An Introduction to the Parables

In the first and second centuries non-Christians observed that believers drew their faith from parables. Galen was a very famous doctor in the second century. He wrote an important medical textbook that was used up until about the 18th century. About AD 140 he wrote:

"Most people are unable to follow a demonstrative argument consecutively. Hence, they need parables and benefit from them ... just as we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables and yet sometimes acting in the same way as the philosophers ... and in their keen pursuit of justice, they have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers."

Sadly, later the philosophers took over and the parables became a source of **ethics** but not **faith**. Galen saw that Christians built their **faith** on parables. Today most Christians don't think of the Lord Jesus as a serious theologian. In the Greco-Roman tradition of Western Europe theology has always been constructed from ideas held together by logic. In general, the more abstract the theologian, the more difficult it is for the average person to understand what he is saying.

So the popular opinion of the Lord Jesus is that of a village rustic creating folktales for farmers and fishermen. But I hope we will see that His parables **are** serious theology and the Lord Jesus emerges as **the** greatest and most astute theologian of all.

What is **metaphorical** theology? We know that God is Spirit and is neither male nor female. Yet we are told that every believer is ***"born of God"***. (1 Jn. 3:9) Here John is using female language of God in "His" relationship to believers. The Lord Jesus told us to address God as ***"Father"***. Scripture uses the metaphors to help us understand God who is Spirit and is far beyond male or female. Metaphor communicates in ways rational arguments cannot. Pictures trump but do not replace abstract reasoning.

A metaphor is not "an illustration" of an idea. It is the **way** of theological communication. A metaphor does not explain the meaning. It creates it! A parable is an extended metaphor. To understand it you need to enter into the world of the parable. So the culture of the storyteller and the original listeners is crucial to understanding "the message".

Unlocking the theology of the parables

It is true that every culture has loving fathers, rebellious sons and self righteous older brothers and so nearly everyone can identify with the "Story of the Prodigal Son". But in the Near East when a son asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive he is really saying, *"Dad, I want you to drop dead now!"* The father is expected to get very angry and the oldest brother is expected to give his younger brother a beating. Neither of these things happens in the parable. Why not? As we process the significance of the missing bits of cultural insights, new meaning emerges that would otherwise be missed.

The Bible is the Word of God spoken through people in history. The history and culture **must** be taken into account; otherwise we will substitute our own meaning and miss the import of the original text. So it is critical to interpret the parables of the Lord Jesus within the culture of First Century Palestine. Only then can we grasp the meaning created by them.

A warning! From about the 4th century until the 16th century allegory reigned supreme as a method of Biblical interpretation. For example: in the parable of the Prodigal Son the fatted calf killed for the feast was a symbol of the Lord Jesus' death on the Cross. The problem with allegory is that you can put your favourite ideas almost anywhere! Confusion and finally meaninglessness reigns. This is possibly why parables ceased to be a source of **faith** to believers and were limited just to ethics. So from the Reformation onwards there has been a "one point per parable" rule to protect from all sorts of fanciful meanings being added that would never have occurred to the original listeners.

The question is not, "Where are you on the ladder?" but, "Did you get there by climbing or falling?" All of us have limited exposure to cultures. Nora and I, along with many others, have had the opportunity to learn something of the Arab culture of the Near East. We are all

influenced by our own language, culture, history, economics and politics. We need, as best as we can, to strip these away and begin to "live" in the original settings of First Century Palestine. Palestinian believers saw their own culture reflected in the parables and could understand directly the intent of the Lord Jesus. For us the parables are about "foreigners".

In Upper Egypt, in the mountains of Lebanon and in the isolated communities of northern Syria and Iraq, there are peasant communities that have lived in remarkable isolation from the rest of the world. It isn't only their isolation that has enabled them to preserve their ancient way of life. It is also the fact that they regard changelessness as being a very great virtue. Meaning can only be found in what is static. This is radically different from our 21st century Western culture. So to preserve meaning is to preserve the status quo. The best compliment you can give to a village elder today is to call him, *"Hafiz al-taqalid"* (preserver of customs).

