 : 34).

Straton in his book, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, wrote :

The memory of Jesus as one of the most original and challenging minds that ever lived is kept fresh by His parables. In all literature and art there is nothing that equals them. If you define literature as the dramatization of life, Jesus stands supreme among literary figures because of His parables; no one else remotely approaches Him. Others have at the most two or three parables that are striking, while Jesus has a score or more. His teaching about God, about man, about prayer, about the Kingdom is made vivid for all time through His parables” (p.11).

Although other writers of the New Testament use allegories and similitudes, it is remarkable that they do not use story-parables like Jesus. However, parables were a part of the rabbinic method of teaching and varied examples are found in the Talmud. There are some parables in the Old Testament and the most famous is that one told by the prophet Nathan to King David: A rich man who took a poor man's only lamb (II Sam. 12:1-4). Another example is the Parable of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Although other Rabbis in the time of Jesus used parables in their teaching to an extent, Christian interpreters are convinced that Jesus was master of the parable art and that his parables contain a creativity and lifelikeness quite beyond the rabbinic parallels.

I. WHY DID JESUS USE PARABLES?

Knowing that the parable was an excellent teaching tool and that Jesus was certainly the Master Teacher, such a question might seem foolish. But the question needs answering for two main reasons: one is that Matthew has the disciples asking Jesus why He speaks in parables (13:10), but the parallel passage in Mark 4:11ff., which is supposed to answer the question, is interpreted variously. The other reason is that in answering the question we can see several reasons why the parabolic method was an excellent and appropriate teaching tool for Jesus.

Hunter in his *Interpreting the Parables* seeks to answer the above question as follows:

The short answer is: to quicken understanding, by putting truth in a vivid and challenging and memorable way. (In the footnote he writes that Abraham Lincoln was fond of using parables, and Lincoln said: "God tells the truth in parables because they are easier for the common folk to understand and recollect). And therefore, if the notorious verses in Mark 4 :11 f. mean what, at first glance, they appear to mean—that Jesus deliberately used parables to hide God's truth from the multitudes and make them ripe for judgment—they cannot be words of Jesus. (But Hunter's conclusion is that they are genuine words of Jesus, but that they do not belong here.) (p. 13).

Let us look at Appendix I by Hunter, pp. 110-112, THE PROBLEM OF MARK 4 : 11-13.

Jesus' answer to the question of the disciples about why He spoke in parables poses something of a theological problem as well as a textual problem. In Matthew 13 : 13-14 we read:

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah...

Matthew then quotes Isaiah 6 : 9-10.

This prophecy refers to the spiritual deterioration of the people of Israel. They would hear God's Word but not understand it, and they would see God's power at work, but not perceive what He was doing. Their dull hearts would make them spiritually blind and deaf, and the result would be judgment.

(Wiersbe, *Windows on the Parables*, p. 10)

The account in Mark 4:11-12 is as follows:

And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.

Matthew uses the causal particle *hoti* whereas in Mark, *hina*, which usually introduces a purpose clause, is used. Does this mean that Jesus told parables so that those outside the group of disciples would be condemned?

The renowned Baptist Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, agrees with Gould who argues that Mark here probably "Preserves the original form of Jesus' saying." He goes on to say: "God ironically commands Isaiah to harden the hearts of the people. If the notion of purpose is preserved in the use of *hina* in Mark and Luke, there is probably some irony also in the sad words of Jesus... What is certain is that the use of parables on this occasion was a penalty for judicial blindness on those who will not see" (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol. 1, p. 286).

Wiersbe sees in Jesus' answer both aspects of "because of" and "in order to."

By using parables, our Lord was seeking to interest and awaken those whose spiritual senses were growing dull. The Jewish people in general, and their religious leaders in particular, were involved in a process that was deadening their spiritual perceptions... By telling stories with hidden meanings, He was arousing their interest and giving them opportunity to be saved.

But the other aspect of this prophecy is also true: the same message that awakens one will harden another. These parables both revealed and concealed. The careless and indifferent, those with no spiritual hunger for truth and salvation, would not understand His teaching. It is not that His Word would harden their hearts so much as their hearts were hardened against His Word (p.11).

Wiersbe also sees Mark 4:21-25 and Luke 8:16-18 as shedding light on why Jesus spoke in parables. "Jesus seems to be teaching here that He has hidden the truth in parables, not to conceal it, but to reveal it. The man who has faith will learn the truth and receive more while the man who lacks faith will lose even what he thinks he has" (p.12).

Robert H. Stein has a long section in his book, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, explaining various attempts at interpreting Mark 4:10-12 (See pp.28-33). He concluded that Jesus, at least at times, used the parables for "purposes of concealing as well as revealing" (p.33).

