



“But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear,”
Matthew 13:16.

Hear a Parable

Lesson Aim: To give principles for interpreting parables.

L262. Date: March 1978. **Text:** Matthew 13:10-17, 34, 35.

Topic: Christ: Parables of.

Parables are important. They are important as teaching aids. They are important as techniques to gain and hold attention. They are important in clarifying obscure truth. They are important in making truth stick in the memory. The teacher who can use a parable wisely will be effective.

The parables of Jesus are very important. (1) They are a large part of the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Bible. (2) They are a part of the inspired Scripture. (3) They clarify many great principles of spiritual truth. Parables were so important in the teaching of Jesus that approximately one-third of His teachings recorded in the Gospels are found in parabolic form.

For thirteen weeks, the Sunday School lessons will be dealing with the interpretation of selected parables of Jesus. The first lesson will be given to an examination of the parable as a form of literary expression and a setting forth of principles by which a parable is to be interpreted. The next twelve lessons [L263-L274] will interpret individual parables and apply their teachings to current concerns of life. The way looms bright with promise as the study of parables begins.

I. WHAT IS A PARABLE?

The English term, “parable,” comes from the Greek word, **parabole**. The term occurs fifty times in the Greek New Testament, primarily in the Synoptic Gospels (seventeen in Matthew, thirteen in Mark, eighteen in Luke, and two in Hebrews).

The Greek word means “to throw alongside.” It pictures placing one thing which is understood beside another thing which is not understood in order to clarify the unknown. It is almost the equivalent of saying, “This is like that.” A parable is a story told to make clear a truth which should be understood.

A parable is a literary device. It is related to, but different from, other literary devices. (1) A **similitude** tells of a typical situation while a parable tells of a specific case. (2) An **allegory** has meaning in each detail, while a parable has meaning in one central truth.

(3) A **fable** breaks the bounds of the natural, giving trees and animals human powers, but a parable is true to life in all details. (4) Fiction deals with things which are reasonable but did not happen, and a parable may include either fact or fiction.

(5) A **proverb** is a brief, pithy saying, while a parable is a full story. (6) A **myth** uses characters and events which are purely imaginary and sometimes unreal, but a parable is always concrete and true to life in characters and events. A parable is a proper literary device for teaching spiritual truths.

II. WHY DID JESUS TEACH IN PARABLES?

Jesus changed His teaching style in the midst of His ministry. There was a particular point when He shifted to parabolic teaching as His major method of teaching.

Jesus began teaching in parables after the Jews rejected Him and pronounced their judgment that He was inspired and empowered by Beelzebub the prince of demons (Matthew 12:22-33).

The disciples of Jesus wondered why the sudden change in His style of teaching. They asked, “**Why speakest thou unto them in parables?**” (Matthew 13:10).

Jesus replied, “**Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given . . . because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand; . . . For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed**” (Matthew 13:11, 13, 15). Jesus' sudden use of parables must be regarded as divine judgment upon the nation of Israel for her rejection of Christ.

A. Jesus taught in parables to reveal truth to some. Those who were spiritually sensitive were quickened in understanding when the truth was put in a vivid, challenging, and memorable way. The parable's clear illustration

and succinct presentation of truth made it easy to understand and remember.

Jesus says to believers, "*Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear*" (Matthew 13:16), Parables are important to the Christian today.

B. Jesus taught in parable to hide truth from some.

Some people close their minds, harden their hearts, and shut their eyes against spiritual truth. To teach them is like casting pearls before swine and giving that which is holy to dogs (Matthew 7:6). It only provides them material with which to oppose the truth. Such people will trample truth under foot and attack the teacher.

There is no way for the believer to know who will hear and who will not hear today, so he is obligated to present truth to all people. Jesus did know and used parables in His teaching.

C. Jesus taught in parables to fulfill prophecy.

Seven hundred years before the ministry of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a people who heard but did not understand, who saw but did not perceive. They were a people whose hearts were fat, whose ears were heavy and whose eyes were shut. Jesus declared that Isaiah spoke of His generation. He taught in parables that the prophecy of God through Isaiah might be fulfilled.

D. Jesus used parables in many different ways.

(1) The parable of the two debtors was used to introduce a lesson on forgiveness, Luke 7:40-42. (The parable of the two builders was used to conclude, rather than introduce, His teachings on the mount, Matthew 7:24-29. (3) The parable of the publican and the Pharisee praying in the temple was used to explain the concept of humility and exaltation, Luke 18:9-14, (4) The parables of marriage joy, patching a garment, and putting wine in new bottles were given to answer the question, "Why do your disciples not fast?" and the parable of the good Samaritan was given to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Matthew 9:15-17; Luke 10:25-37. That shows that Jesus was very free in His use of parables in teaching.

III. WHERE DID JESUS GET MATERIAL FOR HIS PARABLES?

Jesus' parables were taken from the common affairs of life. H. H. Horne finds sixty-one parables and parabolic sayings of Jesus, concluding, "Twenty-six percent deal with the inanimate world of things, while the remaining seventy-four percent deal with the animate world plants, animals, and men. Of the last, eleven percent deal with plants, seven percent deal with animals, and over fifty percent deal with human relations."

