

# PREACHING PARABLES

When reading various books or hearing sermons on various parables, you may well encounter some interesting commentary. What is your response to the following comments on the parable of . . .

The Prodigal Son:

- This is an unusual story since it is about a family that has only two sons. Most Jewish families were large, and there were many sons.
- We are not told all the details of what happened when he packed up to leave, but it must have been traumatic to the whole family.
- For the son to ask for an inheritance was comparable to a death wish upon his father -- "Dad, I wish you were dead."
- The younger son was asking for a favor since the father had no legal obligation to grant such a request. However, the father saw no purpose in hindering his son's determination to leave.
- The father was heart-broken over the son's leaving.
- This young man's words must have thrust a dagger in his father's heart.
- Surely dad tried to persuade him not to leave, no less step onto that road. Nevertheless, his son continued to ask.
- The father never considered his son prodigal. The word is never used in the passage.
- The son had no idea that a famine was coming and made no provision for such a day.
- He spent his money with and on his friends, but when the famine struck, he also lost those friends.
- The prodigal son understood it was his own fault that he found himself in this situation.
- One night he began pondering his options. Home did not look so bad anymore.
- Dad was probably looking down that road daily, hoping his son would come back home.
- The father quickly instructs the servants to prepare a banquet of food and sends them out to invite others to join him for a quickly planned party.
- There was probably tension and conflict between these two sons over the years.
- The second son, who was older, was the worker of the family.
- The older son has been working all day, comes back from the field at the end of the day, hears the sound of music and dancing. A crowd of neighbors and friends had assembled.

It is not uncommon to read and hear such commentary from various Bible teachers and writers. I have seen such commentary appear more and more, and there seems to be a mindset that underlies this handling of biblical parables.

Too often I have heard and read teachers and preachers approach the Bible's parables as if the account was a true story. Seemingly, more and more, biblical parables are approached as if they are true, and not

fictional accounts. The primary impetus for such a handling may be coming from an attempt to contemporize them for a modern audience. Whether or not one or more of the above statements on "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" would be fair-minded or "pushing-it," such is not at issue, at least at this time. Whether it is exegesis or eisegesis is yet another appropriate concern, but at another time. That concern may become moot if we address the cause underlying such commentary.

What underlies such comments, as those above on "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," or the many other similar comments on the other parables, belies an approach to the parables that is methodologically faulty. What needs to be clearly and consciously "remembered," called-up throughout the study of the parables, is the very nature of parables. The parable is not a "real" or historical story. It is fiction. It is fabricated. It is not "fabricated," as in a "lie." But "fabricated" in that it is woven with strings of one's own choice, to form a story that accomplishes one's own point.

There indeed may have been a father who had two sons, and/or whose sons were at odds with each other, and who experienced such an upsetting family situation. Whether or not there was an actual historical parallel that stood behind this parable, or that such a parallel was or was not known by the audience, is not justification to handle a parable as historical. Whether or not there are commonly known allusions within a parable that were well known to the audience (creditors, debtors, servants, injustice, muggings, lepers, masters, long journeys, wayward sons, etc.) is not reason enough to treat a parable as factual or historical. The very nature or essence of a parable is lost. The very effectiveness and impact of the parable depend on its fictional nature.

It should also be said that such an approach, as outlined above with the prodigal son, also lacks methodological or interpretive controls. Where do you stop? What are the limits to inferring or including unstated details or comments? Where is a teacher, writer, or preacher out of bounds when he includes what was not included? Is one's sanctified imagination the limit? For instance, whoever said that asking for one's inheritance is saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead!?" Nevertheless, I have heard and read that specific comment over and over in recent days. After one writer states it, others pick up on it, for whatever reasons that compromise appropriate biblical interpretation.

