

Quail Neighborhood Men's Bible Study

Session 4

What's the Deal with Parables?

Psalms 78:1-4 (NRSV)

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Parables were used by rabbis as teaching tools. Specifically, they were used to teach about God—His majesty, His powers, His actions. They presented heavenly truth in familiar earthly terms.

Proverbs 1:1-7 (NIV)

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

What are the characteristics of a proverb? _____

What are the characteristics of a parable? _____

Ezekiel 17:1-2 (NIV)

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable. ..."

Ezekiel 24:3

"Tell this rebellious house a parable and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ...'"

Ezekiel 20:49

Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! They are saying of me, 'Isn't he just telling parables?'"

Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 13:43

"He who has ears, let him hear."

Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8, 14:35

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Why does the Lord command Ezekiel to prophesy in parables? _____

What does it mean to "have ears to hear"? _____

Notes About the Parables of Jesus

(From *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* by Brad H. Young)

Jesus was a Jew. His parables are a teaching form that was used in Judaic teaching both before and after His time. Both the parables of Jesus and the parables of the rabbis are Jewish *haggadah*, which is storytelling with a message.

Characteristics of haggadah:

- Often entertaining, even captivating—a story, rather than a sermon
- Focuses on the heart (emotions) and the imagination, rather than the intellect
- Reaches people on all levels, from the untutored to those who are highly educated
- Proclaims a powerful message about God
- Demands a decision

“If your desire is to know Him who spoke and the world came into being, then study Haggadah and from this study you will know Him who spoke the world into being and you will cleave to His ways.” So say the rabbis about haggadah.

A brief synopsis of some of Brad Young’s conclusions based on his study of rabbinic and Gospel parables:

All parables fall within the realm of haggadah, even though haggadah encompasses much more than parables. The rabbinic parable describes the relationship between God and his people. The theological significance ... must be fully appreciated.

A parable is an artistic representation. It is a picture of life. Dramatic portrayals within parables are the common characteristics of both rabbinic and Gospel texts. The parables of Jesus and those of the rabbis have much in common. As haggadah they tell a story about God and invite their listeners to cleave to his ways.

The purpose of a parable (of a rabbi or of Jesus) is to teach—not to conceal a message (though many scholars have thought so).

The six parts of the classic parable form:

1. A *prolegomenon*—an introductory attention-getter, usually brief, something along the lines of “Let me tell you a story” or, often for Jesus, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...”
2. Introduction of the cast of characters. “A man had two sons” or as simple as “A man” or “A farmer”
3. The plot of the story. “A farmer went out to sow his seed, and he did...” This is the action that sets the scene, leading up to ...
4. A conflict—raising the question, “How did it turn out?”
5. Resolution of the conflict.
6. A call for a decision, and/or an application to life. It can be cryptic (“He who has ears to hear, let him hear”) or not (“So it is with ...”).

Extensions and variations:

1. More than one conflict. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, there are three players introduced, for a reason: the second plot, with its conflict between the father and the elder son. In another parable a servant was forgiven a huge debt, but did not forgive his fellow servant a small debt.
2. In the parable of the mustard seed and the one of the yeast, a well known natural process replaces the cast of characters and the plot, and there isn’t a conflict element. Nonetheless, the point is made.

The Unwilling Friend and the Unjust Judge

Luke 11:5-13

Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Is Jesus saying God is like the unwilling friend? _____

How does Jesus challenge the hearers of the story? _____

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Is Jesus saying God is like the unjust judge? _____

How does Jesus challenge the hearers of the story? _____

Paraphrasing Young's explanation:

The problem with prayer is God—not the words or the liturgy, but the way one understands the nature of God. Jesus employed humorous story parables to make his listeners redefine their view of God's character. These two parables use exaggerated characterizations of actions unlike God to make the listeners understand the divine nature. The exaggerated behavior of the friend and the judge is reversed in the divine character. Yet the disciples prayed as if God were like an untrustworthy friend or an evil judge, unconcerned about their needs. The parables challenge one's concept of God while they teach expectancy in prayer.

The exaggerated role reversal in these parables employs the Jewish principle of the light and the weighty. On the light side, if a person will respond to the persistent demands of a friend or an annoying complainer, how much more on the weighty side will God answer the prayers of his people? The early rabbinic literature customarily used the phrase, 'how much more,' at the transition point between the light side of the argument and the weighty. Such a friend or judge may be known in human behavior, but it is absurd to suggest, within the context of the Jewish view of God, that God would behave in such a manner. By giving a comical characterization of what God is not like, Jesus teaches his listeners what God is like. God is one's good and trusted friend. He is a righteous and conscientious judge who helps those who are in need.