

THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

VERNON D. DOERKSEN

Assistant Professor of Theology and New Testament
Arizona Bible College

The striking importance of the parabolic method of teaching in Jewish thinking can be seen from this passage in the Apocrypha:

But he that giveth his mind to the law of the most High, and is occupied in the meditation thereof, will seek out the wisdom of all the ancient, and be occupied in prophecies. He will keep the sayings of the renowned men: and where subtil parables are, he will be there also. He will seek out the secrets of grave sentences, and be conversant in dark parables (Eccles. 39:1-3).

Our Lord made ready use of the parabolic method of teaching to the extent that Mark comments "but without a parable spake he not unto them" (4:34). The parables are not mere human tales; they are teachings of the Son of God, the One to whom the crowd listened gladly (Mk. 12:37). Of Him it is declared, "...the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:28, 29). Of the parables, Armstrong writes:

Indeed, they are sparks from that fire which our Lord brought to the earth (Lk. xii. 49)--the message of One who was 'a prophet...and more than a prophet' (Mk. xi.9; Lk. vii. 16)¹

Christ's parables are not of mere man. Their higher quality is evidenced by deep earnestness and the lack, yea, total absence of jesting or folly.

By a consideration of the great number of parables, one can note the importance of them in Christ's ministry. Ramm has written, "The importance of the study of the parables is to be found in their sheer number representing a large part of the text of the Gospels."² And he further makes an important observation, "Any doctrine of the kingdom or eschatology which ignores a careful study of the parables cannot be adequate."³

The individual parables have been interpreted in many diverse ways, from the extreme allegorical method of Augustine to the topical method of Chrysostom. Hubbard vividly states, "They have been made the stalking-horse for all kinds of false doctrine and not a little sheer nonsense besides."⁴

It is necessary, therefore, to determine hermeneutical principles for the uncovering of Biblical truth contained in the parables.

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

The definition often learned by Sunday school children is, "A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." This, though true, needs further clarification.

In the Authorized Version "parable" is a translation used of three different terms. The Hebrew word is mashal meaning "a proverbial saying" (I Sam. 10:12; 24:14), "a prophetic figurative discourse" (Num. 23:7), a similitude" or "parable" (Ezek. 17:2), "a poem" (Ps. 49:4), or "a riddle" (Ezek. 17:2).⁵ In the New Testament the word is a translation of two Greek terms parabolē and paroimia. The former is used in the sense of "symbol" or "type" (Heb. 9:9; 11:19), and it is used in the Synoptics to denote "a characteristic form of the teaching of Jesus," (6) and the latter word is used by John (Jn. 10:6) as "dark saying" or "figure of speech" and by Peter (2 Pet. 2:22) as "proverb."

The importance of a definition, and the confusion at this point, can be noted by the varied lists of parables that are assembled. Moulton relates that scholars have made lists varying from "33 to 79 parables."⁷ He concludes, "This divergence of opinion makes it evident that it is not easy to determine the precise extent of the parabolic material."⁸ Standard listings contain about thirty. A. B. Bruce lists 33 parables and eight parable-germs,⁹ and Trench gives 30.¹⁰

In our thinking, the word "parable" generally brings to mind the longer stories of Jesus. Therefore it is well, at this point, to distinguish between parable, allegory, simile, and metaphor.

A metaphor equates one object or person with the other. For instance, John's Gospel contains no parables, in the usual sense, but it gives many metaphors of our Lord, such as, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11) and "I am the true vine" (15:1).

A simile does not equate the two, but it does draw out a comparison. Straton writes, "A simile says that one thing is not another but like

another.”¹¹ An example is, "But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling to their fellows..." (Matt. 11:16ff). The simile and parable are very close together in a parable such as, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took..." (Matt. 13:33). This may be called a parabolic similitude, or an extended simile, though Smith points up the problem of endeavoring to split hairs at this point:

If the illustration of the Mustard Seed is a similitude in Mark, are we to class it as a parable in its Lukan form? And if so, where shall we place Matthew's version of it, which stands half-way between the two?¹²

One further form is the allegory. An allegory is a story where every point is important. The classical illustration is Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. A Biblical example is allegory in Galatians (4:22-31). This is perhaps pressing it too far, but Straton indicates that the Christian soldier in Ephesians (6:14 ff) is an allegory. (13) Thus in an allegory every detail of the story has its counter-part; whereas, in a parable there is usually but one central truth. Terry makes this pertinent observation:

The parable is essentially a formal comparison, and requires its interpreter to go beyond its own narrative to bring in its meaning: the allegory is an extended metaphor, and contains its interpretation within itself.¹⁴

Thus for our purpose, a parable is a similitude or full-length story, true to nature and to life, a picture of something which can be observed in the world of our experience, which was told by our Lord to illustrate a divine truth.

