

Discussion:

- Why does Jesus often use parables when teaching?

Parables

'Parable' comes from the Greek word παραβολή (*parabole*) which literally means 'to put things side by side'. It has a much broader meaning in the Gospels than the English word 'parable'. It can be used as a proverb (Lk 4:23), a riddle (Mk 3:23), a comparison (Mt 13:31-32, 33), a contrast (Lk 18:1-8) a simple story (Lk 13:6-7) or a complex story (Mt 22:1-14). This range of meaning is derived from the Hebrew word *masal* which in addition can be used to describe a taunt, a prophetic oracle or a by-word. A *masal* is any dark saying intended to stimulate thought.

Four forms of parables are often distinguished: similitude, example story, metaphor and allegory¹.

- A *similitude* is an extended simile (an explicit comparison using 'like' or 'as'). The parable of the leaven bread is a similitude (Mt 13:33).
- An *example story* presents a positive or negative character who serves as an example to be imitated or actions to be avoided. Examples are: the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21), the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14).
- An extended *metaphor* (an implied comparison) referring to a fictional event or events in the past to express a moral or spiritual truth e.g. the parable of the banquet (Lk 14:15-24).
- An *allegory* is a series of related metaphors e.g. the parable of the sower (Mt 13:1-23; Mk 4:1-20; Lk 8:4-15).

History of interpretation

Throughout most of the church history, Jesus' parables have been *allegorized* instead of *interpreted*. That is, people have read into the parables elements of the church's theology that had nothing to do with Jesus' intention. The best known example of this Augustine's interpretation of the parable of good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37).

Augustine:

- The man = Adam (and in turn us)
- Jerusalem = the heavenly city.
- Jericho = our mortality.
- The robbers = the devil who strips us of immortality and beats us by persuading us to sin.
- The priest and the Levite = the priesthood and the ministry of OT.
- The good Samaritan = Christ
- The binding of the wounds = the restraint of sin.
- The oil and the wine = the comfort of hope and the encouragement to work.
- The inn = the church.
- The next day = after the resurrection of Christ.
- The innkeeper = Paul.
- The two denarii = the two commandments of love.

Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins {35 Greek two denarii} and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." **Luke 10:30-37**

¹ Note the PTC Notes (by Rob Maidment) suggest three types of Parables, 55.

Reacting to the excessive use of allegory in the interpretation of parables scholars such as A. Jülicher denied that Jesus used allegory and suggested instead that each parable was used to illustrate one truth only. Jülicher viewed Jesus' parables as simple and straight forward comparisons that do not require interpretation. The only point of comparison was between the image and the idea being expressed. His mistake was effectively to reduce the parables to moral platitudes.

More recent scholars have rightly recognized that the parables formed part of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. J. Jeremias and other scholars have insisted that the parables must be understood in their original historical settings within the ministry and teaching of Jesus. For them, the main aim was to find the exact historical setting in which the parables were spoken. Sometimes the historical contexts were given by the narratives (Lk 10:25, 7:41, and 19:11). Other times the historical contexts were not given. Bear in mind that for the Gospel writers the placement of the parables in the narrative of the book presents its own literary setting.

The study of the parables with the aid of insights from modern linguistics and semantics has shown that they are not simply ways of conveying information in an attractive form. They have a variety of logical forms and functions. Very often their aim is to jolt the audience into seeing things from a new point of view and to be the actual means of bringing them into a new situation. The parables were meant to force people to decide about their attitudes to Jesus and his message and thus to bring them into a new relationship with him. Through the parables the kingly rule of God comes to humanity with its promises, judgments, demands and gifts.

Characteristic of parables

Parables tend to be brief and symmetrical. They typically omit unnecessary descriptions and frequently leave motives unexplained and implied questions unanswered. They usually are taken from daily life, but they are not necessarily realistic. In addition, parables elicit thought. Parables frequently cause a hearer to pass judgment on the events in the story and then require a similar judgment about religious matters. The crucial matter is placed at the end of the parable. They often have Christological and theological implications in that they focus on God, his kingdom and his expectation for humans.

