

The NT Gospels and Parables of Jesus

I. HOW TO INTERPRET THE GOSPELS--One Story, Four Accounts.

- A. Almost all the difficulties one encounters in interpreting the Gospels stem from two obvious facts:
1. Jesus Himself did not write a gospel.
 2. There are four gospels.
- B. God gave us what we need to know about the life of Christ in this way, not in another way that might better suit someone's mechanistic tape-recorder mentality. And in any case the fact that the Gospels were not written by Jesus, but about Him, is a part of their genius not their weakness.
- C. None of the Gospels supersedes the other, but each stands beside the others as equally valuable and equally authoritative. How so?

Because in each case the interest in Jesus is at two levels:

1. There is the purely historical concern that this is who Jesus was, and this is what He said and did. It is this Jesus, who was crucified and raised from the dead, whom we now worship as the risen and exalted Lord.
2. There was the existential concern of retelling this story for the needs of later communities that did not speak Aramaic, but Greek, and that did not live in a basically rural, agricultural, and Jewish setting.

D. The Teachings of Jesus.

Jesus taught in many different forms:

1. In parables (Lk. 15:11-32).

And He said, "A man had two sons. **12** The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. **13** And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. **14** Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. **16** And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him. **17** But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! **18** I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'" **20** So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; **23** and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; **24** for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be. **27** And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' **28** But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him. **29** But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; **30** but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' **31** And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.'"

2. In hyperboles (Mt. 5:29,30).
If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. **30** If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.
3. In proverbs (Mt. 6:21).
for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
4. In similes and metaphors (Mt. 10:16; 5:13).
(Mt 10:16) “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.
(Mt 5:13) “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.
5. In poetry (Mt. 7:7,8).
“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.
6. In questions (Mt. 17:25).
He said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?”
7. In irony (Mt. 16:2,3).
But He replied to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘*It will be* fair weather, for the sky is red.’ **3** And in the morning, ‘*There will be* a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?”

E. Why Four accounts?

Because each had a different audience:

1. Matthew was basically written to the Jews.
2. Mark was basically written to the Romans.
3. Luke was basically written to the Gentiles.
4. John was basically written to show Jesus’ divinity.

F. Learn to think horizontally. This means that when studying a pericope (a small cut away section) in any one Gospel, one should be aware of the parallels in the others Gospels.

G. Learn to think vertically. This means that when reading or studying a narrative or teaching in the Gospels, one should try to be aware of both the historical context and the purpose of the writer.

II. HOW TO INTERPRET THE PARABLES.

A. The scholar, Augustine offers the following interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan:

“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho”	=	Adam,
“Jerusalem”	=	the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell,
“Jericho”	=	the moon, and thereby signifies Adam’s mortality,
“thieves”	=	the devil and his angels,
“stripped him”	=	namely, of his immortality,
“beat him”	=	by persuading him to sin,
“and left him half-dead.”	=	as a man he lives, but he died spiritually,
“The priest and Levite”	=	the priesthood and ministry of the OT,
“The Samaritan”	=	is said to mean Guardian and is Christ Himself,
“bound his wounds”	=	binding the restraint of sin,
“oil”	=	comfort of good hope,
“wine”	=	exhortation to work with a fervent spirit,
“beast”	=	the flesh of Christ’s incarnation,
“inn”	=	the church,

“the morrow” = after the resurrection,
“two-pence” = the promise of this life and the life to come,
“innkeeper” = Paul.

- B. As novel and interesting as all of this might be, one can be sure that this is not what Jesus intended. After all, the context clearly calls for an understanding of human relationships (“Who is my neighbor?”), not divine to human, and there is no reason to think that Jesus would predict the church and Paul in this obtuse fashion!
- C. This is not an allegory; it is a parable. A true allegory is a story where each element in the story means something quite foreign to the story itself.
- D. Function and Audience.
1. The best clues as to what the parables are is to be found in their function. In contrast to most of the parabolic sayings, such as the figs from thistles, the story parables do not serve to illustrate Jesus prosaic teaching with picture words. Nor are they (the parables) told to serve as vehicles for revealing truth--although they end up clearly doing that. Rather the story parables function as a means of calling forth a response on the part of the hearer.
 2. Therefore, to interpret a parable is to destroy what it was originally. It is like interpreting a joke; once you do it the joke isn't funny anymore.
 3. Interpretation is a combination of three things:
 - a. Sit and listen to the parable again and again.
 - b. Identify points of reference intended by Jesus that would have been picked up by the original hearers.
 - c. Try to determine how the original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore what they would have heard.
- E. The Kingdom of God.
1. It must be noted that the introduction, “The kingdom of God is like...” is not to be taken with the first element mentioned in the parable. That is, the kingdom of God is not like a mustard seed, or a merchant, or treasure hidden in a field. The expression literally means, “It is like this with the kingdom of God...” Thus the whole parable tells us something about the nature of the kingdom, not just one of the points of reference, or one of the details.
 2. It is tempting to treat “kingdom parables” differently from the others we have looked at, as if they were actually teaching vehicles rather than stories calling for response. But that would be to abuse them.
- F. Another hermeneutical suggestion is related to the fact that all of Jesus' parables are in some way, vehicles, proclaiming the kingdom. Hence, it is necessary for you to immerse yourself in the meaning of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus.
- G. As always, we concern ourselves basically with the parables in their present Biblical contexts. The parables are in a written context and through the exegetical process we can discover their meaning, their point, with a high degree of accuracy. Then translate that same point into our own context.