

Then How Will You Understand All The Parables? by Ken LaPrade

Early on, when Jesus began “preaching the Gospel of God, saying, the time has arrived, and the Kingdom of God is near. Repent [change your mindset and purpose] and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:14-15), he clearly re-echoed the announcing of Good News (or the heralding of the Gospel) which had occurred more than seven centuries earlier.

The prophet Isaiah is known for having boldly proclaimed Good News: “Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of Good News; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of Good News, Lift it up and do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold his reward is with him, and his recompense before him (Isaiah 40:9-10). “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings Good News, who proclaims peace, who brings Good News of happiness, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’ The wide context of Isaiah, chapters 40-66, vividly picture an upcoming time of “new heavens and a new (recreated) earth” when God’s ultimate reign will be decisive, and his recompense (toward believers) will be richly provided.

This ancient preaching of Good News is also directly linked in Isaiah 61:1-2 to Jesus’ reading of the scroll of Isaiah (when in Nazareth - in Luke 4:16-21) After reading out loud from the scroll: “to proclaim Good News to the poor” and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”, Jesus announces that “today” that Scripture (from Isaiah) was being fulfilled. Later on, in this same chapter, Jesus reiterates his proposed mission in a concise way (Luke 4:43): “I [Jesus] must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God to other towns also, because I was sent for that purpose.”

So when it comes to beginning to fathom Jesus’ detailed teachings, including his dynamic parables (or comparative illustrations) in the four gospels, the focused context of Jesus’ devotion to herald the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of/from “Heaven” as used in Matthew- Mt. 4:17, 23) must be given well-studied consideration. As we have seen briefly already, Jesus keenly embraced what Isaiah had declared about announcing Good News concerning God’s (YHWH’s) eventual, ultimate “reign” on a thoroughly renewed earth (Isaiah 65:17-19, 2:1-5).

Jesus also alluded to and often quoted the book of Daniel, from which specific future Kingdom concepts and vocabulary are derived: “And in the days of those [future] kings the God of heaven will set up a Kingdom which shall never be destroyed ... and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). The projected leadership roles of “one like a son of man” and “the saints” (or holy ones) in managing (or governing) a never ending Kingdom are furthermore described in Daniel 7:13-14, 18, 22, and 27. The truth of Jesus’ urgent, repeated Gospel proclamation obviously indicates that he took this Jewish hope of revamped, future management of the whole earth - at face value! Jesus, never - for a moment, went with the flow of vague modern trends, using Kingdom notions lightly as a hazy symbol for the spread of church activities or for mere positive feelings “in the heart”. No, he and his followers clearly expected a drastic resolution to all human history through God’s Kingdom arriving on earth (when Jesus literally will return to earth) - as the cataclysmic “restoration of all things”, a reality formerly announced (at some level) by all of Israel’s genuine prophets: Mt. 5:5, 6:10, 19:27-, Luke 22:28-30, Acts 3:17-21.

Such a real, biblical hope for authentic believers does not at all entail an ethereal expectation of surviving death as shades, ghosts (or phantoms), but, it deeply considers the constant scriptural portrayal of the collective, unconscious condition of “Sheol” and the “sleep of the dead” (Ps. 6:5, 13:3, Eccl. 9:5-6, 10). This hope anticipates the definitive future time of folks being “awakened” from death and resurrected in a solid, tangible, bodily way: Dan. 12:2, John 5:28-29, 1st Cor. 15:20-23, Phil. 3:20-21. Meanwhile, the dead are at rest, totally asleep, though they are perfectly remembered by God while in Sheol until a future “renewal”, as implicit in Job’s plea in Job 14:13-14.

So, with Jesus’ overall Gospel context of hope firmly in mind, involving a proper response of changed focus (repentance) toward the heralding of the future arrival of God’s ultimate Reign (Kingdom), we can begin to grasp Jesus’ meaningful parables which comprise approximately one third of his recorded teachings and comments.

The parables span the gamut from simple (one point) analogies to more complex stories (with multiple points of comparison). The word “parable” basically means the placing or tossing of one idea alongside (or in parallel with) another idea. Parables appeal to the human mind’s readiness to compare and contrast concepts. Jesus often used them in very startling ways: like showing a landowner who surprisingly pays each worker the same salary, from those who worked a relatively short time to those who worked the full day (Mt. 19:29-20:16) to illustrate coming Kingdom truths. Thus he emphasized (about future rewards) a thoughtful Kingdom maxim: “The first will be last, and the last first.” It is important not to oversimplify these parables nor to add symbolic meanings not implied by Jesus himself. Context clues can also be quite relevant!

As an example of these few concerns mentioned above, let us briefly consider the famous illustrative story developed in Luke 15:11-32. The context (15:1-2) demonstrates that Jesus addresses a very mixed audience of eager listeners (from among tax-collectors and “sinners”) along with a grumbling crowd of Pharisees and scribes, who were complaining that Jesus welcomed sinners and even ate with them. Jesus prefaced his longer parable with two short analogies: a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to seek out one which is lost and a woman who diligently seeks for one lost coin (drachma) out of ten. In both cases (whether they might seem to be likely scenarios or not) a bunch of folks are invited to joyfully celebrate! Thus, the simple point is made: this is how angels in heaven will be extremely glad when even one sinner repents!

