

1.

Parables Intro Class

INTRODUCTIONS:

Climate: How was your summer? Where did you meet God this summer?

What is the earliest parable you remember hearing? Or What is your favorite parable?

Never underestimate the power of parables, nice stories! Goal is to open minds to the idea that parables are profound and often complex stories that could change our lives.

We want to emphasize mystery and depths of the parables.

Parables can help us comprehend God better, know ourselves more realistically, change how we value and deal w/people in healthier relationships.

As we get to know the parables better they speak to us on many levels and in new ways.

Jesus chose parables as a primary way to communicate His word.

The parables of Jesus are the most influential literature in Christian history. They are simple stories that almost any child can understand, and for more than two thousand years they have also challenged biblical experts to explore their precise meanings.

Parables were not new during Jesus' time. The Hebrew word for Parable is mashal and the Greek work is parable'. Rabbis often used this storytelling technic to teach their students.

Classic definition of a parable (1961 C.H.Dodd):

At its simplest, **the parable is a metaphor or simile** (comparing two dissimilar things)

...**drawn from nature or common life** (secular realism – everyone can relate)

...**arresting the hearer** (story form to build in interest) (old adage if you want to put a child asleep tell them a story, if you want to keep an adult awake tell them a story) (a story which demands a response)...stories entertain, inform, involve, motivate, authenticate and mirror existence.

...**by its vividness or strangeness** (stands out because the context of the story is commonplace)

...**and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application** (danger in trying to state conclusively what they mean) (doubt is essential to understanding)

...**to tease it into active thought**(The parable is intended to be open not closed) (with ambiguity the mind is “teased” into continuing to think about them)

Let's read 2 SAM 12:1-9

(Discuss its impact on King David)

SOME POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How did David get caught up in the story that Nathan tells?

At what point does David realize that the story is about him?

To what degree does the story change his life?

What does this say to us about the power of a parable?

Jesus when speaking to the crowds spoke almost entirely pictorially, explaining his ideas through stories.

Jesus taught profound theology through down to earth stories reflected in the world in which he lived: stories about family life, agriculture, the natural world, trade and commerce, weddings, rich and poor people, politics and kings.

To begin to understand the parables:

You must consider the CONTEXT:

We, on the other hand, are 2000 years distant socially, politically, and religiously so the full force and flavor of Jesus' sayings may elude us.

Consider:

- The overall historical context

- The context of Jesus' teaching and ministry

- The context of the Gospel in which they are found

Consider with regard to the Old Testament scriptures (many reference and parallel the stories that people then knew from their history)

We can also look at the parables FORM:

The Shape and structure of the parable itself. Most have more than one point. And don't try to fit them all into one mold. Note selection and definitions and categorizing the parables are arbitrary. Many also discount John's use of the parable since he never uses the term and his stories are different than the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke!

Some call John's parables – sayings! In fact the word parabole (gr: paraboLAY) is NEVER used by John.

SO WHY PARABLES?

Humans our brains are wired for story...Stories are easy to understand and easy to remember – the oral tradition (there were no books and most folks couldn't read). Jesus uses everyday imagery and concepts from Nature, Works and Wages, Open and Closed, Hospitality, Feasts, Lost and Found etc...things they easily understood day-to-day.

All the *synoptic* Gospels can be seen to use parables (EXPLAIN WHAT THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS ARE). This indicated that these Evangelists were heirs to a solid tradition – not the inventors of one!

NOTE: The Evangelists felt a measure of freedom in retelling Jesus' stories. These related to their audience and their times. (Hence the same parable told to a different group would be told in slightly different ways), however, they were all strongly committed to preserving the common tradition of Jesus' teachings.

Parable equaled many things. Parable (Greek) suggests putting things side by side. Putting things together from different spheres in such a way that one idea illuminates the other.

The Hebrew/Aramaic word Mashal/Mathla was very broad in scope. It covered Riddles, Fables, Proverbs, stories and so on...

Parable in the Gospels is characteristically a pictorial story or saying. (John's gospel never uses this term).

