

The Synoptic Gospels

Week 9

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Outline

The Value of Parables

- Memorable

- Deaf Ears and Blind Eyes

Kingdom Parables

- Life in the Kingdom

- The Kingdom's Value

- The Coming of the Kingdom

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Human Psychology

For anyone, memory and recall are largely governed by the formation of mental connections. The more connections there are, the better. God knows this and it is probably behind these facts of Scripture:

- The Psalms are sung and written in verse, drawing in musicality, tonality and verbal artistry. Vivid images, tunes and rhythm are powerful mnemonics.
- Roughly half of the Old Testament is narrative, expressing theological principles in the form of concrete examples.
- The prophets' oracles are brimming with poetic devices.
- Jesus spoke in parables, using imagery from everyday agrarian life. Even his ethical teachings exhibit formulaic structures.
- Authors of epistles use tons of analogies (body of Christ, spiritual warfare, etc.)

This is not to denigrate abstract statements of principle: they are crucial complements when it's unclear whether some narrative feature or poetic device is a mere artifact or a matter of principle.

Democratic

Along the lines of the above, very few people are equipped with high-powered critical faculties, necessary for digesting raw abstractions.

Therefore, in spite of the Bible's depth and mystery, Jesus' parables' concreteness and simplicity make them accessible to all people, all other things being equal.

Matt 11:25—At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. 26 Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. . . .”

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Obscurity

Parables can also obfuscate, much like a riddle. Jesus' answer to the question, *Why parables?* is as follows:

Matthew 13:13-14—Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled . . .

He then proceeds to quote Isaiah 6:9-10. Let's look at the broader context of this citation.

Obscurity

Isaiah 6:8-13—*Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people:*

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 10 *"Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed."*

11 *Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered,*

"Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate, 12 The Lord has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. 13 Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump."

Obscurity upon Obscurity

Why would Jesus not want them to understand? Why does he cite Isaiah?

1. Audience—Don't Cast Pearls to Pigs (Matthew 7:6)

- Some people won't listen anyhow. Jesus explains the parables to his *disciples*, a term broader than just the Twelve. He tells people he knows are open.
- Wicked people will persecute those who bring the truth. In the pearls-to-pigs parable, he says, "they will trample [the pearls] under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."

2. Timing—

- Continuing insights from pearls-to-pigs, the time for persecution and crucifixion had not yet come. Leaving things in obscurity would delay the tearing to pieces.
- More speculatively, perhaps if Jesus spoke directly, people would have prevented his crucifixion (cf. Mark 3:21; John 6:15).

3. Fulfillment—

- In the case of Isaiah, God is accomplishing a larger goal of judgment over the nation of Israel that has less to do with individuals coming under judgment.
- Jesus fulfills the law *and the prophets*. Even though Isaiah had an immediate fulfillment, Jesus sees his day's rejection-judgment pair as parallel to and even more serious than the rejection-judgment of the prophets' day. (Cf. Matt 23:35)

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Mustard Seed and Yeast

Beginning with some potential puzzles, Jesus describes birds landing in the branches of the mustard tree. In Biblical imagery, birds can symbolize doom (Gen 40:16-19) or even Satan (Matt 13:18-19). How does that fit in to this parable? What would Jesus be saying?

Likewise, in Biblical imagery, yeast symbolizes sin and evil. Is Jesus describing the infiltration of wolves in sheep's clothing? (Cf. Matt 10:16, Acts 20:29, I Cor 5:6-8)

Frankly, I think this is patently absurd and betrays an obsession with making every single part of the parable mean something. Both of them describe the fact that the kingdom begins very small and spreads far and wide in a "bottom-up," grass-roots fashion. This contrasts with the violent, "top-down" take over that will characterize the Second Advent (and was the expectation of Jesus' disciples during the First Advent.)

Botanical Mystery

The parable of the Growing Seed (or Botanical Mystery, as I'd prefer) is unusual because in similar parables, the one sowing seed is usually God. Furthermore, the one who harvests is usually God with his angels.

The fact that the sower “does not know how” the seed grows suggests that this sower is us!

