

STUDY 7

Parables of the Kingdom

1. How would you answer someone who said that parables are easy-to-understand picture stories to make Jesus' message clear to all?

It is true that some of the parables are easier to understand than others and Jesus did use picture illustrations in His teaching. The picture of the wise man building his house on a rock and the foolish man building his house on sand, for example, is straight-forward. But often with Jesus' teaching there are layers of meaning. There is more to be learned than is obvious on the surface.

Jesus had a unique challenge. He wanted to present His message of the Kingdom of God to the Jewish people, which of course implied that He was the King. The danger was that this would be misunderstood and that people would understand Him to be a political king - like His ancestor David - and attempt to crown Him to lead a rebellion against Rome. This was precisely what the Zealot party stood for.

So many of His parables are Jesus' way to *re-educate* people about what the kingdom was really all about. The *Parable of the Sower*, for example, illustrates the fact that entry into the kingdom is a matter of personal choice not compulsion. The gospel is an invitation as much as a summons. By teaching in parables, Jesus was giving people food for thought. Those whose hearts were open would (sometimes with a bit of extra explanation) be able to see what He was saying.

The *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (recorded by Luke) on the surface is a story about compassion. At a deeper level, it challenges people to think about 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus is saying it's broader than most people think. It also challenges the hearer to think about who can be included in the kingdom - which goes beyond narrow national boundaries. Digging deeper it shows the limitations of righteousness based on rule-keeping. The priest who passed by was indeed keeping the law of Moses by avoiding ceremonial defilement, but in terms of the higher law of love he fell short. The fact that it was a Samaritan who understood true neighbourliness would have been totally shocking to the original Jewish hearers.

To take another example, the *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares* (weeds) is about God allowing evil to persist in the world alongside good. Philosophers and thinkers have wrestled with the problem of evil in the world. For some it is a barrier to believing in God. It responds to the question that people often ask, "Why doesn't God do something about it?"; not with a simplistic answer but an assurance that there will be a day when God says "Enough!" History does not go round and round in circles. There will be an end.

The parables provide food for thought. Nourishment comes by meditation. Biblical meditation is not the emptying of the mind (as it is in some other religions), but rather a sustained focus on an aspect of truth with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will shed light. Parables, because they are visual and easy to remember, provide a valuable resource for reflection in those in-between times, when we are engaged in repetitive tasks such as hoeing the ground or sweeping the room or waiting for a bus. They are an inexhaustible reservoir of food for the soul.

2. What warning or admonition did Jesus give to His disciples after explaining this parable to them? How might we apply this to ourselves today?

He told them to “...**take heed what you hear**” and His following words show that what He had in mind was what they should *do* with it. If they took it to heart and acted on it, they would receive more understanding (“...**more will be given to you**”). But the person who treats it lightly and does not respond, will lose that which they had. There is no neutral position. To say, “Well that’s interesting!” but leave it at that is to refuse Jesus’ words.

So for us, today, when we hear the voice of Jesus through His word, we need to prayerfully consider how to act on it. We need to let God’s word shape our values, our ambitions, our motives, our aims and plans.

3. Why do you think Jesus described wealth as deceitful?

Wealth promises satisfaction and contentment. In fact, it tends to stimulate the desire for more. Wealth can provoke discontentment and coveting. ‘*Enough*’ is somehow never quite enough. So in that respect it is deceitful. A person whose focus is on material wealth has great difficulty experiencing kingdom blessings. *See later in Mark 10:17-29.*

Wealth for a citizen of the kingdom is not measured by how much we *get* but rather by how much we share and *give*. It is giving that brings joy not receiving or getting.

The Christian concept of wealth goes far beyond the material. Jesus talked about treasure in Heaven.

4. An assumption of the parable is that the sower is sowing good seed. What in gospel terms is good seed?

Good seed is a clear, balanced and bold presentation of the straightforward facts of the gospel: ‘..**that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...**’ (1 Corinthians 15:3-4); so repent, believe and receive forgiveness of sins. The gospel has to be proclaimed. *See Romans 10:14.* The Holy Spirit’s role is to convince hearers of their need for forgiveness and the truth of the gospel. It does not have to be *proved* by clever reasoning. To those ‘outside’ it appears to be foolishness, partly because of its simplicity and also because of its profound depth. This is indeed a paradox. The gospel, proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit is self-authenticating. It has its own inbuilt proof. It is something *revealed*. *See Romans 1:16-17.*

Although it is ultimately beyond man’s *full* understanding, there is a place for explaining the atonement and how it works. The truth is that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s solution to the need of mankind. God says it is *sufficient* and God says it is *effective*. So the appropriate response is to repent and believe.

So a person does not need to be a highly educated intellectual either to proclaim or to receive the gospel. Indeed those who are full of the wisdom of the world find it very difficult to receive. Jesus said in *Matthew 18:2-4*, “**Except you become as little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.**”

Once a person is a citizen of the kingdom, they can grow in understanding and God will give them

what they need. But being persuaded by clever reasoning is not the way into the kingdom. The way into the kingdom is through conviction by the Holy Spirit and a response of repentance and faith.

Why is this so? That is a question that only God can answer, but we can say three things. First, this makes it accessible to everyone not just 'clever people'. Second, only people with an appropriate humble attitude to Almighty God can receive it. Thirdly, man's capacity for logical thought and proof is not capable of proving or disproving the truth of the gospel. (There is a whole branch of philosophy called epistemology which has occupied the finest minds over many centuries, but this has been incapable of reaching absolute certainty.)

So to return to our initial answer, good seed is a clear, balanced and bold presentation of the straightforward facts of the gospel and we can perhaps add *proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit with love and compassion*.

5. Jesus is talking here about people *first* hearing the message of the kingdom. Do you think what He says applies to growing-up as a Christian and moving forward in fruitfulness? Can you support your answer from elsewhere in the Bible?

The need to “...*take heed what you hear*” (AV) or “...*consider carefully what you hear*” (NIV) in *Mark 4:24* is something that applies throughout our Christian lives. We should never get away from it. Learning to recognise God's voice and responding obediently is essential. Jesus said, “*My sheep listen to my voice...and they follow me*” (*John 10:27*).

The writer to the Hebrews wrote three times in his letter, “*Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...*” (*Hebrews 3:7, 3:15 and 4:7* quoting *Psalms 95:7*). The Hebrew Christians were in serious danger of going backwards to their old ways. The writer is warning them not to harden their hearts but to listen carefully and respond. In their case, the situation was as Jesus described in *Mark 4:17*. Being a Christian was difficult and they were being tempted to go back to an easier life. So the whole thrust of the letter is not to give up but to hold on and move forward. But, for the strong warning to have its effect they needed to listen carefully and take it to heart.

So the *Parable of the Sower* is hugely relevant to all of us in the Christian life whether first hearers of the gospel, new converts or experienced disciples. At every stage of the Christian life, to stay on track and keep moving forwards we need to listen carefully to the words of Jesus.

6. If after sharing the gospel with someone they are just not interested, what can you do?

The pattern of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament was to 'move on'. (*Matthew 10:14*). There is no need to take it personally. The temptation to try to prove the gospel should be resisted. It is generally best to back off for a while. Pray, show love, try again later. Share your testimony and, above all, live a life that speaks the gospel.