

The Parables of Jesus



go and do likewise'

Introduction

What is a parable ?

Today in our series about the teachings of Jesus we are looking at parables. Parables are a really important feature of Jesus teaching, not least because so much of the Gospels are parables. It must be said that there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to what actually constitutes a parable in the first place. So much so that the disagreement over the number of parables ranges 37 to over 65. We don't want to get bogged down in sterile theological debate but it is worth taking a brief look at the questions surrounding parables, where parables came from, what they are and why Jesus used them.

What is a parable ?

The word parable is a Greek translation of the word in the Hebrew bible 'masal.' It was the translators of the Septuagint (LXX) in the third century BC who chose the Greek word 'parabole.' This had a wide range of meaning, for example it might refer to a puzzle used to provoke thought. The word means 'the placing of two things side by side for the sake of comparison'. Strictly speaking therefore we should think of parables as including times when Jesus said such things as 'The kingdom of heaven is like..'

Parable was not a common word, Josephus used it only twice, Philo three times, Plato twice. Other words could have been used, such as riddle, or proverb. The translators therefore brought the word to prominence and brought about much confusion in the process!

The word parable clearly covers a wide range of material and not just those familiar stories which we think of as the traditional parables. When we use the word parable most of us think of something like the Parable of the Prodigal of Son, but what about these other occasions when the word parable is used in the New Testament?

In the Gospels the word parable is used to describe all of the following types—

1. **Proverb** 'physician heal thyself' (Luke 4:23)
2. **Riddle** 'how can Satan cast out Satan (Mark 3:23)

3. **Metaphor** You are salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13)
4. **Similitude** The mustard seed (Mark 4:30)
5. **Story** The banquet and the guests (Luke 14:16-24)
6. **Example parable** The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37)
7. **Allegory** The vineyard and the killed son (Mark 12:1-11)

This means that we find it difficult to simply put up a list of Jesus parables. If we were to include all the times that the Greek word for parable is used (30 different sayings), and all the other sayings which are clearly stories we could get near to 80. If we included every simile, proverb and aphorism then almost all of what Jesus said would be included!

There are so many different types of parable we cannot really effectively use one word to describe them all. Given the Greek background to the word, people often describe a parable as an illustration and from this people have described parables as 'Earthly stories with heavenly meanings.' This fails to recognise that parables are much more than just illustrations. More of this later!

The history of parables

Jesus was not the first to tell parables, nor was he the last. All cultures have parables. However what is clear is that Jesus took parables to a new level. Nobody used parables as brilliantly as he did and he must have been a convincing storyteller for so many of them to have survived. So whilst Jesus did not invent parables, he did nevertheless master their use.

Parables in the Graeco Roman world

Herodotus in the 5th century BC tells of king Cyrus failed attempt to get the Ionian and Aeolian cities to join in a revolt against Croesus. After the defeat of Croesus these cities sent messengers offering to be Cyrus's subjects on the same terms that they had served Croesus. Cyrus rejected their offer with a parable

Once, he said, there was a flute player who saw fishes in the sea and played upon his flute, thinking that so they would come out on to the land. Being disappointed of his hope, he took a net and gathered in and drew out a great

multitude of the fishes and seeing them leaping, 'You had best,' said he, 'cease from your dancing now; you would not come out and dance then, when I played to you.'

Now we can work out what this parable means and we can immediately see some allegorical features, Cyrus is the flute player, the cities are the fish, their refusal to dance is their refusal to join in with the revolt with Cyrus, their leaping is their current attempt to please Cyrus. The consequence is also clear !

This quote from Seneca 4BC to AD65 is also an interesting parable 'You look at the pimples of others, when you yourself are covered with a mass of sores.'

Parables in the Bible

Old Testament

One of the most important influences on Jesus must have been The Old Testament. In the Old Testament we have for example the parable of the vineyard

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." *Is 5:1-7*

It is worth noting that when parables occur in the Old Testament they are the work of prophets. They are used to confront the nation and the king, they warn of judgement and they call for change. In view of this it is worth recognising that Jesus stands in the tradition of the Old Testament prophet, calling the nation to account.

