

Parables: More Than Mere Stories

Matthew 13:1-3; 10-17

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:1-17

Introduction

This past Monday we celebrated Memorial Day – the holiday that traditionally kicks off the summer season here in the U.S.

So this week we are kicking off our summer sermon series where we will be considering some of the parables of Jesus that we find in the gospel accounts

Jesus loved teaching in parables and we find over three dozen examples of his parables in the New Testament – mostly in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the gospel of John only contains one parable found in John 10)

And the parables of Jesus are some of the most familiar passages in the Bible

Even people who might not readily identify them as coming from the Bible are aware of many of the parables and the general lessons they teach

My family wasn't big on regular church attendance when I was a child but I remember my sister having a necklace with a little mustard seed contained in a plastic bead and even I knew it had something to do with the power of small faith

That metaphor is just a part of the common vernacular so when we see a mustard seed the idea of the great power of a small thing comes to mind – even if it's not connected in any meaningful way to a teaching from the Bible

I doubt you could find many people who haven't heard about the wise and foolish builders and how the foolish builder built his house on the sand and the wise builder who built his house on the rock

And the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are universal characters even if people don't appreciate the full weight of what Jesus was illustrating when he told the parables about them

Our Scripture reading this morning contained another common parable known as **the parable of the sower** which will be the first parable we look at in depth next week

We're going to consider it first because that parable is one for which Scripture records Jesus' explanation for what it means so from it we can gain clues as to how to understand the remaining parables

Because, while parables are common they aren't always easy to understand

And not all biblical parables are explained so the meanings of some of them are still debated today by well-meaning people and some of the lessons may be different than we have thought

But parables are part of God's Word and they include important lessons for God's people so we need to do our best to understand them – we can't just shrug them off as mysterious

So today we are going to lay some groundwork for understanding the parables that will help us as we address the various parables I have selected for the series

First, we are going to take some time to look at **just what a parable is** then we will discuss **why Jesus taught in parables**

We will **establish some guidelines** for understanding parables and look at **what we should expect to learn** from this series

The first thing we want to consider is just **what is a parable?**

I. What is a parable?

“Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates.”

That line by Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump could be one of the most easily recognizable movie lines in there has ever been
And it’s also a great modern example of a parable

But even Forrest Gump’s mama had to explain what she meant with her “Life is like a box of chocolates” line when she continued, “You never know what you’re going to get”

And with that statement of explanation suddenly the image of a box of assorted chocolates that only reveal the nature of their filling when bitten into makes us understand the idea of life being full of surprises through the use of a common image and experience

And that’s just what a parable does – they cause us to understand and remember better than merely stating a fact could

A. Definition

The English word “parable” comes from the Greek “*parabole*” which means “*to place beside*” or “*to cast alongside*”

And in a parable one thing is put alongside another in order to make a comparison

The late Warren Wiersbe defined a parable as – **“a story that places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching – putting the known next to the unknown so that we may learn”**

With that in mind, parables can often be identified by the use of the word, “like”

Jesus uses this formula often as he begins many of his parables with the phrase, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”**

As you read through Matthew 13 you will see this formula used 6 times to introduce a new parable

We see the use of the word “like” also in the parable about the wise and foolish builders which I mentioned earlier from Matthew 7 which makes a comparison between verses 24 and 26:

Verse 24 (**Matthew 7:24**) reads: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be *like* a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

And verse 26 (**Matthew 7:26**) reads: “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be *like* a foolish man who built his house on the sand”

Other times the “like” is merely implied as the context of the narrative invites the comparison as in the parables of the new cloth on an old garment and the new wine in old wineskins from **Matthew 9:16-17**

Abraham Lincoln a master of the parable and I remember a story about him being at a gathering where a little man kept popping up to challenge Lincoln and he would go on and on every time he stood –

It was quite annoying to everyone present who were there to hear Lincoln speak

So Lincoln handled the situation by telling the story of a steamship he had been on that he said had a 5-pound boiler and a 10-pound whistle

He told how it was a glorious whistle that made a wonderful sound but every time the whistle sounded the whole affair was forced to come to a halt because it stole all the steam from the engine

Everyone laughed and the interrupter was silenced as the parable humorously made the point

Lincoln used what was common knowledge in his day to make a humorous yet effective point about a current situation

B. New Testament Usage

And the use of parables is the same in the New Testament although the subject matter is more serious

A parable is still “a simple story that illustrates a profound truth” as one author put it (Kendall, 14)

And Jesus often used earthly stories to convey heavenly truths

And the subject Jesus was most often clarifying was the kingdom of heaven and telling parables was Jesus’ main way of helping his followers get a grasp on spiritual truths as he built bridges from the natural to the spiritual

But like I said, parables aren't always easy to understand and quite often the lessons are either misinterpreted or missed altogether

Because of that, we see in verse 10 of our passage (**Matthew 13:10**) the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

