

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS SERIES

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Volume Three

by

Harold Fowler

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INTRODUCTION

IS THE SERMON IN PARABLES ONE UNITED WHOLE?

The Apostle Matthew has a recognizably editorial style which he puts to good use by collecting together ideas and facts that logically go together. For example, he collected together a series of fast-moving illustrations to convince his readers that Jesus possesses the divine credentials to tell men what God wants them to know (Mt. 8, 9). In these sections at least we noticed that Matthew was driven not so much by chronological considerations as by his interest in assembling those events whose unified weight would have considerable persuasive power. Since the divine inspiration of Matthew as Apostle guarantees for us the rightness of his procedure, we are not surprised whenever his method surfaces at any given point in his work.

Now, does Matthew's chapter 13 represent this procedure? Did he collect these parables into one place without regard to context? That is, is the material contained in 13:1-53 the account of one particular sermon preached by Jesus in its entirety on a given day in Galilee?

Farrar (*Life*, 254) doubts it, offering the following arguments against its fundamental unity:

It seems clear that our Lord did not on this occasion deliver all of those seven parables . . . which, from a certain resemblance in their subjects and consecutiveness in their teaching, are here grouped together by St. Matthew. (Footnote: For the scene of delivery at least changes in Matt. xiii. 34-36.) Seven parables (Footnote: . . . Eight, if we add Mark iv. 26-29. . .) delivered at once, and delivered without interpretation, to a promiscuous multitude which He was for the first time addressing in this form of teaching, would have only tended to bewilder, and distract. Indeed, the expression of St. Mark—"as they were able to hear it" (Mark iv. 33)—seems distinctly to imply a gradual and non-continuous course of teaching, which would have lost its value if it had given to the listeners more than they were able to remember and understand. We may rather conclude, from a comparison of St. Mark and St. Luke, that the teaching of this particular afternoon contained no other parables, except perhaps the simple and closely analogous ones of the grain of mustard-seed, and of the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear, . . .

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Farrar's explanation, and any others of which his may be considered typical, does not take adequate account of the following arguments urging the fundamental unity of this discourse:

1. Matthew intentionally gives the distinct impression that he is recording both the beginning (Mt. 13:1-3), and the conclusion (Mt. 13:53) to a single discourse given in its entirety at least in the presence and hearing of His close disciples. Mark (4:1-35) and at least Luke 8:4-18 confirm this impression. (See critical note on 13:53 at that place.)
2. Again, it is Matthew himself who clearly notes the change from public discourse to private explanations and continued teaching which obviously came later (Mt. 13:36). The only problem that arises is that affecting the intervening material, i.e., "Why Jesus Teaches by Parables" (Mt. 13:10-17). "The Explanation of the Sower Parable" (Mt. 13:18-23) and probably also "The Use of Parables" (Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18). However, Mark (4:10) reveals that this intervening material, which Matthew has inserted before the end of the public discourse, was the subject of Jesus' remarks made privately to the insiders. Thus it would seem that only this aforementioned material became the private property of these intimates, whereas the parables recorded immediately thereafter are but the continuation of the public sermon. This is true, because, after the story of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29), of the Tares (Mt. 13:24-30), of the Mustard Seed and that of the Leaven, Matthew gives the discourse a definite rounding off: "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables" (Mt. 13:34). Should any object that Matthew should have interjected an explanation or two out of order, when, as a matter of fact, they were given privately and later, let it be remembered that Mark and Luke do the same thing. Then, it is Mark who verifies this conclusion:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it, he did not speak to them without a parable. But privately he explained everything to his own disciples (Mk. 4:33f).

