

The Parables of Jesus

New Testament Survey – Lesson 8

Recently, we had the opportunity to have two couples from Jerusalem around a dinner table. Both couples are special friends, and it was a treat for us. While one couple had been in the United States for several months, the other had only just arrived. During the dinner conversation, we had an opportunity to discuss the latest political issues in Israel. With the recent bombings and rocket attacks drawing closer to Jerusalem, we were interested to know not only how the couples were doing, but how their families were fairing as well.

Our two youngest daughters were also at the dinner table, and both have started developing an interest in foreign affairs. This may be because they are maturing, but more likely it is because we force them to participate in speech events where they frequently have to give speeches on foreign affairs. Regardless, I thought it important for our daughters to hear, and certainly something I personally wanted to know, the ideas that our friends have for resolving the conflicts. So I posed the question,

"Do you see any hope for a political solution to the decade's long conflict?"

After first explaining that the conflict is centuries and millennia old, our friend Hal said that the question was best answered with a story.

"There was a scorpion and a turtle. The scorpion wanted to cross a stream, but was not able to swim. The scorpion told the turtle, 'if you will take me across the stream on your back, I would be most appreciative.' The turtle replied, 'why on earth would I do that? We would get into the middle of the stream and you would sting me, and I would die.' The scorpion replied, 'why would I sting you in the middle of the stream? That would be suicidal. If I drowned you in the middle of the stream when I am on your back, then I would drown as well. Common sense tells you we will both make it across the stream.' The turtle relented, and agreed to give the scorpion a ride. The scorpion climbed on the back of the turtle, and the turtle began to swim across the stream. Halfway across the stream, the scorpion stung the turtle. The turtle died and sank, also drowning the scorpion."

Hal paused for a moment, and then said,

"Welcome to the Middle East."

Hal's story told a profound truth. There are deep character issues involved in the conflict, and the conflict makes no political sense. Nor does there seem to be a ready resolution. The manner in which Hal gave his answer was engaging to everyone at the table. It seeded further discussion, and it certainly stayed in our memories. I asked Hal an important question. He answered with a parable.

Hal is a multi-degreed biblical scholar, who spends a lot of time studying and teaching from both the Old and the New Testaments. While Hal also reads and contributes to these lessons on a weekly basis, I doubt he knew at the time that he was providing me with a perfect introduction for our lesson this week. This week, we are studying the parables of Jesus. Most scholars list about 40 different parables from the teachings of Jesus. We will not cover each parable, but we will try to understand basic ideas that will help those interested in further contemplation and study of this important aspect of Jesus' teaching ministry.

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

The Oxford English dictionary defines a parable as an "allegory, proverb, discourse, speech, talk." Quite properly, the OED references the Greek source for our English word parable, *parabole* (παροβολη), which means placing side-by-side. In Greek, a parable was a comparison, analogy, or a proverb. Of course, while our Gospels were written in Greek, the language of Jesus and his apostles was principally Aramaic and likely some degree of Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word for parable is *mashal* (משל), and in Aramaic it is *mathla*. The Hebrew/Aramaic words come from the verb that means to "represent" or be "like." As a noun, *mashal* is generally found to mean a "proverb" or other wise saying. It was used in sayings and stories of many different kinds. The Proverbs in Hebrew are called the "parables [*mashal*] of Solomon." Even Balaam's prophecy is labeled a *mashal* in Numbers 24:3, 15, 20.

By the time of Jesus, and in the rabbinic literature immediately after Jesus, his specific form of a *mashal* or parable had evolved. These are the parables that Jesus used to teach, and they are found extensively among other rabbis of the 1st and 2nd centuries. These parables took a form that is not found in other cultures and civilizations. The closest one might find are Aesop's fables, which date back to the 5th and 6th centuries BC. While those fables are stories that express some moral or principal, they do not take the distinct form of Jewish rabbinical parables. Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safri have undertaken an extensive analysis of the Jewish rabbinic parables. They set forward basic characteristics found in most of the parables:

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1. a statement setting out that it is parable (*mashal*);
2. a narrative or story that is told to convey an underlying message;
3. few if any identifying details about where or when the story took place;
4. a description of some "reality" also lacking details about names, *etc.*;
5. the reality does not contain divine visions;
6. the stories message or moral is generally understood and often spelled out; and,
7. the parable is always told in Hebrew, even when the text itself is Aramaic.¹

Many of these characteristics are found in the parables of Jesus, although we do not see each characteristic every time. Of course, we should remember that the recorded parables are never word for word dictation of *everything* Jesus said. The Gospels provide important and accurate details, but not all details.