In the section, "Why Jesus Taught in Parables." Stein lists three reasons as follows:

One reason, according to Mark 4:10-12, was to conceal his teachings from those outside. From even a superficial reading of the Gospels, it is evident that Jesus needed at times to do this. Time and time again Jesus found in his audience those who were hostile to him. The Sadducees saw in him a threat to their sacerdotal system... Many of the Pharisees likewise saw in Jesus a threat to their own selfrighteousness (Luke 18:9-14) and their religious leadership... By his use of parables Jesus made it

more difficult for those who sought to find fault with him and accuse him of sedition.

Another reason why Jesus taught in parables... was to reveal and illustrate his message to both his followers and to "those outside."

A third and final reason... was to disarm his listeners. At times Jesus sought to penetrate the hostility and hardness of heart of his listeners by means of a parable(pp.33-35).

Jesus sought to reach Simon by the parable of the debtors(Lk.7:36-50).

William Barclay lists five great teaching advantages offered by the parables in his discussion on Matthew, chap. 13 (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, *The Daily Study Bible*, pp.54-56) as follows:

(1) The parable always *makes truth concrete*. Few people can understand abstract ideas; most people think in pictures. "In order to be understood, every great word must become flesh, every great idea must take form and shape in a person; and the first great quality of a parable is that it makes truth into a picture which all men can see and understand." In parables Jesus could state truth in crisp form so that it would be easily remembered and later "digested" or understood.

(2) The parables of Jesus make use of the basic teaching principle that in order to teach about things people do not understand, you must *begin from things which they do understand*. "The parable begins with material which every man understands because it is within his own experience, and from that it leads him on to things which he does not understand, and opens his eyes to things which he has failed to see." Bowie in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7, p. 169,

says much the same thing: "He taught in parables because parables conveyed ideas and feelings that every plain man could appropriate. He taught in parables because through them the truth would most vividly appear."

(3) The great teaching virtue of the parable is that it *compels interest and attracts attention*. People will not listen, and their attention cannot be retained, unless they are interested. Jesus knew, as does every speaker, the power of a good story. The simplest definition of a parable is in fact that it is "an earthly with a heavenly meaning."

(4) The parable "enables and compels a man *to discover truth for himself*. It does not do a man's thinking for him; it says, 'Here is a story. What is the truth in it? What does it mean *for you*? Think it out for yourself.'" In other words, the parables of Jesus stir men's minds and call for a decision; they stimulate inquiry. Unless we discover truth for ourselves, it remains a second-hand and external thing. By compelling a man to draw his own conclusions and to do his own thinking, at one and the same time the parable makes truth real to him and fixes it in his memory.

(5) While the parable *reveals* truth to him who desires truth; it *conceals* truth from him who does not wish to see the truth. It conceals truth from those who are either too lazy to think or too blinded by prejudice to see. H. I. Hester clarifies this point with the following statement: "With the increasing opposition of his enemies who sought occasion to misquote and misrepresent his sayings there were times when Jesus wanted to convey his meaning to his disciples

without his opponents being able to comprehend it" (*The Heart of the New Testament*, p. 147).

II. WHEN DID JESUS USE PARABLES?

It is obvious that Jesus used parables often in his teaching and that the situations were quite varied. But a common setting for many of his parables was the tension in which he found himself as he faced the unbelieving and critical scribes and Pharisees. For example, the parables in Luke 15 are in response to the complaining of the Pharisees and scribes that "This man receives sinners and eats with them." A certain lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus answered with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. On another occasion a man put Jesus on the spot and asked him to serve as a judge and get his brother to divide the inheritance with him. In response Jesus told the parable of the Rich Fool and warned of the sin of covetousness.

Along the line of declaring the parables to be weapons of warfare against his enemies, C. W. F. Smith states:

The parables were for the most part, struck off in the heat of debate ... They were designed to confront men with an issue to be decided. They are related to action rather than rationalization, to life rather than literature...they are valuable instruments in disputation...tactical weapons in his strategy (*Jesus of the Parables*, pp. 19-21).

Jones says that two marvelous feats were accomplished simul-

taneously by the answering parables. “They *exposed* the self-righteousness of opponents and *extolled* the kingdom of God. They put the activity of Jesus in a fresh light. A nice case in point is the parable of the Playng Children (Matt. 11 : 16–19; Luke 7 : 31–35)”. /The Baptizer had been faulted as sternly ascetic while Jesus was criticized for being a party-goer. “Both were scorned iconoclasts. The parable exposes the inconsistency of the two criticisms and the underlying presupposition and defends the joy of table fellowship with sinners, which anticipates the joys of the age to come” (p. 37). However, Jesus through such a parable was not intending merely to win a point, but to win over a person. In the words of Jan Lambrecht, “He wants to convince his opponents, not crush them; he wants to win them over, not merely put them down” (Quoted by Jones, p. 37).

