

THE LATTER PARABLES OF JESUS

Message 2

Scripture: Matthew 16:1-4

INTRODUCTIONS: In these messages we will be looking at a number of the latter parables of Jesus as given in the Gospel of Matthew. He gave these just shortly before He was apprehended and crucified. Some years ago we covered the parables of Matthew 13, which I believe gives a prophetic overview of the kingdom of heaven. Lord willing, we will be looking at what the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God' means in the next message.

Now, parables are a figure of speech. And I mentioned in the last message that a figure of speech is a purposeful deviation from normal speech for a specific purpose. We looked at Matthew 13:10-15, where Jesus referred to Isaiah's prophecy where he said, "Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you shall see and not perceive; for the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them."

We said it was not that God did not want them to see or hear. He wanted that. But they did not want to see or hear because if they did, they would have to turn. We have a world full of people like that, both inside and outside the Church. All you have to do is follow the events surrounding the 'gay' issue to see this.

In these parables we will be looking at, we will see a subject that the Church does not want to see or hear about today. Most of these parables are prophetic in nature, and today, sadly, the Church has lost interest in the prophetic Scriptures. Prophecy is even maligned in places.

But, in the parables before us are eternal truths taught by the Lord Jesus as capsuled in a figure of speech called a parable. When I went to Bible school, the teacher that taught us how to interpret parables taught us that to understand parables takes a special key. When you interpret prose, you read the words and interpret those words in their normal given meaning. You can go to a dictionary and check the meaning conveyed by the words used and interpret what has been said. But when you come to figures

of speech, you need a special key for each kind of figure of speech. We will be looking at that.

B. TO PARABLES

1. What is a parable?

So, let us begin by considering what a parable is. Go with me to Matthew 13 (read 1-3). The word for parable in the NT is *parabolee*. You can tell we get our word 'parable' from that. This word occurs 48 times in the NT and 11 of those are in this chapter. This word is made up of two words, *para*, meaning *alongside* or *beside* and *ballo*, to *cast* or *throw*. It means to throw alongside.

Can someone tell me, what is a common explanation of what a parable is? Probably the most often repeated definition of a parable is, "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." In Scripture, generally, an earthly story is laid alongside some heavenly or spiritual truth. It is a figurative way of teaching truth.

C.H Dodd says, "A parable at its simplest is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to rouse it into active thought." I mentioned to you in the last message that Bullinger said it was like traveling by train and the monotony of the clickity clack clack is putting you to sleep, and then when the brakes squeal and the train begins to slow down, all of a sudden your attention is up.

Don Schwagar, in an internet article asks, "What is a parable?" Then he writes, "A parable is a word-picture which uses an image or story to illustrate a truth or lesson. It creates a mini-drama in picture language that describes the reality being illustrated. It shows a likeness between the image of an illustration and the object being portrayed. It defines the unknown by using the known. It helps the listener to discover the deeper meaning and underlying truth of the reality being portrayed. It can be a figure of speech or comparison, such as "the kingdom of God ..is like a mustard seed ..or like yeast" (Luke 13:19, 21). More commonly it is a short story told to bring out a lesson or moral. Jesus used simple stories or images to convey important truths about God and his kingdom, and lessons pertaining to the way of life and happiness which God

has for us. They commonly feature examples or illustrations from daily life in ancient Palestine, such as mustard seeds and fig trees, wineskins and oil lamps, money and treasure, stewards, workers, judges, and homemakers, wedding parties and children's games. Jesus' audience would be very familiar with these illustrations from everyday life. Today we have to do some *homework* to understand the social customs described (Don Schwager; www.rc.net/wcc/parable1.htm).

Go to Luke 6:39. Now here is a short parable. Here is the earthly story. Two blind men are on the way to some place, and one blind man is leading the other one. Eventually the blind leader is going to land in the ditch. So watch them stumbling along, and sure enough, after some careful walking, the leader falls in a ditch. What is sure to happen to the one who is being led? Conclusion? Lesson? Do not follow a spiritually blind leader. Sooner or later he will land you in the ditch.