Their **PURPOSE** was:

To communicate effectively (HEAR & UNDERSTAND... **or** NOT)

In general parables communicate by bringing together parallel ideas so that one illuminates the other. It is a story with an expanded analogy. They presuppose the kingdom (or condition) they seek to reveal.

Parables were the means Jesus used most frequently to explain the kingdom of God and the expectations That God has for us.

Nathan's parable to David was devastatingly simple! The meaning lies just below the surface.

Jesus' parables, however, were often teasing sayings that had to be figured out or explained and which were more effective for that reason.

The Purpose is alluded to within the Synoptic Gospels themselves: Mt 13:3-23, Mk 4:3-20; and Lk 8:5-15

We'll focus on this particular parable later!

For now note that all the Evangelists place this particular saying between the parable of the Sower and its interpretation. The Parable was addressing the crowds while its meaning was addressed to the disciples. This is significant!

To the Disciples the mystery is given...to those outside it may be concealed,
Educational function - disciples; judgmental function – outside

Similarities to OT Books of Isaiah, Daniel and Habakkuk

Parables have two functions: Prophetic messages – revelations of the divine. The truth and God's plan are granted to those who can comprehend or grasp it (actually to those who are open to receiving it)

So they both reveal and conceal!

They can bring both Blessing AND Judgment.

UNDERSTANDING:

Jesus' Parables were designed and intended to teach people about the kingdom of God through an effective medium of communication,

Parables are not so simple – some get it... and some don't

This is the pattern of Jesus' ministry as a whole! Some are open; they see, hear and respond and some are closed, blind and reject it. (Many OT references here to the prophets having the same effect).

Disciple's understandings of these mysteries are not their own but a gift from God.

Outsider's failure to understand them is a sign of God's judgment on people's hardness of hearts as in the prophetic ministry of Isaiah.

Therefore Jesus' ministry as reflected in the parables comes as a gift to some and judgment to others.

(Many folks try to categorize the parables into groups and types, no two people agree so I've chose not to get into it with our group)

Here are some **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS**:

Jesus' Parables are brief, even terse. (they use no more words than necessary)

Parables are marked by simplicity and symmetry

Parables focus mainly on humans.

Parables are fictional descriptions taken from everyday life.

Parables are engaging.

Parables often contain elements of reversal

The crucial matter of parables is usually at the end.

Parables are told in Context!

Parables are Theocentric (God centered) – Parables seek to change behavior and create discipleship, but they do so by telling us about the qualities of God and God’s kingdom – the new or rather the intended or original reality God seeks to establish on earth.

Parables frequently allude to OT texts (which would be easily recognized by his audience) They work on many levels.

Most parables appear in larger collections of parables. These characteristics are specific to each of the Gospel writers.

The parables make up about 35% of Jesus’ teachings in the synoptic gospels.

There is little agreement on the number of parables (33-65), depends on the definition and the classifications people use (we will not address this too much variation throughout the scholarly community).

Mark has just a few 4-6

Matthew has many (10 unique to MT for his Jewish community/audience)

Luke has 2/3rds of all the parables with 18 unique to Luke (Greek/ Roman audiences in Rome)

(Mat and LK thematically arrange the parables in their respective Gospels)

The gospel of Thomas also has many of the parables that are found in the synoptics.

INTERPERTATION:

1. Pay close attention to the form and main emphasis of each parable. Parables will often have one main point; but not always...we should not press every detail but seek to be sensitive to what is significant given the historical context. Focus on the difficulties in the passage. Do not fall into either extreme: seeking to find some spiritual truth in every detail and also thinking that there is ONLY one spiritual truth in each parable.

2. Account for the first century Palestinian background of Jesus’ ministry. Also include the OT background.

3. Interpret the parable in the context of Jesus' ministry and the context of His other teachings.
4. Be guided by context and other interpretative hints given by the evangelists (NOTE even how they group parables together for added emphasis). NT teaching should also not be neglected since these teachings were the foundations of the early church.
5. Base reflection about the contemporary message of the parable on the historical meaning of the parable.
7. How are the stories relevant for us now?

