



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Stories for the Heart

Why Jesus Spoke In Parables

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Introduction

1. You are a Galilean Jew living in the first third of what will be known as the first century AD. You have become a follower of a new and charismatic teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, whose discourses amaze everyone and whose works of healing, control of nature, and even raising of the dead astound them even more.
2. You listened to him on the side of the mountain as he presented profound teaching that impressed the crowds because it was *not* like the scribes (Matt 7.28-29).
 - a. You marveled at the things Jesus did after that discourse: cleansing a leper, healing Simon's mother-in-law, stopping a raging storm, exorcising demons from two men, healing a paralytic, raising a synagogue ruler's daughter from the dead, stopping on the way to the ruler's house to heal a woman with a flowing hemorrhage (Matt 8.1-9.26).
 - b. You saw him heal two blind men and exorcize a demon from a mute man (Matt 9.27-34).
 - c. You followed as he went "throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction" (Matt 9.35).
3. You watched as he summoned those closest to him and sent them out to perform works like the ones he has been doing. You wondered why he was warning them about resistance and the costly demands of following him—so far, the only resistance you have seen was from some Pharisees who argued that Jesus was exorcising demons because he had a demon (Matt 9.34). What could he have meant by saying that he came, not to bring peace, but a sword (Matt 10.34ff.)? The crowds were ecstatic; how could anyone turn against him?
4. Lately, however, you've noticed a change. The crowds still follow and are still amazed, but more people are asking questions and you see signs of more resistance.
 - a. You hear John's disciples ask if Jesus is "the one who is to come" (Matt 11.3).
 - b. You hear him rebuke Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for failing to repent (Matt 11.20-24).
 - c. You watch the growing controversy over his Sabbath healings and hear that the Pharisees want him dead (Matt 12.1-21).

- d. And the idea that he is demon-possessed has become prominent enough that Jesus actually had to debate it with some of the religious leaders (Matt 12.22ff.).
 - e. The crowds are still coming, but the tension is growing.
5. You're noticing a change in his teaching style too. He's always had a different way of putting things and has said a few things that were cryptic (Matt 5.25-26; 7.24-27; 9.16-17; 11.16-19; 12.29, 43-45). But lately, he's begun to do it more, adding longer stories that almost seem calculated to drive some people away and baffle others.
 6. The above is a summary of Matthew 7.28-13.50 in a broad big picture view we sometimes overlook as we focus on shorter passages. The goal is to illuminate Matthew's entire portrait—how Jesus became more widely known; how crowds came to hear and touch and be touched by him; how what was at first occasional dissent gained momentum; and how Jesus began to use more parables.
 7. Matthew collected several of the parables in what we know as chapter 13. Over the next four lessons, we will study them. But before we do, let's look at Jesus' answer to his disciples' question, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt 13.10).

Body

I. Things We Must Understand First.

A. First century Jewish understanding of the word "parable."

1. We may realize that "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" is a too simplistic definition of parable but may still think of the word only in terms of a story.
2. In Greek, the word is *parabolē* (παράβολή), literally "to throw alongside."
3. It translates the Hebrew *māshāl* (מָשָׁל), which was used to refer to a variety of figures of speech, including allegories, fables, riddles, wise sayings, maxims and stories that convey some truth (cf. Num 23.7, 18; 1 Sam 10.12; 24.13; Job 27.1; Psa 49.4; 78.2; Prov 1.6; Eccl 12.9; Isa 14.4; Ezek 12.2; Mic 2.4; Hab 2.6).¹
4. The main idea is comparison, using a figure of speech to make a true point in an illustration that captivates and is memorable.
5. At the same time, there is an inherent challenge in the use of the figure: one has to actually discern the meaning and then apply it.

B. The importance and place of Isaiah 6.9-10, quoted in Matthew 13.14-15.

1. In context, Isaiah 6 follows the introductory section in chapters 1-5 in which Israel is exposed as a rebellious nation needing to repent, but stubbornly refusing to do so. Thus, the nation remains on the path to their demise.
2. Chapter 6 is Isaiah's call to serve as a prosecutorial ambassador on God's behalf.²
 - a. He sees the Lord of glory (vv. 1-4).
 - b. He responds, is cleansed, and volunteers for hazardous duty (vv. 5-8).
 - c. He receives his ministry assignment which includes the realistic announcement that faithfulness will be more important than numeric success (vv. 9-13).

¹ In the New Testament, the Greek *parabolē* also has a range of meanings. See, for example, Luke 4.23a: "And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb (*parabolē*), 'Physician, heal yourself.'"