While the parables of Jesus generally conform to the parables of the rabbis in form, there are some important distinctions. While most rabbinic parables deal with a King, the parables of Jesus generally deal with the rural life of ordinary people. Rabbinic parables seem to be inserts in larger sermons, while Jesus' parables are often the core of the sermon. Not surprisingly, rabbinic parables are generally quite short, but Jesus' parables are usually noticeably longer. More typically, we see the parables of Jesus stylized to a greater degree than the parables of the rabbis. Perhaps the most notable difference between rabbinic parables and those of Jesus centers on the subject of the message. As we will detail more fully below, rabbinic parables usually illustrate a biblical verse or point to scholarship of the Torah. The parables of Jesus have a different targeted message.²

INTERPRETING THE PARABLES

In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus told the crowds that the kingdom of heaven is comparable to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While the men were sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the seed. As the plants came

¹ Notley, R. Steven, Safrai, Ze'ev, *Parables of the Sages*, (Carta Jerusalem 2011), at 5-6.

² *Ibid.*, at 67ff.

up, so also did the weeds. The servants of the Master of the house came to the master asking whether he had sown good seed. They did not understand why the weeds had sprung up. Jesus replied that an enemy had done that nefarious sowing of weeds among the good wheat seeds. The servants then planned to gather up the weeds, but the master instructed them to wait until after the wheat was ready for the harvest. At the harvest time, the weeds could be gathered and the wheat saved. Shortly after this, the crowds dispersed and Jesus went into a house with his disciples. His disciples came up to him and asked him "explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." Jesus proceeded to do so.

Since the earliest days, people have worked to understand the meaning of the parables. The apostolic fathers took an allegorical approach to understanding the parables. One of the most frequent illustrations of the allegorical approach of the church fathers concerns the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is found only in the gospel of Luke. Jesus told the parable after a lawyer put Jesus to a test asking Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied that the man should follow the law, love the Lord with all of his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love his neighbor as he loved himself. At this point, the lawyer pushed further. The lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" It is in reply to this question that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus gave the lawyer a fact pattern:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back (Lk 10:30-35).

Jesus then asked the lawyer which of the three men proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers. The lawyer properly answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus instructed the lawyer to go and do likewise.

The early church father Origen (185-254) preached on this parable delivering an allegorical interpretation typical of the early church. The man going down the road was understood to be Adam. Adam was leaving Jerusalem, which represented Paradise, and was headed to Jericho, which represented the world.

The robbers were hostile powers that set upon Adam. The priest represented the law, the Levites were the prophets, and the Samaritan was Christ. The wounds represented the disobedience of man, and the animal that brought the man to the inn was the Lord's body. The two denarii given to the innkeeper represented the Father and the Son. The innkeeper represented the church entrusted with the care of the wounded until the Samaritan's return, signaling the second coming of Jesus. After giving this allegorical interpretation, Origen preached that the obligation of the church was to both take care of the wounded and to be the body of Christ seeking those who have fallen on the road of life.³

This allegorical approach was highly popular not only in the early church, but also throughout the Middle Ages. Once the Reformation Movement began, the approach fell into disfavor. In commenting on some of the allegorical claims made by others, John Calvin termed them, "too absurd to deserve reputation." After referencing three allegorical interpretations that he deemed contrary to his theology, he concluded,

I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ.⁴

Since Calvin, the disdain for an allegorical interpretation has only grown. In 1888, the German New Testament scholar Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938) published a major work on the parables of Jesus. Jülicher did not believe that the parables told by Jesus were ever properly interpreted allegorically. Where an allegorical interpretation might be found in Scripture, Jülicher believed that the early church added it later. Jülicher fought that every parable had one message, at least in the form Jesus originally told. Jülicher was part of an early movement that tried to distinguish what is read in the New Testament from what really occurred at the time of Jesus. He was part of a school that thought that the Gospels were written very late, perhaps 100 years or more after the events took place. During that period of time, the second and third generations of the church had superimposed a more developed theology onto rudimentary facts.⁵

³ Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 34.3ff.