THE PURPOSE FOR THE USE OF PARABLES

In order to draw a proper conclusion in the interpretation of the parables, it is first necessary to determine the reason for Christ's use of the parabolic method. The "Whereunto shall I liken it?" of Christ's teaching method is not without significance. Two specific reasons can be suggested; one a pedagogical, the other a historical one.

The Pedagogical Purpose for Parables

The value of illustration can scarcely be denied in proper teaching. A parable is an illustration. The term itself is from parabalō, "to cast along side." It is a story "cast along side" as an illustration. Several characteristics of the parabolic method of teaching can be noted.

They are Stories. Parables are pictorial, easily grasped, quickly remembered, and attention holders. Mark 4:1, 2 demonstrates this fact. A great multitude had gathered and He taught them by parables. The group stayed all day; finally in the evening they were sent away. It appears that the parabolic method was a good way of keeping their attention (cf. vs. 33-35). The story-telling method is a powerful means of imparting truth. The Lord made effective use of it.

Truths are Taught. It cannot correctly be said that unbelievers did not understand any of the parables. An example is the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Lk. 20:9-18). The parable was told to the people, in the presence of the chief priests, scribes, and elders who had questioned His authority to perform His mighty deeds. At the conclusion the chief priests and scribes sought to kill him "for they perceived that he had spoken this parable against them" (v. 19). Lenski makes an interesting observation at this point: "They realized that the parable was directed against them but did not realize that by their rage they were justifying that parable in its severest part."¹⁵

No doubt, the full implication of the parable, and certainly the prophetic utterance, they did not understand, but it was sufficiently clear for them to desire to kill Him.

Thus it is evident that unbelievers as well as believers were taught truths by means of parables.

They Unfold the Meaning of Scripture. One parable can be mentioned at this point. An inquirer questioned Christ concerning His understanding of "neighbor" as found in Leviticus 19:18. Christ responded by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-36). The parable clearly gives, in illustration form, the meaning of "neighbor."¹⁶ This parable was understood by an unbelieving lawyer who had come to challenge Christ, and the Lord told him to do even as he had understood the Samaritan to have done (v. 37). Geldenhuys writes, "Jesus' answer was so clear and challenging that the lawyer was compelled to acknowledge the deep truth conveyed by it."¹⁷ Thus the truth of Leviticus 19:18 is clearly taught by our Lord.

They Force the Hearer to Think. Though Moule misses the point of Mark 4:11,12, his statement concerning those verses is worthy consideration:

You cannot teach people by spoon-feeding: you must set them a puzzle to think out for themselves; those who start to crack it are getting somewhere. There is no short-cut to understanding.¹⁸

A liberal writes, "The parable is not so much a crutch for limping intellects as a spur to spiritual perception."¹⁹

An illustration of this purpose may be seen in the parable of the two debtors (Lk. 7:41, 42). Evidently Simon, to whom Jesus addressed this parable, was an unbeliever, but he was able to understand the meaning and respond to the question posed by Christ. Christ said, "Thou hast rightly judged" (v. 43). And in the words of A. B. Bruce:

Jesus looks at the woman now for the first time, and asks His host to look at her, the despised one, that he may learn a lesson from her, by a contrast to be drawn between her behavior and his own in application of the parable.²⁰

One of the most difficult parables of our Lord, the parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:1-9), closes with two searching questions (vss. 11, 12). It seems obvious that the questions appeal to the hearer to think that matter through and come to a conclusion.

The Historical Purpose for the Parables

It has been shown that some parables were given to illustrate a truth so that the hearers would grasp the meaning more readily. They were stories of common settings and close to the experience of the Palestinian people. But beyond this, when our Lord was asked why He spoke in parables He responded, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matt. 13:11; cf. Lk. 8:10; Mk. 4:11,12). It would seem that Christ's teaching in parables did not come until His rejection by the nation of Israel was becoming clear, and He saw the need to speak in a manner understood by His true followers, but not understood by the mere curious or those who were hostile to His ministry. Bruce shows that there was a progression toward the parabolic method from beatitudes to metaphors and similes to parables.²¹ Matthew 12 is a turning point in the ministry of Christ. At this point the work of Christ has been attributed to Satan and the leaders of the people have turned their backs on Christ. Matthew 13 introduces the reader to the parables of the kingdom. (22) The coming Inter-Regnum is being unfolded. At the close of the first parable, we are introduced to the purpose of the parabolic method. The truth was revealed to the followers of Christ, but through this method it was concealed to those who were not true believers.