The parables of Jesus will always remain the very center heart of the teachings of Christ. They summarize what Jesus thought and taught and lived. They tell us what the good life is, and what the real values of life are. They speak to man and bind principles upon him, in terms that he can understand. They are plain, practical lessons for all ages, even as they depict a religion that is designed for all men.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that the truth embodied in the parables made the religious leaders most uncomfortable and was a key factor in their decision to do away with him. Straton(p.23) states it well by saying:

Jesus was crucified because His foes understood well the intent of His parables. Light, mercy, and love were there, but also condemnation for

those who were so blind as not to recognize incarnate light, truth, and goodness. With vigor the parables assert that those who do not accept will be cast into outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth; the door is shut firmly against improvident bridesmaids, the vineyard owner slays the wicked tenants.

III. VALUES IN THE PARABLES

A study of the parables will reveal that Jesus is teaching lessons of supreme value through them. Many of them deal with the theme of his teaching, The Kingdom of God. Whatever their subject, they are filled with practical, ethical, and theological lessons and/a wonderful source for teaching and preaching the message of the Kingdom.

Neil Lightfoot appropriately writes in *Lessons from the Parables*:

A. Teaching about Man and Life

Probably the first impression we get concerning the source material for the parables is that it comes from the real life of man in the first century. The stories in the parables are not imaginary, but true to life. The people of the parables are real people, acting in character, and the scenes and situations are real happenings. "When Jesus used the similitude of The Burglar, no doubt the whole town was talking about a recent ease of housebreaking. Behind the story of The Ten Virgins lay the story of an actual wadding at which some guests, forgetting to make proper preparations, turned up late and found the door shut in their faces. H. B. Tristram has described a *kadi* (or judge) and a widow in Nisibis uncommonly like

the two people in Christ's story" (Cf. Hunter, p.16). And the examples of realism have just begun.

Straton eloquently expresses how Jesus' parables reveal life as Jesus saw it. Note his words as follows: (pp.11-12)

From the standpoint of sheer reality to life the parables of Jesus are unsurpassed. They furnish the most complete and accurate picture that we have of the everyday life of the average first-century man in a province of the Roman empire; a woman baking, a farmer sowing, a fisher casting his net and then sorting his haul, a son becoming completely surfeited with his home environment and going out to seek his fortune in the distant city, a shepherd trampling the hills of the Judæan wilderness until the one sheep is found, a widow pestering a magistrate until she gets a measure of justice, bridesmaids at a wedding, evil tenants stopping at nothing—not even murder—to get control of property, a king going on a journey to the capital of the empire, and so we could go on.

In another place Straton writes: "The parables of Jesus glow with life in all its kaleidoscopic vividness, life in the first century and life in all centuries" (p.26).

Concerning the realism of the parables, Hunter declares that one thing is clear. It is that "Jesus believed that human life with all its faults and frailties could furnish pointers and analogies of the Kingdom of God" (p.17).

B. Teaching about Jesus and His Mission.

Modern-day study of the parables of Jesus has emphasized more and more the eschatological emphasis in them and what they tea-

ch about Jesus and his mission. We are told that we must not ignore the Teller of the parables as we seek to understand their meaning. Jones suggest that a wide-spread concensus recognizes with Otto Kuss, "Who will understand Jesus must seek to understand his parables." They are veiled selftestimony. Jones comments further: (pp. 37-38)

A striking instance of "Christological penetration" appears in the parable of the Strong Man Bound(Mark 3:23-27) when the exorcism of demons caused critics to link Jesus with evil(v. 22). The counter claim is remarkable. There is "no gentle Jesus, meek and mild, with a pale Protestant face," no peaceful pastoral in response, but admission of a campaign to roll back the powers of evil and make way for the kingdom. Jesus claimed that a stronger One had bound the strong one in a great ministry of liberation(cf. Luke 11:20). The Parabolist depicts himself as Conqueror as he exposes the inconsistency of his critics.

The Teller often emerges as Prophet, vis-a-vis Israel(Luke 13:6-9), religious leadership(Mark 12:1-11), and the cult(Luke 10:25-37; 18:9-14). In a similar vein, he is Defender of the religious outcast, Awaker of faith and Proclaimer of the kingdom(Mark 4:1-34), and even Son(Mark 12:1-11) and coming Son of man (Matt. 25:31-46).

