

# **The Definition and Purpose of Parables**

## **With accompanying examination of Mark 4:10-13**

Jim Livengood

### **I. Definition.**

The word “parable” is derived from the Greek verb, “παραβαλλω.” παρα = along side of, beside, or by; and βαλλω = to throw or to place. Hence, “παραβαλλω” means a “throwing along side of” or a “placing along side of” for the purposes of comparison. A parable, therefore, places the truth to be taught alongside of that which is known and familiar. This is done in order to illustrate the essential truth of the issue being taught.

Said another way, the familiar and known aspect of the parable serves as an analogy that aids in understanding the lesson being communicated. An “analogy” is a resemblance in certain aspects between things otherwise unlike. Hence, a sower sowing seed is analogous to Christ preaching the Word of God. The sower, the familiar part of the analogy, serves to illustrate what the Lord Jesus does when He preaches; the sower spreads out the seed, Jesus distributes the Word. A sower and a preacher are different things. Yet one illustrates the other. There is thus a resemblance in certain aspects between things otherwise unlike. A parable is therefore said to be an analogy or comparison.

There are apparently between thirty-four and fifty-two (depending on how one applies the definition) parables in the New Testament, all but two of which are in the gospels, these two being in Hebrews 9:9 and Hebrews 11:19.

The most common use of the parable utilizes the familiar narrative story, such as the sower of seed, as the point of comparison to the truth being taught. However, the narrative story is not the only form in which a parable can appear. For example, proverbial sayings, riddles, pithy statements, and even known historical events can serve as the familiar aspect of the parable from which the truth being taught can be compared. For example, Jesus said in Luke 6:39, “A blind man cannot lead a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?” This simple observation about a blind man served as the familiar point for the parable’s comparison. The lesson to be drawn was that the people needed to rise above the teaching of the blind Pharisees and listen to the Holy Spirit within them leading them to Christ. If they continued to listen to their leaders’ teachings, well, it was like the blind leading the blind. We see in this example how a lengthy narrative need not be the only form from which a parable can be built, though as already mentioned, it is the usual one. But, regardless of the form in which the parable is presented, it is the lesson that is of value; the hearer must catch the analogy if he is to be instructed.

### **II. Purpose.**

When looking at the general uses of the parabolic teaching method, it seems to be nearly universally acknowledged that the purpose of the parable is to instruct and reveal. This is fascinating in view of the sudden turn of direction which we observe when Mark 4:10-13 is

exegeted. Before tackling that passage, however, the following purposes can be identified for utilization of the parable.

The parable was often used by Jesus, and Old Testament writers as well, to convey enigmatic truth in an easily understandable way. The parable took the familiar and applied it to the unfamiliar. By analogy therefore, the unfamiliar became comprehended.

Another purpose of the parable, as can be seen in Nathan's reproof of David (2 Samuel 12:2-13), was to convey truth in a less offensive or more engaging form than that of direct assertion. Gary Smalley refers to this method of communication when he talks about "emotional word pictures." Smalley advises wives to speak to their husbands in emotional word pictures when the direct approach doesn't seem to be working. In essence, he is instructing them in the use of the parabolic method. The wife presents a picture story to the husband to which he can relate. He is then led to the conclusion that he is the culprit to which the story points and in the realization, is encouraged to change his ways. For example, the wife might explain that when he comes home from work, the husband's verbal berating of her makes her feel like the dog that gets beaten around the yard for getting into something it ought not get into. The comparison between a wife and a beaten dog enables the husband to see what he is thoughtlessly doing, hence, repentance is more likely to occur.

This illustrative property of the parable assists in making truth more intelligible, or, if already intelligible, to present it more vividly to the mind. The vividness in which the truth appears brings us to yet another purpose of parabolic teaching. The mind takes a natural delight in this manner of teaching, appealing as it does not to the understanding only, but to the emotions, to the imagination, in short, to the whole man. Thus, all the faculties of a man are engaged when parabolic teaching is presented. Whenever truth is taught in an appealing and winsome manner, it is more likely to be remembered, for all things learned with delight are those which stay riveted in our soul the longest. Here then is yet another reason for parabolic teaching. It serves to perpetuate the conveyed truth since its form has tangible shape for future ages.

