Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 6
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Parables

Review and Preview

We’re looking at the Synoptic Gospels course here. So far we’ve looked at the historical Jesus, Jewish background, introduction to Jesus and narratives, authorship and date of the Synoptics, and we’re about here to start on section five: parables. It will start with some definitions relevant to parables. There is some confusion that can arise about exactly what a parable is since the definition used in English literature is not quite the same as the range and usage of the word *parable* in the Greek New Testament. On top of that New Testament parable studies have been messed up for about a century because commentators have unwisely followed Eulicher’s claim that parables were quite different from allegories and always only made a single point.

**Parable, definition of**

So let’s have a look. If you look in a standard English dictionary, the dictionary definition would be something like this: A parable is a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle. That is not a bad definition. Of course, a parable doesn’t have to be fictitious, but we have no way 2000 years later to tell whether any or all of Jesus’ parables were fictitious. That a parable is a fictitious [story], however, casts no shadow on the biblical teaching of inerrancy.

The literary definition of a parable is: A parable is an extended simile, whereas an allegory is an extended metaphor. This definition gets us into technical questions as to what a simile is and how it differs from a metaphor. On top of that, it makes a distinction that Jesus and New Testament writers do not make.

The word “parable” as used in the New Testament includes allegories and a number of other figurative genres. For your information, we give the following definitions of simile, metaphor, etc. A simile is an explicit comparison employing words
“as” or “like.” For example, “God is like a king.” A metaphor is in implicit comparison not employing words “as” or “like.” For example, “God is a king.”

A parable is a simile expanded into a story showing how some item, person, etc. is like the story, or like some element in the story.

An allegory is a story picturing concepts and such by means of persons or elements with a story named for each concept. So Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan is probably the most famous of the English allegories in which the chief character is called Pilgrim; and “Progress” we don’t normally catch today because it’s changed meaning, but a “progress” is a journey. So it is a pilgrimage, or Pilgrim’s journey to heaven, etc. You run into all these characters with different kinds of names, and they represent different kinds of problems and encouragements and such that Pilgrim faces in his journey that Christians will face in their spiritual journey as well.

New Testament usage of the word “parable” is a rather broad genre of illustration including parable—in its narrow definition—allegory, similitude, and sample parable, as well as proverb and paradox. We’ve already defined parable and allegory as used in the sentence in the second definition, the literary definition.

What do the other terms here mean? Well, a similitude is something that is longer than a single simile, but not really long enough to be a story. Think of the parable that Jesus gives to the women that puts leaven in dough until it’s all leavened. There is not much action there. I know her kneading the dough might take some time, but it’s not an action-filled story, if you like. It’s just kind of a sentence almost. In the parable of the mustard seed, just the seed grows until it becomes big enough for birds to rest in the branches—a sample parable we mentioned just briefly earlier when we discussed characteristics of Luke. It is a story which illustrates some spiritual truth by giving a sample of it rather than by giving an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, as parables more commonly do.

The parable of the sower and the soils is an earthly story about planting seed with a heavenly meaning about the very reception of the gospel. A sample parable, by contrast, is the Good Samaritan, which gives a sample of what it means to be a neighbor.
Function of Parables

We want to think a little bit now about how parables function. We can say lots of things, but we’re going to construct it here in terms of two things: first of all, parables are stories. They’re designed artistically by the creator of the parable to be interesting and use a number of the standard devices of storytelling. For instance, Amos Wilder, in an article in *Semeia*, pictures parables as stories in a sense that they are brief; so the longest parables in the New Testament are probably something like the Prodigal Son, or something like that, and where it takes up a page of the Bible; whereas a short story typically takes a half a dozen pages at least. So it can be very brief.

Unified: it doesn’t go shooting all over the place. It doesn’t usually have several plots or anything of that sort. There are a limited number of actors. Wilder mentions the rule of two: chiefly, two principal actors. Not all parables satisfy two principal actors, but an awful lot of them would. Some of them, think of the parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, your two principal actors are the father and the son, but then there is the other brother, etc. So there is a little bit more going on there.

