

Chapter Eight

The Parables in His Preaching

Jesus contributed the parable to religious literature. It would have remained an occasional example of genius if he had not so largely adopted it.

I. The Parables Classified

1. Definition.—The word parable occurs in the Synoptic Gospels 48 times, but it is nowhere in them defined. Its meaning was taken for granted, since it occurred in the Septuagint, where παραβολή usually translated the Hebrew מַשְׁל. The original idea of the Hebrew word is variously suggested by scholars. "To represent or to stand for something," and "likeness or resemblance" are the two prominent ideas suggested for the root meaning. The Greek word means "beside" and "to throw or cast," and had its figurative significance of nearness for the purpose of comparison for likeness or difference.

The word parable may be defined descriptively rather than scientifically. A parable is a rhetorical figure that translates through contrast and similitude natural facts and laws into terms of the spiritual life. Its basis may lie in real or idealized events of history or in the phenomena of nature. It has family ties with the metaphor and the simile but is sufficiently important to deserve separate classification. Scholars have not agreed as to the exact amount of the parabolic material in the words of Jesus, the number of individual parables ranging from thirty to eighty. Our list includes thirty-four parables and nine prominent parable germs. The parable expresses a complete thought in the form of a comparison of likeness or contrast, and contains a spiritual lesson which may or may not at first be apparent.

2. Interpretation.—False methods of interpretation have made the parables teach what was not originally intended or could logically be inferred. It is a false method to spiritualize each detail of the parable. The correct method regards the parable as an illustration given to teach one lesson or a few central ones. The details should be subordinated to this end. The entire number of Jesus' parables may be classified under a few great topics, which each one emphasizes in special ways. The first process in interpretation of an individual parable is to discover its group relation; the central teaching will advance this theme. Then the special purpose of the parable may be discovered, details being so regarded. The parables will uncover to the reverent student a largeness of truth that will satisfy him with their grandeur.

3. Groups.—There are many schemes for grouping the parables of Jesus. Two are here presented.

The first scheme classifies the parables according to the central thought. The thirty-four parables divide equally into those whose central thought is that of the

kingdom of God and that of personal experience. For Jesus the kingdom of God filled a large place in preaching and thought. The parables of the kingdom are placed by the records first and last in Jesus' ministry. Five parables describe the beginnings of the kingdom, whose value should justify any sacrifice, but may be disregarded and its benefits may pass to aliens to Israel. The growth and principles of the kingdom are outlined in five, of which two are repeated. The remaining seven forecast the consummation of the kingdom. The parables of personal experience show that the Preacher could not forget the needs of the single heart, even though a kingdom filled his vision and he should be its King. These occupy the middle part of his ministry. In fourteen of this division Jesus sets forth the individual's relations to God, and in three the complementary duties to fellow-men.

The second scheme for grouping considers the parables in the origin of illustrations. Jesus had an accurate insight into human life. He drew a larger number of parables from the occupation of agriculture than from any other, ten being here grouped. Jesus did not enjoy the blessings of his own home-life during his strenuous ministry, given to the work of redemption, yet he showed its value by basing five parables upon the household. (Editor's note: no parables were spoken relative to carpentry, his trade growing up and in maturity, except to say that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and the house built on the rock being one with solid foundation to resist a violent storm.) A related but larger idea is that of the social order in which seven parables are founded, and the general practices of people afford basis for five. Commercialism, the specialty of the Jew and the ambition of every race, furnishes setting for five. The shepherd life, so dear to the heart of the Oriental, is represented by several illustrations but by only one parable. In view of the fact that Jesus spent a large part of his ministry around the borders of the Sea of Galilee and that most of his apostolate were fishermen, it seems singular that he should have based only one of the recorded parables upon fishery. (Editor's note: the first disciples Jesus called to become his "Fishers of Men" – and all their experience totaled the "body" for the new "central thought" he'd put in their lives.)