Interestingly, there is one other purpose for the parable which many have identified. This purpose seems to fly in the face of all the other purposes examined, yet, based on Mark 4:10-13 and Matthew 13:10-17, it appears to be valid. In those two passages, the parable seems to also have the aim of concealing truth. An objective thinker finds this shocking for this does not seem to fit with the purposes we have already listed for parabolic teaching. We have previously identified the parable as a means for revealing and clearing up truth, for making it more easily understood, for making it more delightful, for perpetuating it, for clarifying it; and now, we find out that it is for concealment purposes? Very surprising, if true. Yet, a possible key to comprehending this turn of events may be provided in the Biblical text. The previously mentioned goals of the parabolic teaching method are accomplished only in those who possess the key of understanding. Those who possess that key would be identified by the Scriptures as believers. Whereas, unbelievers, especially those with hearts which are being hardened, do not possess the key. Thus, the parable, though ideally designed to reveal, for them, becomes a concealment. As mentioned, the understanding of the parable's concealment purpose appears to be based completely on Mark 4 and Matthew 13. Those passages will be examined in the last part of this paper.

Lastly, before examining Mark 4:10-13, a danger of parabolic interpretation needs to be pointed out. Not every detail in the parable needs to have significance. Though the details obviously have a purpose to the overall point of the lesson, they cannot be pressed to some conclusion that

is obtuse to the main thrust of the parable's message. Hence, one should never build doctrinal positions on the parable's details. In fact, even the parable's main truth should be and will be confirmed in the more straightforward didactic teachings of the scriptures.

### **III. Mark 4:10-13 and Matthew 13:10-17.**

The Mark 4 text reads as follows:

“And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, ‘To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, in order that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE; AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND LEST THEY RETURN AGAIN AND BE FORGIVEN.’ And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable?’ “

#### **The standard exegesis of Mark 4.**

Until Tuesday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998, my understanding of this passage more or less followed the standard evangelical interpretation. Had you asked me to explain the meaning of Jesus' words, the best way I could have said it follows.

It is very important to understand something about Jesus' use of parables during His teaching and ministering to the nation of Israel. When we come to Mark chapter 4, we are already over one and one-half years into Jesus' three years and several months ministry. But suddenly, in Mark 4, Jesus switches teaching methods and begins to use the parable as the means to convey spiritual truth. This shocked His disciples, who at the first opportunity, took Jesus aside and asked Him what He was doing. They wanted to know why He switched His method of communications. Though Mark only hints at this, Matthew's parallel passage clearly reveals the disciples' puzzlement over this turn of events. Matthew 13:10 records that when finally alone, they asked Him, “Why are you speaking to the crowds in parables?” After all, for over a year and a half, Jesus had been more direct. He had scarcely used the parable and now had gone exclusively to it. What a remarkable change!

Jesus' answer reveals something that should be a serious warning to all of us. As Mark 4:24 reports it, “Be careful what you listen to.” In context, the implication is that depending on what one does with the truth he hears today, his future spiritual insight may be adversely affected. He says that to the disciples, the mystery “has been given,” but implies that it is not now given “to those outside,” the unbelieving Pharisees and the multitudes. Due to something in the past, the disciples have this mystery, the others have it not. “Has been given” is passive and the implied agent in this passive form is God. God has therefore given them this gift. Additionally, the verb is in the perfect tense, which indicates that the act of giving was done in the past and has resulted in the present possession of the gift.

What occurred in the past that caused the present difference between the disciples and those outside? All the Scriptures answer: no unwillingness on the part of God to bestow the gift, but only the unwillingness of so many to receive God's grace and gift. 2 Peter 3:9 records that “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all come to a knowledge of the truth.” Many such passages could be adduced to demonstrate God's willingness to give everything concerning His kingdom.