They typically are characterized by direct discourse. To make the story vivid, you have the different characters speaking instead of the narrator describing what they said, or something of that sort.

A serial development: it goes from beginning to end without taking a few sidetracks here and there to explain other things going on, and that’s probably partially just a result of being brief and unified and not having multiple plots.

There’s also what’s called a “rule of three,” and that is that typically parables don’t go beyond three items for certain things in order not to complicate things too much. So for instance, in the parable of the pounds, the ruler who’s going to a far country to receive a kingdom in return gives pounds of silver to each of his servants. There are ten of them, but you don’t get a working out of the thing when you get back. You get a working out of three of them. One guy made five pounds with his, one made two pounds with his, and one hid the stuff in the ground. So the rule of three is a common feature to make the thing memorable and not get too complicated.
Repetition: often there is verbal repetition or thematic repetition in the thing, again to help make it easier to remember. This is characteristic not only of parables, but also of other types of storytelling techniques, like fairytales. That there are three brothers and the one brother goes and does this and this, and this and this, and finally this disaster happens. Then there is the second brother that does this and this, and this and this, and you get a lot of the same words that are used in the previous one, etc.

Binary opposition: there is a clear-cut black versus white perspective. These are not discussions of some difficult psychological problem where you’ve got all of these grays and nuances and things of that sort, but very typically, very good or very bad. Not always, but again the parable of the Prodigal Son is a little bit more nuanced than that. Is a little bit nuanced in that, although in the lost coin you have nine coins non-lost and one coin lost, and the sheep you have one sheep lost and 99 sheep not lost; in the Prodigal Son you kind of wonder whether both sons aren’t lost to some extent. But typically there are very strong oppositions, very strong distinctions between the various characters, or events, or things of that sort. There’s a stress that you often have the final resolution of that shows up quite suddenly at the end of the story.

Often there’s a resolution by reversal. This shows up pretty strongly in connection with the parable [of] Lazarus and the rich man where the rich man is now begging and the poor beggar is now feasting.

They’re usually two-level: they are usually an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, which I said the only real exceptions of this are these six parables of Luke, which are sample parables.

Parables are stories, so they’ve got a tight structure to them and these distinctive things that make it easy to see what’s going on in that sense.

Parables are analogies, and the best work on this I’ve seen is a book by John Sider called *Interpreting the Parables*, published by Zondervan back in 1995. He says basically that parables make an analogy between an earthly story and its various features with a heavenly meaning, and its various features and the terminology that’s used in literary studies for verbal analogies, if you like. This is the tenor, that is, the heavenly meaning,
the vehicle, the means by which that tenor is conveyed—and that’s the earthly story. For those of you who get tangled up with complicated terminology, we think of a vehicle we think of [it] as an automobile, or a bicycle, or a motorcycle; it carries the passenger. So here the earthly story carries the heavenly meaning, if you like. Or if you are into paint, the vehicle is the oil or latex base that carries the color and sticks it to the wall. So you have the vehicle, the story, the tenor, what the meaning of the story is, then one or more points of resemblance, which are the analogies that you can make between the earthly story and the heavenly meaning.

Almost all of Jesus’s parables are what we call analogies of equation; that is, this is to this equals this is to this. Let’s take a look at some of those. Starting with an example from Shakespeare in *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1, line 37. Leer is complaining, “As flies are to wanton boys, so are we to the gods.” So that’s the vehicle; that’s actually both of them. That’s the two analogies. Here are wonton boys, which in early English means boys who are mischievous, or something of that sort, and the way they treat flies is analogous to the way the gods treat humans. He actually explains it in the last line, “They kill us for sport.” So the boys kill flies for fun, and the gods kill humans for fun. You can see it’s not a Christian worldview that Shakespeare is presenting as Leer’s view on the matter. So, the tenor, the relation of gods to humans, the vehicle, the way boys treat flies, if you like. Point of resemblance, they kill us for their sport—it said explicitly. So point of resemblance: if you try to construct the point so that it works for both sides of the analogy, it’s in respect of how these people are mistreated. So the gods mistreat humans just as the boys mistreat the flies. He shows how that can be diagrammed, and that’s not easy to be verbalized.