Understanding Parables as Allegory

Any study of the parables must say something about allegory. Until the end of the 19th century the church interpreted parables using allegory. The theologian Adolf Julicher attacked allegory as the way to understand the parables, he saw them as much more straightforward and simple than the allegorical method suggested. Jesus parables did not require interpretation and he even suggested that where allegorical explanation occurred in the Gospels themselves, this had been added by the early church, it was not authentic to Jesus. The most famous of the allegorical interpretations is that of Augustine on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Look how allegory sees every detail as having a point. An allegory is a string of metaphors

1. The man, is Adam,
2. Jerusalem, the heavenly city
3. Jericho the moon, our mortality
4. Robbers, the devil and his angels who strip of our immortality and beat the man causing him to sin
5. Priest and Levite, are the ministry of the OT
6. Good Samaritan, is Christ
7. Binding wounds, is restraint of sin
8. Oil and wine, are comfort and hope and encouragement to work
9. Donkey, is the incarnation
10. Inn, the church
11. Next day, is after resurrection
12. Inn keeper, is Paul
13. Two denarii, are two commandments to love or This life and life to come

We have to be very careful. Whilst there might be some allegory in parables, we should be careful about its use. If we are not careful then we might easily read too much into the parables which is simply not there. Allegory can, as in this case, be taken way too far. A parable usually has a single meaning, a punch at the end, the details should not usually be given too much meaning.

This is not to say that there is never allegory in parables, allegory was used in Homer, Plato, Qumran and ever since. However taking the teachings of Jesus and reading all kinds of things into them is

unjustified. Julicher is helpful because he challenged the way that parables have been used to reinforce the theological positions of the church, theologians etc. It is legitimate to ask, yourself in a parable

- Do some elements have deeper meanings?
- Do some elements of parables stand for things?

There is a need to recognise that whilst parables are not generally allegorical, some are. Listen to this parable from Matthew 21:33-45

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Who is the vineyard = Israel

Who were the servants meant to be = Prophets

Who is the Master = God

Who is the Son = Jesus

If we were to take away these allegorical details then the parable would lose its entire meaning. It is the same with the Parable of the Sower in which Jesus actually explains an allegorical meaning.

Why are parables so important ?

One of the most important reasons why we should read the parables is because almost everybody agrees that in them we have the closest we are going to get to the authentic teaching of Jesus. We know for example that the early church did not use parables, so parables would not have been made up by the disciples after Jesus died. Most people agree that the parables are a sure bedrock of Jesus teaching.

Parables are also important historically as they often drew upon life in Palestine and Galilee, so they give us a glimpse of what things were like then in the times of Jesus.

For example

- In the Parable of the Sower Mark 4:2-20, the sower uses the Palestinian method of sowing where the seed is sown before the plowing.
- In the parable of the Great Net Matt 13:47-50, we obtain a glimpse of the sorting of the fish on sea shore probably around the Sea of Galilee
- The farm labourers paid at the end of the day tells us of the economic situation in Palestine, where labourers were employed, not slaves as in the rest of the Mediterranean.

This is not to say that everything in the parables is literal. Often Jesus uses massive exaggeration to get the point across. The forgiveness of a thousand talents is a case in point Matt 18:24. So we hear that all the virgins slept Matt 25:5, and all the guests refused to come to the banquet Luke 14:18

So why did Jesus speak in parables ?

1. They are a good way of teaching, we all love a story

We all love a good story. When we go on holiday we often take story books, they are part of the escapism of the holiday, we can lie on a beach and enter a different world, physically because we are on holiday, but also mentally, the story takes us to another place. They entertain us, draw us in - and the parables of Jesus did just that, he was a great storyteller.

Parables are like reading a novel, the narrative takes us away and they are able to touch us at a different level and open another area of our minds. To remember the Heineken advert, they can reach parts other types of teaching cannot reach! So parables can help us to see things differently.

2. They can be remembered

Remember the conditions in which the parables were told, they were not written down. They circulated orally, and the first Gospel to be written might not have been committed to the written word until 30 years after the death of Jesus. When Jesus spoke the parables, they were not heard over the radio or broadcast in any

way other than word of mouth. So it was particularly significant that these stories are easily committed to memory. We only need to listen to the story of the prodigal son once and we will remember it.

3. The parable has its own power

Parables are often stories and so they can be seen as illustrations to teaching, but they are much more than that, they are the teaching itself, they have their own power. Remember these stories circulated by word of mouth so they had to be the message, not just illustrate it. When Jesus spoke the parables they drew strongly upon life, agriculture, the world of work and economics, they used people and things which would be immediately understood by those listening. As a result they did not usually need much explanation. Once they were told the listener would understand. This is sad for us because often we lose the impact because we do not understand what life was like in first century Palestine. We have to study the parables but when we do we tend to lose something, because they were meant to be heard and have an immediate impact! We can study them as literature but they act more like art, to move us at a different level and to convey a message which will touch us at a deeper level.