But the people's complete UN-willingness to receive God's gifts is illustrated in Hosea 13:9 and Acts 7:51. Hosea reads, "It is your destruction, O Israel, that you have turned against Me, against your only help." Israel is seen to have turned against God, to have rejected Him and His gifts. Further, Acts 7 says, "You men are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always RESIST the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did." Many such passages could be listed. Thus, persistently declining the grace and gift, whenever it came to them, these people "outside" are now going through life without it. The realities of the kingdom have judicially been decreed as removed from these "outsiders." Spiritual truths will now continue as a mystery to them. They nullified every effort of God and of Christ to bestow the heavenly gifts upon them; this nullifying is the work of persistent unbelief. It is now too late. God will now take an active role in hardening their hearts, as was pointed out by Pastor Kauffman's Joshua 11 sermon. This principle is also recorded in Proverbs 29:1. Proverbs 29 intones, "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof, will suddenly be broken beyond remedy."

In other words, when unbelief has advanced far enough, all its seeing and its hearing will not only produce nothing, it is even God's own will that it should be so. Thus, Jesus speaks in parables so as to hide spiritual truth from these hardened souls. It should be pointed out at this juncture, that in the previous two chapters of Mark, Jesus was constantly confronted with such sinful and repeated rejection of open spiritual truth, that He actually became "angry" over it (e.g. Mark 3:5). Now, for those souls, it is too late. They hear truth in parabolic form that "Seeing, they may not see, hearing they may not hear, lest they return and be forgiven." The key of understanding has not been given them.

In regards to the general teaching about a man's hardened heart, one needs to remember that the Scriptures identify three sources of hardening. A man hardens his own heart, God hardens the man's heart, and the Devil can harden a man's heart. It begins with the man hardening his own heart. It is irrational. It is foolish. It is sinful and serves only to excuse the man from his moral sins. But eventually, it goes to the point where God takes an active role. God will no longer allow the man to repent, at least for the time being. Whether a man continues in that state forever is another question.

This hiding of spiritual truth from a man's soul is called "voluntas consequens." *The will that acts after* grace has operated on a man and been repeatedly rejected. "Voluntas antecedens" is *the will that first comes to man and brings him the grace.* God must finally will judgment for all persistent unbelievers. God is compelled to cast such people off, and in His judgment, He lets the very Word become to them a savor of death unto death (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). The "outsiders" in Mark 4 had reached that point. Having seen the Messiah with their own eyes, having observed His powerful healings and teachings direct from Jesus, they reached that point quicker than others in different ages (see Luke 10:12-15, "It will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than...you.....as for you Capernaum...you will be brought down to Hades...for if the miracles had been done in...").

As for the disciples, since they had responded to God's grace, Jesus gave them the key for knowledge to all the parables. In Mark 4, He explained to them how He intended the parable of the sower to be applied. In gaining this knowledge, the disciples could use the information in similar ways when interpreting other parables.

As a side point, notice that one's position on Calvinism need not be affected by this interpretation. All believe that God is active in the hardening process, but only after a man has repeatedly failed to respond to the light he has previously been given.

### **New possibility concerning the interpretation of Mark 4**

Although I am captivated by the following exegesis of Mark 4:10-13, which is new to me, I do not want to leave the impression that I have adopted it. It is intriguing and very appealing, but I haven't given assent to it yet. I am simply mulling it over in my mind. Were I to argue for it, here follows my best statement of it.

The difficulty in understanding Jesus' words about His use of parables in Mark 4 lies in the fact that it seems He is purposely trying to keep these sinners out of the kingdom. That might be acceptable except for the fact that His very mission, for which He came to earth, makes a strong statement against that interpretation. John 12:47 says, "If anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I DO NOT judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." The implication is that during Jesus' earthly ministry, it was never His mission to hide truth but only to reveal it and to provide salvation for sinners. There will, of course, be a future day when judgment from Christ will come, but it wasn't the intention during His first coming. In a similar vein, John 3:17 reads, "For God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him." Under the standard interpretation of Mark 4:10-13, we see a Jesus who is purposely withholding light, grace, and truth from His people. This is the opposite of His intended and stated purpose for coming to this world. Thus, the standard interpretation of the passage must be wrong. Indeed, there is a better one readily available.

It must first be noted that the difficulty is not due to what the passage says, but due to a long-continued misunderstanding and misinterpretation of it. Further, if we simply realize that Mark has condensed the actual events that are more fully recorded in Matthew, we will see that some of the difficulty is immediately explained. Careful integration of Matthew's records will bring us nearer to a full understanding of our Lord's teaching here.

