

Examining the text & our hearts:

1. What are Parables?

- a. Parables are stories
 - a. They are stories/narratives about common everyday situations
 - a. “Jesus’ narrative texts...are all formally similar enough to deserve the label ‘parable,’ whether that word explicitly appears in the context of the passage or not.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, p. 23
 - b. However, the stories are turned upside down
 - c. The conclusion is not usually expected –e.g. “the last will be first, & the first last.” (Mt. 20:16)
 - d. They are stories with a message, a “punchline” e.g. You “Go and do the same.” (Lk. 10:37)
 - e. They often create more questions than answers
 - a. “Jesus intended his parables to both conceal and to reveal.” — Craig L. Blomberg
 - b. “The parables are meant to pop every circuit breaker in people’s minds. After all the yammer & opinions about how God should or shouldn’t run the world, getting people to just stand there with eyes wide open & their mouths shut would be a great step toward. This is what Jesus’ parables are designed to do.” Robert Farrah Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage & Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*.
 - c. “Jesus did not use the parables to explain everything to people’s satisfaction, but rather to call into question people’s previous understandings. In other words, the parables are trying to upset people’s existing ideas as well as provide them new ones.” Robert Farrah Capon, *Op. cit.*, p.
 - f. Stories remain with us more than mere teachings
 - a. Examples: Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son

2. The Purpose of the Parables

- a. They are stories primarily about Jesus and his kingdom
 - a. **Matt. 13:9-17** 9? Let anyone who has ears?listen. 10? Then the disciples?came up and asked him, “Why are you speaking to them in parables?” 11? He answered,?“Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know,?but it has not been given to them. 12? For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.? 13? That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see,?and hearing they do not listen or understand.? 14? Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says:
 - b. ‘You will listen and listen, but never understand; you will look and look, but never perceive. 15? For this people’s heart has grown callous; their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back— and I would heal them.’
 - c. **16?** “Blessed are your eyes?because they do see, and your ears because they do hear.? **17?** For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see the things you see but didn’t see them, to hear the things you hear but didn’t hear them.
 - d. “Jesus’ parables serve a larger and prophetic purpose within a comprehensive narrative scheme to engage people with God’s kingdom.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 34
 - e. “Jesus’ parables are handles for understanding his teaching on the kingdom.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 8
 - f. “Jesus’ parables are explicit illustrations and signs of the in-breaking kingdom of God, personally ushered in by his own ministry and message...” Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting Parables*, p. 67
 - g. “A? *parabolos*, ... is a form of metaphorical speech, drawing an analogy between an ordinary aspect of life and an aspect of God’s divine saving activity or dominion.... Jesus’ parables are always about what we call the kingdom or reign of God. In other words they are about God’s attempts to establish his kingdom, his saving reign (or rule) on earth as it is in heaven, and, in this case, doing it through the ministry of his Son.” Ben Witherington, <https://seedbed.com/why-jesus-spoke-so-much-in-parables-a-study-in-the-gospel-of-matthew-with-ben-witherington/>
 - a. This new reality is about new human relationships with Jesus as the king
 - b. They are about what life in the kingdom of God is like
 - c. They are mainly a non-direct form of speech
 - b. They create interest and deal with issues

- a. “Parables...were told to create interest, and various schemes are used to draw hearers in and compel dealing with the issues at hand... Parables elicit thought and require decision. Often they require the hearer/reader to pass judgment on the events of the story and then require him or her to make a similar judgment about religious matters.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 18
- c. They force people to think deeply and differently
 - a. “22 parables start with a question such as ‘Who from you [would do this] ...? Or ‘What do you think ...?’ Parables frequently cause a hearer to pass judgment on the events of the story [e.g. ‘Which one was a neighbor...?’ (Luke 10:36)] & then require a similar judgment [e.g. You ‘go & do the same’].” [*Parables* ,” in JB. Green (ed) *Dictionary of Jesus & the Gospels*, p. 594]
 - b. “Often the parables require a reversal in one’s thinking. The despised Samaritan is a neighbor; the tax collector, not the Pharisee is righteous.” [*Parables* ,” in JB. Green, *Op. cit.*, p. 594]
 - c. “The intent of parables is to force thought, usually new and unexpected thought, so as to gain insight and bring about response. A number of parables end with the statement “Let the person who has ears to hear hear” [“Let anyone who has ears listen”] or something similar, which is a call to move past superficial thinking, to discern, and to understand the impact of the parable.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 19
- d. They are meant to change behavior
 - a. “A parable is not told for its own purpose, but to serve a specific teaching purpose and to bring about change in people’s beliefs and actions... Parables seek to change behavior and create disciples, but they do so by telling about God and his kingdom, the new reality God seeks to establish on earth... They are about God, God’s kingdom, and God’s expectations for humans.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 20
- e. Many are not interpreted
 - a. The occasional explicit interpretations of parables in the Gospels are additional exceptions to Jesus’ usual practice, and they too are not to be taken as normative.... The very fact that Jesus left most of his parables without such interpretation proves that they are to be taken less elaborately. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* , pp. 17-18
- f. They teach spiritual truth and demand a response.
 - a. “Though parables can contain a variety of figures of speech ..., many times they are simply stories that attempt to teach spiritual truth (which is unknown to the hearers) by using a comparison with something known to the hearers. In general, parables usually advance a single idea, though there may be many parts and characters in a single parable and subordinate ideas may expand the main idea further. The beauty of using the parable as a teaching device is that it draws the listener into the story, elicits an evaluation, and demands a response.” (NET Bible note)