Think of parables as like a comedian telling a joke. Everybody around you gets the joke and laughs out loud. You miss the point because you don't appreciate something which was said, you ask for an explanation and suddenly the joke makes sense, but everybody else has laughed and it is just not as funny after the analysis.

This is a problem with interpreting the parables. They are not just meant to be vehicles of a message, they are the message, they invoke response. To interpret the parables is like describing a picture. This is something which we have to do but we need to recognise what we are doing. The parable is supposed to produce an outburst which comes from being challenged at a deeper level, parables should touch our soul.

4. To conceal

This passage from Mark 4:10 has caused some confusion

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

Sometimes Jesus does have to explain the parable to his hearers

Mark 7:17

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked.

Jesus expects his parables to be understood. It is sometimes said that Jesus taught in parables so that his enemies could not understand what he was saying, that it was a veiled way to preach without being trapped. This just doesn't make sense, for one thing his opponents clearly did understand what he was saying and they were angry about it. It is odd to suggest that Jesus wanted his teaching to be obscure. However parables do require the listener to become engaged, to enter the story, to fully appreciate them. The parables are not straightforward philosophical statements, they require our willingness to enter their world so that they have impact. As unwilling participants some of his hearers would just never get the point.

5. To use story to challenge and bring about change

Parables are a very subversive way of teaching, as the story is told the hearer is engaged and is tempted to pass judgement, then suddenly realising that they are the one condemned! One of the most famous is from the Old Testament. 2 Sam 12:1-4,

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms.

It was like a daughter to him. "Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Jesus used this softening up process of the story and then often put a tinge in the tail. Look at this example,

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The hearers would have agreed with the parable right up to the end, when after engaging with the story they are suddenly confronted by a new reality. Parables have this ability to challenge.

Conclusion

Jesus used parables to teach and to tell people about God. He made it very clear what God was like and what he expects us to be like. Then Jesus challenged the listener to respond in their behaviour. After we have heard a parable we should be motivated to ask,

How does Jesus expect us to change behaviour by this parable ?

Put this way the parables are not so much about story as encounter, God is able to cut through the learning process and engage with us. By revealing God, Jesus is not just teaching us but changing us, turning us around, to return us to God.

The parables would have meant so much more for the people who originally heard them, they would have understood details which wash over us. In our study we must try to let them engage us in our guts as much as in our minds.

Perhaps we should try and use the parable method afresh. I remember one day watching a play that the young people acted out in church. It was a simple drama which I would describe as an acted parable. It was about a bunch of people going to church. One of them had blue shoes and the rest of them decided that wearing blue shoes to church was ridiculous. Those with only black or brown shoes stayed together and so there was one less in the group. It went through this process over a few different things, such as who had an umbrella and eventually the group was no more.

It was a comment upon Christians who like to do things certain ways and how we separate ourselves into groups over trivia, like which hymn books we like. To me it was a powerful comment upon human nature and the mechanisms which we use to establish groups of those who belong and those who don't, to make ourselves feel different, special etc. I hoped that the story would be powerful enough to convince all Christians that anything other than a willingness to accept people who were different was ridiculous. Sadly many people listened to it but few were changed. This is the worrying feature of parables, we all listen to them, but to what extent are we willing to be changed ?

Let's look at parables!

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' ; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply 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. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 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. The next day he took out two silver coins 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.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Information

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is 17 miles. It drops from 2,700 feet above sea level to 800 feet below sea level at Jericho, the lowest city on earth, 200 feet per mile. It is barren, no vegetation and would have lots of places for bandits to hide.

Samaritans and Jews did not get on! Samaria had been the capital of Israel's northern kingdom. When Assyrians conquered Samaria in 722 B.C., they deported about half the Samaritan aristocrats to other parts of the Assyrian empire and forcibly settled other conquered people in Samaria to lessen the chance of uprisings. Intermarriage and theological differences led to a widening gap between the Samaritans and the Jews to the south. The Samaritans, excluded from worship in Jerusalem, worshiped in their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews being told this parable regarded Samaritans as mongrels, half-breeds, almost Gentiles (John 8:48), cursed them publicly in the synagogues, and prayed that they should have no

share in eternal life. Jews would not eat with Samaritans, use their drinking vessels (John 4:9), or believe their testimony in court. The man who was attacked was stripped of his clothes and so there was no way of knowing what religious group he belonged to. Rabbinic texts said that you should keep four cubits or six feet from a corpse. Defilement for seven days could come through touching a corpse, or what a corpse had touched, or even through the air, or a coffin. However Jews were required on religious grounds to bury a corpse and nothing, not even purity laws stood in the way of saving life. Laws were suspended when life was endangered. The victim is described as half dead, so in either case they were obliged to help either bury him or help him!