2. What are the parts of a parable?

So, let us look at the main parts of a parable. In general, a parable has three main parts. There is the setting of the parable, then the parable itself and then the application or the spiritual truth.

Let us look at an example. Turn to Luke 14 (read 28-32). There is the parable. On its own, it is quite useless. But look now at the setting (read 25-27). In the setting, Jesus is saying, "Before you commit to following Me, you need to count the cost. If any of your family members are more important to you than I am, you cannot be My disciple. And, anyone who does not bear his cross and come after Me, cannot be My disciple." What is He saying? He is saying, "Before you commit to following Me, you need to count the cost. It may cost you your family, and it will cost you yourself. You will have to die on the cross. If you do not bear your cross, you cannot be my disciple." And then comes the parable which we just read. Now look at the application in verse 33 (read).

It is interesting in this instance that all of that forms the setting for another parable which Jesus leaves the hearer to draw his own conclusions on. Look at verses 34-35 (read). What is the natural application? If you become a Christian without counting

the cost, and you fall away because of the cost, you are like salt that has lost its flavor.

Now, what is a person good for if he has committed his life to being a Christian, and difficulties set in and he leaves his spiritual life because of it? Luke says he is not fit for the land, or for the dunghill. You can't fertilize the land with it, nor can you put it in the manure pile because then it too is ruined for use for the land. And in this passage it says, "But men throw it out." In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said, "It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men." I understand they used this savorless salt on pathways that were slippery when they were wet, and thus they were trodden underfoot by people.

Is this a parable for modern Christianity? How many become Christians in order to become wealthy or to fix their marriage or to overcome other problems? But they are not taught to count the cost? Consider now how much light these parables put on a spiritual truth. The earthly story puts a lot of light to an otherwise undesirable truth.

3. What kinds of parables are there?

So we have looked at what parables are and the main parts of a parable. Now let me show you the two main kinds of parables I find. I classify parables into two types; parables to teach and parables to trap. All parables are designed to teach but one type brings out its lesson by trapping a person into a truth otherwise hard to accept.

Biblical parables have the purpose of teaching some spiritual truth. The parable we just looked at is a classic example of a parable that teaches. But let us look now at a parable to trap.

A writer I read years ago said that a parable that is designed to trap has one point in common with a joke. It will have a punch line which the hearer is drawn into. And he gave this example of a joke with its punch line. A native preacher phoned the Board of Health to have a dead mule removed from his front yard. The young clerk who answered thought he would be smart and said, "I thought you preachers took care of the dead." And the preacher said, "We do, but first we always get in touch with the relatives."

Probably no parable more clearly illustrates a parable designed to trap than that of 2 Samuel 12. Turn to it. Let me give you the setting. One day king David saw a

beautiful woman and he took her for himself. Her name was Bathsheba. And Bathsheba had a husband, and he was in the Israeli army fighting for King David. And when this woman was expecting a child, David knew he had to do something. And most of you will know the story. Well, it ended up that David had his army general put Bathsheba's husband in a place where he would be killed. After Bathsheba's husband was dead, David married her.

Well, God had taken note and he has a hard message for David and he delivers it by a parable. We begin with the parable in verses 1-4 (read). These verses give us the setting of the trap with its bait. Well, King David took the bait. Look at verses 5-6 (read). And the trap springs shut over him in verses 7-12 (read).

Now, look at verse 13. Tell me, how could God have gotten David to admit his wrong in a more effective way than by a parable? David ended up trapping himself. There was no way out. And if the Lord had not been able to catch him, he might have been ruined altogether.

4. What are the rules for interpreting parables?

When I went to Bible school I was taught a number of principles to be used in interpreting parables. I will give some of those along with my own conclusions. The first principle is:

a. Carefully study the historical occasion and purpose

We have seen already that understanding the setting of a parable is very important. If you take a parable without its setting, it may have almost no use, or it might be interpreted in many different ways. But once the setting is discovered, it helps guide to a clear interpretation.

