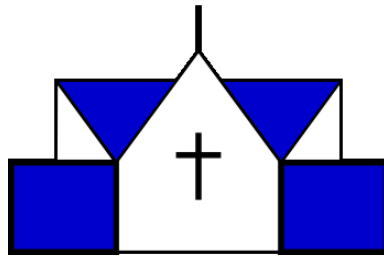


UPPER BEEDING BAPTIST CHURCH



HOME GROUP STUDIES SUMMER 2010

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Jesus' parables form a very basic part of His teaching; in fact a large proportion of what He said comes in the form of 'Story Telling'. A good number of the parables appear in several of the Gospels and clearly they were a very memorable element of His ministry.

If you have a copy of the 'Life Application Bible' – which is a valuable source of information for study – you will find all the Parables listed after the end of John's Gospel.

For simplicity of study we shall use only Luke's Gospel and take parables from a variety of the different headings listed in the Life Application Bible. Each study is independent of the others, but throughout the series we gradually build a picture of the values and attitudes of Jesus in His teaching.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke was a careful historian. (Luke 1 vv 1-4) Moreover, he wrote with a definite readership in mind – a thoughtful non-Jew named Theophilus, a follower of Christ. His purpose was to set down in writing an existing oral tradition, and allow his reader to gain a greater measure of certainty in his grasp of the person and teaching of Jesus. In order to do that he has selected material carefully. Some of the stories can also be found in Matthew and Mark, whereas other elements are unique to Luke. He emphasises Jesus' real humanity and how Jesus was in touch with ordinary people, including many on the margins of society who were considered by the religious establishment to be 'Sinners'.

As you read the gospel, it becomes clear that Jesus' teaching touches the hearts of such everyday people- the Parables especially. You will discover however that the placing of the parables in the overall story is not random. They are linked with the events that Luke is recording – their order and placing does seem to be significant. As a result, no Parable can be really grasped without first looking at what else is going on in the story – the context. So in these studies learn to look carefully at the context in which the parable is spoken.

Parables – An Introduction.

When Jesus taught, people listened! You cannot help but notice that he told plenty of stories, and people like stories. This would have been utterly different from the way others teachers went about speaking to people. The scribes and Pharisees, who were determined to try to get everybody to obey the law, simply told people what to do. They instructed them how to behave, demanding obedience to the minutest elements of the law. In that way they laid burdens on the ordinary people and made them feel guilty about their slightest misdemeanours. So who wouldn't have enjoyed listening to a teacher who told stories!

But these stories were parables – stories with a meaning. In fact, Jesus' methods puzzled even the disciples somewhat. We find them asking, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (Matt 13:10). Sometimes the parables were so pointed that everyone got the message immediately, even the Pharisees. They certainly got the point of the parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21, leading Matthew to record "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus'

Parables, they knew he was talking about them.” (Matt 21:45) On other occasions even the disciples were mystified by the stories, and had to corner Jesus and ask for an explanation. They failed, for example, to grasp the significance of the parable of the sower in Luke 8, prompting Luke to write, “His disciples asked him what this parable meant.” (Luke 8:9) – and so Jesus explained it in detail.

The word ‘Parable’ means literally the placing of two things side by side for the purposes of comparison: hence the illustration of truth in the spiritual realm by a story in the earthly or natural realm. They are designed to make people think for themselves rather than just allow ‘the teaching’ to go in one ear and out of the other. The story prompts us to visualise something tangible and earthly and so make the leap into understanding some spiritual reality. The other side of this is that those who are too lazy to think, or believe they have nothing to learn from Jesus, gain nothing from the story – the meaning is lost on them!

It is important for us therefore to look at the parables and try to grasp something of the circumstances that prompted Jesus to tell them. He told them in order to illustrate a point that was relevant in their immediate context. It may have been because of the people who were present, or in response to a particular question or incident, or even arising from events going on around them. But the point he was making was relevant to that particular situation – and we shall try to figure that out as we read. That may not be possible for every parable, but it is worth the effort of trying to find out.

It is also worth bearing in mind that there is generally one major point that Jesus is trying to convey. Many of us might have heard sermons elaborating on the tiniest details of each story, trying to draw out meaning from the most insignificant elements. So beware – these are parables and NOT allegories. An allegory is generally a longer piece of writing, such as ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ or ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’. In an allegory there are deliberately many points of correspondence between the story and the truth-reality that it illustrates. A parable is a pithy and memorable story that moves the hearers to think for themselves about the principle meaning. It is the process of thinking about the parable that makes the story and its significance so memorable. Even if we cannot agree on what the major point is, trying to work it out together in a Home Group becomes really worthwhile.

