

Session 8 - Figurative Language – Parables

Mark 4:3-8 The Parable of the Sower

³ “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ⁷ And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

Jesus taught His people many important lessons and concepts through the use of “parables.” A parable is a true-to-life short story that is designed to teach a “heavenly” truth. Notice that we say “true-to-life story,” and not “true story.” It uses truth in something that you are familiar with, such as a common earthly experience, to shed light on something that you are not familiar with, a heavenly mystery. By putting the familiar alongside the unfamiliar, Jesus was able to impart an earthly understanding of heavenly mysteries.

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word “*parabolē*” (παραβολή), which refers to placing one thing by the side of another, or comparing one thing with another. More directly, it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Most parables concern the kingdom of God, also referred to as the kingdom of heaven. This can be heaven, the church on earth, or the nation of Israel.

It is vitally important when dealing with parables to remember that the earthly side is a story, not a true event. The heavenly meaning is a truth; the earthly story is not. Parables can be easily misinterpreted, so they should *never* be relied upon as the main reason for your doctrine! Many cult doctrines are drawn from the Bible’s figurative language passages, which are then manipulated in to falsehood to prove an erroneous point.

There are three main standards for observing and interpreting parables. Let's call them the "Three C's" (in English) – Context, Content, and Consistency.

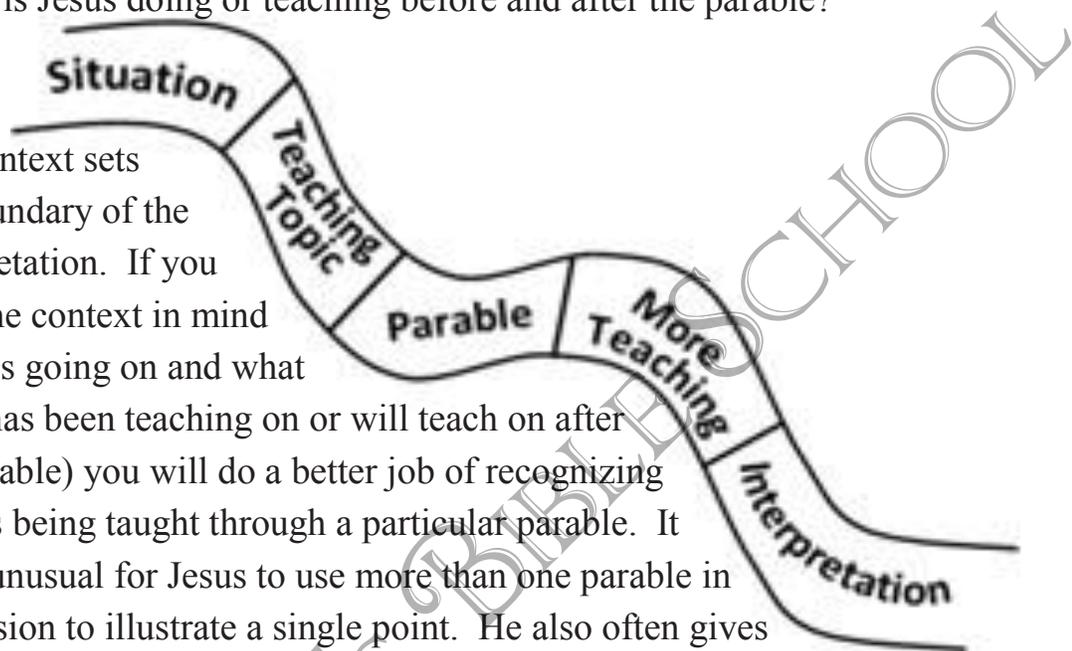
Context

When determining context, ask yourself questions like these:

“What is the occasion for telling the parable?”

“What is Jesus doing or teaching before and after the parable?”

The context sets the boundary of the interpretation. If you keep the context in mind (what is going on and what Jesus has been teaching on or will teach on after the parable) you will do a better job of recognizing what is being taught through a particular parable. It is not unusual for Jesus to use more than one parable in succession to illustrate a single point. He also often gives us an interpretation, so we don't have to guess!



