

## Parables

In the mountainous regions of northern Italy there was a small monastery which overlooked a sub-Alpine village. Every day a monk would wind his way down the mountain path to say mass in the village church. One cold fall day, he noticed a bird lying by the path, nearly expired from the cold. He looked at the bird and then without hesitation, put it inside his cloak, next to his warm body. By the time he entered the village church, the bird, revived by the warmth of the monk and his clothes, had begun to wiggle about rather freely inside. The monk knew that it would not do to take the bird into church with him, so he began to look about for an alternative. As he pondered what to do, he noticed a great steaming cow pie, providentially placed in the village square by one of the dairy cattle who had departed for the meadows beyond the village. Gently but firmly he put the bird into the warm and gelatinous mixture. He went into the church. The bird was further revived by the warmth of the cow pie, so much so that it was now no longer wiggling but actually chirping and singing merrily. An old fox happened to be patrolling the wall around the village that day and he saw and heard the bird. He jumped off the wall and quick as a flash, leapt into the piazza and snapped the bird out of the cow pie. There are three points to this story. First, the one who puts you into it is not necessarily your enemy. Second, the one who gets you out of it is not necessarily your friend. Third, when you find yourself up to your beak in this stuff, it's best to keep your mouth shut.

I just told a parable, and you laughed at it. Parables were originally somewhat like jokes in that they often surprise people. The ending is uncertain. That's why jokes make us laugh. Parables don't ordinarily make us laugh, but they do surprise us. In that way, they're like jokes. Secondly, they're kind of like illustrations and yet they seem to be more than illustrations. I said there were three points to this story. This story was first told by a Christian scholar addressing a group of young and older Christian scholars, most of whom teach at secular universities. The man who told this parable teaches at a major university, and he was speaking to university teachers. What did the parable mean in that setting? What was the scholar saying to his audience? Is it possible that he was saying if you want to survive in the university world you'd better keep your mouth shut? It seems like a counsel of despair. But the man who told that parable heard it from the president of the university where he taught, who told it to an incoming group of first-year university professors. What did it mean coming from the mouth of the university president? Was it a threat? Did it mean, "Toe the line; keep your mouth shut if you want to survive"?

This leads us to the question: what are parables? They are stories. However, they're not just stories. They are stories that make a point, a point that is often highly dependent upon the context in which the parable is told. That's true of this not very profound story of the bird and the cow pie; it's certainly true, much more profoundly, of the parables of Jesus.

The parables in Matthew 13 that we explored in the last lesson told us that the kingdom of God is like a seed that a sower or farmer sows. It comes quietly and is easily rejected; it's like something that could be trampled and broken with surprising ease. The kingdom of God is also like a seed field or a field in which good seed and bad seed have both been sown so that the good seed (the seed of God, the seed of the kingdom) grows, but meanwhile, as this world progresses, the bad seed (the seed of the evil one) grows up along side it. That's the world in which we live. The kingdom doesn't come with mighty armies or great power but quietly, like a seed. And we will never in this life live free from strife and struggle with evildoers. Nonetheless, the rest of those parables of the kingdom teach that the kingdom is worth everything we have; it's a pearl of great price. Those are the parables of the kingdom.

Now we will consider the parables in Luke 10-15, which I will call "the people parables." But before we do, let's think about what parables are and how they work.

To define parables, first consider the biblical language for parables. In Greek the word for parable is *parabole*. But this word doesn't exactly mean what we mean by a parable. For example, when we think of a parable, we think of the big parables like the Good Samaritan or the sower. But in the Greek language and in the Bible, the word is actually used to refer to riddles or short sayings like, "How can the blind lead the blind?" That's called a parable. It's just a little saying, an image or a metaphor. Some very short, simple stories. The Hebrew word behind the Greek word for parable is *mashal*, meaning a dark saying, a figure of speech, a riddle, an oracle or even a taunt, rather like a dark joke. So it is not possible to understand what a parable is from the words. The words only give us a few ideas about what a parable is.