Points for consideration by the leader of each study

It is very helpful if every member of the group reads the whole passage before coming to the meeting. You may need to remind people about this!

It will be useful in preparation to look up and consider other parts of the Bible that deal with the same issues as the parable.

ABOVE ALL – The questions are only a guide to encourage the group to wrestle with the text and come to their conclusions as to the meaning and application of the story. The quotations are only one person's understanding of the story and are not some infallible answer to the meaning. Try to put yourselves in the position of the first hearers and ask – What is this all about?

Questions to be considered in each study:

- A. What is the context of this parable, or what circumstances prompted Jesus to tell the story?
- B. What does the story teach us about Jesus, His priorities and values?
- C. How did people respond to the story?
- D. What is the single main lesson of the story? (You may not all agree about this, but don't get hung-up on the incidental detail!)
- E. Are there other parts of the Bible that throw light on the story, or apply it clearly?
- F. Learn to be personal about the story as if you were a listener: -
 - Does it prompt you to action?
 - Does it cause you to re-evaluate your priorities?
 - Does it say anything about your relationships with other people?
 - Does it help you to understand more about Jesus or God's character?
 - Does it challenge your own existing ideas or patterns of behaviour?Be prepared to share these personal responses in the discussion.
- G. Try to write one pithy sentence that sums up what you have learned from the parable, and send it by email (or snail mail) to Colin Skeates at colidawn@tiscali.co.uk

You are unlikely to be able to respond to all these questions every time, and it is very likely that other questions will spring to mind anyway. So use these questions as a springboard for further discussion.

A few further thoughts, questions and quotations for each study

1. **12th April.** The Kingdom of God. Luke 8 vv 4 - 15
Extra question: What sorts of people do the four kinds of soil represent? What experience do you have of the truth of this parable in yourself and others?

The things it (the parable) relates are continually going on in every congregation to which the gospel is preached. The four kinds of hearts it describes are to be found in every assembly which hears the Word. These circumstances should make us always read the parable with a deep sense of its importance. We should say to ourselves, as we read it: "This concerns me. My heart is to be seen in this parable. I, too, am here." It should never be forgotten that there must not only be good preaching, but good hearing. (Bishop Ryle)

Seeing that He (Jesus) spoke, not to hide spiritual truth but reveal it, we may take it for granted that the sublimest meaning (of the parable) is also the simplest. (G Campbell Morgan)

Commenting on v 14 '...choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature ...' Marvel not at His calling our luxury *thorns*. For thou indeed art not aware of it, being intoxicated with thy passion, but they that are in sound health know that it pricks sharper than any thorn, and that luxury wastes the soul worse than care, and causes more grievous pains both to body and soul. (St John Chrysostom)

This parable is not about a response to the word at any given moment. It sums up the different ways the word is received over a lifetime of exposure. It takes time to fall away from an initial attraction to the word. Only over time do the pleasures of life erode the seed's effectiveness.

As the crowds gather in response to Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, Jesus in this parable expresses his confidence that no matter what miscarriages may ensue along the way, the potency for renewal in the seed that he sows is such that rich fruitfulness will be the certain outcome. With his varied images of miscarriage and extravagant fruitfulness, he holds up a mirror to his hearers so that each might be challenged by finding his/her own response patterns imaged in Jesus' tale. (John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

2. **26th April.** Prayer. Luke 11 vv 1-13.

Extra question: In this 'sample' prayer (vv.1-4), what aspects and themes of prayer are selected as the most essential? How does your prayer measure up to this pattern? What attitude in prayer is commended in vv.5-13? What results may prayer expect? What reasons are we given for confidence in prayer?

Jesus regarded prayer as so important that he demonstrated it by his example (v 1), taught a model prayer (vv 2-4), gave a memorable parable, (vv 5-8) and held out an immense promise. (vv 9-13). Each one of these is worth a study in itself!

These verses focus on three aspects of prayer: its content, our persistence, and God's faithfulness. ... Persistence, or boldness, in prayer overcomes our insensitivity, not God's. To practise persistence does more to change our hearts and minds than His, and it helps us understand and express the intensity of our need. (Life Application Bible)

On the word translated as 'boldness' in v 8 .. It would be rendered more literally 'shamelessness'. It signifies a continual asking and entreating, in spite of rebuffs, like the asking of an impudent beggar. (Bishop Ryle)

Jesus invites his hearers to exercise their imaginations about their friends. Do any of his hearers have a friend who would refuse help if he went to him at midnight, embarrassed at his own inability to provide food for the hospitality needs of a friend who had unexpectedly arrived from a journey? In every culture the bonds of friendship involve the readiness to be put out for one's friends (who can be expected to return the favour). And in ancient (and indeed modern) Eastern cultures the responsibility of showing hospitality was seen as of extreme importance (see Gen 18:1-8; Heb 13:2). One's name would be mud, not only with one's friend, but also with the wider community: here is the man who treated his friend like this, and caused him great embarrassment with his guest! The initial judgment is strengthened yet further: no friend, however poor a friend, would fail to come to one's rescue in such a situation. (John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

3. 10th May. Wealth. Luke 12 vv 13-21.

