

JESUS' METHOD OF INTERPRETING PARABLES.

PROFESSOR C. B. WILLIAMS, SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

The parable is not exclusively Jesus' method of teaching. The parable can be found even in the Old Testament. There are five unmistakable parables in the Old Scripture: II Sam. 12:1-4; 14:6f.; I Kings 20:39f.; Isaiah 5:1-6; 28:24-28. Even in the Jewish Talmud we find that the Rabbis used the parable as a method of teaching. There are some striking parables spoken by the Rabbis. For instance, the Parable of the King and the Roses. A king went out into his garden one morning early in the spring. The roses were blooming and he admired their beauty. He was called away for duty and late in the spring he went out again, and behold, all the roses had withered and fallen. The next year when he entered his garden early in the spring and the roses were all blooming, he began to pluck them at once. "So," says the Rabbi, "the young die. The great King wants his people in their freshness and beauty, and so he plucks them from the garden of earth in their youth."

There is also a striking parable of "The Man and His Three Friends." The man had a case in court. He loved his first friend best of all, but he absolutely refused to help him in his case. The second friend refused to help but went to the door of the court to look in. The third friend whom he loved least of all went in and pleaded his cause. So every man has three friends when summoned by death before God, his Judge. The first whom he prized most, that is, his money, will not go with him a step. The second, his friends and kinsmen, accompany him to the tomb but no farther. While the third whom he had in least esteem, that is, The Law and Good Works, appears with him before the King and delivers him from condemnation.

Many other Jewish parables illustrate their views on the Law, Good Works, their philosophy of Sin and Suffering, etc.

There are also parables in portions of early Christian literature. Especially is *The Shepherd of Hermas* remarkable for its twelve parables.

But Jesus gave to the parable a distinct type. His parables are more simple and sublime, and they distinctly illustrate great spiritual truths more conspicuously than any other parables. Jesus did not use the parable at the beginning of His ministry. In fact, there seem to be three distinct methods of Jesus' teaching, in three separate periods of His ministry. In His early ministry His type of teaching was that of direct promulgation of the kingdom and exhortation to preparation for entering that kingdom. Matt. 4:17, "From that time began Jesus to preach and say, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In the next period He adopted the regular discourse which is illustrated in the case of the Sermon on the Mount, recorded by both Matthew and Luke. Perhaps He delivered several discourses which are not recorded. The third method of Jesus' teaching is that of the parable.

In all Jesus used somewhere between fifty and sixty parables. Of course, the number depends on what you regard as a parable. Many of the short proverbs of Jesus are counted by some as parables and with these scholars, the number would reach one hundred. Others, limiting the parable to the longer stories, would cut the number down to less than fifty. For our part we feel like counting something near sixty.

We have taken considerable pains in comparing the portion of Jesus' teaching in parables with the rest of His teaching. We find that nearly forty per cent of all His direct teaching in the Synoptics was cast into parabolic form. Nearly one-half of the teaching recorded by Luke is in the form of parables; about one-third of that

in Matthew and nearly one-fourth of that in Mark. Hence we see the great importance of studying Jesus' method of interpreting His parables. Unless we can properly interpret the parables we miss the cream of much of His great teaching.

I. Let us ask the Purpose of the Parable. Matthew and Mark both tell us.

Matt. 13:10, 11, 13, "The disciples came and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? And he answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. . . Therefore, speak I unto them in parables; because seeing they see not and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

In this passage Matthew represents Jesus as saying that He is using the parable because of the dullness of the people to understand and appreciate His teachings. That is, the people could not understand great abstract truths concerning the kingdom unless they were clothed in picture dress.

Mark 4:11, 12, seems to represent Jesus as giving quite a different reason for His use of the parable. "And he said unto them, Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without all things are done in parables; that seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand, etc." But *ὅτι* may express result and not purpose, (see Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, etc., pp. 997-999), in which case we do not have the purpose stated in Mark.

If *ὅτι*, however, expresses purpose, Mark seems to make Jesus say that He used the parable in order to conceal the truth from the masses and in order to keep them from understanding the truth of the kingdom. However, the contradiction between Matthew's record and Mark's is only apparent. According to Matthew Jesus doubtless saw the incapacity of the masses rightly to perceive the

truth of a spiritual kingdom. And so, according to Mark, Jesus adopted the parable in order that He might hide the truth from them temporarily. Surely He meant it to be only temporary concealment.

