



PACE Class – February 3, 2019

Discussion Outline:

- What is a parable??
- Why did Jesus so often use a parable to open our minds to some part of God's truth?
- Explore two different ways of interpreting "the Sower".
- Examine what this parable means to us and how can we apply it in our lives today?

Simile, Parable and Allegory

- **SIMILE:** A simile directly compares two essentially unlike things, often in a phrase introduced by like or as. As a result of this comparison, surprising new meanings and characteristics are ascribed to the object of the comparison. Examples: *She had a mind like a steel trap. His hair was black as midnight. The Pharisees were like blind guides.*
- **PARABLE:** A parable is a story, often brief, meant to convey a moral or religious point that is not explicitly stated in the story itself. The individual characters and elements in the story do not have special meanings in and of themselves. The parable is intended to be understood as a whole and to convey a single message.
- **ALLEGORY:** In an allegory characters and events are given symbolic meanings. For example, in a story about animals a monkey might represent people who are playful, a snake might stand for people who are evil or cunning, or a turtle may depict people who are slow. No matter what happens in the plot of the story itself, embedded comparisons to the various characters in the story are already present and obvious.

Why Parables?

- Greek word is *παραβολή (parabolē)*, meaning "comparison, illustration, analogy."
- Comparisons and stories – two of the oldest teaching techniques
- Jesus uses parables intentionally to turn people's understanding of the Kingdom upside down!

As far as the Gospels are concerned, the word parable only occurs in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Interesting that none of the parables found in the Synoptic Gospels appear in the Gospel of John.

Most teachers would use a comparison to help students understand the concept. For example, a science teacher might compare the structure of an atom and its electrons to planets orbiting around the sun. Jesus uses parables for another reason – he is not trying to explain things to people's satisfaction. He is calling their attention to the errors in their previous explanations and understandings about the Kingdom of God.

A great example is found in Luke 18 9:14 where Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector:

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18)

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”



Illustration for *The Life and Lessons of Our Lord* by John Cumming (John F Shaw, c 1890)

Here we find Jesus addressing a group of people who are smugly content and confident that they are upstanding citizens – they are convinced that anyone not exactly like themselves has no chance of making it into God’s Kingdom.

Tax collectors, because of their association with the hated Romans, were seen as traitors to Israel and were loathed and treated as outcasts.

Note what an insulting story it is to the Pharisees! How small the chances are that they will understand its point. Imagine the scene – how would you have reacted if you were one of the Pharisees? Jesus is not the least bit interested in their wonderful lists of moral and religious accomplishments.

A traditional parable is a story with a point. The objective is to make a bewildered person say, “Ah! Now I understand!” Do you think the Pharisees listening to Jesus on this day had an epiphany – did they say “Thank you Jesus for clarifying my understanding and showing me the error of my way??”

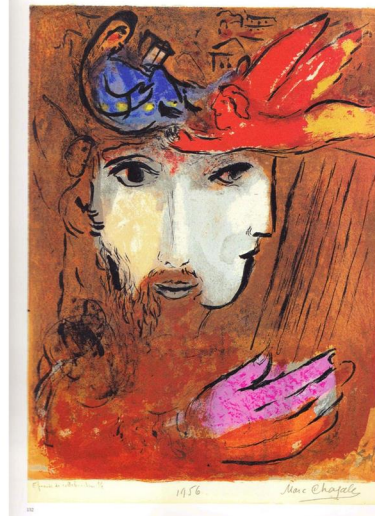
You can see that Jesus is not using the parable as a traditional teaching technique to provide them with an explanation; he is intentionally popping every circuit breaker in their minds!

We can find parables in the Old Testament too; let’s look at an example:

David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12)

1 and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." 5 Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; 6 he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

- 7 Nathan said to David, "**You are the man!**"



Marc Chagall, David and Bathsheba - 1956

Nathan's answer comes like a lightning bolt out of the blue – "You are the man". This is certainly a parable used to open a king's eyes.

We find another famous parable in Isaiah 5: 1-7 in the Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard.

