

Preaching The Parables

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Preaching the Parables

- This is a series of talks given at a Homiletics Renewal Seminar at Biblical Seminary back in 1984.
- My three main presentations were entitled:
 - What Are Parables?
 - How Do We Interpret Them?
 - How Do We Apply Them?

What Are Parables?



English Definition

- *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*:
 - A usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.
- Common literary definition:
 - An extended simile
 - Since a simile is a figure of speech in which a comparison is explicitly stated, e.g., *big as a barn*...
 - ... a parable is longer—a sentence to a story— which makes an explicit comparison.
 - E.g., "the kingdom of heaven is *like* (this story I'm going to tell you)"

The NT Word *Parabole*

- As used in the NT, this word has a broader meaning than the English word 'parable.'
- It includes proverb (Luke 4:23) and paradox (Mark 7:17) as well as various types of illustrative stories.
- This is probably due to the influence of the OT word *mashal* which we will discuss by and by.

Other Uses of *Parabole*

- Proverb: Luke 4:23 (NIV) Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb [*parabole*] to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"
- Paradox: Mark 7:15 (NIV) "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'" ...17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable [*parabole*].

The OT Word *Mashal*

- This is the general Hebrew word for a comparative figure of speech.
- It includes:
 - Proverb (1 Sam 10:12, title of Proverbs)
 - By-word (Psalm 44:14, 69:11)
 - Parable (Ezekiel 17:2, 24:3)
 - Prophetic poem (Numbers 23:7)
 - Taunt-song (Micah 2:4)

The OT Word *Masha*

- Proverb: 1Sam 10:12 (NIV) A man who lived there answered, "And who is their father?" So it became a saying [*masha*]: "Is Saul also among the prophets?"
- By-word: Psal 44:13 (NIV) You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. 14 You have made us a byword [*masha*] among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us. 15 My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame.

The OT Word *Mashal*

- Parable: Ezek 17:1 (NIV) The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable [*masha*]. 3 Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon...'"
- Prophetic poem: Numb 23:7 (NIV) Then Balaam uttered his oracle [*masha*]: "Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. 'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel'..."

The OT Word *Mashal*

- Taunt-song: Micah 2:4 (NIV) "In that day men will ridicule [*masha!*] you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: 'We are utterly ruined; my people's possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.'"

Types of Stories Called Parables

- We can categorize the illustrative stories in the Gospels into several different sorts:
- Similitude: a common process or generic activity which teaches a lesson (e.g., Mustard Seed, Mark 4:30)
- Parable Proper: a specific story which teaches a lesson by comparison (e.g., Tenant Farmers, Matthew 21:33)

Types of Stories Called Parables

- Allegory: a more artificial story, with individual features independently figurative (e.g., Sower, Matthew 13:18)
- Paradigm: a specific story which teaches by example rather than comparison (e.g., Rich Fool, Luke 12:16)
- Acted Parable: teacher performs a symbolic action, or a historical incident has symbolic significance (e.g., Tabernacle service, Hebrews 9:9; Abraham offering Isaac, Hebrews 11:19)

Similitude

Mark 4:30 (NIV) Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

Parable Proper

Matt 21:33 (NIV) “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”

Allegory

Matt 13:18 (NIV) "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time... 22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. 23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Paradigm

Luke 12:16 (NIV) And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' 21 This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Acted Parable

Matt 21:18 (NIV) Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

Uses of Parables

- How are parables used by Jesus et al?
 - To capture audience's attention by questions, involvement, surprise, suspense.
 - To sneak by audience's defenses (e.g., 2 Samuel 12:1-4; Luke 7:41-43)
 - To impress a lesson vividly (Jeremiah 9:10-13; Luke 15:11-32)
 - To change one's way of looking at a situation (e.g., Mark 3:10; Luke 15:11-32)
 - To mystify opponents (John 2:18-22; Matt 13:10)
 - To provoke further thought (Matt 13:51-52)

Sneak by Defenses

2Sam 12:1 (NIV) The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 3 but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. 4 Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

Impress a Lesson

Jeremiah 19:1 (NIV) This is what the LORD says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests 2 and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you...Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, 11 and say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.'"

Change Way of Looking

Matt 3:9 (NIV) And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Mystify Opponents

John 2:18 (NIV) Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” 19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” 20 The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Provoke Further Thought

Matt 13:51 (NIV) "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied. 52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

How Do We Interpret Them?



By Observation

- Rather than by bringing to the parables a complete set of interpretive rules, we look at how they operate.
- We compare them with rabbinic parables.
- We look at the OT background.
- A number of misconceptions have arisen by ignoring some facets of their use:

Misconceptions

- Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings.
 - This works well for most parables, but not for the Paradigm parables, like the Rich Man & Lazarus.
- Parables are intended to clarify.
 - True for many parables, but not all. One must reject Matt 13:10ff to hold this.

Matthew 13

10 (NIV) The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

Misconceptions

- Parables are intended to mystify.
 - This is also unbalanced, though true for some parables.
 - Note that ~16 parables precede Jesus' remarks in Matthew 13.
- Parables make only one point.
 - A widespread error that started in Germany in ~1900 with Jülicher.
 - Some do, some don't. Have to decide from details, context, etc.