A standard English definition for parable is, "An earthly story that conveys moral or spiritual principles." This is true, but there is more to it. Another way of thinking about parables is that the story holds up a mirror to the real world. Jesus told stories that weren't true, but they explained the way things really are. It is similar to the way a good fictional novel can describe characters that are as real as anybody you've ever known. About 50 years ago, a man named C. H. Dodd defined a parable as, "A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, leaving the mind in enough doubt about its significance to tease it into active thought." Dodd brought out some very good points in his definition. First, almost every parable has something startling or strange. It starts off with nature, with ordinary things, and then something extraordinary happens that grabs our attention. We can make sure the right thing grabs our attention. In the parable of the sower we could be arrested by the fact that he's throwing seeds in the road, but actually that's commonplace; that's the way everybody did it. It's just saying he threw it on the part of his field that people were walking on. The really strange thing is that some of the fruit yielded 100 fold.

There is almost always something odd in a parable, something that makes us wonder what the parable is about. We've heard Jesus' parables so often that we don't notice it. But the two new parables we've considered recently—the one about the monks and the baskets and the second one about the monk and the bird—brought up questions about the meaning of the stories. What was the point? When Jesus initially told His parables, each one made people wonder, "What does He mean? What is He driving at? What's the point?" To understand and exegete the parables, we need to recapture that sense of wonderment. To teach the parables we must capture their vividness and strangeness again, or else we will just be walking through them point by point.

Reading through the Gospels we see that parables don't all work the same way. It's useful to distinguish between the parables in Matthew and Mark and the parables in Luke. The parables of Matthew and Mark are more about the kingdom of God, while the parables in Luke are about the life of discipleship, about the people who are following Jesus. Kingdom parables tend to be more allegorical, that is to say, one thing stands for another. For instance, in the parable of the sower, the sower is the Son of Man, the seed is the Word, the field is the world, the seed that gets a good response represents the sons of the kingdom, etc. The parable of the wheat and tares does the same thing.

But there is not so much allegory, point by point, in the parables of Luke. They are usually fairly simple. Somebody in the parable represents God and the way He does things or Jesus and the way He does things, and somebody represents a disciple. There might be someone who is trying to decide or who is opposed to the cause of God. The parables of Luke put us in a story, not about the kingdom but about us and about the way we respond to God.

The parables in the last week of Jesus' ministry tend to be clearer and more confrontational, such as the parable of the tenants (or the wicked tenant farmers), in Matthew 21:33-46. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and did everything he could to make it a good vineyard. He rented it out to workers, to tenants. When he sent servants to collect the rent, the tenants beat one servant, killed another, and stoned a third. He sent more servants but the tenants did the same. Finally, he sent his son saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they conspired to kill him to get the vineyard. Jesus told this parable during the last week of His life in the temple districts and it's not hard to see who He was talking about. God is the owner of the vineyard and the Jews are the tenants of the vineyard. The prophets were the servants sent to collect the rent. The son in the parable represents Jesus Christ. The son's murder by the tenants represents the crucifixion of Christ, the murder of Christ after He was thrown out. So, the parables in the last week of Jesus' life tend to be controversial and very clear, functioning as a warning to His opponents and sometimes an encouragement to His disciples.

Parables are sometimes classified by what they are about, when they are told, and who hears them. These are all valid considerations, but that basic three-fold distinction will not take you a long way in understanding how different types of parables tend to work. A man named Craig Blomberg has written a valuable book called *Interpreting the Parables* in which he provides substantial insights. It came out in 1990, and was an enormous advance in the history and method of interpreting parables. He not only explained how to interpret the parables, but he also surveyed the way people had been doing it and examined what they did, and how they talked about what they did. Blomberg's insights are well-worth consideration.

First, we should note the work of an early twentieth century man named Jülicher, who said that every parable has one moral or ethical point, not so much a spiritual point. Jülicher was pretty close to old liberalism. He basically believed that the main idea of the Christian faith is that God is the father of us all, we are all brothers, and all of our souls are of infinite worth. To be a Christian you live a good life. Jülicher also criticized people who applied wild allegorization to the parables, such as those who read meaning into every aspect of the parable of the Good Samaritan: the inn represents the church, the oil poured on the man's wounds represents the Holy Spirit, the two denarii represent 2000 years because a denarius is a day's wage and a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, so Jesus is going to return in the year 2000. Jülicher did a serious job of pointing out the excesses in allegorical interpretation. But to point out an excess is not to prove that people were doing things entirely wrong. The fact that some people overeat doesn't mean we shouldn't eat at all, does it? So if some people over-allegorize, it doesn't mean allegory is wrong.

Blomberg said almost all Christian interpreters have taken parables as allegories for 2000 years. Furthermore they were fundamentally correct in doing so, even though they may have shown a lack of restraint and allegorized too many things. So they didn't err by taking things allegorically but by allegorizing the wrong features or too many features.

