

Prophetic Parables

The parables of Jesus have always been favorite sources of teaching. Each parable illustrates so many simple truths applicable to all people in all times. Or, so I once thought! As with every other facet of Biblical learning, I have had to continue to revise my understanding of Jesus' parables. On this subject, please let me offer here some viewpoints intended to stimulate new thoughts. The concepts of prophetic parables expressed here are more exploratory than dogmatic.

Most of Jesus' parables were intended primarily for the disciples to whom he was speaking though some might involve ageless principles. In each parable Jesus made one main point though I often tried to milk all sorts of lessons from different details. Lessons are not to be sought from each detail of the story, such as discussing whether it was wise for the planter to waste seed by sowing among the weeds. After much misdirection, I have come to realize that parables are not the basis for doctrinal dogma. For illustration, when the righteous die, do they go to Abraham?

For so long, I thought parables were illustrations to simplify truth, but actually they veiled truth which could have been spoken more plainly. That is what Jesus indicated when his disciples asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10). Veiling of prophetic truth allowed the inner circle of disciples to understand impending judgments without arousing undue opposition and persecution from unbelievers. Much figurative language, especially in Revelation, served that purpose. Sometimes, Jesus explained the veiled meanings to his inner circle. In this lesson we shall look again at some of Jesus' prophetic parables to be interpreted in this light.

John the Baptist and Jesus began to proclaim the imminence of the kingdom of heaven. They called for repentance (as did Peter on Pentecost) because of the impending judgment awaiting them. (Lesson 64, "The Great and Terrible Day" dealt with this.) The axe was already at the root of the tree (of Israel) and the winnowing fork was already in his hand. The "wrath to come" was so close that many fled from it in repentance like snakes before a fire. It was not excitement about a universal judgment hundreds or thousands of years in the future but about a judgment of Israel in their generation.

In view of the nearness of the "great and terrible day" of the "parousia" / coming / presence of the Lord in judgment upon Israel, Jesus taught some prophetic parables about the kingdom of heaven which pointed to that historic event.

THE BARREN FIG TREE (Luke 13:6-9). Finding no fruit on the tree for three years, the owner instructed that it be cut down. But the gardener begged for an extension of another year in which he would fertilize and cultivate it. Then, if it bore no fruit, it would be cut down by the axe lying in readiness at its root. The implication of the parable is that God was giving Israel a last chance for repentance and bearing fruit that befits repentance.

THE TARES AND THE DRAGNET (Matt. 13:24-51). Due to unfortunate translation and traditional teaching, I always explained these parables as picturing universal judgment at the “end of time” and the “end of this universe.” The word “cosmos” rendered as world in verse 38 means the world about us, but “ainos” in verses 39 and 40 refers to a period of time to be rendered AGE or EPOCH. In harmony with John’s and Jesus’ teachings of coming judgment upon that generation, these parables refer to the END OF THAT AGE. Later translations, as in the RSV quotations below, properly render the word as age.

In those last days from Pentecost until the destruction of their nation, there was an overlapping of nationalistic Israel and spiritual Israel. Those who based their hopes on being children of Abraham, national Israel, and the earthly kingdom should have found the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price (v. 44, 45). All Jews should have been as Paul who gave up confidence in the flesh with all his credentials as an Israelite, counting them as garbage, and eagerly surrendering the earthly hope in order to gain the spiritual kingdom (Phil. 3:2-11). For those who clung on to nationalistic hopes, the “great and terrible day” of judgment and separation loomed before them.

Jesus instructed his disciples, “Let them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (v. 30). He states further (vs. 39f), “.. the harvest is the CLOSE OF THE AGE, and the reapers are ANGELS. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the CLOSE OF THE AGE. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil-doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire.” There they would be destroyed, as John had taught, but the righteous would not. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43).

Although the fishnet contained the good and bad, they were separated when drawn to shore. “So it will be at the CLOSE OF THE AGE. The ANGELS will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire” (v. 49f).

When was Jesus to come with his angels to render this judgment? After centuries or millenniums? He, himself, told his listeners: “For the Son of man is to come with his ANGELS IN THE GLORY OF HIS FATHER, and then he will REPAY every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are SOME STANDING HERE who will not taste of death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:27-28; also Mark 8:38; 9:1; Luke 9:26-27). Do you deny the truth of that statement? I am just pointing to the words of Jesus recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We shall add more to this later in this discourse.

IMPORTANT WIDOW (Luke 18:1-8). This parable pictures a widow pleading with a judge for avenging or vindication. He finally relented to her continual pleading. “And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he DELAY long over them? I tell you, he will

VINDICATE THEM SPEEDILY. Nevertheless, when the SON OF MAN COMES, will he find faith on earth?” “When YOU SEE Jerusalem surrounded by armies ... these are the days of VENGEANCE, to fulfil all that is written” (Luke 21:20-24). The evidence of his imminent coming and judgment piles up.

THE PARABLE OF THE POUNDS (Luke 19:11-17). Jesus told the twelve, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished.” Though he told them what would happen to himself, he seemed more concerned about the impending destruction of Jerusalem and their nation than about his own death. As Jesus approached Jerusalem for his last Passover before his crucifixion, the disciples thought the kingdom was to appear immediately. He corrected that misconception by the parable of the pounds indicating there was a brief interval of development yet.