Extra question: Was the rich man wrong to make provision for the future? Where did he go wrong? In what does a man's life consist? What should be the central motive in the life of a Christian? If this is taken seriously, what suggestion do we find here with regard to material needs? How could this apply practically in your own situation?

The English Martyr-Bishop, Latimer, began a sermon on these verses like this, "Take heed and beware of covetousness. Take heed and beware of covetousness. Take heed and beware of covetousness. And what if I should say nothing else?"

Have you ever harvested a bumper crop in your garden or allotment? So what did you do with it?

Note how the first person pronouns in the rich man's thought vividly depict his character! (New Bible Commentary)

I'm not sure I could handle having vast sums of money, but there are very wealthy Christians who manage their money in a godly way for the benefit of God's Kingdom.
(Cover to Cover Bible Studies)

Life does not consist of possessions, and it is foolish, indeed incredibly myopic, to think that one's responsibilities in life have come to an end if one has been able to secure one's economic future. True wealth is only accumulated when one has God in mind in the use of one's economic means.)

(John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

When possessions are the goal, people become pawns. When I think of this story and its lesson, I picture a Buddha with a dollar attached to its stomach. For some, the material world is god. Many of us end up serving our dollars or pounds and bowing before their demands rather than relating sensitively to people.

(Darrell L Bock. IVP New Testament Commentary)

1 Timothy 6 vv 6-11 & v 18 and James 2 v 5 tell us about real riches; and Phil 4 vv 11-12 is Paul's statement about contentment.

4. **24th May.** Christ's return. Luke 12 vv 35-48.

Extra question: What reasons do these verses give us for being alert? In what ways can we be ready for our Master's return? Against what dangers are we here warned? (In the following verses, what warnings does Jesus give to the disciples, and to the crowds about the effects of His coming?)

We learn from these verses the *importance of doing, in our Christianity*. Our Lord is speaking of His own second coming. He is comparing His disciples to servants waiting for their Master's return, who have each their own work to do during his absence. "Blessed" He says "is that servant whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing." (Bishop Ryle)

The fact of our Lord's return is simply accepted here.
The detail and dating of our Lord's return is not an issue here.
What we do whilst we are waiting is of fundamental importance.

Jesus said that a Kingdom is being prepared for His followers. Many Greeks envisioned this as an idealised, heavenly, spiritual kingdom. The Jews – and Jesus – saw it as a restored earthly kingdom.
(Life Application Bible)

Its not so much that we go UP to Heaven, but that God and the Holy City come DOWN to be on a renewed earth. That is what Jesus' return is all about.
(Philip Greenslade on Rev 21 vv 1-3)

The servant involved has been a privileged servant entrusted with a special task (and so corresponds to a disciple of Jesus), but the challenge to readiness has a wider relevance as well: servants are always answerable, but they are the more answerable to the degree that they are more aware of the master's will. The gifts of opportunity create the demands of responsibility.
(John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

The end of the passage helps to explain its start. We should live prospectively, sensitive to the accountability of discipleship. We should wear our work clothes and keep the lamps burning, looking for the Lord's return by serving him faithfully.
(Darrell L Bock. IVP New Testament Commentary)

5. 7th June. God's love. Luke 15 vv 11-32.

Extra question: How does this parable answer the Pharisees' objections in v.2? (What does this parable teach about sin, repentance and the love of God?) What were the Pharisees meant to learn from this story? Can you see the same / similar tendencies in yourself?

More deeply affecting words than these, perhaps, were never written. To comment on them seems almost needless: it is like gilding refined gold, and painting the lily. They show us in great broad letters the the Lord Jesus Christ towards sinners. They teach how infinitely willing He is to receive all who come to Him, and how complete, and full, and immediate is the pardon which He is ready to bestow.
(Bishop Ryle)

More than with almost all the other parables, it is significant to look carefully at who were the listeners, and consider why Jesus might have told a string of stories about 'lost things'.

We often overlook the last part of the parable. Why do you think Jesus added the final section about the older brother? Does it alter your view as to what the main point of the story is (if you think there is a main point!)?