Some Observations

- From looking at OT parables.
- Parables may take the form of realistic stories (1 Kings 20:39-40) or very contrived stories (Ezekiel 17:3-10).
- Even a realistic story need not be historical (2 Samuel 12:1-4).

Realistic: 1 Kings 20

39 (NIV) As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, "Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, 'Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent {[39] That is, about 75 pounds (about 34 kilograms)} of silver.' 40 While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared." "That is your sentence," the king of Israel said. "You have pronounced it yourself."

Contrived: Ezekiel 17

3 (NIV) Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar, 4 he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders. 5 He took some of the seed of your land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, 6 and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out leafy boughs...”

Not Historical: 2 Samuel 12

1 (NIV) The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 3 but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. 4 Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

Some Observations

- Interpretations may be given (Ezek 37:11) or not (Isa 28:24-28), obvious (Isa 20:2-6) or not (Zech 5:5-11).
- Interpretations may be simple and natural (Isa 5:1-6), or peculiar and complex (Ezk 17:11-21).

Given: Ezekiel 37

(God has just given Ezekiel the vision of the valley of dry bones.)

Ezek 37:11 (NIV) Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'"

Not Given: Isaiah 28

24 (NIV) When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? 25 When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? 26 His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. 27 Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick. 28 Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it. 29 All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.

Obvious: Isaiah 20

2 (NIV) at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot. 3 Then the LORD said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, 4 so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt's shame. 5 Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame. 6 In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?'"

Not Obvious: Zechariah 5

5 (NIV) Then the angel who was speaking to me came forward and said to me, "Look up and see what this is that is appearing." 6 I asked, "What is it?" He replied, "It is a measuring basket." And he added, "This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land." 7 Then the cover of lead was raised, and there in the basket sat a woman! 8 He said, "This is wickedness," and he pushed her back into the basket and pushed the lead cover down over its mouth. 9 Then I looked up—and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth. 10 "Where are they taking the basket?" I asked the angel who was speaking to me. 11 He replied, "To the country of Babylonia to build a house for it. When it is ready, the basket will be set there in its place."

Natural: Isaiah 5

1 (NIV) I will sing for the one I love a song about his vine-yard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a wine-press as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. 3 Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? 5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. 6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

Peculiar: Ezekiel 17

11 (NIV) Then the word of the LORD came to me: 12 "Say to this rebellious house, 'Do you not know what these things mean?' Say to them: 'The king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon. 13 Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land, 14 so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty. 15 But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the treaty and yet escape?' 16 'As surely as I live,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'he shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose treaty he broke. 17 Pharaoh with his mighty army and great horde will be of no help to him in war, when ramps are built and siege works erected to destroy many lives.'"

Some Observations from Rabbinic Parables

- See my PowerPoint talk, "Rabbinic Parables" for sample rabbinic parables and some observations about them.
- Parables vary considerably in complexity. Some make only one point, some have several analogies. If no interpretation is given, study the parable structure to see how detailed the fit is likely to be.

Some Observations from Rabbinic Parables

- As oral teaching devices of experienced instructors, the parables of Jesus and the rabbis don't waste words.
 - Presumably, all words used are either for vividness or to develop the analogies.
- Parables of Jesus & the rabbis regularly make use of stock similes, most from OT background.
 - You should check for the OT figurative usage of any elements in your parable.

Some Observations from Rabbinic Parables

- Parables also make use of features from everyday life familiar to the hearers, but often not to us.
 - We may need to study the cultural elements to aid in interpreting these.
- The formula "A is like B" which often introduces a parable is ambiguous. Though it often compares A with B, it may instead compare A with the whole story.

How Do We Apply Them?



How Do We Apply the Parables?

- Explain the parable story first, then apply it.
- Try to recover the vividness & emotional impact the parable had for its original audience.
- Don't leave the congregation feeling the parable has no application to their own situation.

Explain the Parable First

- In addition to exhortation, a sermon is also a teaching device.
- We want to make the congregation as self-sufficient in Bible study as possible, not spoon-feeding them.
 - Therefore, they need to see where you are getting your lessons from.
- If they see how the application arises from the parable, they are more likely to remember it the next time they read the parable.
 - So they can apply it to themselves or to those they are helping.

Recover Vividness & Impact

- This makes the parable easier to remember and use, not to mention more interesting.
- Use historical-cultural information:
 - Pharisee & Tax Collector: how viewed then?
 - Prodigal Son: impact of father running to meet
 - Two Debtors: explain relative size of debts

Recover Vividness & Impact

- Don't explain away the intended peculiarities! Surprise is often a main point.
 - Crookedness of steward and judge
 - King's cancellation of forgiveness
 - Owner sending son, tenants killing him

Don't Abandon Congregation

- Since your audience is different from Jesus' audience, try to figure out the proper generalization.
 - Crooked Business Manager: even unbelievers have sense enough to take action when they see they're going to lose all; do you?
 - Sower: Gospel will receive different responses; which response are you making?
 - Ten Virgins: will the Lord's delay be too long for you?

Don't Abandon Congregation

- Proper Generalizations:
 - Two Debtors: have you really been forgiven? Does your life show it?
 - Vineyard Workers: Is God unjust in not giving you what others get?
 - Wheat & Weeds: no perfect world, no perfect church till Christ returns; are you wheat or weed?

The End

May God help us to properly interpret and apply Jesus' parables!

