

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PARABLES

I. Introduction to Parables

One-third of the teaching of Jesus in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) comes in the form of a parable.

R.C. Sproul: “Since parables are concrete stories based on life situations, they seem easier to handle than abstract concepts. Yet, from the viewpoint of the New Testament scholar, the parables present unique difficulties in interpretation.”

The purpose of this section is to prepare the interpreter to overcome these obstacles by setting forth specific principles for interpreting parables.

A. The Definition of a Parable

Waymeyer: “The word ‘parable’ comes from the Greek preposition *para* (“beside”) and the Greek verb *ballo* (“to throw” or “to cast”), so that the root word literally means ‘to cast beside.’ In the telling of a parable, truth from the everyday physical realm is *cast alongside* truth in the spiritual realm so that the hearer/reader can learn this spiritual truth by analogy to the physical truth he already understands. In this way, a parable is a true-to-life narrative that is designed to illustrate spiritual truth.”

A parable is: An earthly story with heavenly meaning

A physical story with spiritual meaning

Roy Zuck: “Parables were an effective form of communication because, as stories, they immediately sparked interest in the hearers. As the people heard Jesus’ stories, all of which were true-to-life, they were immediately drawn into the stories with Him. Their curiosity was aroused as they wondered how the stories would develop and conclude.”

B. The Purpose of Parables

In Matthew 13:10-17, Jesus defined two very different purposes for the telling of parables, depending on the spiritual condition of the hearer.

¹ Notes compiled from The Master’s Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

1. To conceal Truth from Those Who Reject
2. To reveal Truth from those Who Believe

Henry Virkler: “It may be that as a man resists truth and yields to sin, he becomes less and less able to understand spiritual truth. Thus the same parables that brought insight to faithful believers were without meaning to those who were hardening their hearts against truth.”

Mike Canham:

“Parables confirmed unbelievers in their rejection of the truth. Thus, the truth veiled in parables is itself the test of a person’s spiritual responsiveness, of whether he has the spiritual intention to follow through and learn its meaning.”

- **Additional purpose:** To call forth a specific response.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Parables

McQuilkin: “Parables have been the source of untold blessing in enlightening God’s people concerning spiritual truth. At the same time, parables have been the source of untold confusion in both doctrine and practice in the church.”

For this reason, it is essential for the interpreter to have a clear idea of how to discern the divinely intended meaning of parables.

A. Understand the historical and cultural background of the parable.

Perhaps more than any other genre in the Bible, understanding the historical and cultural background of parables is absolutely essential.

Vlach: “Remember that Jesus used illustrations from everyday life that people back then would have immediately understood. If we do not understand their historical background, then we cannot fully grasp the meanings of the parables.”

B. Determine the specific question/problem/need/situation which the telling of the parable.

Jesus’ parables are typically sparked by some error, question, or problem. Identifying that from the outset will enable proper interpretation.

The interpretation of some parables will come inductively from the larger literary context and/or from the content of the parable itself.

- **Parables In Response to Specific Questions**

Luke 10:25, 29: "And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" "But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

- **Parables In Response to Specific Requests**

Luke 12:13: "Someone in the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'"

- **Parables In Response to Specific Complaints**

Luke 7:39: "Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.'"

Luke 15:2: "Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

- **Parables in Response to Specific Misconceptions**

Luke 18:9: "And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt."

C. Determine the natural meaning of the story in the parable.

A parable is a story that is told for the purpose of illustrating spiritual truth by way of analogy.

Roy Zuck: "Two things, then, are being brought together in a parable—a true-to-life incident and the spiritual truth it is illustrating or illuminating. Therefore to understand the spiritual truth properly, it is essential first to comprehend fully the truth-to-life incident."

D. Determine the primary points of correspondence in the parable.

Waymeyer: "One of the most important steps in the process of determining the central point of the parable is to determine the specific

points of correspondence. This involves taking the main characters/features of the parable and identifying the corresponding points of comparison in the spiritual realm. In other words, it involves answering basic questions like: ‘What exactly is being represented by such-and-such in the parable?’”