We must again remember that it was not until this point in Christ's ministry that He turned to the parabolic method of teaching. When asked about this in private, Jesus said to His disciples that "unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God." In other words, to His disciples, He could tell the full secrets, the intimate details, the ultimate meaning of spiritual things, in essence, "the mysteries." But to the people without, to those whose heart was in the process of hardening (He had seen that frequently, clearly, and recently, e.g. Mark 3:5), He could no longer speak openly, in detail, plainly, and directly. Why? Because they took offense at the open, plain, and blunt words. For them, therefore, the picture, the parable, the emotional word picture was needed. When Matthew's passage is examined, this explanation becomes more obvious. Let's look at Matthew 13. It reads,

"I speak to them in parables; because seeing, they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in them, which says, 'hearing, you shall hear but not understand; seeing, you shall not perceive. For this people's heart has grown hard, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; or else they would perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and would turn again, and I would heal them.' "

Here in Matthew 13, Jesus is telling the disciples that He has been forced to the parabolic method by these people. They had willfully and resolutely shut their ears and eyes, or else they would turn and be forgiven. But, due to their refusal to appropriate the truth before them, Jesus used the parabolic method, not in order to blind them, but in order to make them look again; not in order to prevent them coming to forgiveness, but in order to lure them towards a new attention. Jesus expounded the mysteries to the disciples, but to the man who hardens his heart against the mysteries, Christ will now lure by a picture which conveys to the man, not a blunt revelation of the secret and profound things, but by a picture; which, in and of itself, is true to those secret and profound things, but blunts the offensive directness of them. Thus, He uses the emotional word picture (to quote Gary Smalley) to enlighten men's hardened hearts. And if they will but be lured by the parable to inquire concerning the thing hidden from them, there may yet be ultimate revelation. As Jesus says in Mark 4:22, "Nothing is hidden except that it be revealed, nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light." That is why He thus spoke to them in parables, to engage their hearts in another way.

Thus, it is seen that our Lord was adopting a method, not of preventing these men coming back to Himself and to the Father; but was employing the last and only method possible in public teaching for luring them towards the thing which they would not receive in its nakedness and in the unveiling of its essential glories.

There is a plain example of this very point given in Luke 15. When there were only several months left before Christ's crucifixion, these men, still in hostility, bitterly criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with publicans and sinners. Yet, Jesus still reached out to them in love through the matchless parable of the lost things; the lost sheep, silver, and son. The elder brother of that parable represents the Pharisees and is yet another way that Jesus attempted to reach out to their hearts. It is unthinkable that Jesus adopted the parabolic teaching method to prevent men from reaching the Father. His mission was to save and He was luring men who would not listen to the essential truth, with pictures.

In conclusion, Christ hid the mysteries which would affront and offend by their directness, and instead presented pictures which invite and suggest. Thus "seeing" (i.e. the picture), "they do not see" (the offensive details). And so, the parable draws, it engages. The mystery is not stated within the parable directly, but it is involved. If men will but consider the picture, which they will, given its winsome presentation, they will be compelled to inquiry. And if they will inquire, Jesus will answer, and will lead them beyond the picture to the facts behind it. He will lead and instruct, through the parable, to the deeper mystery of life in God's Kingdom.

Proverbs 25:2 crystallizes this method of teaching in a flash. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a matter." God conceals some things at first, because things concealed are things that men at the moment cannot look at, understand, or accept. He conceals them, for example, as He did concerning the Messiah; concealed through the items and services that constituted the Old Testament tabernacle. In our present case, He did so with the parable. But the glory of kings is to search out the matter, and a man demonstrates his humanness by pressing his heart to the understanding of a concealed matter. Whenever he does that regarding spiritual matters, God, Who has concealed the matter, answers him in fuller revelation. That is God's method in all creation.

When Jesus looked around and saw the grossness and hardness of men's hearts, He turned to parables. It is the perpetual method of God to conceal offensive truth, but only so as to ultimately reveal it later. Let us dare to use His method on those we come in contact with, never

forcing the mysteries of our faith upon unwilling souls, as necessary to salvation; never demanding in the first place, from deaf and blind men, that they accept doctrines which they cannot understand. Let us rather lure them with gentler words, with pictures which are true to the mysteries, and which must inevitably lead on to those mysteries. Behold the parable!