

# The Parable

## Not the Fable

The thought in fable is twofold, it is that "which provokes laughter, and which advises life with prudent counsel."

**First:** "The parable is constructed to set forth a truth spiritual and heavenly: this the fable, with all its value, is not. It is essentially of the Earth and never lifts itself above the Earth. It never has a higher aim than to inculcate maxims of prudential morality industry, caution, foresight and the like; and these it will sometimes recommend even at the expensive of the higher self-forgetting virtues."

Compare: 'The Ant and The Grasshopper' with the following parables.

- The ant reminded the grasshopper that it sung all summer instead of preparing for winter. Now that it is starving the ant recommends the grasshopper just dance. The prudent counsel here is to prepare for the time of need. It has nothing to say about preparing for eternity
- **Luke 16:1** [The Unjust Steward] "There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods."
- **Matthew 25:1** [The 10 Virgins] "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."

**Secondly**, as regards fables: God's creation is too perfect and God has too much reverence owing to it to represent it otherwise than as it really is. "The great Teacher by parables, allowed himself no transgression of the established laws of nature. He presents to us no speaking trees or reasoning beasts...."

- **Judges 9:8-15** "The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them;" is a story Jotham tells to the men of Shechem [who foolishly elected Abimelech their king]. He will teach them their folly, not their sin.
- **2 Kings 14:9** "And Jehoash the king of Israel sent to Amaziah king of Judah, saying, The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, Give thy daughter to my son to wife:" Here, too, it is neither God who speaks, nor His messenger. There is no higher spiritual truth projected in these stories.

## Not the Myth

"The mythic narrative presents itself not merely as the vehicle of the truth, but as itself *being* that truth; while in the parable there is a perfect consciousness in all minds of the distinctness between form and essence, shell and kernel, the precious vessel and yet more precious wine which it contains." [The parable is not the doctrine; it confirms and explains it in story form.] The myth is an "artificial product of a self-conscious age employed to give outward subsistence to an idea." [according to Trench]. Myths are stories about divine beings and forces that are not subject to natural law. They are tales woven to reach a desired conclusion no matter how miraculous or impossible.

- Narcissus falling in love with his own image in the water-brook is an example. Narcissus was too proud to yield to any lover. As a punishment, he fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He died of starvation, unable to tear himself away from his "beloved," which he thought was a water nymph. This was one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* myths, an erotic tale meant to push back on Caesar Augustus's reform efforts to bring morality back to the Roman world.

## Not the Legend

The legend is similar to the myth except its "truth" is an *after-thought* borne of a cultural memory. All outward details may be sacrificed for the sake of asserting some idea from that memory." The legend might be altered to give emphasis to the idea. Legends often begin as real historical accounts but become eventually exaggerated stories of heroism, etc. in which the original imagery might not even be recognizable anymore.

## Not an Allegory

In an allegory the meaning of the subject is inherent in the symbol instead of representing it. The allegory needs not, as the parable, to be further interpreted or explained, since "it contains its interpretation within itself." In an allegory, like in "Pilgrim's Progress," or "Narnia" the link between the symbol and what it represents is taken as obvious, whereas, in a parable the idea it presents is more loosely linked in the story and must be further explained to avoid misinterpretation. [*In a parable not every detail represented in the symbolism is significant to the meaning.*] In the allegory the person or object *represents* someone or something. In the parable the person or thing is *compared* to the real subject or object.

- **John 15:1** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman." [**is allegorical**]
  - Here Jesus calls himself "the vine." for those who know what a grape vine is and who are believers, the meaning is self-evident.
  - but **Isaiah 5:1 is a parable** " My well beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill:" Here, however, God isn't the vineyard He *has* a vineyard which needs to be interpreted in so far as the meaning for the parable requires it. Parts of the parable have little or no significance, i.e. the hill it is planted on or the condition of the soil are not as important as the grapes at harvest time. God found wild (not good for making wine) and not domesticated grapes (the best which He planted).
- **John 10:1-2** "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that enters not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that enters in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep."
  - Here, **John 10:7** "Then said Jesus, "I am the door of the sheep." [**is allegorical**]
  - **John 10:11** "I am the good shepherd:" [**is allegorical**].
- **John 1:36** "Behold the Lamb of God!" [**is allegorical**]
  - But **Isaiah 53:7 is a parable** "he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." Jesus is the Lamb but He was not sheared but crucified. The significant detail is " he opened not his mouth."
- **Allegory**
  - Allegory was practiced on a vast scale ... to interpret the scriptures in philosophical terms. A mark of pure allegory is that it is "vertical," concerned with the relation of the soul to higher things. Allegory was useful as a way of interpreting difficult passages or laws which Christians did not observe. For instance, The wars and massacres of ancient Israel were taken to be spiritual warfare against demons or one's own sins and vices. The wrath of God did not mean that he got upset but that he punished sin. Where the literal sense of the scriptures is impossible, immoral, or absurd, a spiritual reading is required.