² See the article by J. Carl Laney, "The Role of the Prophets in God's Case Against Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December 1981, 313ff.

3. The reason he would fail was not because the people *could* not repent (cf. Jer. 18.7ff.), but because they *would* not.

II. The Point of This Text for Jesus' Original Hearers.

- A. Remember the context in Matthew: popular opinion had once favored Jesus, but his enemies were growing bolder and stronger.
- B. So, Jesus turned to parables, illustrations and stories capable of challenging his followers to a greater depth of understanding³ even as they proved enigmatic to others.
 1. The disciples.
 - a. Because the disciples were receptive, they were able to handle more of Jesus' teaching, were able to build on what had been taught, and thus were able to perceive greater insights into the figures he used (Matt 13.12).⁴
 - b. And Jesus did want them to understand: "secrets" (μυστήριον, *mystērion*; "mysteries" in NASB) refers to what was formerly hidden but was now being revealed (v. 11).
 - c. Because they were open to what he taught, they would be blessed with knowledge into things the greatest of prophets and righteous men would have loved to have known (vv. 16-17).
 2. Those who did not understand.
 - a. They heard, but didn't hear; they saw, but didn't see.
 - b. Why? Because their hearts were hard. As in Isaiah's time, they did not receive the truth because they would not receive it, not because they could not.
 - c. Because they resisted the message, they could not grow in it or hear more (v 12). So, they simply moved farther away.
- C. The point is not that the parables were to be so enigmatic that they could never be understood, but that they were to give insights into revealed truth in a way that would help the hearers remember and deepen their spiritual insight.
 1. We will say more about how to interpret the parables as we study the specific examples in Matthew 13.
 2. Suffice it to say at this point that some have interpreted and applied them in ways their contexts do not allow.
 3. At the same time, understand that the parables are designed to be understood—even by those at odds with Jesus (cf. Matt 21.45; Mark 11.18).
 - a. This was doubtless easier for the original hearers than for us (e.g., they already understood about pearls whereas we have to learn about the culture and history before we can really begin to interpret the figure—Matt 13.45).
 - b. But it is still possible for us to discern their meaning.
 4. The issue now is the one they faced: not *can* we understand, but *will* we understand?

III. The Challenge of This Text for Us.

- A. We must allow ourselves to be confronted by the parables.

³ See the repetition of the word, συνίημι (*suniēmi*), translated "understand" in Matt 13.13-15, 19, 23, 51.

⁴ The context of the parable of the sower and its explanation—to be discussed in lesson 2—supports this understanding of v. 12.

1. What makes a good story work is that we are drawn into it; what makes a story like the parables work is that, as we are drawn in, we are confronted with the truth the story is intended to teach (cf. 2 Sam 12.1-14).
2. We can avoid the confrontation by:
 - a. Neglecting to study the parables.
 - b. Not giving proper attention to their background so that we can understand the figures well enough to transfer them to modern circumstances.⁵
- B. We must listen as searchers (cf. John 7.17) instead of “confirmed Christians” (used in the sense of “confirmed bachelor”—one who is set in his ways and refuses to be moved).
 1. In fact, the spirit of Israel in Isaiah’s day and the Pharisees in the time of Jesus remains alive.
 2. We risk being so comfortable that we become calloused to the jarring truths Jesus wants us to see.
 3. So, we read the parables like we read the Psalms, choosing our favorites, the ones that comfort us, but do not challenge, while bypassing those that will awaken us from our spiritual stupor to be confronted with the truth Jesus wants us to see.

Conclusion

1. While I was in college, a student was critical of what he saw as rude behavior by guests to the campus during the annual Bible lectures. Later in the conversation he told of his own dislike for a part of the program and how he had acted in response. He didn’t recognize that he had done what he criticized the guests for doing until a friend asked him to spell out what he had done more specifically and then pointedly asked what the difference was between his behavior and that of the guests. Only then did he see his actions for what they really were.
2. Just as my friend made me confront my inconsistency that day, a good parable—and Jesus told good parables—will focus our attention on a great truth and challenge us to correctly respond to it.
3. Hopefully we will have courage enough to take them to heart and make the necessary changes.

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⁵ See, for example, the way many idolized the “Good Samaritan”—my sisters were born in one hospital with that name—but do not fully feel the force of Jesus’ parable because they haven’t examined the history and seen how the typical Jew would have reacted to a Samaritan helping that way and being the story’s hero.