Purpose of the parables

Some have found Mk 4:10-12 very difficult to understand, for it seems to suggest that Jesus purpose in the parables was not to enlighten the unenlightened, but that the unbeliever might become hardened in his unbelief. It is possible to read in Mk 4:10-12 a *result* clause instead of the *purpose* clause. The parables of Jesus may have the effect of hardening the unbeliever, just as Isaiah prophesied (c.f. Is 6:9 and Jn 12:37-41). It can also have the effect of making people seek the truths in the parables. The truth is that Jesus' parables are unique; Jesus and his parables are inseparable. To fail to understand him is to fail to understand his parables. By using the parables Jesus seeks and divides people into those who accept him and those who do not. In that way parables both hide and reveal the truth about Jesus and the kingdom of God (c.f. Mt 13:10-11, Lk 8:9-10).

As such, parables function to:

- a. *Draw the disciples (listeners) to Jesus.*
 - As listeners hear the words of Jesus and want to find out more, they are drawn to him and in the process gain more of an understanding.
- b. *Reveals truths of God's kingdom to those who are to listen.*
 - Mark 4:11 makes clear that some are chosen to receive the truth of the Kingdom of God and others not. Understanding is God's gift.
- c. *Harden those who reject who come under judgment*
 - For those who reject – they hear the parable but not the explanation (Mk 4:11-12). The

truth passes them by and they have no desire to find out more – that in fact is God's intention. The parable confirms the person in their unbelief.

Fittingly, the short series of parables from Mark 4 conclude in verse 33-34 with these words:

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Jesus moves on to the next stage of his ministry proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Reflection:

- Consider the way that people often reject Jesus today – dismissing what the Bible says about him as simply a story or legend. Or they might dismiss Jesus as being simply a good man, or moral teacher.

How different is this from those who *'may be ever seeing, but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding'*?

Guidelines to interpret the Parables²

In order to understand the parables of Jesus it is important to consider both the immediate and the wider picture. These considerations may help guide you through the process.

1 - Analyze the sequence, structure and wording of the parable.

- Are there any words you don't understand? Are words repeated? Is there a flow to the argument in the parable?

2 - Note cultural or historical features in the parable that provide insight

- Who is being addressed, when? Are there any markers in the parable that point to a historical time or place?

3 - Look for help in the context, but know that the context of many of the parables has not been preserved.

- What comes before and after in the gospel?

4 - Compare how the parable is worked in the other Gospels (if at all).

- How does it fit into the plan and purposes of the Gospel in which it appears?

5 – What is the Parable actually saying?

6 - Determine the function of the story as a whole in the teaching of Jesus and for the gospel writer

7 - Determine the theological significance of the story

8 – Think about how the various listeners would have responded. How does the parable challenge listeners to a response?

9 - Pay special attention to the end of the parable

- Is there a message or summary teaching?

²

Note from the PTC Notes (page 59) some considerations for interpreting parables. For a more developed approach, read on!

- Read Luke 15:1-16:15 (use the unedited Bible passage printed in the Appendix rather than edited passages printed in your Bible)
 - a) Break it into logical parts
 - b) Suggest a title for each of the parables based on what you believe it is saying.
 - c) What point was Jesus making in each Parable?
 - d) How does each parable apply to you in your situation today?

Conclusion

Jesus used parables to reveal and to hide his message about the kingdom of God. As we read the parables we are often forced to make decisions about Jesus and his kingdom. In some ways we are judged on how we respond to the parables.

For next Week:

- Read Unit 5 (for next week).

References (for possible further reading)

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| Moore Theological College, | <i>New Testament 1 MTC Correspondence Course</i> . Sydney: MTC, 2008, 54-67. |
| Snowgrass, K.R., | 'Parables' in <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> . Edited by I.H. Marshall, Ar Millard, J.T. Packer, D. J. Wiseman. 3 rd Ed. Leicester: IVP, 1996. |
| Tasker, R.V.G., | 'Parables' in <i>New Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J.B. Green, S. McKnight, I.H. Marshall. Leicester: IVP, 1992. |

Appendix - Luke 15:1-16:15 (NIV – unmarked)

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son'. "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your

father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-- I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.