## Not just the Proverb

In Hebrew the same word means either proverb or parable. This is also true in the Greek New Testament. Often in Scripture, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. The proverb is often a "concentrated" parable. Both utter, "dark sayings" offering some meaning but leaving much to be inferred. Perhaps, it is best to illustrate any difference:

- **2 Peter 2:22** "But it is happened unto them according to the true **proverb**, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."
- **Luke 6:39** "And he spake a **parable** unto them, Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?"
- **John 10:6** "This **parable** [of the Good Shepherd] spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them."
- **John 16:25, 27, 29** "These things have I spoken unto you in **proverbs**: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. ... the Father himself loves you... His disciples said unto him, Lo, now you are talking plainly, and ... no proverb."

## Characteristics of the Parable

- The parables of Jesus always have a spiritual application unlike fables that are stories of this life only.
- The parable is a realistic story without talking animals or talking trees, etc. It is a spiritual truth in a real life situation unlike myths that are unrealistic tales confused with reality. [Scholars think the Trojan War was the last mythological tale since both gods and humans were involved, but a generation later only true historical accounts were written.]
- Of parables, it is said, the "deeper meaning" of the spiritual symbolism remains "separate and inseparable unlike the proverb in which the symbol is integral to the point made, i.e. "Wisdom cries in the streets!" [**Proverbs 1:20**] while the wisdom spoken of the 5 virgins in Matthew 25:2 needs to be interpreted.
- The parable differs from the allegory in that the parable never ascribes human attributes to the symbols representing those attributes in the story. The properties, qualities and relations of the one to the other remain distinguishable and separate. In allegory, Christian meets Hope in the Town of Despair. Perhaps, **Isaiah 43:2** is parabolic: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you: when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon you."
- Parables do not only illustrate heavenly truths; parables are *proof*.
  - They represent a pattern of the heavenly. **Exodus 25:40** "look that thou make them after their pattern [figure, the design, drawing], which was shewed thee in the mount."
    - "What if earth be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein each to other like, more than on earth is thought? **Hebrews 10:1** "...having a shadow of good things to come,"
    - They represent the "harmony unconsciously felt by all men, and by which deeper minds have delighted to trace, between the natural and spiritual worlds ... something more than illustrations." **Ephesians 5:32** "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church."
    - "The world of nature being throughout a witness for the world of spirit, proceeding from the same hand, growing out of the same root, and being instituted for that very end. ... mysterious harmonies." **Psalms 19:1** "The heavens declare the glory of God...."

- Parables are not "finely chosen similitudes but they are rightly appropriated *types*. John 3:3 the figure of the spiritual act of salvation only by grace.

So we can say that what is natural is nothing less than God's design that parallels otherwise hidden heavenly realities. "The entire moral and visible world from first to last, with its kings and its subjects, its parents and its children, its sun and its moon, its sowing and its harvest, its light and its darkness, its birth and its death, is from beginning to end a mighty parable, a great teaching of supersensuous truths, a help at once to our faith and to our understanding."

- [But God delights in creation itself to such an extent that He often finds Himself depicted in the very nature of things which He created, rather than in our words which we have concocted or invented...]

"The ghastly dream of Gnostic and Manichaeism, who would set a great gulf between the worlds of nature and of grace, ascribing this to a good, but that to an imperfect or an evil power, is a lie; and that, being originally God's world, is there for a share in his redemption."

- **Romans 8:20-22** "For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now."

The parable [though it does not lie or invent fantasy] does not always give a clear witness, nor speak ... in distinct accents, of God's truth and love. Of these [the parables] often times are inadequate expressions—yea, sometimes seem not clear at all [as a] consequences of the Fall."