An example of Jesus’ parables is the Wheat and the Weeds, Matt. 13. The story: a man sows good seeds in his field. His enemy sows weeds on top of them. When what has happened is discovered, the man’s slave wants to remedy the situation right away by pulling up the weeds, but the owner has him wait until the harvest. So that’s the vehicle.

What is the tenor? Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like this. So Jesus’ subject is the kingdom of heaven, and he’s telling us about certain features of its future
history from the time that Jesus’ teaching. There’s going to be this analogy between this 
man sowing good seed and the enemy sowing bad seed, with the discovery and the desire 
to rip it up, and the owner having to postpone it until the harvest, etc. So the vehicle is the 
story above. Jesus is telling about the kingdom of heaven, heavenly subject, by means of 
an earthly agricultural story of an enemy’s attempt to spite his neighbor by ruining his 
crop with weeds.

Point of resemblance: this story has a number of them, not just one. Let’s stop and 
think what they might be. Well, the owner is to the enemy as God is to Satan. Or you can 
make an analogy between what the owner does. Just as the owner sows good seed into his 
field, so God puts sons of the kingdom in the world. Another point of resemblance is just 
as the enemy puts weed seeds in the field, so Satan puts his people into the same 
situation. You can actually make a bunch of those sorts of things, but you’re probably 
going to end up with 4 or 5 significant points of resemblance that are going on here. 
That’s basically the picture we have here. That’s how a parable functions as an analogy.

I’m going to give you a quick walk through of the parables in the Synoptic 
Gospels. I will also throw John in here so you can get a feel for that, structured in terms 
of their content. We will start out with Christological parables; there are a number of 
those: the strong man defeated in Matt 12, Mark 3, and Luke 11. You have the analogy 
there as the strong man who can only be defeated by a stronger man, so Satan can only be 
defeated by someone stronger than him: implication—Jesus. So what’s going on here is 
this demon exorcism, if you like.

There is the rejected stone in Matt 21:14-22: there Jesus was really just 
commenting on the Old Testament passage—on the Psalm 118 if it is indeed that psalm 
he is quoting. “The stone the builders rejected, the same has become the chief 
cornerstone,” and he leaves it to the audience to figure out what the analogy is. Jesus, if 
you like, is this rejected stone; rejected because it’s the wrong shape,. It’s not the shape 
they expect, or something of that sort, would be a speculation; that would be my guess.

The builders represent the powers that be in that state at this particular time, and 
yet this stone turns out to be the chief stone in the architect’s plan. It’s the chief
cornerstone, or the cap stone, and there have been various ways suggested to handle that kind of thing.

The Christological parable, or the door of the sheep in John 10. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life in John 14. He’s the way into the sheepfold and such. The good shepherd is also in the same passage. Jesus the vine dresser, the father of the the vine dresser in John 15, verses 1 and 2. Those would all be examples of Christological parables. They’re mainly about who Jesus is, if you like.

There are the parables lost and found, and that’s the lost sheep found in Matthew 18, but also in Luke 15. Then also in Luke 15, the lost coin and the lost son, and they are all doing the same sort of thing. The Pharisees are complaining that Jesus is concerned about all of these wicked people—prostitutes, and tax collectors, and things of that sort. Jesus basically says, “Well, if you owned a hundred sheep wouldn’t, you be concerned if one got lost; and when you found it, wouldn’t you want your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you?” So God is seeking the lost, and when he finds it, he’d like you to rejoice with him instead of complaining.

