

PARABLES

Misunderstanding of parables: Due to Jesus comment in Mark 4:10-12, people have assumed that parables are difficult to understand and thus they have allegorized them. (An allegory is a story where each point in the story represents something quite foreign to the story itself.) An example is St. Augustine's allegory of the Good Samaritan.

However, Jesus told his parables to groups of people and it is evident that the listeners in most cases understood them due to their reaction to the parable and its obvious intent. See as example Luke 10:25-27, the Good Samaritan was addressed to a lawyer in response to his specific question. Also Luke 20:1-20, 19:11, 18:9, & 14:7.

Perhaps Jesus' statement in Mark 4:10-12 can be seen as a statement concerning peoples' hearts, for the same passage, which is from Isaiah 6:9, is also quoted in John 12:40, Acts 28:26 and Romans 11:8. These passages seem to illustrate a person's consistent hard heart rather than the fact that God doesn't want them to see. In other words Jesus is saying to his disciples they understand the mystery of the secret of the Kingdom but to those who won't receive it; it remains a parable or a riddle to them.

The Parables were to be understood and the key is to discover the original audience; to hear what they heard and to understand the parables as the first listeners would have understood them.

The Nature of Parables - (take people by surprise; exposes hearts, attitudes)

A true parable is a story with a beginning, an ending and a plot. Examples of true parables: Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37; The three lost parables in Luke 15; the Great Supper in Luke 14:15-24; the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16; the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16: 19-31 and the Ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13.

Other Parable types may best be called Similitudes in that they take an illustration from everyday life to make a point. Examples: Leaven Luke 13:20, 21; Mustard Seed Luke 13:18, 19; and the Sower and Seed in Mark 4.

Others are really more like similes or metaphors, "You are the Salt of the earth".

Sometimes Parables approach being allegories because many details represent something else but in an allegory every detail stands for something quite different than what one would think. (True allegory - Gal. 4:21-31) Bible always tells us when it's an allegory.

How Parables Function

The purpose of Parables is not to give a teaching with pictures though they do that. Nor is it to reveal truth though they do reveal truth. The function of a Parable is to:

1. Call forth a response on the part of the hearer. Parables are heart sifters. They reveal our attitudes, how we are a little taken with our righteousness as in the "Pharisee and the Publican", how we are unforgiving as in the "Prodigal Son" and how we are angry at God's grace and would rather him to be fair instead of merciful as in the "Laborers and the vineyard".
2. Parables catch the listener (reader) by surprise. They are like a political cartoon compared to an editorial.
3. Parables call for a response to Jesus' ministry.

Our problem is that we are culturally removed from the parables and we often have to have them interpreted to us for us to get the point. The parables were originally spoken and they have been passed down to us in written form so some of the impact is lost. It is similar to a person getting a joke or missing it. A joke can be interpreted but when it is, the impact and the catching of the person by surprise is lost. What we then have to do is to recreate the punch that the parables had to their original audience.

Interpretation of Parables

A. Two things are important in interpreting Parables:

1. The knowledge of the "points of reference" or the parts for the story which one identifies with as the story is being told and thus what leads up to the unexpected turn in the story.
2. Seeing the unexpected in the story.