This parable seems to signal our relative ignorance of what God is doing behind the scenes. Cf. Jesus' teaching on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in John 16:5-11.

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Pearl, Treasure

The parables of the Pearl and Buried Treasure are parallel. The pearl and treasure represent the same thing; the land-pirate and the merchant of pearls are the same. What or who do the pearl/treasure represent? What or who is merchant? Land-pirate? Defend your position.

Here is my read:

1. The pearl and treasure are eternal life with God.
2. The merchant and land-pirate are individuals who respond to the gospel.
3. What about the lost coin, sheep, son?
 - Jesus starts our present parables with “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” which is not true of the lost items.
 - The audience of the *Lost* parables is obviously the religious leadership and the lost items of value are people; the audience here is the disciples.

Shrewd Manager

A dishonest manager is oddly commended by Jesus, who draws this lesson:

Luke 16:10-12—“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”

Let’s break it down:

- The master/owner is the world system.
- The manager’s termination is his inevitable death (or return of Christ).
- Changed bills was the manager converting worldly value to eternal value
- Future hospitality the manager sought is eternal life with Christ.

Christ isn’t urging dishonesty, but to see money in itself is worthless where we’re going. It’s only valuable if it’s “exchanged.”

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Parable of the Net

A friend from graduate school once said, “I don’t believe in a binary concept of salvation.” I’ve meditated on that many times since and have come to the conclusion that *God* believes in a binary concept of salvation.

Many of the other parables, along with explicit statements from Christ and John the Baptist leave the “binary” picture unassailable. In the case of the Parable of the Net, this seems to be the only message: in the final judgment, there are only two categories. There is no limbo, purgatory or anything else. Everyone is gathered by the angels and sorted into just two categories.

Talents and Minas

The Talents and the Minas are very similar in structure, but there are some noticeable differences. Let's read both (if there's time). What differences are there?

Here are some straightforward take-aways:

- The Talents imply that God does not automatically treat everyone the same. Presumably, this indicates differences in gifts, but perhaps more seriously differences in degrees of revelation. (Cf. Luke 12:48)
- Properly responding to what we've received will merit reward and responsibility in eternity. In other words, we have a serious stewardship.
- The following remark seems relevant to the matter of revelation:
everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.
- The Minas seems to indicate that some will enter the kingdom (one who buried the mina) but with little to show for it. (Cf. I Cor 3:15)

Served Slave or Serving Slave

How would you harmonize these passages?

Luke 12:35-38—Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak

Luke 17:7-10—“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Served Slave or Serving Slave

How would you harmonize these passages?

- The passage in Luke 12 appears to be describing the final feast. This is what Jesus will actually do.
- The passage in Luke 17 is not describing what will happen but the attitude we should have towards God's generosity.
- A harmonizing parable would be the workers in the field. In the end, they receive their denarius either way, but are chastised for their entitled attitude.

Why is an entitled attitude so tempting?

Ten Virgins

The Ten Virgins represents the urgency of preparedness, discussed last week. While I do not have any special application to add to last week's discussion, here are some interpretative points:

- The bride groom is clearly Christ and the virgins are clearly would-be followers.
- The expression 'foolish' is not merely a matter of clumsy air-headedness, but is often used to mean at least culpable ignorance or neglect. (Cf. Proverbs)
- Given its role in illumination, the oil could be the word/message. Given the lack of clarification from Christ and a lack of clear parallels, to determine exactly what the oil is would prove unprofitable.
- Either way, Jesus' is clearly warning us to take his teaching on the end with solemnity rather than sleepy indifference.

Sheep and Goats

The Sheep are clearly Christians and the Goats are clearly heathen; the sheep go to heaven, the goats to hell. This passage puzzles people because it seems to preach works-righteousness.

Here are some interpretative controls?

1. At the most general level, spiritual fruits are *evidence* of the Spirit. True believers (sheep) will exhibit their faith in their loving actions.
2. The phrase “the least of these brothers of mine,” signals that Jesus is referring to his followers. The success/failure here includes but goes far beyond the acts of service described.
 - Matt 10:40—“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”
 - Cf. Paul’s conversion, “Why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 9:4,5)

References

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