

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 1: LECTURE OUTLINE

AN INTRODUCTION TO PARABLES

WHY DID JESUS SPEAK IN PARABLES?

- We are hard of hearing! That is, we are hard of heart – when God wants to speak to us, we tend to have our defenses up and to avoid being the object of God’s Word.
- Parables are Jesus’s way of “telling it slant” – they are oblique, indirect, even sneaky communications which invade our natural defenses and speak to us in ways that other kinds of communications could not.
- Jesus’s parables make friends, enemies, and converts . . . if we would listen.

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

- We can do no better than the definition of C. H. Dodd (*Parables of the Kingdom*):
“At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”
- “a metaphor or simile”: Jesus uses both.
- “drawn from common life”: that is, the common life of Jesus’ time; the hearers are familiar with the settings and characters.
- “arresting the hearer by its vividness, its strangeness”: Something strange happens in virtually every parable (whether it seems strange *to us* or not); part of understanding the parables is understanding what makes them strange.
- “leaving the mind in sufficient doubt . . . to tease it into active thought”: Parables don’t come with their interpretation; they ask the hearer to think.
- Parables come into “full bloom” in the speaking *and* the hearing.

AN EXAMPLE: 2 SAMUEL 12:1-7

- Keep in mind the background to this parable:
 - David has slept with Bathsheba
 - Bathsheba has become pregnant
 - David tries to cover up his misdeeds with Uriah
 - David murders Uriah by sending him to the front lines in battle

“And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, ‘There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and

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lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man.'

- Notice how Nathan “gets the point” across to David:
 - He tells him a story that evokes a reaction – a visceral reaction – from David.
 - David’s emotions are committed to the narrative, and he becomes *pre-committed* to a certain outcome – only to find out that it was about him all along.
 - Nathan “tells it slant” to David.

A SURVEY OF INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS

- Parables have been interpreted in numerous ways – some of which are helpful, others of which need correction.
- Here’s how parables have often been understood:
 - Early Christian Interpretation: Christian Allegories
 - ♦ Patristic and Medieval Interpretation preferred to treat parables as Christian *allegories*.
 - ♦ Not only the *broad* story represented something beyond the text, but the details were pressed into allegorical service.
 - ♦ Meanings were discovered that are perhaps *theologically true*, but in which the original intent is lost.
 - ♦ The classic example: St. Augustine’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan
 - ♦ This continued into and beyond the Reformation
 - ♦ Allegorical interpretation often goes *beyond* the details of text itself (consider Nathan’s parable to David).
 - ♦ Parables may certainly have allegorical elements, and may benefit from a careful and disciplined allegorical interpretation; but they are not to be taken as thoroughgoing allegories.
 - Morality-Tales
 - ♦ “Earthly stories with heavenly meanings.”
 - ♦ But parables aren’t just about teaching us a lesson.
 - ♦ This doesn’t appreciate the *dynamism* of the parables. Morality tales give rules; parables attempt to present a new view or vision of reality.

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- Another option: Parables are like jokes – but not funny.
 - Parables have the equivalent of a “punch-line,” but not to make us laugh – it’s there to arrest us, to provoke us.
 - We could call this the “Parable-Pump-Fake”: Following the parable along, we find ourselves committed to one thing, and then the parable goes in another direction.

WHERE WE'RE GOING

- That Pesky Widow of Luke 18:1-8
- Those Ungrateful Workers of Matthew 20:1-16
- That Conniving Businessman of Luke 16:1-13
- Those Lost Sheep, Coins, and Sons of Luke 15:1-32

GOING A LITTLE FURTHER

MARK 4 AND MATTHEW 13

Want to get a little taste of Jesus's parables for yourself? Take a look at **Mark 4** and **Matthew 13**. Each of these chapters contains a collection of Jesus's parables (with some overlap). Notice the diversity in the *forms or genre* of the parables (as Anderson discusses in the “Parables” article). Notice also the diversity of the *content* of the parables, too. For further discussion, think on the following questions and prompts:

- What do these parables have in common? How do they differ?
- Which stand out to you as the most familiar? Which raise the most questions for you?
- What do you think Jesus is trying to teach us through these parables? What does he want us to learn, how does he want us to grow, and what does he want us to do?