4. Localization.–The parables were localized variously as to the audiences that heard them. Completeness of statement is impossible here because of the meagerness of data; the disciples were probably present at the delivery of the parables of the Chief Seats, the Great Supper, and the pounds; their presence is implied or stated in company with others who heard the Good Samaritan and the Laborers in the Vineyard. He gathered his disciples into a close companionship with the world shut out and told them of the Unmerciful Servant, the Friend at Midnight, the Unrighteous Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Unprofitable Servants, the Fig Tree Leafing, the Ten Virgins, and the Ten Talents. The remaining twenty-one parables had the general public for audiences, from which the disciples were not barred.

As to time and place the same difficulties attach to the parables as to the other features of the ministry of Jesus. The known and most probable places for the delivery of the parables may be thus indicated: Capernaum and the seashore, 9; Judea, 5 and the repetition of two others; Perea, 11; Samaria, or Galilee, 2; Jerico,

1; Jerusalem, 3; Mt. Olivet, 3. Those delivered in Jerusalem—a small number considering the history of the city—were in the Last Week, when the impending storm was to burst over the head of Jesus.

The first recorded parable was uttered at Capernaum by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, probably in the early summer of 28 A.D. The period of his ministry is the third, the time being about a year and a half after the opening of his public work. Previous to this time there had been uttered six parable germs. He had performed ten miracles of healing and two nature miracles, while his miracle ministry had been suggested in five general references. It thus appears that Jesus was a preacher of much popularity and extent of service before he began the use of parables.

The first parable was the Sower, given in a group of eight, half on the seashore and half in a near-by house. Nineteen discourses contain all the parables. With the exception of nine, delivered on two occasions, all his parables were spoken during the last six months of our Lord's ministry, from the Feast of Tabernacles to the Passover. The Ten Talents was the last parable.



5. Parable germs.—A briefer illustration deserves the name parable germ. The more prominent of these may be cited thus: the New Patch on the Old Garment, the New Wine in the Old Skins, the Potter, the Waiting Servants, the Wise and Foolish Builders, the Two Debtors, the Children at Play, the Blind Guiding the Blind, the Evil Spirits Returning, and the Goodman and the Thief.

II. The Parables in Homiletical Value

1. Literary form.—The parables were often introduced by a formula or particle that called attention to this special form of address. The parables that use a concrete experience to teach a spiritual lesson are sometimes called similitudes; of this class the Fig Tree Leafing is an example. Other facts gain attention through a concrete form rather than an abstract statement, the Sower being a fair sample. The parable differs from the allegory, which carries the idea of a detailed and hidden correspondence between each part of the story and intended truths; no clear case of its use by Jesus can be cited. The parable in the narrative and story form was quite common with Jesus.

The Gospels in their records of the parables deserve notice. The Gospel According to John does not give any parable, though the illustration of the Good Shepherd is sometimes classed among the parables. The parables of individual experience form a series in the central part of Jesus' ministry, and are peculiar to Luke, which gives only three parables of the kingdom, the first being peculiar to this Gospel and the others repetitions—the Pounds, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven. The Synoptics all record three—the Sower, the Wicked Husbandmen, and the Fig Tree Leafing.

The Seed Growing Secretly is peculiar to Mark, which gives only five out of the entire number. Matthew gives fifteen, of which all but four are peculiar to it. The purpose of each Gospel determined the selection of the parabolic material, Matthew giving those of the kingdom as fitting for a Jewish audience, and Luke those of individual experience as fitting for Gentiles.

2. General Design.—The parables formed a part of the discourse material of Jesus' preaching. Eighteen discourses, or nineteen, counting another for the repetition of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, contained all the parables; these discourses are distributed chronologically thus: two with parables on a single day in the early summer of 28 A.D., one in the late summer or early autumn of 29 A.D., and the others with the remaining twenty-five parables during the last six months of Jesus' ministry. The Passion Week contributed six parables in two discourses. The Gospels in their present form sometimes present the discourses as entirely composed of the parables. The Sermon on the Mount does not contain any parable, though it ends with the parable germ of the Wise and the Foolish Builder.