Blomberg makes the point that Jesus allegorized parables. We saw this in Matthew 13. Jesus said the sower is the Son of Man, the field is the world. He allegorized His own parables several times so we know that He intends some things to stand for other things. Blomberg also noted that the best exegetes allegorized, even those writing after Jülicher and those who admired him. They would agree not to allegorize, and then two pages later they were allegorizing. But they were allegorizing with restraint, saying, for example, that the Good Samaritan stands for disciple, and the prodigal son stands for people who stray from God. Blomberg calls this low-level allegory, simple or restrained allegory, allegory on just a few points. This is vital to understanding how to proceed in interpreting parables.

Another extremely important point of Blomberg's, but one that may not make a lot of sense at first, is that when you try to allegorize you need to realize this is just a device for communication. First, notice extravagant details. When the story twists in an unexpected direction, look for allegory there. He also says you need to formulate and test possible relationships, for example, "A" is to "B" as "a" is "b," seeing if the story corresponds to something in reality with regard to X. Specify in what regard the allegory takes place. In the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, the host of the banquet is to the banquet guests as Jesus is to the Jews. The expected guests did not come to the party so He invited others. This seems to agree with what really happened in history.

Here's another one using the formula "A" is to "B" as "a" is to "b" with regard to "X." In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is to the lawyer as the Good Samaritan is to the man who is beaten up and lying in the road in that one who seems to be an opponent or an unexpected person comes to his rescue. Now you see what this one is saying, this one is saying that Jesus is the Good Samaritan, and when He tells the story of the Good Samaritan, He's talking about Himself, not just about disciples. So from the perspective of the man who's lying there beaten up and half-dead, if he were a Jew, he would be astonished that a Samaritan would be helping him, just as the lawyer is spiritually more than half-dead and would be astonished if he realized that Jesus was trying to help him. After all, he came to criticize Jesus. He came to trap Jesus and to test Jesus and to prove Jesus wrong by asking him questions. This is a formulation. To formulate something is not to prove that it's right but to prove that it's possible. Responsible exegesis, responsible Bible interpretation, does not rest on having ideas, but on testing and proving ideas. That's what we all have to do if we want to interpret the Bible.

Blomberg also says that most parables have more than one point; they usually have as many points as they have major characters. For instance, if you have a parable with three characters, there will be three points. As an example, consider the parable of the lost sons: the father is like a God figure, so there should be something learned about God; the younger brother, whom we call the prodigal son, teaches something about the way God treats wicked people; the older brother, who is pretty confident that he's a good guy, can't understand why people are being so kind to the younger brother, and from him we'll learn something about how God treats people in general. There are three main figures and three points, as Blomberg says.

The largest number of parables is found in the Gospel of Luke, so this is where we will focus our study. In Luke, the parables are mostly about people, about disciples, rather than about the kingdom. They are found primarily in Luke 9:51 – 19:44. Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar to each other most of the time, but there are not more than a dozen verses that appear in this section of Luke that are also found in Matthew and Mark.

Luke 9:51 – 19:44 is called the travel narrative, and here we find our most popular, beloved parables. Beginning in Luke 9:51, we see Jesus "setting His face to Jerusalem." Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem and was training His disciples, saying to them things like, "The Christ must suffer many things, must go to the cross and be crucified." They were boggled; they couldn't understand that. Jesus had to patiently explain things to them, defining who He was, who they were, and what it means to be a disciple. As He did this, He presented many of the main themes that occur in the Gospel of Luke, in something like a big parable.

First, the parable of prayer in Luke 11 and 12. Luke was clearly interested in prayer. You could even say Luke is the Gospel of prayer. Only Luke tells us that Jesus prayed before calling His disciples. Jesus prayed before, during, and after the time of His baptism and temptation. Luke 11 tells us that it was His prayer and His disciples noticing Him at prayer that led them to ask for the Lord's Prayer. Matthew's



account of the Lord's Prayer is just part of Jesus' teaching, in the middle of the three chapters that comprise the Sermon on the Mount. But Luke describes that one day the disciples saw Jesus praying in a certain place, and they asked Him to teach them to pray, just as John the Baptist taught his disciples.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus teaches us how to actually pray, which is something that we need. When it comes to our prayer lives, we have a certain liability—we're doers, people of action. Being a person of action is good by itself, but in the spiritual realm we can be led astray by being too interested in action, in method, in techniques. In prayer literature, there's a heavy emphasis on methods of praying. The idea is that by having a specific method of prayer, we will pray more and thus improve our prayer lives. But methodology doesn't get to the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is not simply what we say or how we say it. The heart of the matter is our spirit as we pray. In Luke 11:1-13, Jesus addresses both matters.

