

The Symbolism of the Parables.

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OUR studies in the synoptical records of Christ's parabolic doctrine have shown us that Matthew's is the historical and logical presentation of our Lord's teaching in this form, and that a full parallel to the series of parables here related is to be found in those recorded, without regard to their natural order, by Luke, while the few parables reported by Mark fit into and confirm the Matthean sequence. We have further seen that the parabolic doctrine, as set forth in Matthew's Gospel, is in keeping alike with the normal spiritual development in man, and with the course of our Lord's doctrine generally as this is given us in the first Gospel.

Another confirmatory aspect of that sequence of the parables which Matthew gives, with the developing doctrine which it embodies, may be found in the symbolism of the parables here successively set forth. Our attention has already been drawn in this direction, by the position which we found the Parable of the Net to occupy in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Its appearance at the close of the opening series of parables there recorded, instead of in its more appropriate conjunction with the first two, we could best account for in view of the gradually ascending scale of natural figures made use of in the group of parables to which it belongs.

A very distinct encouragement to find some help in this quarter is given in the fact, that the three parables which alone appear alike in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and that in the same sequence in each, are characterized by this same gradation of their symbols. The first of these is that of the Sower, the essential point in the teachings of which is represented by a variety of soils. The second is that of the Mustard Seed, with its emblem drawn from the vegetable kingdom. The third is that of the Husbandmen, whose human qualities in this case give the point to its teachings.

But this reference suggests the need there is, as an essential preliminary to our present study, to find what one may call the common denominator in our Lord's parabolic teachings. It is quite clear that without this, we can steer no steady

course, nor arrive at any illumining conclusion on the subject we are now considering. If emblems which obviously stand for such varied elements in Christ's doctrine, as do the Sower, the Tares, and the Net, are to form the material for our study, and to be put in the same category, then we shall have a most inconsequent task to perform, without any hope whatever of a helpful result. We cannot, however, have given any attention to that development in the parabolic teaching, which Matthew's sequence of the parables presents, without feeling that this preliminary problem is by no means difficult to solve. It is clearly the soul, or man's spiritual nature, the possible developments and final issues of which are set before us here. And hence it is the several symbols by which this is represented that we must now keep in view.

One might say that this matter of the common denominator in the teachings of our Lord's parables is a very mariner's compass for the voyage upon which we are now embarked. One might indeed say even more, for in view of the strange confusion which the lack of it has caused, not only in the exposition, but in the very nomenclature of Christ's parables, one may be pardoned for thinking of it as the very orb of day. Under its light and guidance, our as yet obscure and dubious study becomes, like the dawn-illuminated world, at once interesting, suggestive, and instructive.

Of all the Matthean parables, it is in the first alone that we find this human soul symbolically represented in terms drawn from the realm of inert matter. This is done in the several figures of the rocky, trodden, weedy, and tilled soils. Only, too, in Luke's parallel Parable of the Lost Coin, have we another instance of a purely material emblem being employed for this purpose. These soils may have an owner, and that lost coin has had one, and in these implications lies the hopeful side of the two initial pictures. The other two Matthean parables, dealing with the great distinction, are both drawn, as regards their figures, from inanimate nature, these presenting us with the harvests of the land, and of the sea,

respectively in the Wheat and Tares, and in the Caught Fish, edible and unsound. The fish are utilized, not in their live and active, but in their dead and marketable, state. And so, too, the grain, whether we regard it as seed or crop, figures here passively, and in regard to its human value as worth the sowing, and wholesome for food. While these first three emblems alike are all of inanimate objects, their ascending gradation is marked by their being taken severally from the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal kingdoms.

We see something which looks like Matthew's use of our compass, if, because of its symbol the Fish being of a higher order than Mustard and Leaven, he gave those parables precedence of this one of the Net, and so removed it from its logical place. But we cannot credit him with much consistency or a very full intelligence in this matter, any more than we can in the case of some of his Old Testament quotations, in so far as concerns the parables of the Treasure and the Pearl. For these terms, which seem to regulate their place, in Matthew's record, do not denote the main subject of the parables. Our criticism here is, of course, conditional on the accuracy of our theory of the unifying parabolic factor.