Has anyone inquired into the psychological value of our author's making the very kind of parenthetical insertion that we find here (Mt. 13:10-23)? Since Matthew is not merely providing his reader with a full transcript of the sermon anyway, and since the readers of Matthew's gospel, faced with a barrage of unexplained parables,

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would have some of the same difficulties as the original audience to Jesus' sermon, the Apostle comes to the aid of his readers. (After all, the circumstances occasioning the sermon in the first place are changed at the time of the Apostle's penning the Gospel.) So, he furnishes early in this chapter not only the answer to the anticipated question of why Jesus used this method. He also provides an interpreter's key for the reader's appreciation of the parables that were to follow. (Cf. Mk. 4:13) So the insertion itself made by Matthew is no argument against the integrity of the discourse given that day by Jesus.

Accordingly, besides the above-mentioned material inserted out of its chronological order for psychological effect, the private explanations included the key to the story of the Weeds, and perhaps also the illustrations of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price and the Dragnet.

3. Again it is Matthew, an eye-witness to the event, who specifies that, besides the recorded stories, many more were delivered on the same occasion (Mt. 13:3, 34, 53). This would allow for considerable variation in reporting the stories, which, surprisingly, is limited mainly to Mk. 4:21-29, and Lk. 8:16-18.
4. The mere observation that some of these parables are to be found elsewhere, reportedly given by Jesus in differing circumstances, does not militate against their repetition on this occasion, especially since their character is general and the need for their retelling widespread.
5. The objection that a barrage of parables without explanation, delivered before a heterogeneous audience would have tended only to confuse, losing its value on listeners unable to understand, entirely misses the real purpose behind Jesus' tactics. In fact, it is His declared intentions to hide truth from some by letting each person's trust in Jesus determine how much truth he would be willing to learn. (See the section on the "Purpose of Parables.")
6. Farrar objected that the expression "as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:33) implies a gradual, non-continuous course based upon the listeners' ability to understand, hence not one continuous sermon. However, Mark's full statement runs: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable." The "word," here, is the description of the Kingdom Jesus revealed. Thus Mark is affirming, not that Jesus doled out the spoonfuls of information gradually or on different occasions as people could swallow them,

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but the victorious truth that Jesus actually succeeded in speaking the soul-saving truth to those people in the measure to which they were actually to grasp it. All this, despite His total use of parables to communicate that truth! The proof that some really understood Jesus' parables is seen in His question of His intimates: "Have you understood all this?" (Mt. 13:51). No doubt much of their affirmative answer is based upon His private explanations, but it by no means follows that all of their understanding was so founded. Much clear, unparabolic information about the Kingdom had already been laid openly before the disciples (Mt. 4:23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 12:28; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 4:43; 8:1). Therefore, it was not impossible that some disciples who had studied His clear teaching could have seen the connections intended between His former lessons and the point of the parables. For these people, then, the parables really illustrated, rather than hid, truth. So Mark's statement affirms Jesus' success in communicating truth instantly to some hearers that day, notwithstanding the fact that many different listeners, for just as many varied reasons, were unable to grasp it.

Upon closer examination, then, there is nothing that would sustain the hypothesis of fundamental disunity in this discourse of Jesus, whereas a comparison of the related texts discloses enough satisfying proof of its unity to convince the objective reviewer.

So what if the message reported by Matthew is one cohesive unit? Many Bible students would never have thought to fragment this chapter anyway, having no preconceived notions about where Matthew must have derived his materials. It is important to see this discourse as a unit for several important reasons:

- (1) If this sermon be one continuous speech, uttered at a given historical juncture of events in Jesus' ministry, its mysterious character, half-revealing, half-hiding precious truth about the nature of the Messianic Kingdom of God, will provide further insight into the plans of God. It will become increasingly clearer to the believer why God has made the choices He has. (Cf. Mt. 11:25ff; 1 Co. 1:18-31)
- (2) If this message was deliberately organized by Jesus, more or less as the Evangelists report it, our own understanding of the Lord as a Master Teacher and strategist is sensibly increased. For if this strange assortment of seemingly disconnected stories be but one lecture, intended to keep pushy, uncomprehending