Matthew Henry, in his commentary, makes the point that the father 'went out to meet both sons'. (vv 20 & 28) He then adds 'This is designed to represent to us the goodness of God; how strangely gentle and winning He has been towards those who have been strangely froward and provoking.'

The story interprets Jesus' involvement with tax collectors and sinners. It invites the righteous not to stand upon their own dignity and to be preoccupied with their own claims upon God, but rather to enter into the joy of welcoming these desperately needy sinners home into the family of God
(John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

The story is left hanging. The elder brother is left to contemplate the father's words. We do not know if he comes in to celebrate or not.... What will he do? Jesus' listeners are to contemplate their own response as well.
(Darrell L Bock. IVP New Testament Commentary)

6. **21st June.** Humility. Luke 18 vv 9-17.

Extra question: What was the Pharisee's error? Was he wrong to give thanks? What does God require in prayer? To what characteristics of children was Jesus referring in v.17, and in what ways, if any is this incident connected with the parable it follows?

The Pharisee went up to the Temple to pray, but forgot his errand, was so full of himself and his own goodness that he thought he had need of nothing, no, not of the favour and grace of God, which, it would seem he did not think worth asking. (Matthew Henry)

The true cure for self-righteousness is self-knowledge. (Ryle)
How well do you know yourself – really?

Do you see any connections with this story between the verses before and after the parable?

The importance of this virtue (humility) springs from the fact that it is found as part of the character of God. ... Paul cites as an example to be emulated the humility of Christ (Phil 2 v 8), who deliberately set aside His divine prerogative and progressively humbled Himself, receiving in due time the exaltation which must inevitably follow. (New Bible Dictionary)

Should we be made suspicious by the need the Pharisee apparently feels to parade his virtues before God? While he thanks God for it all, is he really boasting to God? Is that his problem? Or, does the problem have to do with the way that his own self-estimate depends upon being able to identify others as moral failures—that he can only feel good about himself if he has others to condemn by contrast? Or, are we to note his complacent acceptance of the contrast between his own happy state and that of the tax collector with whom he shares the temple at prayer? Would he, like the older brother of the prodigal, prefer the status quo to continue? Would he be firmly against any rescue mission, or even any suggestion that there could be hope for such reprobates? Certainty is not possible, but somewhere among these suggestions we may find the necessary hints of a fatal flaw (John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

7. **12th July.** Service and Obedience. Luke 19 vv 11-27.
Extra question: What does the parable teach about the present responsibility of the followers of Jesus? What does it teach about future judgment? Was the third servant's excuse a valid one? On what grounds was he condemned? What is his case intended to teach?

There was evidently increasing excitement among the pilgrims as they drew nearer to Jerusalem, and they were expecting that Jesus would set up the Messianic Kingdom there at once. The parable represents the Lord's departure from the world as necessary in order that His Kingdom should be established, and it indicated how the disciples were to be occupied during His absence and how He would reward them when He returned.
(New Bible Commentary)

Jesus told a similar parable, recorded in Matthew 25 vv 14-30. What are the similarities and differences?

Christ tells them that He designed them to be *men of business*; they must expect no other preferment in this world than the trading end of town; He would set them up with a stock under their hands, that they might employ it themselves in serving Him and the interest of His Kingdom among men. (Matthew Henry)

There is a readiness in a general way to be identified with Jesus, but unwillingness to be answerable in any committed sense to God's expectations that are made known to us in connection with Jesus; a preference for doing nothing rather than running the risk of doing too little.
(John Noland – Word Biblical Commentary)

What if the church were to be scrutinized as a business? We are almost shocked to hear such a question raised. Yet is this not what our Lord is teaching us in this parable? God expects a profit, and He holds us accountable for what we have done with what He has entrusted to us. Pressing this matter just a little further, if the church were to be considered a business and every member an employee, how many of us should reasonably expect to "keep our jobs"? Robert (L. Deffinbaugh Community Chapel Texas.)

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The programme outline

1. **12th April.** Meeting at:
The Kingdom of God. Luke 8 vv 4 - 15
The various soils and the resulting crops.
2. **26th April.** Meeting at:
Prayer. Luke 11 vv 1-13.
Persistence in prayer.
3. **10th May.** Meeting at:
Wealth. Luke 12 vv 13-21.
What constitutes real wealth.
4. **24th May.** Meeting at:
Christ's return. Luke 12 vv 35-48.
Preparing for the Master's return.
5. **7th June.** Meeting at:
God's love. Luke 15 vv 11-32.
The watchful father and his prodigal son.
6. **21st June.** Meeting at:
Humility. Luke 18 vv 9-17.
Having a proper view of oneself.
7. **12th July.** Meeting at:
Service and Obedience. Luke 19 vv 11-27.
Using the talents God has given.