⁴ Calvin, John, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* Vol. 3, (Baker 2005) Vol. XVII, at 62-63.

⁵ Time and scholarship has diluted Jülicher's view dating the Gospels so late. It is more difficult to maintain that theology developed so radically as early as would be necessary for the Gospels to be modified. That is not to say that there are not still scholars who seek to determine the "real"

Jülicher started a landslide of alternate ways to understand the parables. Among the many approaches set out by different scholars, some interpret the parables as comments upon the end times. These scholars point out the frequency of Jesus' message in the parables that the kingdom either had come, or was in the process of coming.⁶ We also find those who take an existential view, with the parables almost becoming a Rorschach test. Here, the chore is not as much to interpret the parable as to experience it.⁷ For example, the question after hearing the Good Samaritan parable might be, "How does this make you feel? How does it challenge you?" rather than, "What does this mean?"

The approach that seems to us to have the most merit, actually recognizes value in a number of the approaches of other scholars. The core to understanding and interpreting the parables is not limited to the school of thought of a 21st Century scholar, a 20th Century scholar, or even a 2nd Century scholar. Instead, we reckon most valuable trying to read and understand the parable in light of its actual context. Contextual issues are multi-fold. First, we should examine the context in which Christ delivered the parable. By understanding the history and culture of the day, we better understand the sense that the parable conveyed to the listeners. This will help us interpret the parable in our modern circumstances. A second layer of context can be found in the way the parables are inserted into the Gospels. Beyond the delivery of the parables in the teaching of Christ, the gospel writers have chosen what portion of the parables to include, as well as structured the outline of their Gospels so that the placement of the parables can be important. In other words, we not only want to understand the context of the day, but also the context of Scripture.

We can use two examples to help us see how context adds to a parable's understanding. First, we can look at historical facts that better illustrate the storyline. If we return to the parable of the Good Samaritan, then there are many facts that help us better understand what was at play. We know from the Gospels themselves, as well as extensive literature from the time of the New Testament, that the Jews considered Samaritans the human equivalent of pork. A Samaritan was unclean, not to be touched, and not to be befriended; instead, he was to always be avoided. There would have been a visceral reaction by the good Jews in the day of Jesus when the role of the Samaritan took stage in the drama of the parable.

Jesus and his "real" teachings from those contained in the Gospels. It seems readily apparent, however, that this grows out of a need to eliminate actual recognition of miracles, rather than simply from the scholarship available.

⁶ Dodd, C. H., *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (Scribner 1961); Jeremias, Joachim, *The Parables of Jesus* (S.C.M. 1972), 3d ed.

⁷ See, e.g., Linnemann, Eta, *Parables of Jesus*, (SPCK 1961).

We can also consider the understanding of Jesus' original hearers about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The early church historian Eusebius (c. 260-339) wrote a book called *Onomasticon* in the early 320s. In this book, Eusebius tried to list every geographical site from the Bible, and give its location as best as he could. About 60 years later, St. Jerome expanded the work of Eusebius in his *Liber Locorum*, or Book of Locations. Jerome explained that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was in Latin called "Assent of the Reds" or "Assent of the Blood–Stains." Jerome then added that the road for this name "because of the blood that has been shed there by thieves." He finishes his entry adding, "The Lord is also recorded as mentioning it as a cruel and blood–stained place in a parable of the man going down to Jericho from Jerusalem."⁸ In 1975, John Wilkinson published an article reconstructing that road, providing a lot of pictures as well as geologic data. That article explains the road's desolation, its winding turns as it changes in elevation over 1/2 mile in the span of 20 km.⁹ Without a doubt, the listeners in Jesus' day would have known the precarious road, and would not have been surprised that some fellow had been waylaid and found wounded along the road. This was not a shocking story; it was part of the way of life at the time.