The growth group of parables, to which Mark as well as Matthew makes contribution, and the two Matthean parables of which Luke also reports, draws all its emblems from the vegetable kingdom. It was in their passive aspect, and as objects of use and possession, that the natural symbols of the preceding group were set before us. But it is in their vital and more active aspect, that objects from the realm of nature are utilized to convey instruction in the group which deals with growth. Here, in the secretly Growing Corn, in the expansive outcome of the Mustard Seed, and in the wonderfully pervasive Leaven, it is the developing life of the plant world that is turned to account, for the setting forth of spiritual truth. The growth of the individual soul, of the Church of God, and of the Christian spirit are most suitably illustrated in the ripening, the enlarging, and the disseminating processes, identified with the vital development of the Corn, the Mustard, and the Leaven. But with these, the contributions made by the vegetable kingdom to the symbolism of the Matthean parables are brought to an end. This second group of parables is then, no less

than the first, marked by the special type of its emblems, while showing a distinct advance also in the character of these symbols.

Matthew's next group of parables presents us with the first set of human figures to be found in the parables he records. These are a Treasure Finder, a Pearl Merchant, and an Upper Servant, who occupies at once the position of a forgiven debtor, and an unforgiving creditor. While the former two are gainers, respectively through chance discovery, and prudent trading, the last man figures alike as a gainer and a loser. The mark common to all is that they gain, severally a hidden treasure, a costly pearl, and the remission of an enormous debt. There is thus a distinct note of resemblance between all three, in keeping with the reference of all these parables to that blessing of grace, not only symbolized, but represented, in the last and expository parable of the group. The freedom of sovereign grace is well portrayed in that humanly uncontrollable aspect of fortune, or rather divine providence in life, which is made to dismiss or subordinate the thought of merit from the conduct of the parties brought before us here.

But if lacking here, the thought of duty and desert is a leading note in the parabolic figures of the succeeding group. These personifying labourers, sons, and husbandmen or tenants, have as their common feature that of men figuring in a dutiful relationship. From the engaged labourers, service is due in view of the pay they look for; from sons under the parental roof, the ready obedience of natural affection; and from the profitably occupied tenants, a just rent for the land on which, and by the fruits of which, they live. The whole scope of the divine claims on man is admirably expressed in the human symbolism of these parables.

There is an interesting and very suggestive character common to all the human figures in the concluding group of the parables recorded by Matthew. It is that of a complimentary relationship. The parties here figure as wedding guests, as bridesmaids, and as the trusted and honoured servants and agents of a great lord. It is not the call of duty, but of friendship, of intimacy, and of a confiding esteem, that has conferred upon them the positions they occupy, with the responsibilities these posts entail. While, too, the relationships and duties here depicted are natural enough, they are none of them such as come to

men by birth, or by mere engagement in the professional or commercial pursuits of life. They are all indicative of favour, or affection, at the hands of an exalted, noble, or loving friend. And just because of this, they are most fittingly employed to set forth the privileges and momentous responsibilities implied in man's acceptance of the divine grace.

Our survey of the symbolism of the Matthean parables has shown us that an ascending gradation of their figures marks their sequence in this Gospel. While the emblems of the earliest parables are furnished by inanimate objects, the symbolism of the last is supplied by individuals enjoying the pleasures, the honours, and the substantial rewards of life. But no less notable than this upward progression, are the marked distinctions characterizing the several groups, into which the development of the parabolic doctrine naturally divides them. Thus we have a group with emblems drawn from inanimate objects, dealing with the good and bad; a second about growth, illustrated from the vegetable kingdom; a third about grace, with emblems drawn from the sphere of human fortune; a fourth about the divine claims, and a fifth about the responsibilities of grace, illustrated respectively by the dutiful and complimentary relationships of life.

In order the more clearly to have these features of Matthew's parabolic record brought before us, we have reserved the consideration of the Lucan parables, but must now deal with them. In doing so, we shall follow that parallel with the Matthean sequence, which we have found it possible to compose from the parables which Luke reports. As this parallel, however, entails quite another arrangement of these parables than that of their order in Luke's Gospel, we can scarcely expect such distinct features here, as our study of the more historic Gospel has revealed. It will indeed be sufficiently satisfactory, if we find enough to confirm our parallel of these parables, with the logical arrangement, and grouping of those recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

The Lost Coin is the one parable in Luke's record in which the human soul is symbolized by a material object, and it is in these 'lost and found' parables that we find the equivalent of Matthew's initial group. The Parable of the Sower, also recorded by Luke, is the first alike in Mark and Matthew. But its parallel, this Parable of the Lost

Coin, besides occurring well on in Luke's Gospel, an unimportant matter, is immediately preceded there by that of the Lost Sheep. The reference of the three 'lost and found' parables to the several persons of the Trinity is not without its interest and expository value. And it may be, that a desire to give the Son's work its natural place, before that of the Holy Spirit, and the Heavenly Father, can account for the precedence given here to the living sheep over the inanimate coin, and the consequent departure of Luke from Matthew's sequence in the matter of these respective types of symbols. It is from the animal world that the second emblem in these parables is drawn, but in the third parable, that of the Prodigal Son, we find Christ's first figure taken from human life in the logical order of His parables. Luke's record thus attains to this stage of illustration earlier than either those of Matthew or Mark, but gives us herein the most hopeful element introduced by our Lord into His early teachings regarding man's natural state.