Lockyer in his volume on *All the Parables of the Bible* refers to the contribution made by Habershon in his chapter entitled "The Lord's Portrait of Himself in the Parables."/Some illustrations of the divine attributes are as follows:

His grace and mercy in the Parable of the Debtors.

His patience in the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Growing Seed.
His compassion in the Parables of the Good Samaritan and the Debtors
His power and majesty in the Parables of the Pounds and Two Kings
His greatness and liberality in the Parable of the Marriage Supper
His love in the Parables of the Treasure, the Pearl, the Prodigal
His care in the Parables of the True Vine and the Good Shepherd
His tenderness and pity in the Parable of the Lost Sheep
His longsuffering in the Parables of the Husbandman and the Fig-tree
His sovereignty in the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard
His strength in the Parable of the Strong Man.

Let us remember in our study of the parables to seek to know what they tell us about Jesus. Although they may show us countless pictures of earthly life in first-century Palestine, the true meaning must be found in their heavenly truths and teachings about the Kingdom of God and Jesus as the King of life.

“In attempting to recover the original significance of the parables, one thing above all becomes evident:” concludes Jeremias, “it is that all the parables of Jesus compel his hearers to come to a decision about his person and mission.”/Reminding us of a christological selfattestation in the parables as emphasized by Fuchs, Jeremias remarks: “When a parable depicts the goodness of God, that goodness is actualized in Jesus. When a parable speaks about the Kingdom, Jesus ‘hides himself’ behind the word Kingdom as its ‘secret content’. I can only agree whole-heartedly with the decisive way in which Fuchs finds in the parables the veiled christological self-attestation of the historical Jesus” (p. 230, footnote 1).

Just as the parables are of tremendous value because of what they teach us about Jesus, much the same thing could be said about

what they teach us about God. Ogilvie makes us aware of this aspect and emphasizes it in his recent volume, *The Autobiography of God*.

C. Source Material for Preaching and Teaching

If it is really true as Lightfoot has proposed that the parables “will always remain the very center and heart of the teachings of Jesus,” then it behooves every preacher and teacher of the Word to go to them for the valuable source material which they are.

The emphasis upon the lessons found in the parables is made by Lightfoot’s book, *Lessons from the Parables*. One of Hunter’s chapters in *The Parables Then and Now* is the “Expounding Parables,” and he appropriately closes his *Interpreting the Parables* with the chapter, “Preaching the Parables.” Lockyer includes a section (pp. 125ff) on “Parables as Preaching Potential,” and the conclusion to Straton’s book, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, is “Preaching and Teaching Parables.”

Hunter declares that it is quite legitimate to existentialize the parables and let them speak to today’s situation. In fact,

The parables of Jesus almost cry out for such exposition. First, by their very nature, they are not didactic propositions but invitations to decision... Addressed to a particular historical situation, they aim to win agreement and challenge to decision for or against the kingdom of God. And a successful parable alters the situation and becomes what the Germans call ‘a language event’. Second, the very stuff of the parables is human existence... Third, the subject-matter of the parables-God’s will, the nature and growth of his kingdom, the centrality of his mercy, and

the response required of his people—are obviously themes which still concern us today, for the simple reason that the church as the new Israel is faced before God with the same responsibilities as the old Israel, as it is ever liable to the judgments which fall on ‘the household of faith’.

(*The Parables Then and Now*, p.27).

Hunter writes a little later that “we cannot fully understand a parable till the question, What does it teach about God? is set along-side the question, What does it teach about man’s situation?” He believes that Helmut Thielicke in *The Waiting Father* has, in practice, most effectively existentialized the parables (p.28).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2. Revised edition. *The Daily Bible Study Series*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975.
- Bowie, Walter Russell. “The Parables”, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII. New York: Abingdon Press, 1951.
- Dodd, C. H. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Revised edition. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961.
- Hester, H. I. *The Heart of the New Testament*. Liberty, Missouri: The Quality Press, Inc., 1963.
- Hunter, A. M. *Interpreting the Parables*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.
- _____. *The Parables Then and Now*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1971.
- Jeremias, Joachim. *The Parables of Jesus*. Second revised edition. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972.
- Jones, Peter Rhea. *The Teaching of the Parables*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982.

- Lightfoot, Neil R. *Lessons from the Parables*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965.
- Lockyer, Herbert. *All the Parables of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963.
- Ogilvie, Lloyd John. *Autobiography of God*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979.
- Robertson, A. T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 1. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930.
- Smith, Charles W. F. *The Jesus of the Parables*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948.
- Stein, Robert H. *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981.
- Straton, Hillyer H. *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959.
- Wiersbe, Warren W. *Windows on the Parables*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1979.