In the vivid context of these two striking analogies spoken to the mixed crowd of receptive and grumbling hearers, Jesus launches into a third parable, a major story. If one erroneously labels (or summarizes) this comparison as “the parable of the prodigal son”, he or she might totally miss the clear, detailed truth of three major characters who reflect three dynamic realities. The main mover, the compassionate father (with God’s loving heart of wisdom), watches and waits calmly while his errant younger son finally moves toward a well-reasoned, repentant action - and then calls for a great celebratory feast! Then the wise father also lovingly challenges the older brother, who tenaciously resists forgiving his brother. It is not hard to see, in light of context clues, how the loving father is like the longsuffering but joyous heavenly Father, the wayward younger son like the sinners and tax-collectors (15:1) who eventually repent (and thus are worthy of being celebrated), and the older brother

so like the hostile, grumbling scribes and Pharisees - who can still repent of self-righteous, unforgiving attitudes - if they so choose.

Notice that the trappings of celebration in this illustrative story of the compassionate father and his two sons: namely, the best clothes, the ring, and the fatted calf - are not specific symbols requiring allegorical interpretations at all. Nevertheless, other patterns evident in this parable certainly make excellent, logical teaching points: such as (1) the father's careful, uncontrolling respect for both sons - in terms of allowing their free will choices, (2) the repeated unwillingness (toward the story's end) of the older brother to acknowledge the younger as his own brother, despite the father's reminders, (3) how patiently watchful and eagerly ready the father always is - for initial steps of repentance from his younger son, etc. Anyway, perhaps these observations from Luke 15 illustrate how not to oversimplify nor to overcomplicate Jesus' intended meanings, while we carefully regard key context clues.

On top of these factors seen in Luke 15's context, it is significant that this parable (of the forgiving father and both of his sons) highlights the supreme importance of bona fide repentance (changed priorities and life direction) in order that one truly qualify to inherit the goal of God's Kingdom. Jesus clearly emphasized this requirement of repentant thinking to both tax-collectors and sinners, as well as to Pharisees and scribes.

With all these preliminary, contextual considerations in mind, we can now direct our attention to the primary parable of the sower. Interestingly, all three versions (at the end of relating the actual story) have Jesus saying, in essence, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him listen." Shortly after this statement, Jesus declared (in Mark 4:13) the following: "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" In the context of the Luke 8 sharing of this parable of the sower, it is seen (8:1-3) that Jesus, while accompanied by the twelve and certain women, travelled through towns and villages, proclaiming [heralding] the Good News of the Kingdom of God (an overall Gospel context which we have already observed). Therefore, it is no surprise that when beginning to explain this primary parable (of the sower), the sown seed is equated with "the word of the Kingdom" (Mt. 13:19). Consequently, it is easy to infer that when Mk. 4:14 speaks of the seed as "the word" (or message) and Lk. 8:11 refers to the seed as "the word of God" (or God's message), these phrases refer to the same thing stated in Matthew: the very specific "word of the Kingdom" which is emphasized constantly by Jesus in dozens of statements!

By the way, all three of the presentations of this key parable of the sower and the four categories of soil - contain some of Jesus' pointed comments about why he habitually offered these comparative illustrations. His explanatory comments here quote Isaiah 6:9 or 6:9-10. So, here is Jesus' stated reason for using parables, according to Matthew 13:10-17 - KNT:

His disciples came to him. "Why are you speaking to them in parables?" they asked.

"You've been given the gift of knowing the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" [or Kingdom of God - in Mk. and Lk.] he replied, "but they haven't been given it. Anyone who already has something will be

given more, and they will have plenty. But anyone who has nothing - even what they have will be taken away! That's why I speak to them in parables, so that they may look but not see, and hear but not understand or take it in. Isaiah's prophecy is coming true in them:

'You will listen and listen but not understand,

You will look but not see.

This people's heart has gone flabby and fat,

Their ears are muffled and dull,

Their eyes are darkened and shut;

In order that they won't see with their eyes

Or hear with their ears, or know in their heart,

Or turn back again for me to restore them.'

"But there's great news for your eyes: they can see! And for your ears: they can hear! I'm telling you the truth: many prophets and holy people longed to see what you see and didn't see it, and to hear what you hear and didn't hear it.

It becomes clear with such detailed explanations and warnings that a responsibility is squarely placed on hearers to truly make the effort to pay close attention; the blessings of spiritually perceiving genuine truth come to those who earnestly pursue God's agenda! From 1st Timothy 2:4 we can know that God has a keen desire that all humans be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Nevertheless, understanding biblical truth is not a casual reality which is accidentally achieved through lazy or flippant attitudes. As this parable (the sower and the four soils) demonstrates, a required "entering through the narrow gate" involves a concerted, arduous effort: Luke 13:24. Just as Jesus warned his students not to cast "pearls" (metaphorically referring to spiritual truths) before pigs, Jesus himself is shown to be careful to reserve in depth, communicated understanding for those who desire to stay faithful to God's ways.