The interpretation of Matthew 13:10-17, Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10 has gone in many directions. The critical view is that it was an addition by the primitive church. Torrey writes on Matthew 13:14ff., "The extended

citation from Is. 6 (LXX) is an early insertion in the Greek Gospel."²³ Dodd explains that "this explanation of the purpose of the parables is an answer to the question which arose after the death of Jesus, and the failure of His followers to win the Jewish people."²⁴ He further states,

But that He desired not to be understood by the people in general, and therefore clothed His teaching in unintelligible forms, cannot be made credible on any reasonable reading of the Gospels.²⁵

Dodd clearly misses the idea of judicial blinding upon unbelieving Israel. Armstrong seems to take the ability of sound scholarship away from evangelicals when he writes, "This passage [Mark 4:11, 12]...has been interpreted in different ways by commentators, though it would be hard to find any authority who regarded it as a verbatim record."²⁶

Jeremias holds a view that is unacceptable, when he teaches:

...That v. 11 f. [Mark 4] is a logion belonging to wholly independent tradition, which was adapted to the word parabolai (v. 10-11), and must therefore be interpreted without reference to its present context.²⁷

It was, in his view, a possible saying of Christ, but out of context.

F. Hauck, in Kittel's Theological Dictionary, holds that these were actual words of Christ, but spoken at a later period in His ministry, and "obviously a distinction has to be made between the theology of Mk. and the original meaning and purpose of the preaching in parables."²⁸

Hunter summarizes the critical view well when he writes:

If the notorious verses in Mark 4:11 f. mean what, at first glance, they appear to mean--then Jesus deliberately used parables to hide God's truth from the masses and made them ripe for judgment--they cannot be words of Jesus (My own view is that they are genuine words but that they do not belong here).²⁹

Hauck expresses this view clearly, "The critical understanding sees in it a later construction which echoes the theology of the community rather than Jesus Himself."³⁰

This unbiblical view must be rejected and the verses accepted as a part of the original autographs. The inclusion of Christ's statement concerning His use of parables in the three Synoptics is significant.

How are we to understand this seeming judgment of closed ears and eyes to understand the parables? As has been noted, some reject it altogether, or say the writer added it as a true saying of Christ but completely out of context.

One can slide over the judicial pronouncement of Christ as Thompson has done:

These words are a little hard to understand at first, but the difficulty disappears when we observe that Jesus was quoting a passage from Isaiah, and that Isaiah was speaking ironically, putting the result as a purpose, as is done so often in Hebrew. Jesus also was speaking ironically.³¹

Or as Moule writes, "They will hear without hearing and see without seeing; otherwise--this is a bit of sarcasm, not meant to be taken in a solemnly literal way--they might actually repent,"³²

Another explanation has been suggested by some, proposing that the hina may rather be translated from the Aramaic as a relative pronoun.³³ As Wright says, it "may here be a mistranslation of the Aramaic particle di, which can be used to express purpose, but was here probably used as a relative pronoun."³⁴

Robertson accepts the words as written and draws this conclusion, "What is certain is that the use of parables on this occasion was a penalty for judicial blindness on those who will not see." (35) It seems clear that this is the only legitimate conclusion that can be drawn. Judicial blindness comes upon those who willfully refuse the gracious invitation for salvation. For obscurity and darkness of this kind, no amount of hermeneutical ability can bring clarity and light. "The wicked purpose of the obdurate not to believe and be saved God is eventually compelled to make also his purpose; that they shall not believe and be saved."³⁶

At this juncture a point must be made clear. The honest, believing inquirer was not shut out from understanding. Kirk makes this pertinent statement, "The Saviour explained to those who asked for explanation."³⁷ Certainly, the whole purpose of our Lord was to bring truth to light, to seek and to save that which was lost, to illumine and enlighten.