According to Mark 4:21, 24, spoken in this same connection, "Jesus said unto them, Is the lamp brought to be put under the bushel, or under the bed, and not to be put on the stand? For there is nothing hid save that it should be manifested; neither was anything made secret, but that it should come to light. If any man hath ears to hear, let him hear. And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear, etc."

Here Jesus directly asserts that "there is nothing hid save that it should be manifested." That is, He is only temporarily hiding the truth from the minds of the masses in order that more effectively He may reveal the truth at a later time.

Then, let us state in recapitulation Jesus' purpose in using the parable according to these two texts.

First, to protect His teaching. He is here exemplifying what He had said in the Sermon on the Mount about casting pearls before swine. It was useless for Him to cast the shining pearls of great spiritual truths before an unspiritual public. Such truths must be clad in visible dress for the low-minded masses to appreciate them.

Second, to veil the truth from the masses. According to Mark's account Jesus was now in a great crisis of His life. His year of popularity was reaching its climax in Galilee. The Scribes and Pharisees were beginning to organize their opposition to Him. The masses recognized Him as the Messiah, not a spiritual king, but a political deliverer, and we are told in John's Gospel that just after the feeding of the five thousand, they undertook to make Him king by force. Hence Jesus must veil His great teachings concerning the kingdom from the masses if He would complete His teachings. These seem to be the circumstances under which the parable was born.

Third, to unveil the truth to His disciples. Trench rightly says in his "Parables of Our Lord" that the form of the parable riveted the truth on the memory of the hearers. Take the story of the Tares in the Wheat. How vivid are the descriptions and how easily the apostles remembered the great teachings as they thought of the tares in the wheat! So we see the parable had two sides. To the masses it was a riddle; to the disciples it was a mirror.

II. The Definition of a Parable.

The English word "parable" comes from the Greek word, *παραβάλλω* *paraballo*, which means, to throw alongside, *i. e.*, place one thing by the side of another for the purpose of comparison. Trench denies comparison is included in the word, but it is there in Plato (Phil. 33B; Arist. Top 1. 10. 5; Polyb. 1. 2. 2). Hence a parable may be defined as either a short saying, or probable story concerning things in nature, from ordinary life or human experience, to teach religious truth.

As contradistinguished from the fable, the parable is a possible and probable story, while the fable is an impossible story. The Fable of the Fox and the Sour Grapes describes something that never could have happened and never can happen. As distinguished from the allegory the parable clothes great abstract truths in concrete forms while the allegory makes great abstractions behave as persons. For instance, in Bunyan, he makes Faith, Hope, Giant Despair, etc., behave just as if they were living persons. This is allegory. We need not dwell on the distinction between the parable and the myth. The parable tells the truth and only the truth, while the myth mingles truth and fiction.

As hinted above some scholars refuse to call the short proverbs of Jesus, like "Physician heal thyself," parables. But they are called parables in the New Testament and so we prefer to regard them in the number of His parables. Hence the definition above.

III. As to the Nature of the Parables, we wish to say two things.

First, Jesus' parables are simple, sublime stories. There is no effort to tell a great story. The story seems to make itself and grows easily and naturally out of the things in nature and ordinary human life. See the simplicity in the story of the mustard seed, the leaven, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost boy, etc. And yet in this very simplicity there is a matchless sublimity. Underneath the natural truth is great spiritual truth. Indeed some of the greatest and most sublime truths that Jesus ever uttered are transmitted to us in these simple parables. For instance, the final separation of the wicked from the righteous, the growth of the kingdom, the marvelous love of the Father, His joy over the repentance of sinners, etc., are all beautifully illustrated in these simple parables.

Second, the parable itself is not the teaching of the parable. This must be carefully distinguished. The teaching lies in the analogy which the parable contains and not in the parable itself. For instance, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus is not teaching the world the value of sheep. In the Parable of the Lost Boy, He is not teaching that fathers should receive back their boys when they wander off into shame and misery. These are not the great truths. Some of these may be very great truths and yet back of the natural truth lies the spiritual truth. In other words, we must crack the hick-

ory in order to get the hickory meat. The parable must be broken, for inside of it is the great spiritual truth.

IV. The Classes of Parables.

We will give just a few of the main classes of parables according to different scholars before we go on to the interpretation.

First, of course, is the chronological classification according to which we have the early parables of Matthew 13 and Mark 4. Then the later parables in Luke 10-19, and finally the passion week parables, Matthew 21, 22, 25, etc. This classification does not render much service because it is not logical.