A second way that context helps us understand parables is by comparing the parables of Jesus to those of other rabbis in the 1st and 2nd centuries. An excellent parable for comparison is one provided by Matthew, Mark, and Luke commonly called the Parable of the Sower or the Parable of the Four Soils (Mt. 13:1-23; Mk. 4:1-20; Lk. 8:1-15). As Matthew related the parable,

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear (Mt. 13:3-9).

After Matthew has an intervening discussion about why Jesus spoke in parables, Matthew relates Jesus' explanation of the parable. The four soils represent four different responses to the words of the kingdom. The path represents those who hear the word of the kingdom, but do not understand it, and the evil one snatches away what was sown in the heart. The second soil is the rocky ground. This

⁸ Freeman-Grenville, G.S.P., *et al. Palestine in the Fourth Century A.D.: The Onomasticon By Eusebius of Caesarea* (Carta 2003), at 22.

⁹ Wilkinson, John, "The Way From Jerusalem to Jericho," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1975), 10-24.

represents the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, but does not hold onto it because his faith is not rooted. The third soil with weeds represents the hearer of the word who lets the deceitfulness of riches choke out any fruitfulness in life. The fourth soil represents the disciple who hears the word, understands it, and bears fruit.

Landmark scholar David Flusser, who was a preeminent scholar at understanding the Hebrew roots in the Gospel accounts, saw a parallel between this parable of Jesus and one contained in the Hebrew *Mishnah* (oral rabbinic traditions that are reasonably dated as recording debates between Jewish sages between the 1st Century BC and the 2d Century AD).¹⁰ The *Mishnah* saying cites four types of disciples: Those who are quick to hear and quick to forget, those who are slow to hear and slow to forget, those who are quick to hear and slow to lose; and those who are slow to hear and quick to lose. Of those four, only the third group merits the label “sage” or “wise man.”¹¹

Notley explains that grouping into four types was typical of Hebrew parables.¹² We see it both in the parable of Jesus and in the *Mishnah* parable referenced above. Notley points to an important difference, however, between the values esteemed in the parables of Jesus compared to the typical rabbinic values. We can see this in the examples above. As Luke explains the parable of the sower, those who hear the word as the “good soil” are those who hold the word fast in an honest and “good heart” (Lk. 8:15). Luke says this is the disciple who will yield “a hundredfold” (Lk. 8:8). The expression of “a good heart” is the Greek equivalent (καρδια καλη) of the Hebrew idiom (לב טוב) that signified people who are generous and charitable.¹³ If we further understand that the idea of a 100 fold blessing echoes the promise that the Lord gave to Isaac as a sower in Genesis 26:12,

And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold.
The LORD blessed him.

¹⁰ Flusser, D., “The Parables of Jesus and Parables in Rabbinical Literature,” *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity: Studies and Essays*, (Sifrait Poalim 1979), a Hebrew text cited by Notley and Safrai, at 327.

¹¹ *Avot* 5:12.

¹² As we discussed in the Old Testament survey lesson on the symbolic importance of numbers in the Ancient Near East, “four” was a symbol for earthly matters. It frequently was used as a number to signify completion in that sense, *i.e.*, the four corners of the earth, four winds, *etc.* Copies of these lessons are available on the class website at www.Biblical-literacy.com.

¹³ See, Notley at 40, and cites therein.

It was common Jewish teaching that Isaac knew God would bless him for Abraham's sake. Armed with that knowledge, Isaac sowed in the land. From this, the rabbis taught that Isaac's blessing came through his actions. In his assessment of this, Notley points out, that Jesus elevates the importance of loving action in the life of someone who hears the word. In this way, the teaching of Jesus stands in contrast to the emphasis of the rabbis in their parables. The rabbis emphasized the importance of blessing that came from study of Torah.

