

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE...

PRINCIPLES OF PARABLE INTERPRETATION

I. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLES: “THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE...” The parables present a composite picture of the kingdom of God, with each individual parable presenting a partial view or truth about the kingdom. Taken as a whole,

A. Parables are Word of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:19) They are the continuing promise of a coming kingdom of God that was announced by the Old Testament prophets, and which Jesus had come to fulfill. According to the Prophecies:

1. Its sovereign Ruler is God Himself (Mic. 4:7; Is. 9:6, 59:16).
 - He is a Warrior-King (Is. 59:17), also called our Intercessor, our Redeemer, our Husband, (Is. 59:16); our Righteousness, the Branch (Jer. 33:15-16), Ancient of Days, Dan. 7:9.
 - His authority is granted to the Son (Ps. 2:6, Dan. 7:13-14), who, it implied, is the Stone cut without hands (Dan. 2:34).
2. It will grow to worldwide, everlasting dominion. Is. 9:7, 54:1-3, Micah 4:1; Dan. 2:35, 44; Dan. 7:14.
 - He ordained it & He will carry it to completion (Dan. 2:44-45, Is. 9:7, 55:11; Amos. 9:12; Jer. 33:14).
 - All opposition must be removed, whether the openly unbelieving heathen (Is. 59:17-18, Dan. 7:12), or false professors of the true religion (Is. 9:8, 62:11, 65:2-3,5,11,15; Am. 9:8-10; Rev. 11:8).
3. It is a pleasant, desirable kingdom.
 - A kingdom of peace (Jer. 33:16, Is. 9:6, 54:13, 55:13, 55:12; Jer. 33:6, Amos 9:15, Mic. 4:4).
 - A healthy & prosperous kingdom (Is. 55:13, Amos 9:14-15, Jer. 33:6,12).

4. Its redeemed citizens are of a special character.

- They were formerly outside of God’s grace: in darkness (Is. 9:2); barren & forsaken (Is. 54), thirsting, (Is. 55), captives (Amos 9:14); lame, outcasts, afflicted, (Micah 4:6-7). The gentiles among them were a nation “*that God did not know*” (Is. 54), “*a nation that did not seek,*” and was “*not called by God’s name*” (Is. 65:1).
- Now, having received God’s grace, they are those who know, follow after, and are established in righteousness; who seek the LORD, and in whose heart is God’s law; the ransomed of the Lord (Is. 51); the Lord’s wife (Is. 54:6), servants of the Lord (Is. 54:17, 62:5); people of the covenant, (Is. 54:10, 55:3). They are glorified (Is. 55:5, 60:9); called by a new name (Is. 62:2), a crown of glory (Is. 62:3); They are now called *Hephzibah* [my delight is in her] and *beulah* [married] (Is. 62:4); daughter of Zion (Is. 62:11); Holy people, redeemed of the Lord (Is. 62:12); God’s elect (Is. 65:9). Even gentiles are now referred to in Amos 9:12 as “*all the gentiles who are called by my name*” (See Is. 51:5, 60:3, 62:2, Mic. 4:2, Jer. 33:9).
- They are described throughout Scripture as humble, meek, contrite, those who tremble at God’s word (Is. 11:4, 57:15, 66:2; Mt. 5:5).

B. Parables are an Announcement of the New Covenant. (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:8-10), which would involve:

1. A new disposition towards national Israel, which was nearing the end of its status as the one favored nation.
 - The old Israel would resist the change (Mt. 23:37-38), and depose their King by putting Him to death, but the Master would return and destroy those wicked apostates. (Cf. the parable of the tenants, Mt. 21:33-43).

- Yet the spiritual remnant of Israel, the New Testament church, would prevail spiritually, most notably as believers from among the gentiles would flow into the new Jerusalem (Is. 2:2) as they are grafted into the tree of faith (Rom.11:11-36).

2. A new intimacy with His disciples. This was the new paradigm — that only disciples of the Master would be a part of the new Israel, and the true children of Abraham. The religious leaders and other Jews who resisted the new paradigm, though claiming to be “children of Abraham,” would now be regarded outsiders (Jn. 8:18-20) and spiritual heathens (Rev. 11:8).

3. a new method of teaching, presenting old truths in a new way, testing the responsiveness of the heart, for

- that was how membership in the New Covenant would be determined,
- not by physical birth, as pictured by circumcision, but by spiritual birth, pictured by baptism.
- This new method of teaching was foretold in Psalm 78:2-3, “*I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us,*” which is said in Mt. 13:35 to be fulfilled in Jesus.