Then the lost coin does the same sort of thing, but now using the woman and the lost coin. With the lost son you are kind of sneaking up on the Pharisees and all of these, and now [he] brings in another character, and that is the non-lost son and he has the Pharisees’ attitude. I think the attempt here is to get the Pharisees to see themselves as God sees them, whether they do or not. How many of them were there, we don’t know. There are the Parables are lost and found.

Parables of forgiveness and mercy: the unmerciful servant, Matthew 18:21-35, is about one who has received all this mercy from his master and then doesn’t have mercy on the person that owes him money.

Another one is the day laborers who complain about the fact that they worked all day but some of these only worked just an hour. This illustrates sort of the idea that I want grace but I don’t want anybody else to have grace, and I certainly don’t want them to get more than I have—[that] sort of thing is lurking there.
The two debtors in Luke 7: which debtor would show more love for the money lender who forgave both their debts? Well, you would think the one that had the larger debt, and Jesus is basically saying, “Well, you know you, Simon, [you] think you’ve got a small debt, and you act like it. But the woman thinks she has a big debt, and she acts like she’s been forgiven a big debt, and she really has been, etc.”

The unprofitable servants in Luke 17: they somehow expect to be treated as no longer servants because they have done these things. He is trying to remind us that in some sense our relationship to God is like that of slaves to a master: that’s what we owe the person. That is not appreciated much in a culture without slavery, but does picture a real feature of the real relationship of God to man.

Parables on prayer: the son asking bread Matthew 7, Luke 11; the friend at midnight, Luke 11; unjust judge, Luke 18; are all on God gives us the gifts that we really need rather than the corrupt ones we think we want. God will reward persistence in prayer. If this widow persisted and got what she wanted even though the judge was unjust, how are we treating God when we give up in something? We are treating God as worse than the unjust judge, if you like.

Parables of transformation: the new patch on the old garment, or the new wine on the old wineskins, showing that something new has come here. These feature the regeneration power of the gospel and that sort of thing.

Parables of stewardship are the parable of the lamp and the bushel; and what’s the lamp for,—it is to lighten a room if you don’t put a bushel over it. A crooked business manager who, what shall we say, gives his master’s debtors a break by reducing their indebtedness. We are both to resemble and be different from the crooked business manager. An unfaithful upper servant begins to lord it over the lower servants.

The Parables of Talents are very similar. Wealth is entrusted to us, and it is our responsibility to use it properly and the dangerous temptation to play it safe, to hide it instead of working and risking with it. The parable of day laborers we had had earlier somewhere; [it] was a parable of forgiveness and mercy, but also stewardship. A parable of vineyard workers: these people who want to get the vineyard for their own and they
are ready to kill the heir. Just, in some sense, as the Jewish leaders wanting to run Israel their own way are ready to kill the messiah when he shows up.

Parables of invitation and rejection: children in the market place and some stubborn, crabby children who won’t play funeral [music] and won’t play marriage [music], and Jesus and John the Baptist are like that. John is offering [a] funeral, and Jesus is offering [a] wedding, and the crowds are the crabby kids who won’t go either way.

Parable of the two sons, the one who says he won’t go work in his father’s field, then repents and does, and the one who says he will but doesn’t do it. [this parable] contrasts the tax collectors and harlots, who started rebellious but repent, and the Pharisees who claim they are really doing God’s will, but they never do it.

The great supper and the marriage of the king’s son: we are going to look at the marriage of the king’s son here by and by, so I will not say further about that. Both of those use the theme that parallels the messianic banquet idea. The offer of the gospel [is] like an invitation to a banquet and [shows] the irrationality of some of the people invited in turning the banquet down.

There are parables of a second coming: the vultures and the carcass. How do you tell where a dead body is out in the wilderness? Well, you can see the vultures circling overhead from a mile or two away. You don’t have to be near the carcass. So when Jesus returns, you’ll know it; you don’t have to be standing right where he comes.

Fig tree heralds summer signs preceding the end, like the new leaves and buds on the fig tree herald the coming of summer.

Householder and the thief show the importance of keeping guard, if you like. Jesus’ return will catch you unaware.

