

# DECODING THE PARABLES



The average believer is of the opinion that parables are of minor importance. Parables are among the oldest and most common forms of teaching. During Christ's earthly ministry, Jesus used this medium of teaching almost constantly, and for a very good purpose. Each parable relates to God's Kingdom people as God's agent of blessing to the Word.

## 1. THE NATURE OF PARABLES

A parable (from the Greek verb "paraballo" meaning to place alongside of in order to compare) is a story in which there is a comparison between a specific moral, spiritual and literal truth on the one hand and certain general events on the other hand. To put it in a different way – it is a story or comparison taken from real life and from nature to illustrate some truth in another form than the literal statement of the truth.

The real nature of the parable is that it is confined to the sphere of reality. The story must be true to the facts and the experience of human life from which true illustrations and comparisons are taken from the thoughts that are conveyed. The parable in itself is not the intended truth, but purely an illustration of this truth. The parable or illustrations is one thing, and the truth which is being illustrated is another thing. When a parable has served its purpose of illustrating the truth clearly, it has no further use in education or doctrine.

## 2. THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

The purpose of parables is of a fourfold nature:

- i) To present moral and spiritual truths in an acceptable form;
- ii) To rouse the interest of the hearers (Matthew 13:10-17,35; 2 Samuel 12:1-14);
- iii) To reprimand without offending or hurting (Luke 7:36-50);
- iv) To convey truth to the serious listener and to withhold it from the indifferent hearers, and to test the character and attitude of the listeners (Matthew 13:13-17, 34-35).

## 3. THE ELEMENTS OF PARABLES

A parable includes three elements or aspects:

- i) There is the occasion when it is uttered. The occasion marks the events which give rise to the parable.

### Matthew 13:10-17

10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

11 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

12 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.

13 Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

14 And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: *'hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive;*

15 *for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that i should heal them.'*

16 But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;

17 for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

- ii) Then we have the comparison which is used. This means to say the distinction between the illustration and what is being illustrated.
- iii) The third aspect that we need to take note of is the moral and spiritual lesson which is being conveyed.

#### 4. THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

In order to interpret a parable certain factors must be considered by the student:



- i) Take note of the **HISTORICAL** background of the parable, who asked the question that gave rise to the story in the specific parable; what was this question and why was it asked? Or, what event gave rise to the parable which was told?
- ii) Consider the illustration itself and define the **LITERAL** meaning of the important words.
- iii) Determine what the **MAIN TRUTH** is, the moral or spiritual lesson that the parable aims at illustrating. If you have not identified this correctly, there is no possibility of interpreting the parable. Every parable teaches one central point, all elements of a parable being secondary and subordinate to that one point. For this reason detail must not be spiritualised or emphasised unnecessarily.
- iv) From the previous fact it should be clear that **DOCTRINE** must **not** be formulated from the detail of a parable. The detail is only given to provide a story, in order that some specific thought might be conveyed.
- v) The **CENTRAL MESSAGE** of a parable is always clearly put to us in
  - a) The beginning or introduction of the parable (Luke 18:9; 11:11)
  - b) The conclusion of the parable (Matthew 25:13; Luke 16:13)
  - c) In both the introduction and the conclusion (Matthew 18:21-35; 20:1-16; Luke 12:15-21);
  - d) Parallel passages (Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 18:11-14);
  - e) The general scope of the context (Luke 13:6-9; 15:11-32).