C. Parables are a Call to Examine One’s Fruit-bearing.

Parables that carry this theme include:

- The parable of the sower (Mt. 13:1-23), where only one of four types of soil is considered “good ground,” because only it produces fruit

- the barren fig tree (Lu. 13:6-9, Mt. 21:18-22), which was planted and nurtured for a purpose and takes up useful ground but has no fruit to show for it;
- the vineyard (Is. 5:1-7, cf. Mt. 21:28-43), which the Lord planted, cleared the stones, pulled the weeds, built a wall around it and a tower to watch for enemies;
- the wheat and the weeds (Mt. 13:24-30), in which, the good fruit-bearing grain is hindered for a time by the presence of weeds, sown by Satan the enemy,

All of these present the idea that those who do not bear spiritual fruit cannot be the children of the kingdom.

D. Parables are a Display of the the Lord’s Compassion and Elective Ministry through Christ.

- Examples: The Good Samaritan; the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost or prodigal son (Lu. 15); the royal wedding feast (Mt. 22:1-14) and others all suggest that He Himself will seek and gather into His kingdom all those whom He has ordained for it.
- Thus, parables reinforce the doctrine of sola gratia, by grace alone, and unconditional election, we deserving no credit or glory whatsoever in our salvation.

II. THE ESSENCE OF THE PARABLES.

Introduction: The older understanding of the parables is that they are not a disconnected series of lessons for the moral improvement of Christians, but veiled *gospel* presentations to sinners, particularly those who “*trust in themselves that they are righteous*” (Lu. 18:9). In view of the modern professing church where salvation appeals are seldom, if ever, made to regular attenders, the parables of Jesus are a presentation of Christ requiring us (1) to acknowledge our own unworthiness for His kingdom, (2) to confess His lordship and His all-sufficient work in the salvation of sinners, and (3) to examine in ourselves whether that powerful work of God has been done. Thus,

A. Parables are Gospel, not Morals. Reasons include:

1. The first parable Jesus preaches is the parable of the sower, obviously foundational for all the others, and which He explains to His disciples in gospel terms:

- To His disciples, those who had left the world behind to follow Him, He says, “*to you it has been given to understand...*”
- to the multitudes who gathered to hear Him, most of whom were people of Jehovah by profession only, He refers as “those who are outside,” and to them He speaks in parables.
- If we understand the parable of the sower, a gospel parable that divides hearers not into “spiritual Christians vs. unspiritual Christians,” but into “saved vs. unsaved,” Jesus implies that we should be able to understand “all parables” (Mk. 4:13).

2. Dr. Peter Masters, pastor of Spurgeon’s Metropolitan Tabernacle, 1970-present:

- “It is very sad that commentators who we often appreciate for their technical exegesis cannot find an evangelistic purpose in the parables. If we have access to older works and published sermons, we receive help in abundance.”
- “Looking for the gracious (gospel) element in a parable requires a simplified interpretive grid ... we must look for certain factors in the passage. Is spiritual disease pictured, and is sin reflected, or ignorance, or alienation from God? Is there anything to resemble spiritual deadness or injury, or the receiving of spiritual life? Or is there any allusion to atonement or anything about judgment, or Heaven or hell, or God’s mercy? In addition — and this is very important — do we see any special arguments to persuade lost souls, or is any particular kind of sinner in view?”

See Peter Masters, *NOT Like Any Other Book* (Wakeman Trust, 2004). From ch. 10, “Are All Parables and Miracles Gracious?”

B. Parables Conceal as well as Reveal. He spoke to the masses in a way that some might *not* understand, in fact, according to v. 12, SO that they might not understand. Mark 4:11-12: “*And He said to them, 'To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 'so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'"*

- Jesus speaks not to the *intelligence* of His hearers, but their *spiritual* perceptiveness, thus, His preaching in parables is so often accompanied by the warning, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
- In the parables, the professing people of God heard divine truth in the language of familiar things, and appealing stories that kept them coming back for more. If they responded *spiritually*, that is, in repentance and faith, the eyes of their understanding would be opened and they would be given more; but if not, their eyes would be blinded, thus is repeated several times in the parables the warning, “*For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him*” (Mt. 13:12, 25:29; Mk. 4:25; Lu. 19:26).

III. THE PRACTICAL USE OF THE PARABLES.

- Parables were first given to the Jews, the Old Testament professing people of God They were particularly aimed at those who should have known the truths of which He spoke, and were intended to separate from the masses those whose hearts had been prepared to embrace His coming.
- They are particularly useful today for the professing New Testament people of God (the professing church), but only if they retain their evangelistic purpose, which is to draw true the Christian disciples out from among the false.