II. Why did Jesus teach in parables?

And from our passage we see that Jesus gives his disciples three reasons for teaching in parables

A. To reveal

The first reason he gives is that he wanted **to reveal** "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" in **Matthew 13:11**

And that makes perfect sense because that is the natural function of a parable

Remember a parable places the unknown beside the known so that the hearer can gain understanding

And Jesus says to his closest disciples that his parables are meant to reveal the secrets of the kingdom of heaven

But here's the thing – even his closest disciples didn't understand all of his parables when he told them and we see Jesus occasionally giving them an explanation of one of his parables

However, Jesus didn't explain all of his parables and he often left his disciples wondering about their meaning because he didn't expect them to immediately grasp every detail of what he was teaching

In telling the parables Jesus was sowing spiritual seed in the minds of the faithful that would sprout and bear spiritual fruit later when the time was right

And his disciples only fully understood some of the lessons he taught years after he had ascended to the Father

It's quite interesting and somewhat comforting in a way to realize that Jesus spent three years in close contact ministry with his disciples teaching them constantly by word and deed

And how after his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection they still didn't fully understand why he had come

We see in **Acts 1:6** that after all that and an additional 40-days of instruction they still failed to grasp the most fundamental point about why Jesus came to earth as they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They were still stuck on the prevalent Jewish idea of a conquering Messiah who would overthrow Rome and restore Israel's greatness even after Jesus had diligently taught them that his kingdom was about the Spirit

And it was only after he departed and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell them that they began to understand as the seeds that Jesus had planted in their hearts and minds began to sprout and they recognized the implications of the parables

So Jesus taught in parables in order to reveal truth to the faithful

B. To conceal

But let's look at **verse 11** again

Jesus said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given"

It might strike us as a little bit odd but one reason that Jesus spoke in parables was **to conceal** God's secrets from some people

It shouldn't surprise us that God has knowledge that he has chosen to keep hidden – God has secrets and it's his right to keep those secrets to himself if he so chooses

But he can also choose to selectively reveal those secrets to some while withholding them from others

One of the best-kept secrets of God was his plans for the Messiah and no one – not even Satan – understood the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus until after they were fulfilled

Nothing about Jesus' birth, his upbringing, his suffering death, or his resurrection made sense until after the events occurred

God's plan concerning his Son was his best kept secret and the powers of darkness had no idea what was going on until afterwards when it was too late to interfere

We see this fact expressed in **1Corinthians 2:8** where Paul writes: "None of the rulers of this age understood [the secret and hidden wisdom of God], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

And God also keeps his secrets from those whose hearts are hardened against him so as to keep them in the dark

Look again at **Matthew 13:13-15** –

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

"You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them."

God prevents those who are committed to enmity with him from being able to understand so as to turn them over to their own devices

But he also spoke in parables to reveal his secrets to those to whom they are intended at the proper time

And at just the right time God reveals the truth to all who are earnestly seeking after him

God's Word is able to reach those at whom it is aimed while remaining hidden from those who will not be receptive to it

And Jesus says that his parables are designed to keep some in the dark while reaching those at whom they are directed – those who truly desire to understand

C. To fulfill prophecy

Third, we see that Jesus spoke in parables **to fulfill prophecy**

We just looked at verses 13-15 which Jesus quoted to show the reason for speaking in parables but we also need to look at **Matthew 13:34-35** which reads:

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Jesus is quoting here from **Psalms 78:2** a psalm of Asaph which was penned almost a thousand years before his birth showing God's sovereignty in fulfilling his purposes even regarding the style of teaching Jesus used

Knowing that parables are meant to reveal God's secrets to the faithful while concealing them from those who are not the obvious question to ask is what do we do when we encounter a parable that we don't understand?

Most of the people who heard Jesus teach in parables walked away bewildered and scratching their heads

But his closest disciples asked for the meaning behind the parables

So if when you encounter something in God's Word that you don't understand and you just set the Bible aside and say, "Well, I didn't understand that" you reveal which group you are in and how interested you are in understanding the things of God

But if you seek after God and ask him to reveal his secrets, to give you wisdom and understanding, then you open yourself up to the instruction of the Holy Spirit

And Jesus' parables contain spiritual secrets that can only be revealed by the power of the Holy Spirit to those who truly seek to understand them – but it is still in God's providence to reveal or conceal according to his own purposes

III. How should we seek to understand the parables?

So, assuming we want to understand the parables, what steps should we take besides asking God to reveal his secrets to us?