...The unreceptive and unworthy multitude stood self-condemned because of their rejection of the message of salvation. Teaching in parables is part of their just punishment, and serves also to keep the door open for those who may become receptive.³⁸

The hina clause of Mark and Luke and the hoti clause of Matthew, point to judicial blinding. Mark and Luke view purpose and Matthew result. Haas writes, "Mark sees in actual occurrence what Matthew portrays as a result." (39) Jeremias quotes Bower, "In the case of divine decisions purpose and fulfillment are identical." (40) Notwithstanding differences in statement, the three accounts are in substantial agreement as to the purpose of the parabolic method at that time. Judicial blindness may seem harsh, but:

If we shrink sensitively from the idea that the 'Lord of heaven and earth' reveals to some and hides from others, we are strangely out of sympathy with the feelings of Jesus and of Paul, who found in this idea not only occasion of resignation, but of adoration and joy. ([Matt.] 11:25 f.; Rom. 9:18 ff; 11:30-36.)⁴¹

It is concluded that often the parables were meant to be examples and illustrations, demonstrating a truth which our Lord was emphasizing to believer or unbeliever. At other times (such as Matthew 13), the parables were a method of veiling the truth from those who would not believe. This was a judicial blinding upon the unbelieving. To those who asked, Christ gave the meaning of the veiled truths.

THE INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of parables is not an easy task. The multiplicity of interpretations testifies to this. Even those who walked daily with Christ had need of asking of Him the interpretation (Matt. 13:26). The interpretation Christ gave of several will help in understanding others.

It is self-evident that one's theological persuasions will also bear on his understanding of the meaning. Ramm makes this worthwhile comment:

In general, the amillennialists and postmillennialists have interpreted certain parables optimistically whereas premillenarians and dispensationalists have interpreted the same parables pessimistically.⁴²

He illustrates this by the two basic interpretations of the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (Matt. 13:31-33).

The growth of the mustard seed to a tree, and the permeation of the meal by the leaven is taken by the former to be a teaching of the powerful growth and spread

of Christianity, and by the latter of the corruption of the professing Church.⁴³

This points out the need to keep ourselves open to the ministry of Spirit and compare our findings with the clear teachings of the rest of Word. Certain principles must be observed.

Study the Context

This point cannot be stressed too forcefully. The modern critical method is to remove the parable from the setting. The liberals generally agree that the parables are original stories of Christ, re-audenced, re-applied, and generalized by later editors. Jeremias' first two sentences are:

The student of the parables of Jesus, as they have been transmitted to us in the first three Gospels, may be confident that he stands upon a particularly firm historical foundation. The parables are a fragment of the original rock of tradition.⁴⁴

Jesus and His Parables by Murray is quoted by Buttrick:

A recent commentator maintains (and there is sound and reverent scholarship to support the plea) that the parables themselves are more trustworthy guides than their scriptural settings. He quotes Wernle with approval: 'Our delight in the parables rises regularly in the exact degree in which we succeed in liberating ourselves from the interpretations of the Evangelists, and yielding ourselves up to the original force of the parables themselves.'⁴⁵

So, in their view, the parable is an actual logion of Jesus, but they are quick to say that the setting into which the writer places it was an addition of the primitive church. "Thus the parables, in the earliest days, had two settings--their original setting in the life of Jesus, and their later one in the life of the early church."⁴⁶ Therefore, it is clear, the liberal has no room for the setting as contained in the Gospels. Bishop Kennedy in his work on the parables virtually ignores the setting.⁴⁷

The setting is needful; though, if the proper interpretation is to be derived, even as Hope quotes James Denney, "A text without its context is nothing but a pretext."⁽⁴⁸⁾ The evangelical scholar will recognize this. Lightfoot is correct in stating, "The background of the parable and the con-

text of the passage in which it appears will help immeasurably standing it."⁴⁹ Another scholar has written:

...Perhaps the best way of studying them is not to isolate them from the general history of His ministry for separate consideration, but rather to look at them as parts of a larger whole in connection with the particular occasions which called them forth.⁵⁰

Keys to the interpretation can be found in the context. Often our Lord supplied the interpretation (Matt. 22:14; 25:13). Sometimes it is supplied by the Gospel writer such as the parable of the Unjust Judge (Lk. 18:1). Luke introduces it thus, "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (v. 1). The Pharisees' murmuring that Jesus ate with Sinners brought forth the three parables of Luke 15.