Jesus' elevation of deed and charity in his description of the four types of hearers stands in distinction to that of the Sages with their emphasis upon Torah study.¹⁴

This contrast is actually painted in the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye's sweetest desire would be spending his time in Torah study and discussion. In the song "If I Were a Rich Man," Tevye explains that he would build a great big house and he would see his wife "strutting like a peacock" with a "proper double chin." But with a sigh, he proclaims that the sweetest thing of all would be his ability to "discuss the holy books with the learned men several hours every day." All that would be his dream; his reality was quite different. His reality involved working hard, taking care of his family, holding his faith before God, filling his role in the community, and in seeking the will of God daily. Tevye lived the holy life of deed in charity, even as he longed for the life of Torah study.

As we read the parables and interpret them through context, we find several other modes of interpretation validated. We can start with the allegorical interpretation. Origen, Ambrose, Augustine and many others in the early church went to great lengths to explain the allegorical elements of the parables. This approach fell out of favor as early as Calvin on into the present. The approach, however, is not without some merit. We know this because Jesus himself provided interpretations of several parables. Some of those interpretations are allegorical. We began this section on interpretation, referencing the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13. When Jesus answered his disciples and explained the parable, his explanation was very allegorical.

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place

¹⁴ Notley at 40.

there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Mt. 13:37-43).

Jülicher believed that this was a later insertion by the church, but it is found in every early manuscript. Absent Jülicher's opinion that parables had only one interpretation and it was non-allegorical, there is no reason to believe that this was a subsequent insertion.

Calvin pointed out the difficulty of allegorical interpretations. There is always a tendency to read into a story the theology and beliefs that one chooses, as opposed to reading the story and gleaning what the story actually says. It is readily apparent reading the parables that some had an allegorical meaning. Jesus explained those parables. Many, if not most, of the parables, were much more standard rabbinical parables where the interpretation or the message was very plain and non-allegorical.

Another interpretation of the parables that has merit and is worth understanding concerns the "eschatological" approach. When scholars discuss eschatology, they are seizing upon the Greek word that references the end days. So, the eschatological approach is one that believes that the parables were written with the end time in mind. This does not mean the total end of all things because in the biblical sense, the ministry of Jesus ushered in the end times. The end times are not a split second, but are an age. We are in the end times until Jesus comes again in final glory. In this sense, many of the parables can be understood against the framework of the end times. This is the time of the kingdom of God, which Matthew generally calls the kingdom of heaven. In these parables, we see the coming of the kingdom, kingdom morality, kingdom preparedness, and more.

We have already considered two of the parables in Matthew chapter 13; however, there are more parables in the chapter. Each of the parables point to the kingdom. The first parable is the parable of the sower and the four soil types. This speaks to the disciples of the kingdom. The parable of the weeds, also referenced earlier, speaks to the enemy sowing in the midst of the kingdom, and the way that the weeds will be burned even as the wheat is gathered into the barn at the end of the season. After those two parables, Matthew recorded the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus explained that the kingdom of heaven would be like a mustard seed, although small, grows to be a large tree with its branches available for all the birds in the air. History has borne out the clear meaning of this parable. The Christian faith began with a handful of believers around Jesus in a backwater of the Roman Empire. It is hard to be much smaller than that, yet it has grown to be the largest faith in the world today. Jesus told a similar parable about the kingdom of heaven being like yeast that a woman put in flour. The yeast spread throughout the flour,

and caused all of the bread to rise. Again, history has shown this parable borne out through the growth of the Christian faith in the world.

In addition to the growth of the church, the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 speak to the individual's response. Jesus told the parable of the hidden treasure which a man found. The man quickly sold everything he had to buy the field that contains that treasure. The message of this parable is clear: people who understand the value of the kingdom of God will not hesitate to invest everything they have in that kingdom. Jesus told another parable with the same message equating the kingdom of heaven to a merchant searching for fine pearls. The merchant found one pearl that had such great value that he sold everything he had to buy it. The chapter then follows with the parable of the net. Again, this is another parable explained by the end of days. In this parable, the kingdom of heaven was like a net thrown into the sea that gathered fish of all kinds. The men pulled the net ashore, and sorted the fish and the containers throwing away the bad fish. Jesus explained that it would be the same at the "close of the age" (another indication the age was already starting). At the close of the age, "the Angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace" (Mt. 13:49-50).