Jesus begins with the words we use when we pray and the first thing that He says is "Father." So in prayer we pray to the one who is our Father. Second, we pray "Hallowed be Your name." That is to say, we pray that God's name would be revered. The broader meaning of "Hallowed be Thy name" is that it is a prayer for our entire sanctification. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. When we pray "Hallowed be Your name," we're also praying that Christ's name be hallowed through our lives. When we say or do anything that indicates to outside observers that we are followers of Christ, our actions had better back that up. "Your kingdom come" is a prayer that God would manifest His reign in Jesus Christ today. We're praying that God's reign would be clearly manifested in the world and in ourselves first.

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we are asking that God would give us what we need for that day, by that day. It does not mean, "Give us this day our daily desires." It is a prayer that God, as our Father, would supply what we need each day to stay alive, that God would supply what's necessary. We also pray that He would forgive us as we forgive those who have sinned against. We don't pray that God would forgive *because* we forgive. We pray that He would forgive *as* we forgive. Since we have tasted God's forgiveness in our own lives, we are now forgiving to others because His grace has transformed us. We want Him to demonstrate that He sees that transformation in us by forgiving us yet more. Last, we pray that we would not be led into temptation. We're not asking that we would never be tested, but that we would never be tested beyond what we're able to bear and that the testing would always allow a way of escape. We're asking that we would never be led into a situation that is overwhelming to us.

So the Lord's Prayer teaches us what to pray; it gives us the content. But we all know that there are times when we know what to pray, but we don't follow through. Knowing what to pray isn't enough; the heart also has to be in the right place. There are times when we know we should pray but we cannot bring ourselves to it. Perhaps this is because we have had some experience of praying about that thing without getting an answer and now we are pessimistic about the likelihood that God will hear our prayer. It is hard to take "no" as an answer, so we stop praying altogether. Jesus takes that seriously. He knows you can't just can't pray the words. He knows we also have to have the proper attitude for prayer.

So He tells another parable. In Luke 11:5-8 we read:

"And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.'"

Here we have a man in Israel who has been walking day and night over hill and valley, and he arrives at midnight, exhausted. It is surprising that he has come at midnight. That's not when guests are supposed to arrive. He is tired, and he realizes he knows somebody in this village so he goes to the house. In that society, when someone came to your house you absolutely had to show him good hospitality because there weren't other options. The poor guy is hungry, tired, and thirsty. You must take care of him. But the problem is that in this particular house on this particular night, there is almost no presentable food. The fellow has nothing proper to set before him and so he goes to the house of someone else in the village and explains his problem. The one inside tells him not to bother him, that the children are in bed and the house is closed for the night.

These are terrible excuses. But Jesus says that though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's shamelessness – that's a literal translation – he will get up and give him as much as he needs. A literal translation of verse 8 indicates that it is not about the man outside, but it is about the one who is sleeping – the sleeper. Traditionally, most translations indicate that the boldness belongs to the one who is asking. But that's wrong. The boldness does not belong to the asker, it belongs to the sleeper. All of verse 8 is about the sleeper. All the action is from the man inside. The man inside will not arise, will not give, is not a friend and yet because of his – not boldness, that's the wrong translation, because of his shamelessness he'll get up and give him as much as he needs.

Now, how can shamelessness or an interest in shame motivate? If the sleeper didn't give the asker the food he requested, the asker would have just moved on to the next house to ask for help. In the process, he would say something like, "I hate to bother you, but the first neighbor over there wouldn't help me out. So I had to come to you." So if only because of a desire to avoid being put to shame, the sleeper would get up and give as much as the asker needs. The shame is not a concern of the knocker but of the man inside who doesn't want to be put to shame.

What is this parable about? The sleeper represents God. Perhaps you don't pray because you suspect God is like a grumpy, irascible, irrational neighbor who gives lame excuses for not giving us help when we need it. Even if that were true, if only for the sake of His name, so as not to be put to shame, He would help you. Jesus is saying that even if God were mean like man often thinks He is, if only for the sake of His own name, He would give what is asked of Him. But God is not mean; God is a Father to us. He will give us what we need.