Often the key to the interpretation can be found in the prologue to the parable. The parable of the Pharisee and Publican (Lk. 18:9-14) is introduced by, "And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others" (v. 9). The parable of the Pounds is introduced by Luke in this fashion:

For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear (Lk. 19:10, 11).

At other times the epilogue of the parable gives a key to the proper interpretation. After the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-12), our Lord said, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (v. 13). "Make to yourselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it fails, they may receive you into everlasting habitations" is the conclusion to the parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:9, Greek).

In some parables, information for interpretation is given in both the epilogue as well as the prologue. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23-34) is introduced by the question of Peter, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" (v.21). Christ told him, "Until seventy times seven" (v. 22). This was followed by the parable. The conclusion to the parable is, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (v. 35).

The context of the parable of the Rich Fool (Lk. 12:16-20) is a further illustration. It was given in response to a man asking Christ to arbitrate the dividing of an inheritance between two feuding brothers (v.14). Christ asked the man, "Who made me a judge or a divider over you?" (v. 14); then he said to those around, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (v. 15). This was followed by the parable to illustrate this truth. Our Lord's conclusion was, "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (v. 21).

Dodd has well written:

The task of the interpreter of the parables is to find out, if he can, the setting of the parable in the situation contemplated by the Gospels, and hence the application which would suggest itself to one who stood in that situation.⁵¹

Learn and Understand the Story

An understanding of life in Palestine is essential to an understanding of many of the parables. Christ told stories which were common to the people of the day. "Most of the stories involve customs, conditions, and ideas peculiar to the Jews of Palestine in Jesus' time and therefore require explanation before an American reader fully understands them."⁵² Jesus lived among the Jewish people and most of the parables were drawn from the natural setting of the poor Jewish peasant. Customs of possession and transference of property are involved in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). The size of the mustard herb (Matt. 13:31,32) must be learned, not from the mustard plant of the California and Arizona hillsides, but from the mustard plant growing in Palestine. The relative value of talents and pence must be known to appreciate the lesson of forgiveness taught by the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23-34). The common practice of broadcasting grain should be familiar to understand the parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-8). The parable of the Tares is incomprehensible without an acquaintance with darnel (Matt. 13:24-30).

Ramm has written:

Studies in the local color of the parables have turned up a rich store of information and one is tempted to say that one should never preach again on any parable until he has made himself familiar with this material.⁵³

Recognize the Christological Nature of the Parables

The central theme of the teaching of Christ was the Kingdom of God. The parables were used to illustrate some of the great truths concerning the kingdom. Hope writes:

For a proper understanding of the parables of Jesus it must always be borne in mind that all of them deal with one great subject, and one great subject only, namely, the Kingdom of God.⁵⁴

It is commonly agreed that they are all illustrations of Christ and His mission. Without an understanding of Christ and His mission, the interpretation of the parables is impossible. Bruce divides the parables into three groups: 1) the didactic parables (e.g. parables of the Sower, the Tares, the Mustard Seed) which relate in a general way to teachings concerning the Kingdom of God; 2) the evangelic parables (e.g. parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Son, the Great Supper) which deal with Christ's love for the sinful; and 3.) the prophetic or judicial parables (e.g. parables such as the Ten Virgins and the Wicked Husbandman).⁵⁵

Even the critic recognizes the kingdom nature of the parables though he interprets them as realized eschatology. The evangelical realizes the two-fold nature of the kingdom. In one sense it is present (cf. Matt. 13), and in another sense it is yet future in fulfillment (the Ten Virgins, the Talents). Proper interpretation demands that we "keep in mind the centrality of the reign of God in all that Jesus said and did."⁵⁶

Determine the Central Point of the Parable

With but few exceptions the stories of Christ were parables, not allegories. (57) A true parable has but one main point. Christ spoke a parable to drive home the truth He was endeavoring to teach. Dodd calls this "the most important principle of interpretation."⁵⁸ He continues, "The typical parable, whether it be a simple metaphor, or a more elaborate similitude, or a full length story, presents one single point of comparison."⁵⁹ A parable might be likened to a wheel, the central point is the hub, and all the spokes point to the hub. If the hub is off center, the wheel will not perform and function properly.

Some have seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son two main points; the joy of the Father over the return of a penitent, and a rebuke to those not accepting a sinner returning from the error of his way. These two ideas can be brought together when it is recognized that the thrust of the parable is the joy which should be expressed when a wayward one returns to God.