We can see that prophets and teachers of old often used parables to get their message across. When Jesus used parables, he was using a method which the prophets had long before employed effectively.

Parable of the Sower: First of the Parables



Matthew
Matt 13:1-23

Mark
Mark 4:1-20

Luke
Luke 8:4-15



Found in all three of the synoptic Gospels

By far, the largest concentration of the parables of the kingdom occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. One of the first things we'll notice is that the parable of the Sower gets star billing in all three of the synoptic gospels. All three of them introduce the Sower as the first in the collection of Jesus' parables. They also devote a disproportionate amount of space to it and to the comments that Jesus makes in connection with it. For the record, Matthew gives this parable 23 verses; Mark, 25; and Luke, 12.

It is interesting that all three Gospel writers chose this one first as a preface to Jesus' parables. One commentator I read wrote that a flag should go up in the minds of careful bible readers anytime the Gospels give such an across the board treatment to anything!

Although there are some subtle differences between the gospel stories, we'll concentrate our study on the story as told in the gospel of Matthew.

Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13)

- That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

In Palestine it was the custom for crowds to follow famous Rabbis wherever they went. In this case, Jesus is walking by the seaside and the crowd grew so great that he got on a boat with his disciples. It is easy to imagine the scene as Jesus gazed upon the great crowd; perhaps he was inspired by the sight of a farmer in the fields up from the seashore. The majority of the crowd would have earned their livelihood by farming.

It is easy to see why Jesus used a story like this in his teaching; everyone in the crowd could relate to the story.

The Different Kinds of Ground

- The Path (Wayside ground)



The Jewish historian Josephus describes an abundance and fertility in the land of Israel. He lavishes praise on Galilee in particular where he wrote "the land is so rich in soil and pasturage and produces such a variety of trees, that even the most indolent are tempted by these facilities to devote themselves to agriculture. In fact every inch of soil has been cultivated by the inhabitants; there is not a parcel of wasteland."

In the parable, four different kinds of ground are mentioned. First, there was the "path", or the wayside ground. In Palestine, the common ground was divided into long narrow strips which each man could cultivate as he wished. There was no fence or wall around the strips. These were narrow dividing ribbons were rights of way. Anyone could walk up and down them. The result was that they were beaten hard as pavement by the feet of passers-by. When any seed fell on them it might as well have fallen on the road; it had no chance of getting into the ground to take root.

The Different Kinds of Ground

- The Path (Wayside ground)
- Rocky ground



Second, there was the rocky ground. This does not mean ground that was full of stones. In Palestine there were many places where there was only a thin covering of earth over a shelf of limestone rock. It had no depth. If the seed fell there, it would sprout quickly; but the moisture and the nourishment it needed to withstand the heat of the sun were simply not there and it soon withered and died.

The Different Kinds of Ground

- The Path (Wayside ground)
- Rocky ground
- Thorny Ground



Third, there was the thorny ground. At first the dirt would look good enough. It is easy to make a garden look clean by simply turning over the soil. But if the weeds were allowed to go to seed, then the seeds are still there in that ground; and the weeds will always grow up more strongly than the good seeds. There is only one possible result – the good seed is choked out by the weeds.

The Different Kinds of Ground

- The Path (Wayside ground)
- Rocky ground
- Thorny ground
- Good ground



Fourth, there was the good ground. It was receptive enough to take the seed in it had depth to allow the seed to let down its roots and draw the nourishment and the moisture it needed; it was clean and free of weeds enough to give the seed a chance to grow.

In any field in Palestine, a man would find these different kinds of soil; everyone in the crowd that day would recognize at once the picture that Jesus was drawing in this parable.



Here is a contemporary view of the Sea of Galilee and you can see the fertile farmland nestled between a more arid region and rocky hills.

Let's look now at a couple ways of interpreting this parable.

The Word of God and the Mind of Man

- The traditional interpretation:
 - Wayside ground = a closed heart and mind.
 - Mental laziness
 - Mental arrogance
 - Mental fear

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.”