There are some basic guidelines that we need to employ as we seek to decipher and understand the spiritual truths contained in the parables **and I want to share five of them with you this morning**

A. Remember that parables compare the spiritual to the natural

First, we need to keep in mind the nature of a parable is to compare the unknown to the known to bring about understanding

In the case of Jesus' parables this means comparing the spiritual to the natural or physical

Therefore, our first question should be what are the characteristics of the known and how might they transfer to the unknown – in other words, we should ask just what Jesus wants us to understand from the comparison

B. Consider the context of the parable

To do that we need to look at the situation that prompted Jesus to give the parable in the first place

Oftentimes, there will be clues given that will help us understand the imagery used such as in **Luke 18:1** that precedes the parable about the persistent widow and the unjust judge where we read that Jesus “told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart”

That's a pretty big clue as to how we should go about interpreting the images in the parable

We also see a clue in all the parables that begin with “the kingdom of heaven is like...” which shows that Jesus is revealing some aspect of the kingdom of heaven

We see a clue also when the parables are **grouped together thematically** such as in the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son in Luke 15 – we should take that as a clue that those parables might well teach something individually and as a group based on their similarities and differences

Another clue to consider is **who the audience to whom Jesus told the parable is** and what their understanding would have been

That leads us to the fact that we will have to be sure we investigate and understand the **cultural context** as well as the parables were originally given to a people with different customs and everyday knowledge than we have today

And lastly we should learn how to interpret a parable from **the explanations that Jesus gave** for the parables that he interpreted for his disciples

C. Look for the central truth of the parable

While not all parables teach only one truth most have one main point that stands out

So we must look for the central truth of the parable and make sure that any other truths gleaned are in harmony with it

Our task then is to figure out what fundamental truth Jesus was illustrating by the parable

Take Forrest Gump's mama's parable for instance

She obviously was speaking to the often surprising revelations of daily life and how you can never be certain of what might come your way until it shows up

She wasn't talking about life being sweet or nutty or any other characteristics that a box of chocolates might have

We also have to recognize that not every detail of a parable has to have a deeper meaning

Most parables contain secondary details that are just supporting details that are necessary to allow the parable to make sense

Take the parable about the persistent widow and the unjust judge again

It really doesn't matter who her adversary was or what the details of her case were

The important point the parable is meant to convey is that we should be bold and persistent in our prayers to God

And in the case of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins we would be wrong to attach significance to the perfect 50/50 split and conclude that half of all people are going to prove to be wise and half are going to be shown to be foolish

D. Remember that parables are meant to conceal as well as reveal

Then we need to remember that since the parables are designed to conceal as well as reveal we need to be careful how far we apply our interpretation

In other words we would be unwise to form a doctrine based solely on a parable and no other biblical support

E. We must look for the plain meaning and not over-allegorize the parables

There have been some throughout the church's history who have tried to find hidden meanings in the parables by attaching special meanings to the symbols they contain

And in doing so they completely disregarded the plain meaning of the text and replaced it with their own fanciful ideas

An example of this error would be found in the church father **Augustine's** interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan

Plainly, the text is about how God expects us to be neighborly to anyone who we come into contact with if they are in need and we have the ability to help

After all the context of the parable in Luke 10 is Jesus answering the question posed by the lawyer who asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

But Augustine saw the man walking down the road as Adam, the thieves were Satan and his demons, the priest represented the law, the Levite represented the prophets and as representatives of the Old Testament neither could help the man, the donkey was Christ who bore our sins, and the actions of the Samaritan signified what Christ did for us

He even attached special meanings to the bandages, the oil, the wine, the inn, the return of the Samaritan, the coins paid to the inn keeper and so forth – every possible detail was given a special interpretation

But the resulting teaching was made up entirely of Augustine's imagination and had nothing to do with what Jesus was trying to get across

It was actually a case of overactive imagination and paying too much attention to minor details

We need to be aware of our biases and our tendencies so as to steer clear of these kinds of fanciful interpretations

Conclusion

As we conclude this morning let's take a moment to look at what you should expect to learn through this series

When we look at a listing of the parables and the lessons they teach we see that the parables have an overall theme that concerns "the kingdom of heaven"

Jesus himself in explaining why he spoke in parables mentioned that they concerned "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" in **Matthew 13:11**

So what we should expect to see in the parables will be concepts related to characteristics of the "kingdom of heaven" or the "kingdom of God"

In other words, we should expect to learn about Christianity and how things are for the church now and how they will be in the future

And as we go through our series we will see that the parables that Jesus taught serve to reveal the entire panorama of the Christian experience

They tell the story from conversion to the final consummation of all things when Jesus comes to earth the second time

And although I can't possibly go through every parable in a summer series I have endeavored to select parables that touch on the major doctrines on the spectrum of what the parables have to teach us

We have been given a great blessing along with the disciples of Jesus as we see in **Matthew 13:17** because as Jesus told them the people of the Old Testament longed to see what they were seeing and to hear what they were hearing

And we have the even greater privilege of having the complete Word of God to guide us

Let's pray that God will give us a spirit of understanding as we look at the parables

Next week we will be considering the parable of the sower or more accurately the parable of the four soils from Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23 – let me encourage you to read through the passage a few times between now and next Sunday

Let's pray