

Exegesis of the Parables

Getting the Joke

- Just like a joke, there are 2 items that capture the hearer of a parable and elicit a response
 - The points of reference
 - The unexpected turn

The Points of Reference

- “The various parts of the story with which one automatically identifies as it is being told”
Example: The Two Debtors (Luke 7:40-42)
- Context: v. 36-50
 - Jesus has been invited to Simon the Pharisee’s house for dinner
 - Not as a means of honor, but some sort of test
 - The fact that Jesus was not offered even common hospitality shows this (v. 44-46)
 - When a prostitute shows up and makes a fool of herself for Jesus’ sake, the suspicions of the Simon are confirmed (v. 39)
- The Parable
 - Jesus tells a simple story to teach Simon a truth
 - Two men owe a moneylender some money
 - One owed 500 denarii (500 days’ wages)
 - One owed 50 denarii (50 day’s wages)
 - Neither can pay their debts
 - So, the moneylender forgives both debts
 - The point: Who, do you think, would have responded to the moneylender with the greater display of love?
- Even though the story needs no interpretation, Jesus offer it anyway (v. 43-47)
- The points of reference:
 - The moneylender
 - The 2 debtors
- The identifications are immediate
 - The moneylender = God
 - The 2 debtors = the prostitute & Simon
- The parable acts as a word of judgment against Simon calling for a response from him
- The prostitute heard it too
 - But for her the word was one of acceptance
- Note that this is NOT an allegory
 - The points of reference come from the context
- Also, the points of reference are NOT the point of the parable
 - The intended response is

Identifying the Audience

- The meaning of many Parables has to do with how the original audience would have heard them
- If the audience is given in the Gospel, the task of interpretation is a combination of 3 things:
 1. Sit and listen to the parable again and again
 2. Identify the points of reference intended by Jesus that would have been picked up by the original hearers
 3. Try to determine how the original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore what they would have heard

Ex.) The Good Samaritan (Luke 15:11-32)

- The original audience: An expert in the Law
 - Seeking to justify himself by asking, “Who is my neighbor?”
- 1. As you sit and listen
 - Jesus does not answer the question in the way that it was asked
 - But it also shows the smug self-righteousness of the questioner
 - He knows what the Law says about loving one’s neighbor
 - But he wants to define ‘neighbor’ in such a way that shows he piously obeys the Law
- 2. Points of reference
 - The Samaritan
 - The man in the ditch
 - All the rest of the story details are lesser points to build effect
 - The two that pass by are priestly types who stand over against the rabbis and Pharisees
 - Almsgiving to the poor was the Pharisees’ main way of showing love for their neighbors
- 3. How is it heard
 - The teacher of the Law is going to get caught by the parable
 - Jesus redefines ‘neighbor’
 - No longer the limiting, self-justifying definition of the teacher of the Law
 - Jesus exposes the teacher’s prejudice & hatred
 - The teacher’s lack of love is NOT that would have left the man in the ditch
 - It is in his hatred for the Samaritans
 - And possibly looking down on the priests
 - In effect, Jesus does not answer the question
 - He destroys it

Exegetical Difficulties

- Most difficulties in understanding the Parables come from cultural gaps between us and Jesus’ original audience
- This is where outside help comes in, such as commentaries, etc.

“Contextless” Parables

- There are some parables that appear without much context given
- In such cases, we must still identify the points of reference and the original audience
 - We can utilize the same steps as before

Ex.) The Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16)

- Points of Reference:
 - The landowners
 - The full-day workers
 - The one-hour workers
 - The rest of the details are for effect
- The original audience:
 - Who would have been ‘caught’ by a story like this?
 - The one who identified with the full-day worker
- The point:
 - God is gracious
 - The righteous should not begrudge God’s generosity
 - “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (v. 16)

The Parables of the Kingdom

- Many parables are those of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees
- However, many of the parables that deal with the nature of the Kingdom of God
 - “The kingdom of God is like...”
- The introduction should *not* be taken with the first element
 - I.e. “The kingdom of God is like” = “It is like this with the kingdom of God...”
 - The parable tells us something about the nature of the kingdom
 - *Not* just one of the points of reference
- Like the rest of the parables, they call for a response
 - Including often a call to discipleship
 - Ex. Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-20)
 - Jesus interprets the points of reference
 - But the point is the urgency of the hour
 - Often theme of these parables
- Most of these parables are addressed to the multitudes as potential disciples
- And they proclaim the already/not yet nature of the Kingdom
 - Judgment is pending
 - But Salvation is freely offered