We should add a final note of interpretation under the eclectic approach that finds some merit in most of the scholars' different approaches. The existential approach, that urges readers to find their own experience in each parable is understandably frightening to most evangelicals. In the extreme, it means that a passage can mean one thing to one person and something entirely different to another. Yet, there is a measure of merit in this approach even to an evangelical. We can see this reasoning as we understand why Jesus spoke in parables.

WHY DID JESUS SPEAK IN PARABLES?

Scholars have spent a great deal of time talking about why Jesus spoke in parables. There was a conversation piece even in the ministry of Christ. Matthew 13:10 recorded the disciples coming to Jesus and asking him "why do you speak to them in parables?" A similar conversation is found in Mark 4. In these passages, Jesus explained that he spoke in parables as a blessing to his disciples, but not to those who refused to believe:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand (Mt. 13:11-13).

Many Christians find these passages perplexing because they do not seem consistent with 2 Peter 3:9 (“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”), and other passages that reflect the loving character of God. While a full explanation of these passages is beyond the reach of this lesson, we should note several things. First, both Matthew and Mark insert this response of Jesus after the Parable of the Sower. That parable exposed those who would not have followed Jesus faithfully. The parable taught that everyone received the same opportunity; the seed was the same seed for each group of hearer. The reason that some chose not to follow Jesus was the condition of the soil, which is the heart of the hearer. Jesus taught in parables but those who refuse to hear Jesus cannot blame the parable. It is a condition of their heart. Second, a number of scholars offer some enterprising views that take away some of the sting of what Jesus had to say. Any of a number of commentaries or books on the parables set forward many of these different views. Third, by binding this explanation to the Parable of the Sower, it distinguishes those parables that are very clear in their meaning to most anyone who might read them. When Jesus told the lawyer the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer had no trouble understanding who his “neighbor” was. Similarly, there was no disguising Jesus’ follow-up that the lawyer was to “go and do likewise.”

This leads to a number of other reasons that Jesus spoke in parables. Matthew added that Jesus spoke in parables in fulfillment of prophecy.

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.” (Mt. 13:34-35).

Most every scholar readily acknowledges Jesus using parables as a master communicator. There is a power in a story that goes beyond simply reciting facts. Stories engage the listener. To see evidence of this, one merely needs to compare the number of viewers of the PBS documentary on the Titanic to the number who saw the award-winning movie. Very few watched the PBS documentary. The movie, however, is one of the largest blockbusters of all times. If you think about it, it was the same boat, the same iceberg, and the same result. The documentary relayed the facts. The movie told a story. People love a story.

In addition to engaging the mind, stories can also step behind emotional and psychological barriers. We can witness this today, but we also see it clearly in the pages of Scripture. When David was sinning in his adultery with Bathsheba, he went as far as murdering Uriah to cover it up. When Nathan approached David, Nathan did not bother to tell David of his sin. Instead, Nathan told David a story

of a man who had one sheep and another man who had thousands of sheep. The man with many sheep needed to kill one for a party, and instead of selecting one of his thousands, stole the only sheep of the first man. By telling this story, Nathan got behind David's natural defenses, and David was up in arms, demanding that the second man pay with his life. It was then that Nathan explained that David was in fact that man.

A final note about the purpose behind parables returns us to the existential view of interpretation. It is reasonable to assume that those who heard Jesus tell the parables, left, and spent time discussing what those parables meant. This is not to say that those people found the valid meaning of what Jesus intended simply by their own experience. But there is merit in understanding that people can easily discuss parables and stories. Countless studies show that people more readily remember stories than they do a mere recitation of facts, and so people are able to take those stories and talk about them over lunch, dinner, or walking down the street. We see the disciples discussing the meaning of the parables, and there is no reason to think that the other people were any different. While this does not give us a definitive interpretation of each parable, it certainly gives us insight into one reason why Jesus would speak in parables. It prompted the listeners to consider the implications of Jesus' message.