For example:

- **The Parable of the Two Debtors (Luke 7:40-42)**
 - The Moneylender = God
 - The Debtor Who Owed 500 Denarii = Prostitute
 - The Debtor Who Owed 50 Denarii = Simon
- **The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)**
 - The Father = God
 - The Younger Son = The Unsaved “Sinners” and Tax-gatherers
 - The Older Son = The Unsaved Scribes and Pharisees

HINTS FOR INTERPRETATION:

- Start by determining which parts of the parable are explained in the passage itself. For instance, the significance of the seed and the four soils of the parable in Matthew 13:3-9 is explained later in Matthew 13:18-23. Ignoring these divine interpretations of key aspects of the parable can lead the reader astray. For example, some interpreters have identified the field in the parable of Matthew 13:24-30 as referring to the *church*, but Jesus Himself identifies it later in Matthew 13:38 as a reference to the *world*.
- When interpreting the “kingdom parables,” keep in mind that the words “the kingdom is like” are not simply to be taken with the first element in the parable (i.e., a mustard seed, a merchant, or treasure hidden in a field). As Fee and Stuart note, “The expression literally means, ‘It is like this with the kingdom of God...’ Thus the whole parable tells us something about the nature of the kingdom, not just one of the points of reference, or one of the details.”

E. Recognize that not every detail in the parable has special significance.

In the early church, it was common for interpreters to look for the spiritual significance behind every detail of a given parable. This approach led Origen to see the five lamps of the wise virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 as a reference to the five natural senses, and it led Augustine to identify at

least 19 specific details in the parable of the Good Samaritan as having a corresponding referent in the spiritual realm (e.g., the robbers stripping the man coming down from Jericho signified Satan taking away the immortality of Adam).

To search for meaning in every detail, however, is to turn a parable into an allegory. Although the minor details of a parable provide color and interest to the story, they do not carry with them a corresponding spiritual reality that the interpreter must discern.

McQuilkin: "Having a central point of emphasis is the chief feature that distinguishes a parable from an allegory. In an allegory a number of significant parallels between the story and spiritual truth are intended. In the case of a parable, it is not legitimate to treat each detail as having spiritual application."

This does not mean that the details and secondary elements of a parable are irrelevant, and it does not mean that parables never contain sub-points. But it *does* mean that the primary purpose of a parable is to teach one main point, and that the details in the parable serve to highlight that main idea in the telling of the story.

Understanding the relationship between the two is critical.

Mike Canham: Ascertaining the main point of the parable provides the interpreter with "a master key for the interpretation of each detail which serves it."

Robert Stein: "The greater danger for most interpreters is to see too much meaning in specific details rather than too little!"

A CALL FOR BALANCE:

Henry Virkler: "On the first two recorded occasions when Jesus spoke in parables, he interpreted their meaning (the sower: Matt. 13:1-23; the wheat and the tares: Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). His interpretations appear to be midway between the two extremes of requiring all parables to have a single point and of allegorizing all the details: in Jesus' own analyses it is possible to discern both a central, focal idea and a significant emphasis on details *as they relate to that focal idea*. Jesus' analysis of the details of the parable contrasts with the practice of those who place significance on the details in such a manner that the details teach an additional lesson unrelated to the central point of the parable."

F. Seek to determine the one main point of the parable.

The primary goal of the interpreter is to discern the main point that was communicated through the parable. In the process of seeking to discover the main point, the interpreter should pay close attention to certain key elements of the parable:

▪ **The Situation Addressed by the Parable**

Waymeyer: “Virtually all parables have a clear historical occasion that gave rise to the telling of the story. If the interpreter can pinpoint the question/problem/ need/situation being addressed (see B above), this will lead him to the main point of the parable”:

Luke 10:25, 29: “And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’” “But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

Luke 7:39: “Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.’”

▪ **The Stated Purpose of the Parable**

Sometimes the purpose of the parable is stated explicitly in the passage itself (Luke 18:1). Other times the purpose is stated implicitly and will be determined by identifying an exhortation or principle that accompanies the telling of the parable.

Luke 18:1 “Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.”

Matthew 24:44 “For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.”

Matthew 25:13 “Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.”

Luke 18:14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

- **The Final Element of the Parable**

Waymeyer: “The emphasis of the parable can often be found at the very end, in the final element of the story. This is sometimes referred to as the principle of ‘end stress.’”

Stein: “It is based on the fact that good storytelling builds up and focuses interest on the conclusion of the story. A good mystery holds the reader in suspense until the very end when everything is explained and becomes clear.... In a similar way a parable focuses its emphasis and point on the end of the story.”