Just because an inheritance, by definition, comes upon the death of another, does not mean that in asking another for his or her inheritance early means that he or she wishes another were dead. It does mean that I do not have the resources I think I need to get on my wayward path and that I do not want to wait for what I need to get on that road. Nevertheless, the lack of interpretive controls leaves one up to all kinds of commentary that may or may not be fair-minded, "pushing it," or "out-in-left-field."

The parable of the prodigal son is not about the son wishing his father was dead and securing dad's money now, so that he could immediately get on the road of rebellion, in possession of the necessary resources needed to make that road work for him. That may well be true of many who step onto that road, and that may not be a completely unfair way to characterize rebels. However, it misses the nature and essence of what a parable is in essence and is designed to effectively accomplish.

The nature and essence of a parable are that it is a fabricated story. That is foundational to handling parables. Sometimes the included details can be identified with real life. At other times it can move out of any real-life experience. At times a parable is in the realm of reality. At other times it moves into the realm of fantasy (cp. Judges 9:8-15 — Trees Chose A King; Matthew 13:31 - Mustard Seed Becomes A Tree).

A parable is a fictional, fabricated story so that the pieces or details can be purposefully, directionally, effectively chosen. Parables give one the ability to construct the story as he desires, with the details that inextricably lead to the point or points that the parable builder wants to unmistakably make. Whether or not there is one point that is being made, that point is bounded by the selected events or statements preceding and/or following the parable (Luke 18:1 — “To this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint.”).

What is noteworthy and operative in a parable is that the author can include the details he desires! You can construct the story with one man or woman, two characters, or three or more characters or groups. The builder can include a crisis, a reasonable response, or a socially shocking and unexpected response. You can have any character say or do what you want him or her to say or do. You can construct a specifically worded response of a character, or of anyone who interacts with another one of the characters. You design it as you will, to accomplish what you desire! That is what marks the nature and essence of a parable.

That being said, that is why parables need not be expanded upon or contemporized by bringing into the story content that is not found in the parable, or that may not be fair-minded, relevant to the point, or even legitimate to its interpretation. Rather, take this approach when handling parables like "The Prodigal Son."

The Lord designed the parable of the Prodigal Son. He purposely chose to include two sons. He did not need to construct the story that way, but He did. The Lord obviously did not want to talk just about the actions of one son, but of two sons. He introduces two sons because two sons fulfill His purpose. By design, because it is fictitious, the Lord wants to speak about two sons, the father's two sons.

To further the story and the point the Lord wants to make, the Lord also chose to make the prodigal the younger son. He did not need to construct it that way. He did that for a reason because He did not need to design it that way since it is His story.

Now some parts of the story are part and parcel of what has to be there to make the story stick together. The story has a citizen who gave a job to the prodigal, hired servants who work for dad, and a single servant who responds accurately to the second son's question.

However, the Lord also includes in His story, by design:

- that fact that a famine rose in the land where the prodigal was
- the fact that the son went to a far country, that he ends up taking a job at a gentile farm that raises pigs

- that he was famished in that land
- no one stepped up to help him
- that dad's farm still had plenty
- that . . . . .

And the Lord also includes for us the prodigal's thinking and in doing that states that the prodigal "came to himself" because that is how the Lord wants to describe what was happening. Do all men on this road "come to themselves?" No, but the Lord has him do that because that is basic to the point the Lord wants to make.

And the Lord also writes out the prodigal's speech for us, and by design includes the words that make it honest and acceptable repentance. This is all by design. It is constructed this way so as to be able to make His point.

The Lord also wanted to construct the story in such a way that the parable spoke of desire and love and so He puts this into His story. "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, ran, fell, kissed." The Lord put those parts into His story on purpose.

The Lord also decided to stop the prodigal's speech midway and had the father chose three specific items to respond with, a robe, a ring, and shoes. However, the Lord also decided to make the robe, since it is His story, the best robe.

The Lord also wrote out dad's speech and chose to use the words of dead and alive, lost and found. Because, by design, he wanted to characterize what has just happened, in those words.