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curiosity seekers at bay, if its definitely low-key disclosures are intended to cool Zealots' nationalistic messianism, if its intriguing but unexplained stories are aimed at keeping the scholars guessing, then Matthew is absolutely right to consider the great sermon in parables as symptomatic of the growing crisis in Jesus' public relations, and right to introduce significant portions of that message at this place in his account. There were various ways Jesus maintained His "messianic reserve" (not "messianic secret," as Wilhelm Wrede would have it) such as forbidding demons and men not to inform others He was the Christ until after His resurrection (Cf. Mt. 8:4; 9:30; 16:20; 17:9) This sermon, if our reading of Mt. 13:34 and Mk. 4:34 is correct, is typical of Jesus' approach during this increasingly stormy period that would finally erupt in the crack and collapse of His popularity with the crowds. So, in this very sermon Jesus maintains His messianic reserve in the sense that He deftly defers divulging His own messianic plans in the presence of any but the most dedicated.

Consequently, we see that the question of the sermon's unity is not one of dubious, abstract value, but rather integral to a correct understanding of Jesus, His message and ministry.

ARE JESUS' "PARABLES" PARABLES?

That depends on what we think a "parable" is. If Jesus is using the word "parable" in harmony with modern technical definitions in mind, we will interpret His stories one way. On the other hand, if the word "parable" in the usage of Jesus and His contemporaries plays havoc with modern distinctions and rules, then we must get at the thinking behind His linguistic habits and let that be our guide to understanding His stories.

One must recognize that the ancients used the word "parable" to cover a rather kaleidoscopic range of figurative sayings. Further, since they did not make, nor necessarily respect, our nice distinctions between figures, it would lead to a mistaken interpretation of the ancient figures, were we to use modern rules governing the interpretation of what modern rhetoric would call a "parable." The Bible writers use the word "parable" (Greek: *parabole*) in the following senses:

1. A proverb (1 Kg. 4:32 [= 5:12 LXX]; Psa. 49:4 [= 48:5 LXX];

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- Prov. 1:6; Eccles. 12:9; Ezek. 16:44; 18:2; 12:22, 23)
2. A byword (Psa. 69:11 [= 68:12 LXX]; 2 Chron. 7:20; Jer. 24:9; Dt. 28:37)
 3. An allegory (Ezek. 17:2; 20:49 [= 21:5 LXX]; 24:3)
 4. Any poetic discourse composed of poetical imagery, sustained parallelisms, brief pointed sentences. (Nu. 23:7; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23; Mic. 2:4; Hab. 2:6; Isa. 14:4)
 5. Didactic history (Psa. 78:2 [= 77:2 LXX]; see on Mat. 13:34, 35)
Symbolic or typological events, things or persons. (Heb. 9:9)
 6. A figure of speech, a speaking figuratively (Heb. 11:19)
 7. A germ illustration or enigmatic speech not immediately clear (Cfr. the disciples' attitude: Mt. 15:15; Mk. 7:17)
 8. Of course, the familiar, classic one-point story form made famous by our Lord (although its employment was certainly known before His time, cfr. Hos. 12:10)

These broad uses of *parabolé* are really a part of the historical significance of the word, despite the contemporaneous existence of other Greek words which Jesus could have used to describe His figurative language: *allegoria* (verb: Gal. 4:24), *enigma* (Nu. 12:8; 21:27; Dt. 28:37; Prov. 1:6; Dan. 8:23), *probléma* (Psa. 48:5; 77:2; Dan. 8:23 Theod.; Hab. 2:6); *skoteinòn lógon* ("dark saying," Prov. 1:6); *paroimíai* ("proverbs," Prov. 26:7); *diégema* ("story," Dt. 28:37; Ezek. 17:2)

Therefore, in the light of the broad use of the word "parable" (*parabolé*), it should be no surprise if the Savior calls an indisputable allegory a "parable" instead of an "allegory." Consequently, as we seek to interpret this chapter, we will discover that sometimes a given illustration is strictly a parable with one point and no more, whereas another story is really a short allegory with numerous points of comparison. So, rather than accuse Jesus of abusing the word "parable," we revise our definition! The "correct" definition of "parable" is the meaning the author intended to convey when he used the word. So, if Jesus calls an allegory a "parable," we must not use modern rules governing parables only to ruin the true interpretation of His allegory-parables! As in other areas of good Bible interpretation, so also here: the author's definitions and explanations of his language are sufficient and final. Some of Jesus' parables, as He explains them, are clearly allegories.