Second, the parables are classified as they are related to the kingdom into

- (1) Parables on the nature of the kingdom.
- (2) Parables on the progress of the kingdom.
- (3) Parables on the duties of the members of the kingdom.
- (4) Parables on the King Himself.
- (5) Parables on the enemies of the Kingdom.
- (6) Parables on the triumph and consummation of the kingdom.

The only objection to this classification is that several of the parables would have to be put in two or three classes.

Third classification is that adopted by Dr. Bruce who divides them according to their general tone into

- (1) The Theoretic Parables.
- (2) The Parables of Grace.
- (3) The Parables of Judgment.

Dr. Bruce has the same difficulty in deciding to which class several of the parables belong according to his classification.

Fourth, as to the Intrinsic Character, we for our purpose shall divide parables into

- (1) The Kingdom Parables.
- (2) The Practical or Homiletic Parables.

The first class are all those parables that teach great truths about the kingdom—its origin, nature, members, progress, enemies and final consummation. The second class of parables includes all those that teach some great practical truth that is not directly concerned with the kingdom. In the first class would be placed such parables as the Tares, the Sower, the Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Pearl of Great Price, the Treasure Hidden in a Field, etc. In the second class would be placed parables like the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Boy, etc.

V. The Interpretation of Parables.

There are many systems of interpretation. The rules are numerous. I will name first the rules adopted by five great exegetes, and then study Jesus' simple method of interpreting parables.

First, Chrysostom's Method. He had one simple rule, namely, Get one great lesson out of the parable and ignore the rest. This is partially correct, but we cannot say that everything except the one great lesson in the parable should be ignored.

Second, Trench's Rules. These are three.

- (1) Get the central truth.
- (2) Interpret all details by the help of this.
- (3) Get no doctrine out of a parable unless this doctrine is taught in unparabolic language somewhere else in the New Testament.

The first and third of these rules are excellent. The second is not so good. Would it not be better to make the

details help us in the interpretation of the main truth rather than making the main truth interpret the details?

Third, Tholuck's Method. He has one comprehensive rule: Proceed on the principle that there is import in every detail until shown to be absurd. This rule will lead to vast extravagance in the interpretation of parables.

Fourth, Immer's Method. He has three rules.

(1) The fundamental thing in the parable is its intention. Hence get its intention first.

(2) The criteria of this intention are found in the context, especially in the introduction and conclusion.

(3) Get the leading doctrine and use it to interpret the whole parable.

We have the same criticism on this third rule that we had on the second of Trench's rules above.

Fifth, Terry's Method. He has two comprehensive rules:

(1) Get one main lesson out of the parable.

(2) Remember nearly all details have meaning.

This second rule would lead to extravagance in interpretation just as Tholuck's one comprehensive rule.

Sixth, Jesus' Method.

Now, it is our purpose by an inductive study to see how Jesus interpreted His own parables. Fortunately for us the Evangelists have recorded a few of His parables as interpreted by Himself. We shall study just two of these parables as interpreted by Jesus Himself. If anyone knew the meaning of His parables Jesus Himself knew it and if we can formulate a method based upon the actual facts in Jesus' own interpretation we shall surely have the true method of interpreting parables.

Let us look at the Parable of the Sower as interpreted by Jesus:

THE PARABLE ITSELF.	JESUS' INTERPRETATION.
1. The Sower.	1.
2. Went Forth to Sow.	2.
3. As He sowed.	3.
4. Some by the Wayside.	4. Those who hear and do not understand.
5. Birds.	5. Satan.
6. Came and devoured.	6. Takes away the Word.
7. Other seed on rocky ground.	7. Heard and received with joy.
8. Little earth.	8. No root in themselves.
9. Sprang up immediately.	9. Endured for a while.
10. The sun rose and they withered.	10. Tribulation or persecution ariseth.
11. Because they had no root.	11. Because no root in themselves.
12. They withered.	12. They stumbled.
13. Others among thorns.	13. Those who heard.
14. Thorns grew up.	14. The care of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.
15. And choked.	15. Choked (and maketh unfruitful), the last phrase added.
16. Others on good ground.	16. Those who hear and understand the Word.
17. Bear fruit.	17. Bear fruit.
18. 100 fold, 60 fold, etc.	18. 100 fold, 60 fold, etc.