By paying close attention to this final element of the parable, one can discern the main point of the story.

- The sending of the “only son” in Matthew 21:33-40
- The seed falling on the good soil in Matthew 13:3-9
- The final slave being judged harshly in Matthew 25:14-30
- The last of those invited to the banquet actually coming in Matt 22:2-14

- **An Unexpected Twist in the Story**

Like many good stories, the parables of Jesus often include an unexpected turn of events in the plot. They do so to make a point. As Henry Virkler explains, “Frequently the unexpected shock appears for the purpose of catching the listeners’ attention and forcing them to reconsider their perspective.” For this reason, identifying this unexpected turn of events often helps the interpreter determine the main point of the parable as a whole.

Grant Osborne: “The normal way of things was shattered by the parable’s reversal of norms, and the hearer was forced to consider the kingdom reality behind the image, for kingdom truths also run counter to the world’s ways.”

EXAMPLE:

- The man who worked only one hour receives the same wages as those who worked all day (Matt 20:1-16)

- The father runs to meet the prodigal son and even gives him a banquet (Luke 15:11-32)
- A Samaritan expresses more kindness and compassion than religious leaders in Israel (Luke 10:25-37)
- The tax-gatherer goes home from the temple justified rather than the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14)
- Everyone invited to a banquet refuse the invitation (Matt 22:3), but the poor and crippled attend (Luke 14:15-24)

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING EPISTLES

I. Introduction to the Epistles

Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament – which accounts for nearly one-third of the total content – are epistles.

John Grassmick: “In addition, two brief letters are included in Acts (15:23-29; 23:25-30); seven letters appear in Revelation (2:1-3:22), which itself has an epistolary framework (cf. 1:4-5; 22:21); and the use of letters is mentioned elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Acts 9:2; 22:5; 23:25, 33; 1 Cor 5:9; 16:3; 2 Cor 3:1-3; 10:9-11; Col 4:16; 2 Thess 2:2, 15; 2 Pet 3:1, 16). This shows the importance of letters in Christian circles of the first century.”

Waymeyer: “In the first-century church, epistles essentially functioned as a substitute for a personal interaction between the writer and recipient of the letter.”

For this reason, they served the same purposes as oral communication: “(1) to provide information or instruction, (2) to make requests or issue commands, and (3) to maintain or deepen the relationship between the correspondents” (Grassmick). The goal of this section is to set forth specific principles for interpreting this particular literary genre.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Epistles

It is quite possible that the principles of general hermeneutics “apply more directly to the Epistles than to any other genres” (Grant Osborne). Thus, the interpreter should keep in mind that these additional guidelines should be applied as a supplement to the previously studied general principles of hermeneutics.

A. Be aware of the standard form used in most ancient epistles.

Waymeyer: “Studies indicate that the New Testament epistles share the same basic characteristics found in many Greco-Roman letters of the first century. The standard form of ancient epistles included six basic parts:

- Name of Writer
- Name of Recipients
- Personal Greeting
- Personal Prayer, Wish, or Expression of Thanks
- Body of Letter
- Final Greetings and Farewell

Although the biblical author was not enslaved to this form, “it is usually important for the interpreter to note those instances when the author chose to deviate from it” (Stein). In other words, “the interpreter must observe where and how the author modifies the conventional letter structure and determine the interpretive significance this has for understanding the letter. This is especially applicable to the opening and closing sections” (Grassmick).

For example, “when Galatians has no thanksgiving (had Paul written one, it would have come between 1:5 and 6), and when 1 Thessalonians has two (1 Thes 1:2-10; 2:13-16), readers should take notice. Paul stresses the severity of the Galatians’ lapse into legalism by ignoring standard conventions and plunging directly into the heart of his complaint against them. Conversely, Paul has more words of sustained praise for the Thessalonians than for any other apostolic congregation” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard).

B. Read the entire epistle repeatedly and interpret the individual parts in light of the whole.

When epistles were delivered to their intended destinations, they were read aloud – and in their entirety – to the congregation (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).

Grassmick: So, “each NT letter should be read as a whole from beginning to end to grasp the full impact and development of the author’s thought. Ideally, this should be done several times [and perhaps with different English translations]. This provides an overview of the author’s message and helps the interpreter better understand the meaning not only of the

whole letter but also of the individual paragraphs and their relationship to the whole.”