Keep in mind, when perusing the details about the four soils, that literal "soil" is neutral in itself, but these "soils" are being compared to human dispositions and mindsets, for which humans have free will abilities - to make choices throughout life's potential obstacles.

All three presentations of Jesus' discourse (of the sower and the soils) reveal that a real adversary ("the evil one"/ "Satan"/ "the Devil" - Mt.13:19/ Mk.4:15/ Lk, 8:12) is at work when a hearer is of the first category of the wayside path. Luke indicates that the Devil takes away the message from their hearts so that they do not believe it in order to be saved. Matthew mentions that this is a result of folks failing to

understand the Kingdom message; thus the evil one snatches what has been sown in their hearts. Mark mentions that Satan (or the Accuser) seizes the sown word immediately. This first soil category certainly displays that an aggressive, deceitful enemy (not a fictional character nor a mere symbol for human weakness) actively fights to keep people blinded, so that they don't get to the point of understanding God's key Kingdom message in order to be saved! This stark, essential awareness, involving an existing spiritual battle should never be overlooked or downplayed!

As an encouragement to all readers and listeners, it is truly possible that one be badly stuck in this first "wayside" category (like I was), failing to grasp the core Kingdom Gospel, perhaps due to "dispensationalism" or another man-made theology. However, that dilemma does not have to be the tragic end of the story! One can carefully come back and reconsider the thrust of Jesus' vital teachings, including this essential parable, and repent {make a devoted effort to change one's purpose - while turning away from previous errors) and begin the learning process of being biblically fruitful!

The second category of soil is also a portrayal of an ultimately failed response, to be contrasted with the fourth category, which displays the only authentically successful response to the Kingdom message. The "stony ground" hearers do initially welcome the Gospel message in an eager, joyful way, but they have no root in them. They truly believe and endure for a while, but when trouble or persecution arises because of the Gospel message, they quickly fall away. In other words, they stop making an effort to believe and obediently practice the gospel of the Kingdom which they had embraced. Such a category, among other things, totally dismantles the popular modern belief in "once saved, always saved." One does not blissfully cruise or coast along in a happy-go-lucky way, if he or she uses his/her free will choice to "fall away" from genuine faithfulness. See Romans 11:17-22 about the solemn responsibility to faithfully remain connected - within the metaphorical "olive tree."

The third category of soil, representing another defective response, serves as a third warning about what type of beliefs or behaviors should be sternly avoided. Just as it behooves us not to get the message of the Kingdom snatched away from us by the Devil (through failing to understand it), nor to be "rootless" so as to fall away from a faithful commitment when tried or troubled, we need to avoid getting the Gospel message "choked" by pressures and pleasures in life. We all know (as adults) that life's decisions might involve stress in the workplace, health concerns, the challenge of raising families. struggles in dealing with friends and relatives, financial concerns, etc. As "good stewards" we would want to do our best to manage such diverse situations with priorities of obedient faithfulness and diligent prayers. Nevertheless, such circumstantial sources could provoke anxiety (worry) or promote excessive desires which are not helpful. Such pressures, pleasures, and the misguided focus on acquiring riches (perhaps to avoid financial hardship) can truly become major distractions, which so dominantly occupy our time and efforts that they "choke" or throttle the Kingdom message and its practical growth in our lives - and render it quite unfruitful. We must constantly stay grounded in Jesus' stern warnings about the trap of anxiety over material things and the deceitfulness of seeking wealth. See Matthew 6:19-34 and 1st John 2:15-17.

So, now we will briefly consider the Good News of the fourth category of "soil" response, a category to be held in direct contrast with the first three defective categories. The ground where the seed becomes

productive represents a person whose will, intellect and emotions are focused on producing an abundant harvest from the seed of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus, in Luke 8:15 says, "But the ones on the fertile soil are those who after hearing the message [the word of the Kingdom], hold onto it with an honest and good heart, and through perseverance they produce fruit." The phrase "a crop yielding a hundred or sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Mt. 13:23b) and the similar words in Mk. 4:20b show that a variety of circumstances might accompany successful fruit production among good-hearted people.

Once again this fourth "soil" type is in stark contrast with: (1) those who have the message quickly stolen by the evil one due to not understanding it, (2) those who receive the message with excitement and really believe it for awhile - but fall away when dissuaded by persecutions or trouble, and (3) those who have the message choked by anxious cares (worries), distracting pleasures, and desire for wealth.

Biblically honest, friendly, generous, kind people will keep growing in perception regarding Kingdom realities as they maintain their focus on seeking first the priority of God's Kingdom and being right with Him (Mt. 6:33). The harvest in this fourth category is truly productive because these folks persevere in Jesus' all-important words of life.