

Expositional Preaching from the Parables

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Introduction:

1. Contrary to the popular and simplistic view of the parables, they have been the subject of enormous scholarly debate and are notoriously difficult to interpret.
2. Historically, the parables have often suffered violence at the hands of interpreters, most often those who approached them with a spiritualizing or allegorizing method.
3. Although modern interpreters seldom go to these lengths in “finding” meaning in the parables, the proper approach to parables within an expositional commitment to preaching is a matter that requires careful thought.

I. The Definition of a Parable

A. The Basic Concept: Comparison

“A parable is a form of figurative language involving comparisons. But rather than using a single word or phrase to make the comparison or analogy, as in a simile, metaphor, or hypocoastasis [a comparison by implication], a parable is an extended analogy in story form” (Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 194).

“The word *parable* comes from the Greek *para* (“beside or alongside”) and *ballein* (“to throw”). Thus the story is thrown alongside the truth to illustrate the truth. Hearers and readers, by sensing the comparison or analogy between the story and their own situation, are prodded to think. In interpreting parables we need to ask, What is the point of the story? What spiritual truth is being illustrated? What analogy is being made?” (Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 194).

“The term ‘parable’ in the Bible possesses an extremely broad semantic range. It can refer to the three-word proverb ‘Physician, heal yourself’ (Luke 4:23) or to a lengthy story parable such as the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Lying at the core of the Old Testament *mashal* and the New Testament *parabole* is a comparison of two unlike things. The comparison can be brief or extended, implicit (as in a metaphor, riddle, story, or example parable) or explicit (as in a simile, similitude, or allegory)” (Robert Stein, “The Genre of Parables” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, p. 47).

B. The Types of Parables

1. Maxims or Proverbs, Luke 4:23; 6:39

“Whereas a parable can be a proverb, this does not mean that every proverb can be classified as a parable. Only those proverbs in which a comparison of unlike things is found should be included in the genre ‘parable’” (Stein, “The Genre of Parables, p. 42).

2. Riddles, Mark 7:15-17
3. Similitudes (extended similes), Matthew 13:24, 31
4. Stories, Luke 18:1-8; cf. Matt 20:1-16; 25:1-13

“Under this classification we refer to parables in the narrow sense—that is, to extended, fictional comparisons in story form that refer generally to a unique event” (Stein, “The Genre of Parables,” p. 44).

5. Examples, Luke 12:16-21; 14:7-11; cf. Matt 18:23-35

“The distinction between story parables and example parables is somewhat arbitrary. Whereas a story parable functions as ‘an earthly story bearing a heavenly meaning,’ an example parable functions as an example that says either ‘Go and do likewise’ (Luke 10:37) or ‘Go and do not do likewise.’ As a result, the meaning of the picture part of an example parable—that is, the analogy proper—lies much nearer to the surface and corresponds more closely to the reality that the analogy is teaching” (Stein, “The Genre of Parables,” p. 45).

6. Allegories, Matt 13:24-30; 21:33-41; 22:1-10

“When we speak of the genre ‘parable’ as including allegory, we are referring to allegory as a literary form, not as an exegetical method. This distinction between the literary form of allegory and the hermeneutical methodology of ‘allegorizing’ must be kept clear.... ‘Allegorizing’ is an exegetical method that originates with a reader who interprets an author’s words in a manner that the author did not intend” (Stein, “The Genre of Parables” p. 46).

II. The Purpose of Parables (Matthew 13:10-13)

- A. A Positive Purpose for Those With Ears to Hear, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”
- B. A Negative Purpose for Those Without Ears to Hear, “to them it has not been granted”

Implications regarding the use of parables:

(1) We must handle them with caution, particularly the parables expressly stated to have this dual purpose.

(2) We should not minimize or ignore the deliberate “ambiguity” of many parables that is intended to call for reflection (vs. ease of application). This is where Blomberg’s view about allegory offers some possible clarification.