The reason for this is clear: Silva: “All of us, upon receiving a letter from an acquaintance, proceed to read the whole letter at one sitting....What would one think of a man who receives a five-page letter from his fiancée on Monday and decides to read only the third page on that day, the last page on Thursday, the first page two weeks later, and so on? We are all aware of the fact that reading a letter in such piece-meal fashion would likely create nothing but confusion. The meaning of a paragraph on the third page may depend heavily on something said at the beginning of the letter—or its real significance may not become apparent until the next page is read. The more cogently the letter was written, the riskier it would be to break it up arbitrarily. Moreover, part of the meaning of a document is the total impact it makes on the reader, and that meaning is often more than the sum of its parts.”

C. Interpret epistles in light of their “occasional” nature.

Each of the epistles in the New Testament arose in response to specific historical circumstances. For this reason, epistles are often referred to as “occasional” documents.

Grassmick: “This means they reflect a particular historical situation and were written to address specific issues or problems related to the author or, more often, the readers....For example, Paul wrote Galatians because some false teachers were opposing him and troubling the Galatian Christians by advocating a return to the Mosaic Law and pressuring them to abandon the gospel of grace he had preached to them.”

Fee and Stuart: The historical occasion for the epistle was usually “some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.”

Thus, the interpreter must ask and answer, “What was going on in Corinth that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? How did he come to learn of their situation? What kind of relationship and former contacts has he had with them? What attitudes do they and he reflect in this letter? These are the kinds of questions you want answers to” (Fee and Stuart).

In order to reconstruct the occasion of the epistle, Michael Vlach suggests asking the following:

- Who is writing the letter?
- Who is the audience of the letter?
- Why is the author writing the letter?
- What situation does the author face while writing his letter?
- What problems does the author address in the letter?
- What are the geographical issues related to this letter?
- Does the writer state his purpose for writing the letter?
- What are the major themes, concepts, and words in the letter?

Part of the difficulty in reconstructing the historical background of a given epistle is that we are forced to do so with only one half of the “conversation” available to us. This involves reconstructing the historical context to the extent that is possible “based on information from the letter itself, first and foremost, and supplemented by legitimate, relevant information from outside the letter” (Grassmick). Once this is done, each passage in the epistle should then be interpreted in light of this historical background.

D. Resist the temptation to read the epistles as systematic theology.

Because the New Testament epistles were written to address specific historical circumstances, they should not be read as if they intended to teach systematic theology in a vacuum.

Silva: “It’s not as though the apostle, having nothing better to do, thought it might be a good idea to write a theological essay for anyone who might be interested in it! On the contrary. There was always a concrete occasion that motivated him to write these documents.”

The circumstantial nature of the New Testament epistles does not mean that theology is absent from them. But it does mean that the theology contained in the epistles “is pastorally applied to the circumstances faced by those the author addresses” (Grassmick).

Thomas Schreiner: “The danger of reading [the NT epistles] as systematic treatises is that one might conclude too much from reaching only one letter” (Schreiner). This can happen if the interpreter wrongly assumes (a) that the New Testament epistle is addressing an issue that it’s not or (b) that a given passage is a theologically comprehensive treatment of the issue that it does address. It is helpful to keep in mind that, because of their circumstantial nature, New Testament epistles tend to be less comprehensive and ‘balanced’ in their presentation of truth than systematic theologies.”

E. Trace the argument of the entire epistle and interpret each passage in the context of that overall flow of thought.

The difference between a letter and an epistle is subtle.

“Technically a ‘letter’ is a less literary and more personal form of communication that tends to address a specific situation or problem and builds on an established relationship. An ‘epistle’ is more artistic in form and is intended as a self-explanatory treatise to a wider public” (Stein).

The New Testament epistles seem to fall somewhere in between.

Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard: They are “less literary, formal, and artistic than many classical Greek treatises but still generally longer, more carefully structured, and more didactic than typical correspondence.”

For this reason, New Testament epistles tend to be longer and more sophisticated in their argument and rhetorical features than the average letter written today. This highlights the need to trace the argument of the epistle so that each passage can be interpreted in light of that overall flow of thought. To do so properly, the interpreter will need to be diligent to apply the principles found above in section 6 (“Examining the Literary Context”) and section 7 (“Grammatical Analysis”). In addition, see chapter 6 (“Tracing the Argument”) in Thomas Schreiner’s *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*.