PARABLES AND ALLEGORIES COMPARED

A "parable" in the modern sense differs from the "allegory" in several important particulars. The parable, strictly speaking, is an illustration or a story or an event taken from everyday life, known to all, used to clarify or explain something else not understood by all, with which it can be compared. The parable generally portrays one fundamental point of comparison, and all the details serve only to make this point clear, not being intended to represent separate features of the thing the parable is supposed to illustrate. Obviously, then, the purpose of a parable, in this stricter sense, is to explain something under discussion with a view to making it clear to everyone.

The "allegory," strictly speaking, also involves one great underlying idea (like "the nature of the Kingdom of God," "the tragic folly of rejecting God's messengers," etc.). But, contrary to parables in the strict sense of the word, in allegories the various characters, events, actions and other details that interact to move the plot forward to its natural climax, actually signify, or refer to, the separate parts of the things being described by the allegory. Further, the various parts of the allegory have meaning and must be interpreted. Another interesting feature of the allegory that vitally affects our understanding of Matthew 13 and other "parables" of Jesus, is the fact that quite often allegories are intended to mask, or even deliberately hide, the meaning of the comparison, so that only the initiates, the insiders, the intimate members of a given group should recognize what is meant.

Our task, then, will not be easy, since Jesus Himself uses the word "parable" rather loosely. It may well be that, in those instances where the Lord has not furnished the interpretation, we may need to treat His stories as strictly one-point parables, lest we commit another common error in Biblical interpretation of seeing meaning in details that even the Lord Himself knew nothing about. But, regarding those for which He does provide the meaning, He obviously treats them as allegories, so detailed is His explanation of each part of the stories. (Cf. e.g. the Parable of the Sower; the Parable of the Weeds) Yet even here some of the temptingly interesting details of Jesus' original allegory are discarded in His explanation as apparently meaningless or unimportant, a fact that warns against fanciful invention of meaning for insignificant details even in allegories. As the history of exegesis would amply show, the decision just which details in Jesus' parables are to be regarded as significant, and which meaningless, will not be

easy. In fact, in some cases it will be impossible. Our dilemma is dramatized in Jesus' question: "Do you not understand this parable (of the sower)? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13). It may be granted that His questions mean that the truth contained in the Parable of the Sower is fundamental to a secure grasp of everything else Jesus has to say by means of the other parables, i.e., "The reception of the message of the Kingdom depends upon the condition of one's heart and the attention he gives to the message." Still, one cannot avoid the more than probable conclusion that He intended to furnish us with a key to the interpretation of them all. (See Trench, *Notes*, 16.) If so, the key Jesus provides in the examples He gives is frankly allegorical, since He explains practically every detail in the stories of the sower and of the weeds. (See also the triad of parables in Mt. 21:23—22:14 and parallels.)

SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING JESUS' PARABLES

1. Approach the parables, not with a self-admiring ingenuity that would seek to discover meaning in all the minutest fibers of the narrative, but with the conviction that God's purpose for all Scripture, including the parables, is to make men holy through the truth, not to encourage them to exercise the vaunted ability of dubious value to discover hidden meanings where there were none intended.
2. Determine the one central truth which the parable intends to proclaim.
 - a. How much of the parable did Jesus Himself interpret? He may have pointed this idea out.
 - b. On what occasion is the parable introduced? This may indicate the truth it is intended to illustrate.
 - c. With what explanations is the parable introduced?
 - d. How is the parable applied in its own context?
 - e. Is there a similar parable in the context illustrating the same central point?
 - f. How do the historical and cultural circumstances indicated in the story help to underline the central thought being illustrated?
 - g. Having determined the major point essential to the comparison, all the different parts will appear in their true perspective: either as mere embellishments essential to complete the story as a story,

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or else in their true light as essential points upon which the major comparison is based. These latter must be interpreted; the former, no. Any minor points of comparison must be handled with reserve, i.e., with a rigorous hesitation to accept any minor details in the story unless they really function as part of the comparison. The very lack of connection between any details and the principle lesson of the parable is the clearest indication that they were not intended to be interpreted at all. Any interpretation inconsistent with the subject to be illustrated must be rejected.

3. Parables must not be used to furnish the basis for doctrinal argument, because their purpose is primarily to illustrate truth. They do not prove or demonstrate it. The basis of doctrine lies in the clear, unfigurative expositions of truth elsewhere in Scripture. The function of parables is to illustrate these doctrines to intimate disciples of Jesus, so the illustrations themselves are valid only insofar as they perform this function. Doctrine does not lean on parables; parables lean on doctrine. No detail may be pressed which indisputably violates clear moral principles spelled out elsewhere. No interpretation of a parable can be broader than the nature of the thing it is supposed to illustrate: a parable is not intended to say things greater than, or other than, the thing it is trying to describe. The actual extent of meaning must be determined by the author's intent and by the nature of the subject, not only on the basis of the parable considered by itself.
4. The interpretation of parables must be an easy one, a natural one, not violent or forced. This is especially true and possible for moderns with full access to the completed revelation in the broad outlines of God's plans. Since these doctrines have now been revealed in clear, unparabolic language, the parables which were once such tough going for the early disciples should require little special genius to discover their meaning. To this end, it will be found that the analogies will be real, never arbitrary.
5. No one parable tells the whole story. A parable, by its nature, is a figure of speech called *synecdoche*, by which its author indicates the whole of something by mentioning a significant part of it, or vice versa, the general for the particular and vice versa, the definite for the indefinite, etc. This is most certainly the case with Jesus' parables in Mt. 13, since no one parable exhausts the full expression or meaning of the Kingdom of God. Each parable is but a facet of a lovely diamond. Each facet is fully part of the diamond,

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but in no sense does it alone express all of the gem's beauty. This should be easy to see, since Jesus is quite obviously saying, "The Kingdom of God is like this and this and this and this." How COULD God's reign be similar to so many diverse things, if but one of them exhausted the full meaning of the whole Kingdom? No interpretation of a given parable, therefore, must be permitted to override or contradict the lessons taught by other parables.

6. Parables almost invariably are true to human experience, if not already oblique allusions to historical incidents. But details, missing from the narration, must not be supplied by the interpreter's imagination, because the parable's author selected just so many details as were pertinent to HIS purpose. To invent details, or add them out of historical research, when the author himself did not consider them necessary to the communication of his ideas, is not only to ruin his original, but become the presumptuous editor-author of a different story without any divine sanction.
7. The correct interpretation of a parable has been discovered if it leaves none of the main features of the story unexplained.
8. A clear understanding of the time-period to which many of the parables refer is necessary for their proper interpretation. Most of them are a description of times between the two comings of Christ. Others have as their objective the illustration of certain features of future eschatological events and the Christian's response to them: preparation for final judgment, the unexpectedness of the time, the exhortation to be faithful, the finality of ultimate separations, etc. Some even depict such short-range eschatological truth as the destruction of Jerusalem and the transfer of the privileges of the Kingdom from Jews to the Gentiles. In this sense, some are prophetic, and as such, would then be treated with the same rules that govern the proper understanding of prophecies, especially seeing their significance in the light of their undoubted fulfillment.