- **Mark 4:2, 33** "And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, ... And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it."

The parable, Trench called it, "A wonderful instrument" is a necessary vehicle for knowing God. To explain Truth without them, Trench warns, "It will be only a changing of our images, and that for the worst; giving up of living realities which truly stir the heart, and getting of dead metaphysical abstractions in their room."

- **New learning** and truth must be build on something already understood. Life's lessons found in parables are a good base upon which to **explain** Truth especially if a large part of our current knowledge contradicts this Truth. [**Isaiah 1:18**].
- Truth when **introduced** must be more **concrete** [experienced: [**1 Corinthians 13:12**] than abstract [academic and intellectual: **James 3:13**], more milk than meat [**1 Peter 2:2**], told in story form, a morsel at a time, "your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge " [**Philippians 1:9**].
- It was said of Jesus "Without a parable spake He nothing; He gave **no doctrine** in an abstract form, no **skeletons** of truth, but all clothed, as it were, with flesh and blood." [**Matthew 13:34, 52**].
- Parables are **remembered** as well as their meaning. "How many of His [Jesus'] words, partly from his hearers' lack of interest in them, partly from their lack of insight, would have passed away from their hearts and memories, and left no trace behind them." Abstract ideas are less likely to be recalled unless they are encoded in story form for which the parable was uniquely devised. Ex.: Peter's vision of unclean fare before going to Cornelius' house [**Acts 10:9-16**].
- The parable is **relational**: Hebrews 12:7 "God deals with us as with sons and daughters." What might this suggest in terms of our relationship with Him?

## Interpreting a Parable

- Every detail of a parable need not be considered necessary to serve its meaning or use. Although not a parable, consider Joseph's dream. He told his brothers, "the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me" [**Genesis 37:9**] referring to his father, Jacob, his mother Rachel, and his 11 siblings. Problem is, Rachel [represented by the moon] had died giving birth to his brother Benjamin. She could not have done obeisance to him. She was not going to Egypt.
- The context of the parable often leads with a prologue or what occasioned the parable being told. This explains the meaning. Take the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20. The ending of chapter 19 introduces the parable and holds its meaning, **Matthew 19:27-30**.
- Never form a doctrine on an interpretation or understanding of a parable. It was said of the gnostics that they came to the parable, not to learn its language, but to see if they could not compelled it to speak theirs. **Mark 10:45** "to give His life a ransom for many." Adonis Vidu ascribes Greek cultic influence to the development of an early Christian theology of a ransom paid to Satan for the souls of mankind.
- The parable is meant to confirm doctrine, clothing it in a story easily recognized and recalled. What are the four conditions of the human heart the Savior encounters in spreading the Gospel message? The Parable of the Sower, **Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23**, confirms the answer.

## The Use of the Parable in the Service of God's Grace

- St. Augustine comparing sinful man to the Incarnate Son of God wrote, "How vast difference there is between the prisoner in his dungeon and the visitor that has come to see him."
- Consider **Romans 9:21** "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonor?" The prologue reads: **Verse 18** "Therefore He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardens." In **verse 17** it is a reference to the Pharaoh during the Exodus. But going back a couple more **verses 15-16** Paul talks of God's compassion and mercy. In other words, this continues to project Paul's overarching theme of salvation by grace. Interesting: St. Augustine maintained that "predestination" applied to the believers *only* and not the unbelievers, whereas Calvin saw it more generally applicable to both. Let's bring Jeremiah into this discussion: **Jeremiah 18:4** "And the vessel that he made of clay was **marred** in the hand of the potter: so he made it **again** another vessel, as **seemed good** to the potter to make it."

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## 30 Parables of Christ:

The Sower, The Tares, The Mustard Seed, The Leaven, The Hid Treasure, The Pearl of Great Price, The Draw-Net, The Unmerciful Servant, The Laborers in The Vineyard, The Two Sons, The Wicked Husbandmen, The Marriage of The King's Son, The 10 Virgins, The Talents, The Seed Growing Secretly, The Two Debtors, The Good Samaritan, The Friend at Midnight, The Rich Fool, The Barren Fig Tree, The Great Supper, The Lost Sheep, The Lost Piece of Money, The Prodigal Son, The Unjust Steward, The Rich Man and Lazarus, The Unprofitable Servant, The Unjust Judge, The Pharisee and

The Publican, The Pounds.