Some challenges are:

1. Don't use parables to formulate NEW doctrine!
 2. One of the most difficult concepts to grasp is to allow the parables to speak with their full depth and complexity rather than looking for the "right answer". They are not problems to be solved. Allow them to wash over you and penetrate. Be open!
 3. Look at them from many different aspects (turn the gem) and see how they change from different angles and perspectives.
 4. How are they still relevant for us today?
 5. And then...How can they change you!
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Setting the Contextual Scene if you will...

Imagine a small Middle Eastern country – its people reminisce of a time when they were strong and powerful. But now they are weak and poor and under the thumb of foreign imperialists! They longed for release, freedom, and a better future!

Now this man comes along and tells them that things will be different (not like they haven't heard this before) Peddling hope to the downtrodden!

But it seems different...The revolution is here and this person named Jesus seems to walk the talk!

Jesus' parables all describe some aspect of the Kingdom of God (Jesus' central message and ministry)...in direct opposition to the Kingdom of Herod and the Kingdom of Rome.

What did Jesus mean by the Kingdom? (Nowadays it suggests a place)

Jesus used the term to relate to a state of affairs, to God ruling as King – as well as to the realm where God rules.

Today, words like King and Kingdom have less of a forceful feel to them. Not the power associated with them in Jesus' day.

Kingship was something very contemporary and very powerful...so when Jesus announced the coming of God's Kingdom and Kingly rule this was of enormous importance and relevance.

He was announcing God's final intervention in history...that which the OT prophets looked forward to.

The OT looked forward to a future where God would intervene and put things right and take on rule (this notion is also reflected in Revelations)

They looked forward to the restoration and greatness of Israel.

Today we would describe the Old Testament and its longing, as hope for a divine revolution!

Jesus proclaims the longed for revolution is now underway! (to paraphrase Kingdom of God with the term Revolution of God may help us to understand the excitement of what Jesus was saying at the time.

He was announcing a dramatic forceful change in society where these people looked for God to put things right.

Contextually, They took it to mean the very real and physical overthrow of Herod and Rome.

Jesus meant it instead as the overthrow of Satan and brings Earth and Heaven back into harmony, though not through force of arms, but unbelievably through suffering and death!

Note: The Kingdom of Heaven (Mat Jewish audience) is synonymous w the Kingdom of God referenced in Mark and Luke.

The kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven – it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven...Jesus' miracles were evidence of this fact.

Tangible evidence of the OT overthrow of evil.

Jesus' revolution not only affected people's diseases etc...but more importantly affected their relationships with each other and the way people of different strata and status were to treat each other. Jesus broke through the social barriers (man and women; rich and poor; Jew and Samaritan).

The revolution of God entails the establishment of a revolutionary society!

The most important relationship focused on, had to do with the divine – human relationship! The relationship between God and God's creation.

God's new society...includes GOD!

Father "ABBA" was a revolutionary word to use for God – it was an intimate family word used by children to address their father. (Like Daddy in English). Jews did not ordinarily address their Holy God in this manner.

Jesus expressed a close personal relationship with God!

Like all revolutions those oppressed embraced it; while the establishment (the powers that be) did their best to suppress it because they were in power and had the most to lose.

To sum up: In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing the coming of God's new world as promised in the OT.

God was intervening. Jesus announced this message not in theological terms but in vivid, concrete stories (the parables).

The study of the parables themselves will in turn fill out and clarify our understanding of the Kingdom of God – here and now!

And so as disciples of Christ we begin! Applying the parables today.

Understanding the parable of the Sower helps us to understand other parables

Mt 13:3-23, Mk 4:3-20; and Lk 8:5-15

The Parable of the Sower and its surrounding context have a foundational role in all three synoptic Gospels (also include in the Gospel of Thomas).

It is the first substantive parable in all three and is given a detailed interpretation which follows!

IT IS THE PARABLE ABOUT THE PARABLES!

All three Synoptic Evangelists place an explanation of the purpose of Jesus' parabolic teaching between the parable and its interpretation. In all three a portion of Isa 6:9-10 is quoted. The collection of parables that follow are often called the parables of growth.

