

Parable

A parable is, literally, something “cast alongside” something else. Jesus’ parables were stories that were “cast alongside” a truth in order to illustrate that truth. His parables were teaching aids and can be thought of as extended analogies or inspired comparisons. A common description of a parable is that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

For a time in His ministry, Jesus relied heavily on parables. He told many of them; in fact, according to Mark 4:34a, “He did not say anything to them without using a parable.” There are about 35 of Jesus’ parables recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.

It had not always been that way. In the early part of His ministry, Jesus had not used parables. Suddenly, He begins telling parables exclusively, much to the surprise of His disciples, who asked Him, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” (Matthew 13:10).

Jesus explained that His use of parables had a two-fold purpose: to reveal the truth to those who wanted to know it and to conceal the truth from those who were indifferent. In the previous chapter (Matthew 12), the Pharisees had publicly rejected their Messiah and blasphemed the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22–32). They fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of a hardhearted, spiritually blind people (Isaiah 6:9–10). Jesus’ response was to begin teaching in parables. Those who, like the Pharisees, had a preconceived bias against the Lord’s teaching would dismiss the parables as irrelevant nonsense. However, those who truly sought the truth would understand.

Jesus made sure His disciples understood the meaning of the parables: “When he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything” (Mark 4:34b).

Interpreting a parable can present some challenges for the student of the Bible. Sometimes, interpretation is easy because the Lord Himself gave the interpretation—the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares are both explained in Matthew 13. Here are some principles that help in interpreting the other parables:

1) Determine the scope of the spiritual truth being presented. Sometimes, a parable is preceded by some introductory words that provide a context. For example, often Jesus preceded a parable with the words “this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.” Also, before the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we read this: “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable” (Luke 18:9). This introduction delineates the subject matter being illustrated (self-righteousness and spiritual pride).

2) Distinguish between the “meat” of the story and what is just ornamentation. In other words, not every detail of a parable carries a deep spiritual meaning. Some details are simply there to help the story seem more realistic. For example, in Jesus’ own interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, He does not comment on the fact that there are four (and only four) different types of soil. That detail was meaningless to the overall point Jesus was making.

3) Compare Scripture with Scripture. This basic principle of hermeneutics is invaluable when studying parables. Jesus’ parables will never contradict the rest of the Word of God, which

He came to express (John 12:49). The parables are meant to illustrate doctrine, and the teachings Jesus illuminated are found clearly taught elsewhere in the Bible.

There are parables in the Bible other than those found in the Gospels. The book of Proverbs is full of analogies—whenever Solomon used a comparison to teach a truth, especially in emblematic parallelism, the result was a simple parable. For example, Proverbs 20:2 says, “A king’s wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion.” The roaring of a lion is “cast alongside” the wrath of a king for the purpose of comparison. That is the essence of parabolic language.

After telling some of His parables, Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (Mark 4:9, 23). This was a call to *listen* to the parables, not just as one would listen to an ordinary story but as one who is seeking the truth of God. May God grant us all ears to truly “hear.”