Conclusions

Jesus is asked 'who is my neighbour.' There was no way of knowing which group the attacked man belonged to. The parable shows that you cannot define who your neighbour is and neither should you try. The lawyer is wrong to even ask. Neighbour is perhaps only defined by nearness and need. The ending 'go and do likewise' is important, in the parable Jesus encourages us to action, he is questioning what kind of people we are. Passivity is not an option. The parable has been challenged as showing salvation by works. However the parable goes deeper than that it questions to what extent faith has changed us. Our faith causes us to behave in certain ways towards others. The parable means that we cannot ignore the plight of those suffering. For us this is more difficult because we do not have to travel the dangerous road, we need only turn on our TV sets. If a Samaritan is our neighbour then there are no boundaries.

Question

'How does Jesus expect us to change behaviour by this parable ?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This is one of the most famous and most beautiful parables. The title is one which has been given to it, but which hardly describes what the parable is really about. A suggestion might be the story of the forgiving father and the two lost sons.

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.'" Luke 15:11

Commentary

The younger son

He was at fault. He left the family without a care in the world for anybody other than himself. But for the prodigal it wasn't just about

leaving home, it was about dodging responsibilities, avoiding work and having a good time. He wanted his money and he wanted it now, not so that he could go and learn a trade, set up in business and develop his own independence. The money was all about easy carefree, living. He is an arrogant young man who insults his father (give me what I could have if you were dead!), leaves home to make his fortune (familiar enough then and now), and then hits rock bottom, especially as a Jew ending up in the piggery. He came to his senses in a sort of repentance, but it was hunger and need which drove him back to his father.

The older brother

Well obviously he was at fault. He was resentful at 'slaving away' whilst the other brother was out enjoying the high life, and how could the father welcome the little idiot back! The father is told about the 'prostitutes,' this is surely an attempt to turn the father against the son, bring the loving father up against the full enormity of the crimes committed which the father had indirectly paid for! We all have the propensity to be resentful and jealous and the older brother is a wonderful example of behaviour which is just all too common. He is jealous of the younger brother and angry that he is forgiven too easily.

The father

Is he guilty of crimes in this episode? He is a bit weak in his response to the son, no he could not stop him from leaving but he perhaps should have done more to make it less easy for the young man to walk off. But there is a greater sin than passive compliance. Neither son appears to know or understand that the father loves them. The young prodigal appears to be genuine and sincere in believing that he can return as a servant. The older brother believes that he has been a slave all along, using that word to describe the work that he has been doing for the father. No wonder that he is so resentful and bitter. Had he been more secure in the love of the father, then perhaps he would have been less critical and more accepting.

The Bible is full of families at war, Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, even the family of Jesus look to take him away because they thought he had lost his mind. In this poor father we perhaps see echoes of ourselves also. Surrounded by people whom we do not know how we should love. Treating them in ways which are not helpful

and failing to demonstrate our feelings.

Jesus' hearers would have gasped at the image of the father running, a strong cultural taboo in that society. In another shocking gesture the father orders the son clothed in a robe, ring and sandals. Far from being welcomed as a servant, the son is restored to family dignity and given the signet ring to act with the father's authority. The son as a free person wore sandals, while slaves went barefoot.

Conclusion

If parables have one strong point it is that of forgiveness, and our need never to be jealous of it. The father is to be praised, for it is he who breaks the cycle of mistakes and recrimination. He holds out to both children the prospect of forgiveness and a new start. He will not allow past mistakes to dictate the shape of future family life. We do not know how this story will end. Will the prodigal go off again and show his repentance to be shallow and meaningless? Will the older son be supportive and helpful or simply perpetuate sibling rivalry?

Yet we must not let the past infect the future, or else we become prisoners to past sins. How many relationships could and would be restored if we only said sorry, forgave others and moved on. The father does not know the mind of the son, that he has repented, so it is not about loving people after or if they have repented. The father, not knowing anything but that the son is coming, abandons cultural norms of fatherly dignity and runs to embrace son.

The message is basic: if God is prepared to risk making a fool of himself to welcome back the lost, if it means that much to him that he is prepared to just forgive and forget the past, then we had better learn to have the same generosity of forgiveness.

Question

'How does Jesus expect us to change behaviour by this parable ?