Parable of the porter the fellow who needs to be up to open when the master returns from the feast etc. The waiting servants in Luke 12 are similar, and the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25, where the wise virgins have extra olive oil with them just in case things take longer than expected. The foolish virgins don’t take any extra with them. It does take longer than expected, and they aren’t ready when the time comes.
Well, there’s a huge list of parables of mourning and judgment. John the Baptist’s parable, the axe at the roots, pictures a farmer about ready to cut down a tree, and he’s taking a stance; and those of you who have used an axe properly at least know that you set the axe edge against where you want to strike initially to get your stance right, your distance right and everything, and then you draw it back and whack it. Jesus says the axe is already set at the roots, ready for the stroke. You need to, and actually John the Baptist says this, you need to be ready.

John also gives us this warning in Matthew 3:12 of the guy coming to winnow the grain, and his winnowing fan is in his hands. So he’s about to carry out the judgment that separates the wheat from the chaff.

We’ve got the parable of the tasteless salt; parables of fire, salt, and peace; and the advice of Jesus to settle out of court.

The picture of the eye as the light of the body: the way that you see is when your eye is working, so spirituality we need to be able to see spiritual things. Somewhat similar is the idea of the blind leading the blind in Mark 4 and Luke 6, if you like. We want to make sure that whoever is leading us knows what is going on. Another is the idea of doing an eye repair—taking the spec out of another’s eye while you’ve got the log in your eye already.

The wise and foolish builders: the foolish builders build without a proper foundation, and their work is washed away. Wise builders build on the rock, and this comes at the end of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain. It is basically saying that the people who take to heart what I’ve said and obey it, they’re the wise builders, et cetera.

The empty house in Matthew 12 and Luke 11 are about when the demon has been driven out of someone. It is like when we say squatters have been driven out of a house. It’s empty now, but you need to fix it up and guard it so it doesn’t get refilled by the new set of squatters. I think it is a warning to the nation of the good things that have happened with the coming of Jesus, and that they need to respond.

“Every plant not planted by my Father will be rooted up” is another warning and
judgment kind of parable. The barren fig tree is a parable in Luke 13 and, you’ll remember, is an acted parable. Elsewhere the same sort of thing is found with the tower builder, thinking in terms of what something is going to cost and taking a resolution, and looking for whether you’ve got the resources in that situation as well.

The king going to war is a very similar kind of parable. Will a king with only 10,000 men go to war against a king with 20,000? He has got to at least think it through, you know, whether he can do an ambush, or something of that sort, perhaps, to offset the numbers and allow him to win. Anyway, if it doesn’t look any good, he had better go and try to make peace rather than fight the battle and get wiped out.

The parable of the wicked tenant farmers is about those who don’t want to pay the rent and are going to kill the heir, if you like.

Parable of the sheep and the goats: as the shepherd separates his sheep and his goats, so God, at Jesus’s return, is going to separate those who are really his from those who are not.

We have parables of kingdom: the parables of the sower, tares, the growing seed, the mustard seed, the leaven, the treasure, the pearls, the dragnet, and then at the end of them the old and new treasures of the household being brought out of his house. These are telling us something about the nature of Jesus’ kingdom. I have a PowerPoint on that that goes into some detail and suggests that there appears to be a sequence in this whole thing that we’re looking [at]: a planting, a growing, a harvesting, et cetera. We’re looking at something about the progress of the Gospel, probably, typical [of] the progress [of] the Gospel in different societies and what sort of thing happens there.