3. Principles or guidelines for interpretation

- a. “The interpretation of parables is not a scientific procedure, but *guidelines* [‘rules of thumb’] *can be offered* to enhance understanding & prevent abuse of the parables.” [*Parables* ,” in JB. Green, *Op. cit.*, pp. 597-8]
 - a. Read to hear and understand
 - a. “The primary stance in interpreting is the willingness to hear and respond appropriately, a point made specifically by the parable of the Sower, but even the willingness to hear does not guarantee objectivity and right hearing.... Parables are not lists of information; they are stories, but they may not be the stories we think they are.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 24
 - b. Read within the context of the culture of that time
 - a. “Stories create worlds. By reading a story we, at least temporarily, inhabit that world. If we bring too much of ourselves into that world, we reshape it and rearrange its landscape. But if we do that, we have created a world other than what the story portrays.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 24
 - b. “If we are after the intent of Jesus, we must seek to hear a parable as Jesus’ Palestinian hearers would have heard it. Any interpretation that does not breathe the air of the first century cannot be correct. That requires listening in a context not our own and presumes some familiarity with that context.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 25
 - c. “Note cultural or historical features in the parable that provide insight...E.g. the impact of the parable of the Pharisee &...tax collector is strengthened if one is aware that these 2 men probably went to the Temple at the time of the morning or evening atoning sacrifice.” [*Parables* ,” Green, *Op. cit.*, p. 598]
- c. Should they be allegorized?
 - a. What is an allegory?
 - a. A representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms – Webster Dictionary
 - b. In the past the parables were excessively allegorized
 - a. “Throughout the history of the church, most Christians interpreted the parables as allegories. That is, interpreters assumed that many of the individual characters or objects in the parables stood for something other than themselves...” Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 15
 - c. Parables may be allegorical, some more, some less

- a. "Tremendous effort has been expended trying to distinguish parable and allegory, but in the end we must admit that the effort is a complete failure, despite the gallons of ink expended... Parables are allegorical, some more so than others... However, the allegorical features of parables do not give license to allegorize. The *practice of turning parables into allegories* that Jesus never intended *must be resisted at every point*." Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, pp. 16-17
- b. "Nevertheless, the parables as they appear in the Gospels do have a few undeniably allegorical elements, but these are the exception and not the rule." Craig L. Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 17
- d. Every detail should not be allegorized
 - a. "Modern scholarship has rightly rejected allegorical interpretation in favor of an approach which sees each parable as making only one main point. Down through the centuries, the artificial and arbitrary nature of the elaborate type of allegorization ... became progressively clearer. A careful comparison of older expositors shows that they often did not agree on what each of the details in a given parable represented.... the example of the prodigal's robe, in addition to immortality it was interpreted as standing for sinlessness, spiritual gifts, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or the sanctity of the soul... Presumably the lesson to be learned is that the robe is not meant to be allegorized." Craig L. Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 16
 - b. "Augustine provided the classic example of ancient allegorizing with his interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37); the wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem, the heavenly city from which he has fallen; the thieves, the devil who deprives Adam of his immortality; the priest and Levite, the Old Testament Law which could save no one; the Samaritan who binds the man's wounds, Christ who forgives sin; the inn, the church; and the innkeeper, the apostle Paul!" Craig L. Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 31
- e. Understand the people they directed to, what is the context?
 - a. Large crowds i.e. parable of the Sower
 - b. Smaller groups (tax collectors & sinners with Pharisees & scribes) i.e. prodigal son
 - c. Those who can hear and those who cannot – "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"
 - a. "Jesus spoke in parables to distinguish between "anyone who has ears to hear" (Mk 4:9; that is, those with responsive hearts) and those who do not. He knew His parables would have opposite effects on those ready to listen and those not ready. He therefore implied an element of culpability in the audience (see Mt. 13:14). To those who have ears to hear, more revelation of the kingdom will be given, but to those who do not have ears to hear, even what revelation they have been given will be taken away, or will prove ineffective (Mk. 4:25)." The Apologetics Study Bible
- f. A Parable's interpretation should not contradict the Bible's explicit teaching
 - a. "If the [NT] author wrote a letter, we are to read it as a letter...if a parable, as a parable... Where the Bible suggests that words or narratives are being used symbolically, we should follow the suggestions of the Bible...? *In no case will a symbolic or figurative reading contradict any biblical teaching?* that derives from texts which are obviously intended to be? *taken in their plain ordinary sense* ." [James W. Sire, quoted in Dan Story,? *Defending Your Faith*, ?p. 83]
- g. Realize not all scholars agree
 - a. "It is understandable that not all scholars agree on how to interpret the parables. Should everything be allegorized or should only some things? How many points are there, one, two, three? Is it about the kingdom of God or not?" Robert Farrah Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage & Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*.
- h. Be willing to hear,
 - a. Go deeper, wrestle with the parable, meditate on it
 - b. Talk about it with others, ask questions.
 - c. How does this depict the kingdom of God?