The nature parables of Jesus speak of a sower and his seed, the budding of a fig tree, the growth of plants in a field, small seed growing into great plants, the harvest ready and waiting in the field, and kindred everyday subjects.

The people parables of Jesus tell of a woman putting yeast in her meal, children playing in the streets, the son who left home too early, two men building houses, a merchant of pearls, a crooked jurist and a needy widow, assault and theft on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and like common events.

The purpose of a parable is to explain. Jesus took the affairs of everyday life and used them to clarify the great truths of eternity. He was a master teacher and had no peer in the use of parables.

IV. WHAT QUALITIES MARK THE PARABLES OF JESUS?

A. Simplicity was the most outstanding feature of the parables of Jesus. Charles H. Spurgeon said, "Our Lord's parables were as simple as tales for children and as naturally beautiful as the lilies . . . never strained, fantastic, pedantic nor superficial."

Look at His parables as simple stories (without seeking spiritual truth), and you will see how amazingly simple and easy to understand they are.

B. Apperception was the purpose behind Jesus' parables. The new was interpreted in terms of the old. A parable based on the Old Testament, for instance, was used only when He was speaking in the synagogue or to the Pharisees. They were the ones who could best understand. In speaking to common people, Jesus used parables about farming, home relationships, and fishing.

C. Agelessness marks the parables of Jesus.

Though He spoke in the context of the culture of ancient Palestine, His parables are as fresh as today's newspaper. In every age sheep wander, boys go astray, farmers plant and harvest, people are ambitious for honor. Even a person without particular knowledge of the culture of Israel can understand the parables of Jesus. They still speak to people today.

D. Naturalness is a vital part of Jesus' parables. Animals do not talk. He did not picture three pigs going to market or three bears eating porridge. His parables agree with nature where birds die, lilies bloom, friends borrow, laborers murmur over wages, and young sons leave home. The element of naturalness makes Jesus' parables more impressive.

E. Brevity is amazingly evident in the parables of Jesus. He communicated the truth without any unnecessary words. His illustrations are

so brief, most can be read aloud in less than one minute. The longest parable is concerning the father and his two sons, and it can be read in less than three minutes. W. E. Sangster is correct in his observation, "It would be impossible to shorten the parables without impairing the sense."

F. Contrast is common in the parables of Jesus. The publican is contrasted with the Pharisee. Sheep are set over against goats. A house built on the sand is identified as distinct from a house built upon a rock.

Sometimes the contrast is between one and one (prodigal and elder sons), or one and two (good Samaritan versus priest and Levite), or one and three (kinds of soil receiving seed), one and nine (woman who lost one of ten coins), and between one and ninety-nine (lost sheep).

G. Final stress is common in Jesus' parables. The point of the story is commonly at the end of the story. It is that element which caused a lad to say, "A parable is one of those stories in the Bible which sounds at first like a pleasant yarn, but keeps something up its sleeve which pops up and leaves you flat."

V. WHAT LAWS GOVERN THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES?

(NOTE: Please read this section carefully. It is essential to the lessons that follow, as well as to any study of the parables of Jesus. Read and reread until you have the principles of interpretation clearly in mind.)

A. Follow the law of the primacy of the original languages.

The poor widow requested the crooked judge to "**avenge**" her of her adversary. That sounds like a request to give her satisfaction by punishing him for inflicted injury. Not so.

The Greek term, **ekdikeson**, translated "**avenge**," means "to protect; to defend." Keep your dictionary at hand when studying the Bible. Be aware of the meaning of words.

B. Follow the law of the context.

Each parable has a very real relation to that which precedes immediately as well as that which follows. To interpret without regard to the context is to interpret at random; to interpret contrary to the context is to teach falsehood for truth.

Parables commonly grew out of situations revealed by the context: answer to a request, answer to a question, response to accusation, or response to attitudes of hearers. The context will give a clue as to the point of emphasis in the parable.

C. Follow the law of cultural background.

The parables were set in the culture of ancient Palestine, a poor, agricultural, Jewish economy. Watch for local color such as marriage customs, business customs, and family relations. Do not read a meaning into a local custom where God intended no meaning to be.

D. Follow the law of one central truth.

THIS IS THE “GOLDEN RULE” OF PARABOLIC INTERPRETATION. Here is the most important statement in the lesson comments: “A parable is designed to convey one central truth; the rest is merely incidental.”

Do not press for meaning in every detail of a parable. “A parable is a truth carried in a vehicle. Therefore there is the inevitable presence of accessories which are necessary for the drapery of the parable, but not part of the meaning” — Bernard Ramm.

Many interpreters have gone astray in trying to interpret the parable of ten virgins by putting a meaning on lamps, wicks, oil, and darkness. The parable teaches one truth which Jesus clearly states, **“Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh,”** Matthew 25:13.

There are three basic steps in the interpretation of a parable. (1) Determine its meaning in the minds of those who heard it first. (2) Translate that meaning into contemporary terms. (3) Moralize, warn, instruct, exhort on the basis of that meaning. Following those steps brings great profit.