Other great teachers had given slight attention to the parable as a literary form, but it remained for Jesus to make it a speciality. By it he gathered up the analogies between the natural and the spiritual laws and experiences. Another reason for its use was found in the quick impression that it made upon the minds of the audience. He held their attention. His habit of itineraries gave him many new audiences, and his sermons were compelled to be insistent for attention. The crowds upon the roadside or street, in the homes and synagogues, amid the fields or upon the beach would be lethargic and restless, therefore powerful illustrations were needed to hold them. A third reason made the parable the medium for statements to his disciples, who might gradually arrive at the true meaning and purpose of the parable while the crowds and the critics would remain in ignorance. His followers would be guided by (Christ's/*Editor*) love in their efforts at interpretation. A fourth reason was to give his truth a communicative form; men could easily recount the parables when they might not have been able to repeat learned discourses and doctrines. (Editor's note: one person hearing a parable of Jesus could relate it intact to another not originally present during its hearing, and these folk could discuss it without the second hearer having disadvantage of not being in original attendance. Open discussion would follow and any conclusions arrived at be discussed with Jesus upon his return.)

However, the most prominent reason was the desire to avert an immature crisis in his ministry. Jesus made his message in its appreciation dependent upon fellowship with himself. Two classes brought the risk of a crisis to his ministry—the ill-informed enthusiast, who would crown him king, and the bitter enemy, who would have caused his death. Jesus knew that the lines of his duties converged to the Cross, but he would not let the enthusiasm of his partisans nor the hatred of his foes deflect him from his course or hasten his plans.

The national hopes and misfortunes had made the idea of the kingdom specially important. Jesus shunned the forms of speech that would have endangered his cause. His simple life, his unsullied character, his unfailing sympathy, and his matchless teaching aroused the enmity of the religious leaders. By the time of the

last six months of his ministry the opposition had become well formed and strongly determined upon his death, the suitable occasion being sought. Jesus knew how significant was the (opponent's/*Editor*) feeling. He understood the tenseness of the times. His full ministry of the Father's words had not been met. Through the parable he could continue to preach to the actual and the prospective believer, while the critic would be baffled. (Editor's note: even today our understanding Jesus' parables requires the having of some help. We can consult books on the subject, but that shortcut may speak to a laziness in heart not to seek the Lord directly for those meanings of the parables. And this latter method is experiential, having the Holy Spirit reveal them to us.)

Jesus himself furnished another reason, but it does not entirely displace the others. He made the parable a judgment upon the impenitent. "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that which he has. Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." This is a difficult passage to exegete, but it at least means that the confirmed skeptic will increase his blindness through unbelief, while the disciple will grow in knowledge. (Editor's note: hate interferes with the process of learning.)

3. Discourse purpose.—Supplemental to the general design of the parables was the discourse purpose. Jesus pierced the armor of Pharisaism with his sword of the parable. His later ministry was specially engaged in bitter and open contests with the scribes and Pharisees. His *polemics* (a strong verbal attack or engagement in a disputatious or controversial debate) made use of the parables, five discourses of his polemics containing eleven parables. Pretense of piety, pride of public approval, arrogance of position, and contempt for the sinner were arraigned with piercing sarcasm, fitting rebuke, and sparkling illustration. They could not fail to understand him in his thrusts, though they did not perceive his spiritual truths. This masterful polemist could not be answered, therefore the remaining method of silencing him by death was planned. (Editor's note: Public opinion had been siding with Jesus where there was dispute with Pharisees and Sadducees. They reacted to counter the growing popularity by threat to exclude those who favored him from having any participation in the synagogue assembly—John 9:22.)

Jesus also used the parables for didactic purposes. His primary object of the incarnation was to secure through his own death the redemption of the sinner, but in order to make this mission intelligible to men it was essential that Jesus should spend some time in unfolding his truths. Mission created message, and message illustrated and enforced mission. The Savior conditioned the Preacher, and the Preacher prepared the world for the Savior. His parables unfolded the principles of the kingdom and the gospel of individual experience.

The evangelistic plan of the parables brought to men the personal appeal of one whose willingness to forget self was daily shown and whose interest in the distressed received testimony from his ceaseless cures and favors. The invitation of the parable of the Lost Son could be accompanied by the World's Rest

Call—Matthew 11:28 (Editor's note: *Come to Me all you who labor and are heavily burdened and I will rest you...you will find rest for your souls.* Berkeley Version). Jesus desired to reach men for a personal acceptance of himself and his benefits. Abstract statements could not win men, but the parables could not fail to make plain to some the way of life.

