

Introduction to the Kingdom Parables

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Many books have been written about the parables of Jesus. Some of these books are more helpful than others. Unfortunately, most suffer from one particular problem: They do not truly allow the Bible to interpret itself. Certainly, it can sometimes be interesting and even helpful to discuss the geography and the flora and fauna of the Levant and the social customs of the Jews in Jesus' day. These things can have their place when talking about the parables. But, as is true whenever we study the Bible, unless we rigorously hold ourselves to biblical exposition, letting the Bible interpret itself, we will miss the intended meaning. It is my prayer that in this series of articles, God will keep me holding firm to *Sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone.

Definition of Parable

In almost every case, "parable" in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word, *parabolē*. One of the more literal definitions of *parabolē*, found in *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*, is, "a placing of one thing by the side of another." This is very helpful in understanding the New Testament's use of the word.

What Jesus was doing in His parables was placing a story alongside reality, with things in the story corresponding to real things. Also helpful is seeing that in Mark 4:30, the King James Version translates *parabolē* as "comparison": "And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison [*parabolē*] shall we compare [*parabolō*] it?" If we were being very literal, we could translate this, "...what thing placed alongside shall we place alongside of it?" The *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* translates this as, "with what parable shall we compare it?" A parable, then, might be called a side-by-side comparison of reality with a story. In the King James Version, *parabolē* is also translated as "figure" (Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19) and "proverb" (Luke 4:23). In the final analysis, Jesus' parables are similes. He says something is like something else, just as we might say, "I slept like a log," or "The sounds of the wind were like a symphony."

In John 10:6, a different word, *paroimia*, is translated "parable" in the King James Version. *Paroimia* literally means "a wayside saying." It is not a simile. Notice, for example, that in John 10, Jesus does not say He is *like* a door or *like* a good shepherd. He says, "I am the door" (verses 7 and 9) and "I am the good shepherd" (verses 11 and 14). *Paroimia* is best translated as "proverb" (as it is in John 16:25, 26; and 2 Peter 2:22), "illustration," "allegory," or "metaphor."

Getting back to Jesus' parables, something to keep in mind when we read them is that we should look for parallels, or "likes," between each of the elements of the parable (people, seeds, plants, fields, pearls, etc.) and reality. We should not gloss over any of the elements. Jesus put them into the parable for a purpose. And, very important, we should notice which of the elements is likened to the kingdom of God. This last point is often the downfall of a commentator's explanation of a parable. Jesus may say that the kingdom of God is like the x element of the parable, but the commentator misses this and starts treating the y element of the parable as like the kingdom of God.

Why Jesus Spoke in Parables

Immediately after Jesus gave the Parable of the Sower, He began a discourse about why He spoke in parables. First, He said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). The implication is that there are some people who do not have ears to hear. Then His disciples asked Him, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10b). Jesus' answer is notable in not being what you might expect. Jesus does not reply that He speaks to the people in parables to help them understand. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus replies, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." The word "mysteries" in this verse is translated from the Greek *mustēria*, which means "hidden things" or "secrets." The "you" in this verse are Jesus' chosen disciples. The "them" are the multitudes of people who followed Jesus, but were not chosen by Him. To Jesus' chosen disciples, God had given the gift of understanding the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. But to the rest, Jesus speaks to them in parables so "that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them" (Mark 4:12). Matthew and Luke record Jesus' response essentially the same way, and Matthew adds that this blindness of the people is in fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9-10, which Jesus quotes.

I want to point out here that Jesus says He speaks to the multitudes in parables because the multitudes have not been given the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom. Thus, it is entirely possible that this explanation of why Jesus spoke in parables applies only to the kingdom parables. And, in fact, an examination of the other parables shows that Jesus intended His hearers to understand and learn a lesson from them. But the meaning of the kingdom parables was not for the multitudes, those whom Jesus called the "others" (Luke 8:10) and "them that are without" (Mark 4:11). It was for Jesus' inner circle.

The next article in this series is about the Parable of the Sower (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>).