Content

Content refers to the parable itself. Jesus is telling a story. What do His listeners know about the story? Keep in mind that these were “true-to-life” stories – believable examples of things that could actually happen, and that the listeners would be familiar with. Knowing what the listener knew and how the listener would understand the story is key to understanding the “heavenly mystery.”

Consider what elements of the story were well understood in their culture. What are the main elements of this story? The farmer? The soil? The seed? The sun? Also look for the *single main theme* in the parable. Is it sowing? Reaping? Weeding?

Consistency

In interpreting any part of the Bible, consistency is required. If Jesus interprets the parable for us, this is easy. If there is no interpretation given, make sure that yours is consistent with Jesus' other teachings.

Did you interpret symbols the same way that Jesus interpreted these same symbols in prior parables? This is known as "Expositional Constancy." If Jesus interpreted the symbol previously, then this is the constant interpretation until Jesus tells us differently.

Always look for supporting Scriptures. Ask yourself, "Is there another Scripture that supports my interpretation of the parable?"

Common Errors

It is easy to make errors when interpreting parables. Closely adhering to the "Three C's" can help you to avoid errors. A lack of context and consistency can easily lead to misinterpretation. Consider these short parables from the book of Matthew:

Matthew 13:31-33 ³¹ Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

³³ Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

Here is a common misinterpretation of these two parables:

The Christian church will take over the world and bring rest and comfort to all (verses 31-32). Though the church is starting small, it will penetrate and change the entire world (verse 33).

Does this interpretation consider context, content, and consistency? Ask yourself, "What was Jesus teaching before and after this teaching?" "What do His listeners know that we may not?" "Did I interpret the symbols the same as Jesus interpreted these symbols in prior parables?"

Determining the context requires us to look at the verses before and after the passage we are studying, so we will take a look at **Matthew 13:1-43**.

On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. ² And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

³ Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: “Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. ⁸ But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

¹⁰ And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ¹³ Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

*‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;*

¹⁵ For the hearts of this people have grown dull.

*Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,*

Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,

*Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.’*

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; ¹⁷ for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸ “Therefore hear the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one

comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.²⁰ But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.²² Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.²³ But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

²⁴ Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field;²⁵ but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.²⁶ But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared.²⁷ So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’²⁸ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’²⁹ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

³¹ Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field,³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

³³ Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

³⁴ All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them,³⁵ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“I will open My mouth in parables;

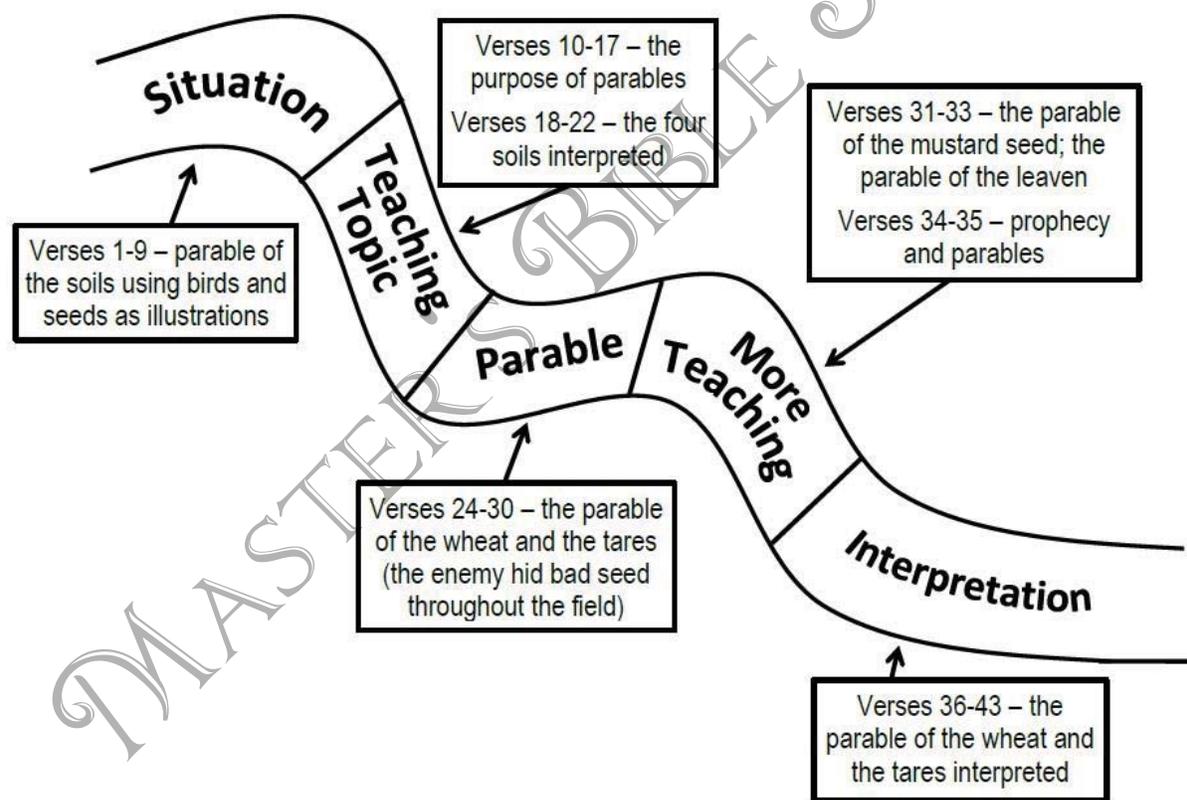
I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.”