The second principle I would give is:

b. In Jesus' parables check for His interpretation

It is interesting that the parables of Matthew 13 do not provide a setting or context for them and this makes a parable impossible to interpret. But Jesus interpreted two of those parables, and in those we get that special key to interpret that particular set of parables. For example, look at Matthew 13 (read 3-9).

But the question is, how do you interpret a parable without a setting like the one we just read? Well,

look at verses 18-23 (read). There Jesus gave the interpretation to the parable. In this section of 12 parables Jesus interpreted 2, and they are the key to all 12.

Now you might find it interesting that in the parables of this chapter, Jesus revealed 2,000 years of Church history before it happened. Verse 11 says these parables reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (13:11). I did a number of messages on those some years ago and we will make those available on line.

Now, just what does that mean? It is most interesting that the parables of this section speak prophetically of a time period that would last at least 2,000 years. In them Jesus revealed 'the mysteries' of the kingdom of heaven (vs. 11).

Another important principle is to:

c. Seek to understand the culture in the parable since the stories used are given in a setting 2,000 and more years old

Turn to Luke 15. In this chapter, Jesus gives three lost and found parables. The first is of a shepherd who had 100 sheep and one was lost. The second is of a woman who had 10 coins, and she loses one. Let us read it in verse 8-10 (read). Now the coin was worth about a day's wages. But, some writers suggest that this coin was one of her dowry coins which she may have worn on her head or around her neck. To lose one would be like losing a stone or pearl from a wedding band. It may have had a lot more significance than just a day's wages. It is important to understand the culture of the day for a good number of the parables Jesus used.

d. Establish the similitude and understand the earthly elements

Another principle is to seek to establish the similitude in the parable. For example, in Matthew 13:3-9, there are four kinds of soil onto which seed falls. The similitude is that of four kinds of hearts into which the Word of God falls, or four kinds of people to whom the Gospel comes.

e. Seek to establish the main point or points of the parable

Another principle is to seek to establish the main point or points of the parable. For example, go to Luke 10 (read 30-35). The question is, what is the main thrust?

So, let me sound a caution here. One must be very careful not to become fanciful or to make more points than are intended. There are examples from the early church where parables were used to teach all kinds of things they were never intended to mean. I taught some of this to our pastoral students some time ago.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglass Stuart, in their book, "How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth" give this example of an interpretation of the parable we just read from Augustine who wrote around 400 years after Christ. Here is his interpretation:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho =
Adam.

Jerusalem = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell.

Jericho = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality

Thieves = the devil and his angels

Stripped him = namely, of his immortality

Beat him = by persuading him to sin

And left him half dead = as a man lives, but he died spiritually, therefore he is half dead

The priest and Levite = the priesthood and ministry of the OT

The Samaritan = is said to mean Guardians; therefore Christ himself is meant

Bound his wounds = means binding the restraint of sin

Oil = comfort and good hope

Wine = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit

Beast = the flesh of Christ's incarnation

Inn = the Church

The morrow = after the resurrection

Two pence = promise of this life and the life to come

Innkeeper = Paul

Some have called this kind of interpretation making a parable walk on all fours. The lesson of this is to not do that. If the interpreter would set that parable in its context, look at the setting and the application, he would never come to a conclusion like that.

So, look at the setting in verses 25-29 (read). The lawyer's question for Jesus was, "And who is my neighbor?" The main point of this parable is to point out to the lawyer who his neighbor is. And when Jesus has completed the parable, He asks this question in verse 36, "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" Well, it did not take a lawyer's degree to answer that question. And by doing so, the lawyer answered his own question to Jesus.

f. Interpret the parable on the basis of the data collected on the parable

Well, the final principle is that once one has gathered the important information, the task now is to interpret the parable. And in the parable we just looked at, Jesus did so when He said to the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

Let me make one more point that I was taught in class that I think is important.

g. Do not establish a doctrine or main teaching simply on the basis of a parable but interpret the parable in light of clear Bible doctrine.