Only in the last two or three decades have these villages been connected to the outside world by road. Before this access was on foot or by donkey. Here a colloquial Arabic is spoken sprinkled with words of Aramaic, Syriac, and even Akkadian (from Babylonian times). So not only is the life of these villages archaic, but their culture is preserved in poems and stories preserved from the past.

So in understanding a parable a number of factors must be taken into account:

1. **Attitude**: what was the attitude of a sleeping neighbour to a call for help in the night?
2. **Relationships**: what was the relationship between a landowner and his renters?
3. **Response**: what is the expected response from the father when his son requests his inheritance?
4. **Value judgement**: what value judgements do the renters make regarding the steward when he suggests the reduction of rents?

The poetic nature of the parables

The Lord Jesus spoke the parables in Aramaic and when translated into Greek, they lost their poetic nature. Poetry needs rhythm to be poetic. Various people have back-translated the parables into Aramaic and have recovered the poetic structure and also the many instances of play on words.

The structures

In the Old Testament we find many simple **Hebrew parallelisms** – A A* structures. We also find them in the New Testament – e.g. Luke 21:23

A ***"Alas for those who are with child***

A* ***and for those who give suck in those days"***

You also get **step parallelisms** – e.g. Luke 11:9-10

A ***"Ask and it will be given you.***

B ***Seek and you will find***

C ***Knock and it will be opened unto you.***

A* ***For everyone who asks receives***

B* ***And he who seeks finds***

C* ***And to him who knocks it will be opened."***

But the most common poetic form used by the Lord Jesus is called **inverted parallelism**. This is more difficult for it needs increasing precision in vocabulary.

1
2
3
4 ◄—— The focus of the parabola
3*
2*
1*

Many of the parables have an inverted parallel/parabolic form. Unlike English stories, where the punch line is at the end, in a parabolic poetic story the punch line is at 4 - the climatic centre. So a standard procedure is:

- Identify the centre
- Find out how the centre relates to the outside (1, 2, 3 and 3*, 2*, 1*)
- Look for a significant shift in emphasis in 3*, 2*, 1*

We will get used to looking at the structures and using these procedures. I hope we will also begin to appreciate that the Lord Jesus was a poet of the highest order!

A short summary

An understanding of the cultural background reveals the Lord Jesus as:

- Courteous and compassionate to the culture He was in, but yet willing to use words like naked steel
- Having extraordinarily keen perception and a penetrating intelligence
- Having very remarkable personal courage that surfaces in **what** and **how** He says things to those who are trying to destroy Him - largely the religious authorities

Four themes recur over and over again:

1. **The love of God is offered to us freely and it cannot be earned**.

   Righteousness cannot be achieved through human effort:

   - The Pharisee, so proud of all his religious works, is not justified.
   - A servant labours but earns no merit.
   - The ruler has kept the law exactly, but has not earned eternal life.
   - The lawyer's attempt to justify himself fails.

2. **The theme of a <u>costly</u> demonstration of <u>unexpected</u> love** comes over and over:

   - The Samaritan risks his life to complete his acts of mercy.
   - This unexpected love is offered to complete outsiders at the great banquet. This will infuriate the original guests and everyone knows it.
   - This unexpected love speaks of the meaning of the Cross and the Atonement.

3. **The acceptance of the freely offered love of God triggers a response** in us, the recipients, of going out and doing costly acts of love as an expression of our gratitude for what God has done for us.

   - The disciples leave land and families.
   - The servant labours knowing nothing is owed to him.

4. **The person of the Lord Jesus is unique**. The call to ***"Follow me"*** is seen again and again as equivalent to, "Follow the way of God". He gives forgiveness and personally accepts the gratefully offered response to His unexpected love. Unswerving service to Him is equated to participation in the Kingdom of God.