Even in the Parable of the Sower, the emphasis is on the soil, not the sower.

The four-fold division represents but one truth, viz., Other things being equal, the growth and fruitfulness of seeds will be determined by the nature of the soil upon which they are cast.⁶⁰

Understand the Details

Recognizing the importance of the one central point, the next thing is to understand the various details of the parable. The parabolic method is not expository but topical and parables must be treated in that fashion. The topical method "looks first of all to find the central thought which the parable was designed to embody, and it treats every detail with reference to its bearing upon this thought."⁶¹ Trench gives this advice:

The expositor must proceed on the presumption that there is import in every single point, and only desist from seeking it when either it does not result without forcing, or when we can clearly show that this or that circumstance was merely added for the sake of giving intuitiveness to the narrative.⁶²

He also writes:

It will much help us in the matter of determining what is essential and what is not, if, before we attempt to explain the parts we obtain a firm grasp of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it; for only seen from that middle point will the different parts appear in their true light.⁶³

The details are included for a purpose, either they have a definite role in the interpretation or ". . .they simply belong to the story as a true transcript of life."⁶⁴ Plummer makes this observation concerning the parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:1-9), "The difficulty and consequent diversity of interpretation are for the most part the result of mistaken attempts to make the details of the parables mean something definite."⁶⁵

Augustine is a notable example of one who endeavored to make the parables "walk on all four." One illustration is sufficient to see his method. In the parable of the Great Supper (Lk. 14:16-24), he interprets the five

yoke of oxen (v. 19) to be the five senses; seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. They are in pairs; two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, the tongue and the palate, and the inner and outer touch. These senses are double; the eyes see light and darkness, the ears hear harsh and musical sounds, the nose smells sweet and offensive odors, the mouth tastes bitter and sweet, and the touch feels smooth and rough.⁶⁶

Against this extreme view is Chrysostom. He taught that the parable had only one central meaning and they were not to be allegorized. In dealing with Matthew 13:34, 35, he writes, "And, as I am always saying, the parables must not be explained throughout word for word, since many absurdities will follow."⁶⁷

Thus, in the history of interpretations there have been these two extremes. It caused Trench to write:

There are those who expect to trace only the most general correspondence between the sign and the thing signified; while others aim at running out the interpretation into the minutest detail; with those who occupy every intermediate stage between the two extremes.⁶⁸

Often it is difficult to determine which is to be interpreted and which is not. Christ gave the interpretation of the parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43) and this may be of help at this point. Note that Christ interpreted for the disciples the meaning of the tares, the sower, the field, the good seed, the enemy, the harvest, the reapers; but, at the same time He does not interpret the meaning of the men who slept, the meaning of sleep, the springing up of the wheat, the yielding of fruit, or the servants.

After dealing with the parables of the Sower and the Tares, Terry concludes:

From the above examples we may derive the general principles which are to be observed in the interpretation of parables. No specific rules can be formed that will apply to every case, and show what parts of a parable are designed to be significant, and what parts are mere drapery and form. Sound sense and delicate discrimination are to be cultivated and matured by a protracted study of all the parables, and by careful collation and comparison.⁶⁹

Thus it is observed that the parts of the parable often play an important role in interpretation, on the other hand they may be given just to

streamline the story. The interpreter must determine the importance of every part.

Certain Warnings

In brief, a few dangers in interpretation should be mentioned. The parables contain much which is doctrinal, and these doctrinal teachings are not to be taken lightly. Ramm has written:

Parables do teach doctrine, and the claim that they may not be used at all in doctrinal writing is improper. But in gleaning our doctrine from the parables we must be strict in our interpretation; we must check our results with the plain, evident teaching of our Lord, and with the rest of the New Testament.⁷⁰

Parables should not be considered primary sources of doctrine. Doctrine may be illustrated and confirmed by parables, but one must be careful to check the interpretation with the whole body of inspired Scripture.

As a further warning, it is needful to be aware that parables are comparisons and illustrations. Every comparison must halt somewhere. The interpreter is to use the parable as an illustration and he must be careful not to interpret it further than the intent of the Lord.

Finally, Christ made it quite clear, many parables cannot be understood by the natural man. These can only be understood by the one who is led by the Spirit (I Cor. 2:9-16). There is a blinding over the hearts of those who willfully refuse the message of our Lord.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Edward A. Armstrong, The Gospel Parables (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 11.
2. Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956), p. 255.
3. Ibid
4. George H. Hubbard, The Teachings of Jesus in Parables (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1907), p. xv.
5. This listing is given by Howard Cleveland, "Parable," The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), p. 621.
6. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: The University Press, 1957), p. 617.