The illustrative parables of Jesus: I’ve said just a word or two about those already in connection with Luke, and I won’t say any more except list them for you again. The Good Samaritan, the rich fool, the lowest seats in the banquet, the dinner invitation on who you should invite to your banquet, the rich man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the tax collector, all in Luke 10 through 18.
Acted Parables

Then we’ve got a category we haven’t said anything about so far, and they are the acted parables. This is where the person, instead of saying anything—you might get a hint or two—but he does something, and it’s something fairly unusual. So most people think that Jesus’ cursing the fig tree is pretty unusual; what’s that about? Is he impatient or something? Well, it’s an acted parable. That doesn’t mean Jesus wasn’t really hungry and wasn’t disappointed that there were no figs on the tree; but the tree did have leaves at the time of year, and the presence of leaves should indicate that there should be some early figs on it. It’s basically an acted parable of God’s reaction to Israel professing to be righteous, but not showing the fruits of it, if you like.

The cleansing the temple is a very similar parable. And, in fact, it is interwoven to some extent with the cursing of the fig tree, and how it turns out overlaps with the cleansing of the temple. In the cleansing of the temple Jesus is expressing his anger at the misuse of [the] temple; and in an acted parable, I think of God’s attitude towards not only Israel’s misuse of the temple, but their misuse of their privileges, if you like. As I mentioned once somewhere back earlier in this series, I think that it picks up the Malachi idea of “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. Who can abide the day of his coming?” et cetera.

Jesus at 12 in the temple is probably an acted parable of some sort. He is saying something about who he is. His father, his real father, is God, and so you would expect to see him is his father’s house, et cetera.

Jesus’s baptism is probably an acted parable as well. John who knew Jesus as a child, and certainly knew something about his character, said, “I need to be baptized by you.” Jesus says, “Let’s do this to fulfill all righteousness.” One of your more imaginative reformed theologians of this last century, whose name has evaporated from my mind at the moment, basically suggested that baptism is a picture of judgment as well as cleansing: of pouring out of wrath, or being overwhelmed by God’s judgment, et cetera. So Jesus is allowing God’s judgment to come upon him to fulfill all righteousness. He doesn’t need to be cleansed, but God’s wrath is going to be poured out on him, if you
like.

Jesus healing on the Sabbath, I think, is kind of again an acted parable, and the remark in Mark 3:1-6 points in this direction. It’s telling us something about Jesus. Well, it’s telling us something about what the Sabbath is, too. The Sabbath is about redemption, and so healing is about redemption. “The Father has been working on the Sabbath, and so am I.” And the Son of Man allusions to the Daniel passage, I think, is “Lord also of the Sabbath.” So he is the one who is going to legislate on all of these things. The Ancient of Days has given him the commission to have an eternal, universal kingdom.

Healing with clay is rather interesting when you remember how the guy’s vision is healed by Jesus spitting and making clay and putting on his eyes. I think [this] is an allusion to the making of Adam in Genesis, where the Hebrew verb there is the verb from “molding clay.” He shaped him as he took the dust of the earth and formed Adam out of it. The term “formed” there in the King James is actually the verb for “to make with clay,” as in pottery and that sort of thing. So I think we’re looking at that there, and it is expressing something about who Jesus is.

Writing on the ground is not explained for us in John 7:53-8:11. Although there is [a] textual question about that particular incident, I think it’s a real event that was known from oral tradition and got put in because it was too good to pass up, or something [like that]. It probably refers to God writing with his fingers on the stone tablets, but that’s a guess; but a lot of these things are basically intended to make people think, just like the proverbs are. You know, what’s that about? Well, think about it a while, and turn it around, and look at it, and you’ll learn something, even if you don’t figure out exactly what it’s about.

The triumphal entry, I think, is an acted parable. The anointing of Jesus occurs several times in his ministry. He’s the anointed one, so these people anoint him, although they’re not even thinking about that. His foot washing is something the lowest slave would be assigned to do typically, and Jesus takes the place of the lowest slave because that’s what he’s going to do: he’s going to take our punishment for us coming up, et cetera.
So, this is a kind of the tour of how the parables work, and most of the parables, I think; I tried to get all the parables in the New Testament there in that particular list. I think we’ll stop here and come back and pick up one particular parable. We’ll look at the parable of Marriage Banquet in Matthew 22, verses 1-14. You’ll get a chance to kind of walk through and see how parables function in this particular case.