We observe in looking over Jesus' interpretation carefully that He interprets every item except three. One of the most important items He leaves uninterpreted, namely, as to who the Sower is. Two more items immediately after this, not so important, are left uninterpreted. Every other item in the parable He interprets.

What seems to be the main point of this story? The various conditions of soil determine the varying results of the reaping. If that is to be the main point in the story, what is the main teaching that Jesus is seeking to enforce? The results of the sown Word vary according to the receptivity of different kinds of people hearing it. These thoughts seem to lie on the very surface as Jesus interprets the parable, and yet exegetes have found scores

of other teachings and regarded them as dominant in this parable.

Before formulating rules as to Jesus' method, let us look at His interpretation of the Parable of the Tares:

THE PARABLE ITSELF.	JESUS' INTERPRETATION.
1. A man sowed.	1. The Son of Man.
2. Good seed.	2. Children of the Kingdom.
3. In his field.	3. The world.
4. While men slept.	4.
5. Enemy sowed.	5. The Devil.
6. Tares.	6. Children of the Wicked One.
7. Blades sprang up and fruited.	7.
8. Tares appeared also.	8.
9. The servants came and asked, etc.	9.
10. The Lord answers: The ene- my did this.	10.
11. The servants said: Shall we go, etc.	11.
12. He said, No.	12.
13. Let both grow together.	13.
14. Until the harvest.	14. The Consummation of the Age.
15. The Reapers.	15. Angels.
16. Gather tares to burn.	16. Cast offenders and doers of in- iniquity into the furnace.
17. Gather wheat into my barn.	17. The righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom.

Now notice the facts in Jesus' interpretation of this parable. You observe there are seventeen items in the whole parable, eight of which Jesus leaves uninterpreted, nine of which He interprets. That is, nearly half of the items of the parable are left untouched in His interpretation. What an example for modern exegetes to follow! Jesus did not think that He was bound to interpret every item in His parables.

According to His interpretation of this second parable it is evident:

First, that the main point in the story of the tares is the certainty of the final separation of the tares from the wheat.

Second, based on this main point in the story is the main teaching which Jesus wished to enforce, namely, the certainty of the final separation of the wicked from the righteous.

Three things are evident as conclusions from Jesus' method:

First, He seems to have one main lesson in each parable.

Second, Jesus did not interpret all the details in the parables which He did interpret. In the parable of which He interpreted the most he left three uninterpreted items, one of which would strike a casual reader as most significant.

Third, Jesus took for granted many great truths in His parables which He did not have directly in mind.

Seventh, let us formulate the rules for properly interpreting the parables.

(1) Classify your parable. That is, see whether it is a kingdom parable or simply a homiletic parable.

(2) If Jesus interpreted it, accept His interpretation and leave alone the details which He did not interpret.

(3) If Christ did not interpret it, get the main point in the story as a story and use this as the basis of the main teaching. This rule must also be kept if Jesus did interpret the parable.

(4) Then get the main teaching by transferring the terms of the main point from the natural to the spiritual realm. (See the main point and main teaching as given by us in the two parables above.)

(5) Interpret all major items in harmony with this main teaching. That is, interpret every item that helps to enforce this main teaching in harmony with the central lesson.

(6) Leave uninterpreted all minor items, that is, all items which do not directly contribute to the enforcement of the main truth.

Eighth, How to find the main teaching. This is not always easy and yet usually it can be done with great precision and certainty. The following rules will help to determine the main point and the main teaching in each parable:

(1) Get from the context Jesus' purpose. For instance, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Boy, Luke 15. Jesus had been accused of eating with sinners and receiving them. In these parables He is answering this charge and defending His own conduct. This will help determine the main point and the main teaching of these parables.

(2) See how the parable is introduced. For instance, the Parable of the Pounds in Luke 19:11-27, "And as they heard these things he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear. He said, Therefore, a certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return, etc." This introduction helps us to see the main point in the story, namely, the fact that the servants must serve before finally they received their rewards in the kingdom. In other words, there is a period of service in the period of the growing kingdom preceding the period of rewards in the consummated kingdom.

(3) Especially note the close of the parable. Usually Jesus Himself came to a climax at the close of the parable. This is beautifully illustrated in the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in that refrain slightly changed, "I say unto you that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." The main point in this story seems to be the joy of God and the Saviour over the moral and spiritual recovery of lost men; that is, the climax of the story seems to demand that the joy is the main thing in the story.