CONCLUSION

When I was a young lawyer, I read every book I could on how to be successful in the courtroom. Some of the very best books I ever read, and some of the very best videotapes I ever watched, were written and produced by a lawyer from Wyoming named Gerry Spence. Spence was famous for defending Imelda Marcos, Randy Weaver of Ruby Ridge fame, and more. Spence's mantra, taught in every book and on every video, was really fairly simple: be yourself, and tell stories! Spence did not mean to tell fiction, but to relate the facts in a story fashion. Spence had discovered and was preaching the power of a story.

With all due respect to Gerry Spence, who is truly one of the great trial lawyers of all time, he was merely following a teaching technique of the Master Communicator: Jesus. Jesus spoke in stories communicating an important and clear message in an interesting and engaging style. We should take time to read his parables in full context, and learn the messages and how they can transform our lives in these end times.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “A sower went out to sow.” (Mt. 13:).

Somehow in reading these parables, it is important for me to move beyond trying to understand them. I want to reach a level where I apply them. So as I read the Parable of the Sower, my prayer and personal examination is of my own heart. Do I even care about what I read and who Jesus is? Am I eager today but disinterested tomorrow? Have I heard the word with an apparent reception, but abandoned the word in light of the world, its riches, its teachings, or its pleasures? It is my hope and prayer that my heart will be open not one day, but every day, and that each day will see me affirmatively seeking the kingdom of God in my life and in my walk. I want to grow closer to God in purity and faith.

2. “There was a man who had two sons...” (Lk. 15:11).

Did you hear about the man who had two sons? The man worked hard to have a close family, and worked hard in business. The man had found great success, and his hard work had paid off, at least in business. The man had been able to put money into two trust accounts so that each of his sons would have a real head start in life. After the youngest son reached an age where he was able to access his trust account, he asked for it from his dad. The dad released the funds to his son, but instead of using the funds wisely, the son went far away from home. He used the money recklessly, and it was all gone before long. The young man was too embarrassed to go home, and he had scorned his family and burned that bridge. Jobs were scarce, unemployment was high, and the young man could not find a good job. The best job the son could find was feeding nasty and unclean animals. That job did not pay enough money for food. The young man realized how bad it was when he was thinking that the food he was giving to the animals was better than the food he had to eat! The young man longed for home.

Figuring he had no chance to return as a son, but knowing his father to be a good man, the young man decided to return home and try to get a job working for his father. On the way home, the young man practiced his speech repeatedly in his head. He would declare himself unworthy, offered to change his name, and be happy if he could just be a yard hand. As the young man neared the house, dirty, barefoot, dressed in rags, gaunt and unfed, his father was outside. The father looked up, saw the young man approaching, and recognized him in spite of his appearance. In tears, the father ran down the road hugging his long-lost son. As the son launched into his well-rehearsed speech, the dad just ignored his requests. Instead,

the dad yelled for the servants to bring the best clothes, shoes, and a family ring. The dad instructed the cook to prepare a great feast, and started party music.

When the older brother figured out what was going on, he was not too happy. It did not make sense to him that his younger brother could squander all of his money, live a wretched life, and get a hero's welcome when he came home. The father explained to the older son that his brother was dead but is now alive. There can be no other response than one of great joy and celebration.

This may be my favorite parable. All of us ~~We are all the~~ ~~hat~~ prodigal son. Our heavenly father welcomes us home with tears and the greatest blessings when we turn to him.

3. *“You go, and do likewise”* (Lk. 10:37).

We all walk a road of life, and on that road we will find people who need help. The charge of Jesus is to love our neighbor as ourselves. He defined our neighbor as whomever we meet on the road that needs our help. It is that simple - and that hard. May God help me go and do likewise, in his name.