4. Tools for Interpreting Parables – ask these questions

a. 1. What's the main point? 2. What was Jesus' main point?

- a. "The key to interpreting the parables is to remember that they are not extended allegories, but that they *tend to teach a single basic point* ." [RH. Stein, *Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, p. 149]
- b. "[1.] In the study of parables we should *seek the main point of the parable* & not press the details... [2.] The second basic rule for interpreting the parables seeks the meaning of its original author... [So,] *seek the meaning of the parable that Jesus intended* ." Of course... in the context of his entire teaching." [Robert H. Stein, *Op. cit.*, pp. 142-4]
- c. "At times in the search for the [main] basic point of the parable, [these] questions prove helpful: Who are the two main characters? What comes at the end? Who is involved in a dialogue? To whom or what is the most space devoted?... [Then] we must seek those implications most relevant to us & act on them." [Robert H. Stein, *Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, p. 149]

b. How many main characters? How many points ~ number of characters

- a. (e.g. Father & 2 sons)
- b. "The main characters of a parable will probably be the most common candidates for...interpretation, & the main points of the parable will most likely be associated with these [major] characters." [Craig Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 166]
- c. The triadic [3 characters] structure of most of Jesus' narrative parables suggests that most parables may make 3 points, though some will make only one or two." [Craig Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 166]
- d. Many 3-person parables "include an authority figure & two contrasting subordinates. The authority figure, usually a king, father, or master, typically acts as the judge between two subordinates, who... exhibit contrasting behavior [e.g. good slave vs. wicked slave.]" [Craig Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 171]

- e. “To ask the question, ‘*Which [one or] two of these three characters [is/are] most important ?*’ is helpful in drawing our attention to the particular character(s) Jesus...wanted to emphasize.” [Robert H. Stein, *Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, p. 147]
- c. **How did Jesus conclude this parable? Is there a ‘punchline’?**
- a. “The crucial matter is placed at the end of the parables, & correspondingly, ‘the rule of end stress’ requires that the interpretation focus on the end of the parable.” [JB. Green, *Op. cit.*, p. 594]
- b. “The crucial matter of parables is usually at the end, which functions something like the punch line of a joke. Interpreters legitimately invoke “the rule of end stress” which requires that interpretations focus on the end of the parables.” Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Op. cit.*, p. 19
- d. **What does this tell us about God’s kingdom?**
- a. “All the parables impinge on Jesus’ understanding of the ‘kingdom of God,’ whether that expression explicitly appears in the context of any given passage or not. For Jesus, the ‘kingdom’ referred more to a power than to a place, more to a rule or reign than to a realm.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* , p. 23
- e. **What do the main characters represent/symbolize?**
- a. “The main characters (and often only the main characters) in Jesus’ parables do ‘stand for something.’ They have symbolic referents in the spiritual realm. This is part of what the term ‘allegory’ has regularly meant. If it seems too misleading to call the parables allegorical, and to safeguard against the overly elaborate and anachronistic allegorizing of other eras, we may label them ‘symbolic’ instead.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 24
- f. **What question does this Parable answer?**
- a. “A helpful way to determine the function of a parable is to ask *what question it seeks to answer* . Sometimes the question is explicit...e.g. ‘Who is my neighbor?’ (Lk. 10:29). At other times the question is implicit... e.g. ‘Is it easy to be a disciple?’ [“*Parables* ,” in JB. Green, *Op. cit.*, p. 598]
- g. **What’s the message for us today? (implications/applications)**
- a. “The process of contemporizing the parables remains crucial. Some portion of a sermon on a parable should remain in narrative form, even if it is only via the reading of that text of Scripture. But in most cases, it will be both easy and helpful to include some modern equivalent to the biblical story in an introduction, in one or more illustrations interspersed within the body, or in a conclusion to the message.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Op. cit.*, pp. 24-25
5. Conclusion
- a. We are challenged to have “ears to hear” that means:
- a. Go deeper, wrestle with the parable, meditate on it
- b. Be prepared to be confused.
- c. Talk about it with others, ask questions.
- d. Don’t ignore the parable or else the meaning will be concealed from you
- e. How does this parable depict the kingdom of God?