(Matthew 13:19)

There are two main interpretations of this parable. First, the “traditional” interpretation says that the parable means that the word of God is always good, but the outcome of it depends on the heart and mind of the listener. In this traditional interpretation, the different kinds of ground represent the different states of the hearts and minds of men. The wayside ground represents the shut mind. The listener’s mind is shut and the truth cannot gain entry. There might be several reasons for a closed mind:

- a. Mental laziness – some people are so lazy that they refuse to think. All they want to do is to be left alone. They don’t want to be challenged, they don’t like to be asked disturbing questions, because then they would have to think.
- b. Mental arrogance – this is the attitude of the man who thinks he knows everything already, that there is nothing else left to learn. This was the attitude of the Pharisees to Jesus; they didn’t want to hear anything he had to say because they thought they knew it all already. This is the attitude that begets intolerance and which shuts the mind to truth.
- c. Mental fear – also known as wishful thinking. Here a man closes his mind to what he does not wish to be true. In Psalm 53 we read “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Here he denies the existence of God, not because he is intellectually convinced that God does not exist, but because he does not want God to exist.

In Verse 19, Jesus explains the meaning of seed sown on the path: (Click / Read)

The Word of God and the Mind of Man

- The traditional interpretation:
 - Wayside ground = a closed heart and mind.
 - Rocky ground = shallow faith.
- Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37-39)

There is the rocky ground, representing those whose faith is shallow. As Christians and Methodists and good students of the Bible, it is always important for us to thing things out and to put them into perspective and context. If we don't, then whenever some storm comes into our lives or difficulties arise, our faith is likely to collapse.

The 10th chapter of Matthew is all about what it takes to be a disciple of Christ.
(click / read)

37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

William Barclay was a Scottish author, radio and television presenter, Church of Scotland minister and Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow. In his book about this parable, he tells a story about a man who wanted to become a Benedictine monk. The monks take the man in, give him his room and all the teaching and training that he required. But for one whole year they left the clothes he had worn in the world in his room. At any time during that year the man was free to take these clothes, put them on again, and walk out into the world. Only after that first year did they take his clothes away and leave him with nothing but his monk's habit. They wanted to make sure that the man understood the cost of becoming a monk and that he knew what he was getting into. Our Christian faith therefore must be deeply rooted.

The Word of God and the Mind of Man

- The traditional interpretation:
 - Wayside ground = a closed heart and mind.
 - Rocky ground = shallow faith.
 - Thorny ground = a life so crowded with other things that Christ gets crowded out.

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.”

(Matthew 13:22)

Then we have the thorny ground, representing a life that is so crowded with other things that Christ gets crowded out. It is possible to be so busy living that we do not think how we are living. It is possible to be so busy doing things that we forget the necessity of prayer, the importance of quietness, of devotion and study. In this parable is a warning to us that our life must not be so full of other things that we neglect what is really important. Have we all felt like this from time to time?

Jesus provides an explanation in versus 22: (click / read)

Here's a wonderful quote from William Barclay: *“The tragedy of life and of the world is not that men do not know God; the tragedy is that, knowing Him, they still insist on going their own way.”*

I think this topic is so important; let's take a closer look at the various reasons why we're so busy.

7 REASONS WHY WE ARE SO BUSY TODAY

1. Busyness as a badge of honor and trendy status symbol — or the glorification of busy — to show our importance, value, or self-worth in our fast-paced society
2. Busyness as job security — an outward sign of productivity and company loyalty
3. Busyness as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) — spending is shifting from buying things (“have it all”) to experiences (“do it all”), packing our calendars (and social media feeds with the “highlight reel of life”)
4. Busyness as a byproduct of the digital age — our 24/7 connected culture is blurring the line between life and work; promoting multitasking and never turning “off”
5. Busyness as a time filler — in the age of abundance of choice, we have infinite ways to fill time (online and off) instead of leaving idle moments as restorative white space
6. Busyness as necessity — working multiple jobs to make ends meet while also caring for children at home
7. Busyness as escapism — from idleness and slowing down to face the tough questions in life (e.g. Maybe past emotional pain or deep questions like, “What is the meaning of life?” or “What is my purpose?”)