The emphasis of each author is striking.

In all three the dominant idea is HEARING. (in Mark's account the verb to hear appears 13 times!)

The parable of the sower is a parable about hearing and being open to the message of the kingdom!

All three attach the OT saying "Let the one who has ears to hear hear". (Ez 3:27)

All three Synoptics indicate that Jesus taught the crowds and then gave further instruction in private to his disciples, often in response to their queries.

Isa 6:9-10 is also included to emphasize hardness of heart and judgment i.e. being closed!

CULTURAL INFO:

Our world of supermarkets is far removed from the fragile agricultural economy of first century Palestine. Everyone but the extremely rich was affected by sowing and the prospects of a bountiful or poor harvest. Most of Jesus' listeners were all too familiar with this scene. The joys of farming in Palestine.

In Galilee Palestine there are many rocks! The soil may look fine but it is a shallow covering over the rocks underneath. The temperature of the soil is warm, which leads to seeds sprouting quickly but dying because of inadequate roots...(NO DEPTH)

Images of seeds, sowing failures of crops are common metaphors to describe life with its hardships and its prosperity, and the judgment and blessings of God.

One hundredfold refers to Genesis 26:12 we are told Isaacs field yielded 100 fold a bountiful harvest showing God's blessings.

Interpretation of the parable is determined by whether one focuses on the sower, the soil, the seed, or the harvest. (turning the gem).

The parable is about the kingdom, the revolution of God announced by Jesus. The sowing metaphor is applied to Jesus' own ministry. Seed sowing seems quite weak and unimpressive, and the seed is vulnerable. But it is the initiation of the greatest importance and power (take an acorn or a baby for eg) a seed is PURE POTENTIAL! As is the kingdom of God here on earth!

It's also about the preaching of the kingdom. The seed as the word...the word of the kingdom! Jesus did not use military might for change he used words (with deep

roots). His ministry was to preach the good news and also to die – to conquer by love not force. Sowing is something that is powerful and life giving!

Jesus words if accepted run deep and quite literally transform us.

And it includes the people's response to the kingdom. It also comments on the success of the word in our lives. The four part interpretation of the parable is a brilliant analysis of the experience of Christian ministry! The parable is about the kingdom and the word which looks for a response! An open response to HEAR!

ADAPTING THE PARABLE

Reception of the word of God. The kingdom is a kingdom of the word. And the parable is about receiving the word! To be a disciple of God's kingdom means hearing and remaining focused on the message in such a way that one becomes DEFINED by it! The key to spiritual formation is the willingness to hear and be open to God to hear and be defined by God's word. The kingdom within!

The parable also emphasizes both receptivity and bearing fruit.

Faith that is temporary and unproductive is not true faith (NOT DEEP) The only conversions that count in the kingdom are those confirmed by a life of discipleship...action in realized potential and transformation.

The parable of the sower is eschatological because it embodies the activity of God sowing his restored people through the preaching of Jesus.

In order to be "productive" in a kingdom sense one must set about putting down deep roots!

What are all the different perspectives one can take in this parable and how do these change the way the parable can be seen: The sower, the seed, the ground...

Can we begin to appreciate the depth of these seemingly so simple stories that Jesus relates to his audience concerning the kingdom of God?

This is but a little foundation to whet your appetite for Jesus stories.

When next we meet we will take on a single parable at a time.

- 1. We will read the parable.**
- 2. We will discuss it from your point of view**
- 3. I will then offer how scholars have looked at the parable and I will provide any relevant context.**
- 4. We will conclude with open discussion and how we can let this parable speak to us and change us today!**

RESOURCES:

Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent, a comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* 2008

Henderson, Richard J. *Parables, Stories for Life in God's World, Kerygma Program Guides* 1998

Wenham, David, *The parables of Jesus* 1989

Baily, Kenneth VARIOUS

Keller, Timothy *The Prodigal God, Recovering the Heart of Christian Faith* 2008

36 Parables DVD series