“The purposes of allegory closely match both the revelatory and the esoteric purposes for which Christ, according to Mark 4:11-12, spoke in parables. Contemporary analysis largely agrees that there are at least three primary functions of allegory: (a) to illustrate a viewpoint in an artistic and educational way, (b) to keep its message from being immediately clear to all its hearers or readers without further reflection, and (c) to win over its audience to accept a particular set of beliefs or act in a certain way. At first glance (a) and (b) can seem contradictory, but in fact they complement one another in service of (c)” (Interpreting the Parables, pp. 53-54, emphasis original).

III. The Guidelines for Interpreting the Parables

A. Avoid Spiritualization or Allegorization

1. Recognize the difference between an allegory and allegorization.
 - a. Allegorization mishandles the text by reading into it meanings which generally: (1) are not indicated or called for by the text itself; (2) reflect the theology of the interpreter; (3) are anachronistic; and (4) would not have been discernible by the original hearers or readers.
 - b. Allegory is a means of communication which uses extended metaphor in narrative form as a parallel or analogy to a deeper truth or meaning.
 - c. Blomberg argues that we can avoid allegorization by acknowledging that the “key to interpreting most allegories lies in recognizing what a small handful of characters, actions or symbols stand for and fitting the rest of the story in with them” (*Interpreting the Parables*, p. 55).
 - d. More specifically, “The main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for allegorical interpretation, and the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these characters” (*Interpreting the Parables*, p. 166).
2. Treat a parable like all other biblical literature—historical, grammatical, and theological interpretation.
3. Since many of the parables are little stories, there is an overlap between their interpretation and that of narrative literature.
 - a. Plot (what is the crisis and how is it resolved?)

- b. Characterization (what do the main characters “stand for” and what do they communicate about that?)
- B. Understand the Historical and Literary Context
1. What was the occasion for telling this parable?
 2. How does the parable fit within its immediate context?
 3. Is there any explanation given prior to or following the parable?
- C. Identify the Main Truth(s) Being Illustrated by the Parable
1. A Point of Debate: How many truths are taught in each parable?
 - a. The Majority View of Modern Scholarship: A parable has one main point.
 - Pentecost sums up this approach, “a parable is designed to teach one essential truth; the details of a parable may be merely incidental” (*The Parables of Jesus*, p. 14).
 - Kistemaker sees this as one of the differences between parables and allegory. Parables, he claims “should not be given a point-by-point analysis and interpreted as an allegory, for then they lose their significance” (*The Parables*, p. 11).
 - Zuck draws a connection with how illustrations are used in a sermon, “Usually a parable, like a sermon illustration, is teaching a single truth” (*Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 215).
 - b. The Minority View of Modern Scholarship: Parables may have more than one point, and, in fact, usually do.
 - Ryken is representative, “Another long-established rule of parable interpretation that is under increasing attack is that the parables can have only one main point. This is an extremely arbitrary rule of interpretation and one that we do not otherwise impose on a work of literature” (*How to Read the Bible as Literature*, p. 149).
 - Blomberg’s has come to the conclusion that there is usually one main point per main character in a parable. His studies have categorized the parables on the basis of points made: (1) simple three point parables (e.g., Matt 21:28-32; 25:1-13); (2) complex three point parables (Matt 20:1-16; 25:14-30); (3) two point parables (e.g., Matt 7:24-27; 24:43-44); and (4) one point parables (e.g., Matt 13:31-32, 44-46).

2. Separate the primary details from the secondary information.
3. Validate the main truths from other Scripture.

D. Note the Actual or Intended Response of the Hearers

IV. The Guidelines for Preaching Parables

A. The theme of the sermon should be the same as the parable's theme.

1. A sermon theme is the combination of subject (what's the sermon about) and complement (what the sermon says about the subject). This is drawn directly from the exegetical theme of the parable, i.e., you have identified what the parable is about (its subject) and what it is saying about that subject (its complement).
2. Caveat: For those parables which it seems too difficult to summarize the main points into one theme statement, it would be better to preach the main points than to ignore them. In other words, faithfulness to the text takes priority over homiletical organization.

B. The structure of the sermon probably should be simplified to get to the heart of the truth:

1. The Story (accentuating the tension and/or comparison)
2. The Main Point(s)
3. The Application(s)