I bet we all know people who retired after very busy careers; work-a-holics who spent much time away from family because of business travel, meetings etc. Now they're wondering where did all the time go... all the opportunities lost...

The Word of God and the Mind of Man

- The traditional interpretation:
 - Wayside ground = a closed heart and mind.
 - Rocky ground = shallow faith.
 - Thorny ground = a life so crowded with other things that Christ gets crowded out.
 - Good ground =
 - a good listener understands the word. (Matt 13:23)
 - a good listener accepts the word (Mark 4:20)
 - a good listener holds the word fast (Luke 8:15)

And finally we come to the 'good ground'. In each of the three Gospel accounts of this parable, Jesus provides an interpretation.

In Matthew it says that the good listener understands the word. That is to say, he does not merely listen, he bends his mind to ask, "what does this mean?"

In Mark we read that the good listener accepts the word. That means that he takes it right into his mind. To accept a thing in our mind means that we really possess it, that it has become part and parcel of our thought and in our life.

In Luke it says that the good listener holds the word fast. That means that he accepts the truth in such a way that he obeys it under all circumstances; we don't simply access it when it is convenient and discard it when it is inconvenient.

William Barclay goes on to say, if we accept this traditional interpretation of this parable, it means that if we bend our minds to find the meaning of the word of God, if we accept it in such a way that it becomes part and parcel of our very being, if we hold fast to it at all times, it will enable our lives to bring forth wonderful fruits.

Looking back at Matthew 13:8 "Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

Does this traditional interpretation of the parable make sense to you?

But is there another way to interpret this parable?

The necessary risk

- A more modern interpretation:
 - Jesus is speaking the parable mainly to the disciples to address their discouragement
 - The real meaning of the parable becomes:
 - *No matter how much seed may seem to be wasted, in the end a great harvest is sure.*
 - “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”
 - (Matt 13:8)

In this different way of interpreting the text, imagine that the parable is spoken mainly to the disciples to address their growing disillusionment and discouragement. To them Jesus was the most wonderful person in the world, who spoke with a wisdom and an authority they had never heard before. And yet, in spite of that, He was being met with growing hostility and it might have seemed to them that a great deal of His preaching was going for nothing. Looking at it this way, the meaning of the parable then becomes, no matter how much seed may seem to be wasted, in the end a great harvest is sure. So the real point of the parable lies entirely in the one verse from Matthew 13:8.

Now there is some great truth here. It is true that no farmer would refuse to sow his seed just because he knows that some of it will be wasted. He knows that even if some of the seeds never grow, nonetheless a harvest will result.

Two great lessons

1. We must never be discouraged even when nothing seems to be happening.
2. We must be prepared to take a risk.

*“Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.”*

(Ecclesiastes 11:40)



From this more modern interpretation, two great lessons emerge.

- 1) We must never be discouraged even when nothing seems to be happening. The parable teaches us that even if much effort seems to go for nothing, the harvest is sure.
- 2) We must be prepared to take a risk. Every time the farmer sows he takes a risk, for so many things can interfere with the harvest. The weather can be a huge factor; there are insects and other pests that can ruin a crop.

In the book of Ecclesiastes there is a wonderful verse on this essential risk:

*“Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.”*

If we wait for the perfect conditions, we will never act at all!

Barclay sums up the meaning of this interpretation as follows:

Start with what you have: don't wait for perfect conditions; risk everything for what you believe to be right, and surely in the end the harvest will come.

Key takeaway:

- Barclay sums up the meaning of this interpretation as follows:
 - *“Start with what you have: don’t wait for perfect conditions; risk everything for what you believe to be right, and surely in the end the harvest will come.”*

Click Dark slide – read excerpt from Don’s book about the mustard seed

Then click to final slide

Thank you!

- “The Parables of Jesus” – William Barclay
- “The Parables of the Kingdom” – Robert Farrar Capon
- “Parables of Jesus” – J. Ellsworth Kalas
- “The Oxford Bible Commentary”