5. Why did Jesus speak in parables?

So, last, we ask, why did Jesus use parables in His ministry? McClintock & Strong say this of a parable, "It secured the attention of multitudes who would not have listened to truth conveyed in the form of abstract propositions. It did so in virtue of two principles of human nature, namely that outward and sensible objects make a more vivid impression than inward notions or ideas; and that the particular and the concrete affect the mind more than the general and the abstract. Thus a virtue or vice may be held up for abhorrence or admiration far more successfully by exhibiting its effects on the character of an individual than by eulogizing or declaiming against it in the abstract. Then second, is that the Jews, like other Eastern nations listened with pleasure to truths wrapped in such figures of speech."

They say thirdly that "some truths openly stated, would have been opposed by a barrier of prejudice, were in this way insinuated, as it were, into men's minds, and

secured their assent unawares", end quote. In our culture, it is possible to sometimes convey spiritual truths that would otherwise be offensive, by giving that truth in humor.

So I think that one of the main purposes for the use of parables is to bring about interest to the subject to be taught. Any teacher knows that the more interest you can raise in your subject, the more learning is taking place.

6. Outline of the parables of the Gospels

Now, let me briefly give you an outline of what I would call the prophetic parables of Jesus. As I see them, there are the early parables. These are those that occur before Matthew 13. In that section there are about 12 parables. Then in Matthew 13 and related passages in Mark and Luke, are the Church parables. There are 12 of these. Here I believe Jesus prophesied what the Church age would be like. Then the parables following that, are what I call the latter parables, and there are some 34 of those. We will only look at some of those as given in Matthew's Gospel.

And maybe a parable that introduces us to the subject of those we want to look at is found in Matthew 16. Turn to it (read 1). They came testing Him. They wanted some supernatural sign from heaven, which they were sure He could not do. Now Jesus knew that even if He did this, they would not believe. At His crucifixion there were numerous such signs but they did not believe.

So, look at verses 3-4 (read). In our Plautdiesch we have this saying, "Owent root, morjen goot." In nature they had the world book and they could discern what was next. But they also had the Word book, and could have discerned what was next, and would not have needed a sign from heaven, but they had failed to study it. They did not need a sign. The signs were all there but they could not see them. A wiser answer than what Jesus gave them hardly seems possible.

They had failed in one major area of Scripture. It is that area that tells them what is coming next. It is a

divine window into the future. And the parables before us will let us look through some of those windows.

May I say here, that from a knowledge of the Scriptures, believers should be able to see what time we are in, but by far the majority don't even care about prophecy. Some now are saying it may be thousands of years before Jesus returns. As a matter of fact, in a time when we should study prophecy as never before, we are dropping it more and more!

CONCL: So, let us conclude. What is a parable? It is a story from common daily life used to bring light to a spiritual truth. Then, there are usually three main parts important to understanding a parable. There is the setting, the parable itself, and the application. Then there are certain rules to interpreting parables that need to be kept in mind and it is important not to get fanciful in interpreting parables. And then there are reasons why parables are used. It helps to gain the interest of the hearers. The story helps give light to the spiritual truth the teacher is trying to convey. And then there are times when a parable softens the harshness of the message that is to be conveyed. , some of the reasons why parables are used are

Now, let me just include here a very interesting point made by McClintock and Strong about the parables of Jesus. Shortly after the time of Christ about 50 other Gospels besides the four that we have were written. But one of the marks of difference between all those other Gospels, and the four inspired accounts that we have, according to them, is the parables of Jesus. These writers say this, "Human invention could imagine miracles (though these too in the spurious Gospels are stripped of all that gives them majesty and significance), but the parables of the Gospels were inimitable and unapproachable by any writers of that or the succeeding age. They possess a life and power which stamp them as with the "image and superscription" of the Son of Man."

If that observation is correct, the parables of Jesus give evidence to the inspiration of the four Gospels that we have in the Bible.