

The Greatest Stories Ever Told

The Teacher is... in

To mention *parables* is almost automatically to turn one's mind to Jesus. Others before Him used parables to teach and reinforce their teaching, but He so far outdistanced them in mastery of parables that few since His time have even tried to win serious attention as users of the art. By the same token, it would be impossible to measure the life and teaching of Jesus without giving serious attention to His parables. They not only constitute a major method of His teaching, but they provide rare insight into His thought and personality. Through His parables, Jesus descended from the heights of theory to walk with His hearers where they lived.

What is a parable, anyway? Some have called it an earthly story with a Heavenly meaning. That is a good statement, but it doesn't encompass the whole nature of all parables. The Greek word *parabole*, signifying a proverb, comparison, figure, or symbol, appears forty seven times in the Gospels, but it is nowhere defined.

Nelson's Bible Dictionary gives the following definition for *parable*:

A short, simple story designed to communicate a spiritual truth, religious principle, or moral lesson; a figure of speech in which truth is illustrated by a comparison or example drawn from everyday experiences. A parable is often no more than an extended metaphor or simile, using figurative language in the form of a story to illustrate a particular truth. The Greek word for parable literally means "a laying by the side of" or "a casting alongside," thus "a comparison or likeness." In a parable something is placed alongside something else, in order that one may throw light on the other. A familiar custom or incident is used to illustrate some truth less familiar.¹

After teaching the story of the sower and the soils to the multitude beside the sea (Matthew 13:1-23), Jesus' disciples wanted to know why He spoke in parables. He gave a two-part answer. To His disciples and those who were willing to listen to His message and consider it, they would grant understanding and insight. To his detractors and enemies, they would serve to close the door to His message, lest they understand it and use it against Him. Later, of course, even some of the enemies would begin to understand what He had taught, but for the duration of His ministry, they served much as the pillar of cloud and of fire had served the children of Israel in their escape from Egypt: it would give light and leadership to God's people, but confusion and darkness to the enemy. Even with His enemies, however, Jesus would frequently reach out to them to try to help whenever He found one who was even momentarily responsive.

How should we use His parables today? We aren't among His immediate followers and we aren't

¹ from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers

His critics. In some instances, the explanation is readily available. We need simply to listen as the Lord explains it to His disciples. From there, we can gain insight into how the others should be interpreted.

The parables of Jesus frequently had but one major point. They differ from *allegories* in that sense since allegories have many details and abound with hidden meanings. Failure to make this distinction has led some students of the Bible far afield in their interpretation of Jesus' parables. No interpretation should have to be forced. The student should seek the meaning as Jesus intended, not his own pet meaning.

Both Christ's teaching and His parables concerned issues of the *kingdom*. The concept of the kingdom in the gospels had to do not with territory in the physical sense. It concerned the rule of God in the life of people. Christ's kingdom today is His church - made up of all those who accept him as King of their lives. Meaning within the parables should point to this issue.

This study is designed to make you think. It is intended to be a catalyst for discussion and application. Be sure to seek personal meaning in each lesson. The right application of God's word will never disappoint you.