

Parables: Rules of Engagement

(For reference in studying the Gospel according to Luke)

General Background about Parables

- Nearly all cultures have them, with records going back 4.5 thousand years in varying civilizations.
 - Parables are brief, simple stories; memorable; built for the ear.
 - They work for the young/simple but are also complex enough that they can stun the gifted/educated.
 - They are small stories that pack big, life-changing meaning.
- In the Bible
 - Used primarily in the Old Testament in the Prophets, Proverbs.
 - In the New Testament, Jesus uses them frequently; they're not common in the epistles.
 - They tend to serve a prophetic function, pointing out people's sin, calling them to repent/change.
 - That's why in the OT, the book with the most parables is Ezekiel.
- Soren Kierkegaard [*Danish philosopher & Christian*]: "Parables sneak up on you."
 - They're like ninja stories; you don't see them coming.
 - If you're in sin & directly confronted with the truth, you may bristle, be in denial, fight, or get defensive.
 - Case Study: David is a king, a man after God's own heart. He's also a man after another man's wife. He commits adultery, stole the man's wife. He was hard-hearted, stiff-necked, rebellious; trusted people probably confronted his sin, the Holy Spirit convicted his sin, & he still did not repent, so a friend came, told him a story:
 - "King David, imagine a very powerful, mighty man who has many, many sheep. Another very poor, powerless man has only one. And the mighty man steals the one from the poor man. What do you think about that?" David: "That's an atrocity." His friend: "That's you." David's heart broke; he penned Psa 51 in repentance.
 - The story snuck up on him & got him in a way that face-to-face confrontation would not work. The parable was able to get to his heart.
 - Purpose/function: The intention of parables is to get our heart, expose our sin, that God might change our life.

Jesus' Parables

- Jesus' parables are the most famous stories in the history of the world.
 - He is the perfect storyteller. Even people who don't know Jesus or anything about Christianity have heard about the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son. Stories Jesus told a few thousand years ago live on today.
 - His parables are short, anywhere from 1-22 verses.
 - Depending on the scholar & how you define a parable, there's between 35-67 Jesus taught.
 - In the Synoptic Gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke), about 35% of His teaching is in parable form, telling stories.
 - If you want to understand who Jesus is & how He teaches, you need to understand parables.
- Luke is filled with 2/3 of all of Jesus' parables
 - 18 are unique to Luke, not recorded anywhere else.
 - If we didn't have the gift of Luke's gospel, we would be missing great stories Jesus told.
 - They are life-changing, earth-shattering, history-altering parables.
 - Most occur between chapters 10-20.

Rules of Engagement

Parables are frequently abused, misunderstood & misapplied. Here's a few principles for interpretation:

- Parables expand on existing teaching.

- a. Parables are simple stories, not intended to introduce new doctrine.
 - b. They illustrate & illuminate existing doctrine; they are extended analogies.
 - c. The Bible teaches a propositional truth claim, the parable helps expand on it & give new perspective on it.
 - d. They function like a good film, creating another world from which we get a new vantage point on our own.
 - e. Purpose: To help us see ourselves & our world/life in a different light, from another perspective, through story.
2. Insert yourself into the story
- a. Most parables include people; most in Jesus' parables are unnamed.
 - b. With the exception of one in Luke 16, all of them have anonymous characters.
 - c. These are fictitious stories of fictitious people in ways that mirror reality, so we come to the story not trying to learn new doctrine, but getting fresh insight & perspective on truth the Bible teaches elsewhere.
 - d. Study by figuring out in the story: "Who am I? Which character am I in the story?"
 - e. We insert ourselves into the story so we don't just receive information, but transformation; we don't just enjoy a good story, but emotionally enter into it to see how God wants to change us through the telling of this story.
3. Meaning
- a. Consider a parable like a pitcher built to hold water.
 - b. We don't want to pour our own meaning into Jesus' story; Jesus is the One who pours meaning into it.
 - c. As we study it, we want to pour out the same meaning Jesus poured in.
 - d. We need to consider the original hearers/audience, & original context.
 - i. These are simple stories for generally simple people.

Questions for Studying Parables

1. What does the parable teach about God & His Kingdom?
 - a. Jesus is King of kings, Lord of lords; eternally-existed as Creator God. We've sinned against Him. He came into history on a rescue mission; He lived without sin. He died for our sin; rose as our Savior; ascended into Heaven. He has a Kingdom that never ends where there is no death, sadness, enemy, & ultimately will bring His Kingdom to reside forever, crushing enemies, blessing friends. Sometimes we have a hard time getting our minds around the concept of the Kingdom, so Jesus comes & teaches a big concept with little parables/stories. As we study, we're learning about Jesus as King, & His Kingdom.
2. What question does it answer?
 - a. 22 of Jesus' parables actually begin with or include a question; then the story is the answer.
 - b. To understand the parable, we have to determine what the question is, either expressly stated or implied through the story itself.
3. What's the closing punch line?
 - a. Every good joke & good parable has one. The story goes on & then there's a reveal at the end, just like how a great movie has an inexplicable close where it all makes sense, & all the lines of the story converge together into meaning; that's the way parables work.
 - b. Almost all of Jesus' parables have a closing punch line that gives the point of the story.
 - c. Some are left wide open; we don't know what happened; there's no resolution. What happened to the characters? The point then is to insert ourselves into the story: "I guess the story of my life could go good or bad; I have to write the ending for myself. What am I going to do? How will I respond?" So, it becomes very personal when the punch line is omitted.
4. What did Jesus want the original hearers to learn?
 - a. We can't just read the story & begin in our world; we have to go back culturally to their context.
 - b. Jesus was walking from one town to another, taking months. People traveled with Him; some come out to see/hear them; many were illiterate; some are children; a handful are educated religious people. This is a diverse, ancient audience.
 - c. What would they have initially understood Jesus to mean? Then, we understand/apply principally to own lives.
5. What action does Jesus expect from me/us?
 - a. It's not just about information, but transformation; not just about what we believe, but how we behave/live.
 - b. Ask: "Jesus, what do You want me to do, individually? What do you want us to do, together: My family, small group, fellowship, church? What's the call to action?"
 - c. Those who live too much in your mind, running down every potential rabbit trail of what a parable could mean, falling into allegorizing, taking a simple story beyond its intent, trying to ascribe meaning to every detail: Know when to stop interpreting & start obeying. At some point, stop trying to figure out what He's trying to say and realize it was a simple statement to get you to get up & go do something. So we need to get up & obey!