³⁶ Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His

disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.”

³⁷ He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. ³⁹ The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. ⁴⁰ Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, ⁴² and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Let’s use the “parable path” from the previous page to help with this.



Context: In verses 1-9, the parable of the soils, Jesus talked about the different kinds of “soil.” Verses 10-17 explain the purpose of parables, and verses 18-20 offer Jesus’ interpretation of the four soils, the seeds, and the birds. Verses 24-30 give us the parable of the wheat and the tares, in which the enemy hid bad seed throughout a farmer’s field. Verses 31-33 give us

the parable of the mustard and the parable of the leaven. Verses 34 and 35 deal with the relationship between prophecy and parables, and in verses 36-43, Jesus interprets the parable of the wheat and the tares.

The parables before verses 31-33 deal with evil among the righteous; the parables after verses 31-33 deal with evil among the righteous. What do you think verses 31-33 deal with? Evil among the righteous! This is context!

Content: What do His listeners know that we may not? Certainly they all know that there is no such thing as a mustard tree. What else? “Three measures of meal” was often the amount used for bread baked as an offering. The Greek word used for “hid” (egkrypto) literally means “stealthily placed.” In other words, the woman was up to no good!

Consistency (Expositional Constancy): Did you interpret the symbols the same way that Jesus interpreted them in prior parables? Birds are identified as Satan in Matthew 13:19. Leaven is consistently a negative symbol in the Scriptures; in Luke 12:1 “leaven” is likened to hypocrisy; in 1 Corinthians 5:8 it is identified as malice and wickedness..

Here is a correct interpretation of Matthew 13:31-33:

The kingdom of heaven (on earth) will grow to be very large and there will be evil concealed within it.

Another common error in interpreting parables is to mistake a true story for a parable, or a parable for a true story. Consider the following from the book of Luke:

***Luke 16:19-31** ¹⁹ “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. ²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, ²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*

²⁴ “Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and

cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.’²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

Is this a true story? Or is it a parable? Is this passage consistent with Jesus’ parables? Look closely at the passages in Matthew 13 that we know to be parables, and you will see that Jesus never gave names to the characters in His parables. Instead, he used terms like “a certain man,” or “like a man.” In contrast, Luke 16:19-31 is about *Lazarus* and the rich man. Also, remember that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. If this is a parable, where is the earthly story? This is *not* a common earthly story that everyone had seen or experienced, but a glimpse into the unseen spiritual world. This is not a parable – it is a true story.

Because parables can be so difficult to interpret, they should never be the main reason for your doctrine!