7. W. J. Moulton, "Parable," Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels (N. Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), II, 313.
8. Ibid.
9. A. B. Bruce, Parabolic Teaching of Christ (London: Hodder, n. d.), pp. xi, xii.
10. R. C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d.), pp. v, vi.
11. Hillyer H. Straton, A Guide to the Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 14.
12. B. T. D. Smith, The Parables of the Synoptic Gospel (Cambridge: University Press, 1937), pp. 17, 18.
13. Straton, p. 15.
14. Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics (N. Y.: Eaton and Mains, 1890), p. 189.
15. R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1946), pp. 984, 5.
16. An interesting change takes place in this parable. From the question "Who is my neighbor?" Christ turns it about to "Who acted as a neighbor?" This is a most interesting switch.
17. Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 312.
18. C. F. D. Moule, The Gospel According to Mark (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965), p. 36.
19. A. M. Hunter, "Interpreting Parables," Interpretation, 14:1 (January, 1960), p. 74.
20. A. B. Bruce, The Synoptic Gospels, in The Expositor's Greek Testament, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n. d.), p. 517.
21. A. B. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, pp. 20, 21.
22. Some have suggested that the parable of the Sower was the first parable of Christ. However, A. T. Robertson, Wm. Stevens and Burton, and C. Roney, in their harmonies, give it as the second parable, with the parable of the Two Debtors (Lk. 7:41-43) as the first one.
23. Charles C. Torrey, Documents of the Primitive Church (N. Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p.67.
24. C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (N. Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 4.
25. Ibid.
26. Edward Armstrong, The Gospel Parables (London: Hodder and Steughton, 1967), p. 22.
27. Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 12.
28. Friedrich Hauck, "Parabole," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p.758.

29. Hunter, pp. 73, 4.
30. Hauck, p. 757.
31. Ernest Thompson, The Gospels According to Mark and It's Meaning for Today (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 86.
32. C. F. D. Moule, The Gospels According to Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), p.35.
33. Sherman Johnson, The Gospels According to St. Mark (N. Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p.90.
34. Francis Beare, The Earliest Records of Jesus (N. Y.: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 111.
35. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (N. Y.: Richard R. Smith, 1930), I, p. 286.
36. R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 169.
37. Edward Kirk, Lectures on the Parables of Our Savior (N. Y.: R. Craighead, 1857), p. 14.
38. W. J. Moulton, p. 315.
39. John Haas, Gospel According to Mark, in The Lutheran Commentary (N. Y.: The Christian Literature Co., 1895), pp. 72, 3.
40. Jeremias, p. 14.
41. John A. Broadus, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Valley Forge: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), p. 288.
42. Ramm, P.263.
43. Ibid., pp. 263, 4.
44. Jeremias, p. 9
45. George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928), p. xxiv.
46. Hunter, p. 76.
47. Gerald Kennedy, The Parables (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1960).
48. Norman Hope, "Bases for Understanding," Interpretation, 6:3 (July, 1952), p. 306.
49. Neil Lightfoot, Lessons from the Parables (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 16.
50. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, p. 1.
51. Dodd, p. 14.
52. Elbert Russell, The Parables of Jesus (N.Y.: Young Women's Christian Associations, 1912), p. 10.
53. Ramm, p. 260.
54. Hope, p. 303.
55. Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, pp. 8, 9.
56. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p. 229.
57. It has been argued that the story of the Wicked Husbandmen (Matt. 21:33-45) is an allegory.
58. Dodd, p. 7.
59. Ibid.

60. Hubbard, p. 4.
61. Ibid.
62. Trench, p. 35.
63. Ibid.
64. Russell, p. 15.
65. Alfred Plummer, The Gospel According to St. Luke (N. Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 380.
66. St. Augustine, "Sermons on New Testament Lessons," The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. VI (N. Y.: The Christian Literature Company, 1888), p. 477.
67. Chrysostom, "Gospel of Matthew," The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. X (N.Y.: The Christian Literature Co., 1888), p. 292.
68. Trench, p. 30.
69. Terry, p. 198.
70. Ramm, p. 263.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary
200 Seminary Dr.
Winona Lake, IN 46590
www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu