

INTERPRETING PARABLES

Perhaps the most distinctive style of Jesus's teaching was His use of parables. From the outset of His public ministry until the last days in Jerusalem, one comes across His timeless parables. Matthew's word is appropriate at every juncture: "He told them many things in parables" (Matt. 13:3). A parable has been defined as a comparison from nature or daily life designed to teach a spiritual truth.

PARABLES AND TEACHING

Everyone loves a good story. Jesus developed stories from familiar images and ideas that reveal truth about the nature of God, prayer, spiritual values, stewardship, judgment, and the kingdom of God. He used parables as a teaching device with His disciples, antagonistic religious leaders, and ordinary people.

The Synoptic Gospels contain between fifty and sixty such stories. Add to that number ten brief stories found in John's Gospel. Some of them are very brief, such as the parables of the pearl of great price, the leaven, and the hidden treasure. Some are full-length stories like the parables of the good Samaritan, the talents, the sower and the soils, the rich fool, and the prodigal son.

PARABLES AND DAILY LIFE

Jesus was a keen observer of daily life. He drew lessons from farmers sowing in the field, from village customs about weddings, from shepherds and sheep, and from banquets. Recall that His audiences often were simple, uneducated people such as fishermen, farmers, and villagers. They could grasp His lessons easily about an unjust judge or a friend who knocked at the midnight hour. Jesus used good storytelling to project divine truths about redemption, the kingdom of God, and ethical values.

There is a timelessness about these stories, as well as a haunting beauty. They always present some powerful lesson about God and His will for today.

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Many of the parables deal with the kingdom of God, a major message Jesus sought to bring to Israel in His day. Matthew 13 is the great chapter on this theme. There, Jesus used a series of parables to proclaim the actions of God in His own ministry.

PARABLES ON GOD'S NATURE

Some parables illustrate unforgettably the nature of God as Jesus came to reveal this essential truth. Speaking

of the love of God to the Pharisees who were grumbling about tax gatherers and sinners around them, Jesus produced some memorable parables in Luke 15.

These parables of Jesus on the nature of God are excellent examples of His understanding of simple truths for daily living. For example, He related the shepherd's concern about a lost sheep, the peasant woman's loss of a coin, and the prodigal's lapse so terrible that he was feeding swine when "he came to his senses" (Luke 15:17).

THEMES OF THE PARABLES

Though Jesus did not follow a consistent theme in His teachings through parables, He did address major subjects of His ministry through these stories. He dealt with the relation of the old covenant with the new covenant in parables of the barren fig tree and the great feast. His lessons on prayer were highlighted by the parables of the friend who knocked at midnight and the unjust judge. Stewardship was emphasized in the stories of the unjust steward and the rich fool.

Jesus's solemn teachings on judgment come through His parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the talents. The parables of Jesus touch movingly on death and resurrection in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as the parable of the wicked husbandman.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PARABLES

Contemporary Bible students strongly insist that Bible students who seek the message of Jesus through His parables must understand the setting of the story. It is also important to realize that the parable usually has one major lesson to teach. Using an allegorical approach to the study of parables is both inappropriate and inaccurate. Students of Scripture should seek one primary lesson from each parable.

Jesus's timeless reputation as a Teacher is rooted in the substance and content of His inspired and authentic lessons. When we add the unique form of these lessons through the parables, we quickly affirm the conclusion of the centuries regarding Jesus's teaching: they "were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority" (Matt. 7:28-29).

This article was taken from *The Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 406-407. Used with permission.