There is what answers to that passive aspect, in which the various emblems of Matthew's initial group of parables are looked at, in the fact that the lost coin, sheep, and son figure in these Lucan parables as all deprived of what has given them their natural value. The coin has lost its currency, the sheep its needful care, and the prodigal son his place in the family and in his father's house.

Luke's three parables on prayer, the means of spiritual growth, forming the natural parallel to Matthew's group on that subject, introduce us to as many distressed members of the human race. There is the Midnight Borrower, in want of bread for a visitor; the Importunate Widow, whose unprotected state exposes her to the neglect and despite of an unjust judge; and the Penitent Publican, whose earnest prayer for mercy presents such a striking contrast to the smug complacency of the self-righteous Pharisee. While representatives of humanity, these characters all figure in undesirable rôles, and remind us of life's sad and unfortunate side. If not, like the emblems of the last group, themselves lost, they each have something lacking which they need and wish to get. We note this, then, as a common feature in the symbolism of these three parables, and one which gives them a suitable place immediately before the Matthean group of parabolic finders.

These finders are recipients of grace, and Luke's parallel parables here deal with the manifestations of its possession, and of its lack. The Good Samaritan, and Two Debtors reveal more or less of grace in active operation, while Dives stands for the typically ungracious man. The relationship, in which the several personages of these parables stand to those they meet with, is distinctly a casual one, creating no more immediate duties than those of humanity and natural kindness. In this the figures here have their resemblance to those of Matthew's third group. There are debtors here, as there was one there, and there are those whom fortune favours and gives chances to, just as it did in the cases of the treasure finder and pearl merchant.

The distinctly dutiful relationship of Matthew's next group is also that of the equivalent parables of Luke's Gospel. In the Farm Servant, and in the royal servants set to trade with their master's Pounds, we have those whose duties are most obvious. The Barren Fig-tree, too, has in its own fashion its duties, in the way of bearing the fruit for which it is kept and attended to, and although alone among the imagery of the later parables, in being drawn from a lower realm than the human one, has had more vogue and currency, as depicting the useless man's cumbering of the ground, than the more intelligent and exalted Tenants of its Matthean parallel.

Just as with this fourth group, so with the fifth and last, a distinct feature, that of complimentary relationship, is common to the figures of Luke's and Matthew's parables. We have here, again, the guests bidden to a Great Supper, although all do not accept the gracious invitation; we have, too, a Steward so trusted that he is enabled to utilize his master's wealth for the benefit of his own personal

interests; and a Rich Fool, a favourite of fortune at any rate, if he be not one of wisdom's children. In all these cases, we have those so highly trusted and honoured, as to make it apparent, how fully the making or marring of their eternal fortunes is in their own hands. The divine goodness and grace at least have dealt benignly and most bountifully with them.

In the case of these parables from Luke's Gospel, affording as they do so fair a parallel to the Matthean sequence, we find enough of the same advancing symbolism to encourage that view of them which we have taken, and this in no respect more markedly than in those features distinguishing the several groups into which the developing doctrine here set forth most naturally divides them.

That development, as we have now traced it through the two advancing sets of symbolism presented in the Lucan and Matthean records, has brought us from the contemplation of its initial pictures of man's soul, as abandoned soil, and a lost coin, to see this same immortal spirit represented by figures proclaiming it as the honoured associate and trusted vicegerent of the Deity. Nor could the course of this development, alike on its symbolical and spiritual sides, be at once more natural, reasonable, significant, and inspiring. Nature's progressive advance through the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms up to man as its head, is here beautifully paralleled in that progress, which, starting from the rudimentary morality involved in the conscious distinction between right and wrong, passes through the apprehensive longings of spiritual growth, appreciative reception of grace, and consequent recognition of Godward duty, to the supreme responsibilities and glorious rewards of the divine fellowship and service.

The Pilgrim's Progress.

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The Argument.

THE passage which follows is not without high value, and there are depths of tenderness and pathos in it. But there is also a state of nerves in which the temper of both men is upon edge, and

the tone of the passage is less pleasant than is usual in the story. One wonders what Bunyan's reason may have been for introducing so apparently unnecessary and disagreeable an element, which deals with petty misunderstandings between great spirits. The answer must be that this daring