4. Training force.—The apostolate received careful training from Jesus. They should succeed to the work of making salvation personally realized. Their preparation might have discouraged a less confident leader. Gathered from the fishing boat and the seat of custom, different in temperament and culture, sharers of the current worldly hopes of the Messiah, these apostles could be fitted for their task only through patience and wisdom on the part of the leader. They would not be able to grasp at once the utmost limits of his doctrines. The parables helped them to keep in mind the words of Jesus. To them was promised future light and leadership of the Holy Spirit; obedience should qualify them for increased gifts of revelations.

5. Circumstantiality.—The parables of Jesus were neither mystical nor mythical. They had the stamp and likeness of truth. They were not copies but reproductions of life, whether the basis be real or idealized history or the child of imagination. The watermark of fact was upon them. The glitter and sham of fiction were absent. The reader of these parables feels the throb of real life. They might all easily be brought into actual existence. Confidence in Jesus is thereby created. He could not be less true to the material than to the form of preaching. (Editor's note: the parables were not delivered in any less sincere a manner than were the conscious, straight-forward teachings.)

III. The Parables in Jesus' Experience

1. Principle of Selection.—Jesus made the known the guide to the unknown. This favorite formula of modern science lay beneath the method of Jesus in the selection of parables. His imagery was always within the limits of popular information, but his own genius was required to unite the familiar form to the spiritual truth. This may be called the pedagogic method. Jesus was an artist whose pictures were those of words rather than of canvas and pigments. His speech abounded in picture words. His parables were specially thus characterized. This was the pictorial principle of selection.

A third principle was his method of concretion. He could have used abstract statements, but few among his audiences would have caught his message. The scholar may be interested in dissertations in abstract terms, but the man of the office and the woman of the home need concretion. Modern science has claimed as its own this method, but Jesus used it in his selection of parables. One might readily see the value of the truth of God's fatherhood and tenderness, but its embodiment in the parable of the Lost Son will bring it both to learned and unlearned. The parable of the Talents is more forceful than a discussion of the benefits and failures in life's opportunities.

A final principle of selection was the theological one. Jesus did not write his system of theology; he put it into his parables. He preferred to suggest the relations

between God and men, and men with fellow-men, by these concrete examples. His theological principle was sure of a hearing.

2. Time of preparation.—When did Jesus prepare his parables? Their spontaneity and vividness suggest immediate preparation, but there are no signs of haste or immaturity. The thirty years of silence must have stored his mind and heart with the solutions of life's problems; he must often have communed with the father upon the frailties of human life, while his own observation of the passions shown in his community life must have evoked fitting illustrations of the method of relief for the woes and misfortunes of men. He would need but the occasion and the needs of the audience (Editor's note: these were discerned) to bring into form his previous thoughts.

But the immediate form of the parables was doubtless left to the time of delivery. The golden harvest, the toiling farmer, the successful fishermen, the pilgrim for worship would bring the proper setting for his terms of preaching. The Preacher was perfectly familiar with his message and was master of any occasion that might arise. He did not hesitate or wander in his themes. His great mind had arranged his materials for preaching. He left to the moment the selection of the proper forms.

8. Attitude toward life.—The parables reflected Jesus' attitude toward life. His was the same world in which we live and suffer and are tempted. Men were sordid in their ambitions, ignorant of religion, oppressed by social customs, and sinners under divine wrath, but they touched the heart of the Preacher. He did not group men into humanity; to him each poor unfortunate man and woman appealed for his sympathy and help. His parables indicate this love for the individual, poor, ignorant, sinning, but competent to be saved. (Editor's note: when the case was that someone he spoke with presented "their parable" of a sort, i.e., the Syrophœnician woman who talked of dogs and crumbs under the table, and the Roman soldier who asked Jesus only to "issue an order" based on lifestyle he had as a commander, results were an enthusiastic granting of this the petitioners had requested. Perhaps we can be called on to be more creative in our petitioning the Father too!)

(End of Chapter Eight – The Parables in His Preaching)