We could go on, but the point is that parables are fabricated stories, and the parts and pieces are chosen by design. Parables give the builder the opportunity to include or exclude what he wants, in order to make the point and points. The details included in a parable are not there because it is historical, or because the teller is even seeking to be accurate to real life. The details are there because the construction engineer is aiming at making specific points, on purpose, by design. It is the choice of the details that have been "chosen and woven into the story" which makes the point(s). It is those details, which Jesus has chosen to write into or to include, that drive the message or sermon.

Sometimes, a parable has several characters, and there is a single main point that encompasses all the characters. Sometimes a parable has multiple characters, and there are several main points (i.e. There are two prodigal sons, and the one is still at home because there are different ways to be "lost.>"). Sometimes it is the "speech" written by the story-teller which is the primary point. Sometimes it is the response of the various characters that make the point(s). Whatever, the builder of the story has chosen to include the details, write the words of the characters, include the responses, and/or set up the situation in which the characters are found.

Parables in form, style, and content are in essence no different from what we do when we devise a hypothetical story. We say,

“Let me give you a hypothetical situation. There are two guys taking a trip out to California, in an old jalopy of a car. Neither one has a lot of money, and they think they will be able to get enough jobs on the way out to just pay for their gas and food. . . . “

We are leading to a point, and have included the parts and details we want to include, details, circumstances, dialogue which will lead to that point we are going to make. You are constructing it in your mind in such a way so as not to give the listener an opportunity to challenge or reject the point you are about to make.

Sometimes, we even have to re-write the story as we are presenting it. We revise it mid-presentation because we realize that we left an opening for disagreeing or contending with the main point, that is going to be made. So we say, “Now, let’s also add in the fact that they have a car that has some serious mechanical issues.” We may do that because we realize that such a revision, by immediate mental construction, will help make our point. We are not as good as the Lord in our storytelling. Therefore, as we are telling our hypothetical story, we may realize that there may be a way, at the end, to avoid the designed point.

Or sometimes we have to revise the story after we are finished, and when we are challenged by the hearer. The hearer is mentally running ahead of us and at the end of our story, he says, "Gas is pretty cheap these days. They may well make it to where they are going with a lot less money and work." So we say, "Let's also say, then, that the car is a gas guzzler." We add that to the fabric of our story to disallow the hearer to come to the conclusion we are making.

The purpose of such hypothetical, fictional stories is to make a point the way we want to make the point. With fictional stories, we have the right to so construct the story in such a way as to make our point, and to make our point with clarity, or with persuasive force, or with the ability to establish a parallel with what we seek to address, or with all of the above. That is what makes a self-constructed story powerful, the ability to include the parts and pieces we want, and which do not take away from the point being made.

It is not that we could not make the point with a present-day real life story, or a well-known historical account. However, such accounts may not have the parts and pieces which need to be included to make the point that we want to make. Sometimes, real life stories include details that allow one to challenge the application we are seeking to make. However, if I am good at construction, and have thought it through, then a fictional, self-designed story can lead the listener to a powerful point and application. Sometimes, to keep the main point the main point, it means limiting the story to very few basic facts. Sometimes, it means including some very necessary facts. Nathan the prophet did that with David concerning Bathsheba. Nathan chose just enough basic facts to lead to only one conclusion.

Parables are fictitious constructs, "legoed" by the designer. Parables were built in such a way as to lead to a specific and effective conclusion. Even though those, to whom the parable was being directed, wanted to, and perhaps succeeded at avoiding the implications and application of the parable, the reality is that the point being made was mentally indisputable by the nature of the characters and/or details the Lord purposefully included. They may have been unwilling to give the story validity in their own lives, but the point being made is clearly established. They could not fail to intellectually understand the details and the point being made, though

they may well have refused to see themselves in it. It indeed would be “hidden” from the eyes of those who were willingly ignorant and who refused to see the clear truth that was so well-crafted by the Lord through parables. The design of the parable is what gave it its potential force and energy!