“A nobleman went into a far country to receive kingly power and then return,” he began. He endowed ten servants to carry on his business in that interim. But his citizens hated him and did not want him to reign over them. When he returned, having received kingly power, he called his servants into account. The enemies who did not want his reign were commanded to be put to death.

Their recent Jewish history evidently gave substance to this parable. Archelaus, seeking to succeed his father, Herod the Great, traveled to Rome in order to receive his validation from the emperor. Having received such power from the emperor, he returned as king after that short interval. In similar manner, after Jesus’ resurrection in victory, he ascended to the Father until his full kingship was attested. In his return in judgment against the nation of Israel and their capital, Jerusalem, surrounding AD 70, his spiritual rule began in its fullness. It was the eternal kingdom succeeding the earthly, nationalistic kingdom. The prospect of the soon destruction of Jerusalem brought forth an emotional lamentation for the beloved city (Luke 19:41-44).

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD (Matt. 21:33-43; Mark 12:1-19; Luke 20:9-19). This parable is especially plain and forceful. A man had a well-established vineyard rented out to tenants while he went on a journey. At harvest time, he sent servants to collect rent, but they were abused. A larger envoy of servants was sent who were brutally rejected also. Thinking the tenants would respect his son, the master sent his son whom the tenants killed. Jesus asked his disciples what the owner would do to those tenants. They replied, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” Jesus concluded, stating emphatically, “I tell you, THE KINGDOM OF GOD WILL BE TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU AND GIVEN TO A NATION PRODUCING THE FRUITS OF IT.” The fleshly nation thought it was the favored kingdom of God, but persons producing the fruits of the Spirit would become his holy nation, the true circumcision. This was the “end times,” the “last days,” the “judgment” of national Israel.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS (Luke 16:19-31). Rather than teaching us about the state of the dead as I taught so long, this parable or allegory dramatically and alarmingly verifies the vanity of Jewish hopes based upon trust in being the children of Abraham. The rich man and his brothers were like the tenants of the vineyard who refused, rejected, and killed those sent to them by God. The rich man represented the Jews who had received God's special favor as a nation, not because of their goodness, but due to God's choice. The poor man represents those outside of that privileged nation who became children of Abraham because they followed in the faith of Abraham. The vineyard was given to them. Now, there was a fixed gulf which could not be crossed. It pictured the fate of Israel that could never be changed.

THE MARRIAGE OF THE KING'S SON (Matt. 22:1-14; compare Luke 14:15-24). Having prepared a wedding feast for his son, the king sent his servants to call those who had already been invited. Refusing to come, they made light of it for various unimportant reasons, while some seized the king's servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. "The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." Then, because those invited were not worthy, he sent the invitation abroad to all. This parable points also to Israel's rejection of Jesus and of God's rejection of their nation with their place being taken by all of every nation who would accept. Even with that, one man still tried to enjoy the privilege improperly dressed -- perhaps as a Judaizer.

It is in this setting the Jesus pronounced woes upon the scribes and Pharisees (Matt.23; Luke 21). He assured, "All these things shall come upon this generation." In an emotional lamentation over Jerusalem he declared, "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate."

Then on the Mount of Olives he predicted "then the end will come," the desolating sacrilege, the great tribulation of the city, the coming of the Son of man on the clouds with his angels, the mourning of the tribes (of Israel), and the harvest of separating of the elect by the angels. He concludes definitely, "So also, when YOU see all these things, YOU know that he is NEAR, AT THE VERY GATES. Truly, I say to you, THIS GENERATION will not pass away till ALL THESE THINGS take place." They (not people centuries later) would see those things. (Matt. 14; Mark 13; Luke 21).

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS (Matt. 25:1-13). When one takes the wrong fork in the road, he will miss his goal and the landmarks along the way. Earlier in life, I was taught and accepted that from Matthew 24:36 to the end of the chapter related to the end of the universe rather than the "parousia" or "coming of the Lord" in judgment against Israel. So it easily followed that Chapter 25, the "judgment parables," related to a universal judgment at the consummation of the universe. That would have been a shift in subject from the present to thousands of years later with no indication to his listeners. So I was not ready for James Stuart Russell's making the chapter an extension of the prophecies of Chapter 24. And I can understand if I lose some of you who have stayed with me this far when I make this application.

The imminent coming of the Lord in judgment and vengeance against Jerusalem is the theme of Chapter 24 in harmony with the prophecies of Malachi, John the Baptist, and Jesus' early preaching and parables. It was to be accomplished BEFORE SOME OF THEM TASTED DEATH. From verse 36 to the end of the chapter, Jesus urged those present to be in readiness. Unfortunately, men have started a new chapter after verse 51 as though the subject had changed, but it had not. The "then" of Chapter 25:1 definitely connects it in sequence to what preceded in the latter part of Chapter 24.

The parable of the maidens was spoken to then-present Jews rather than to a universal audience. However you may interpret the various details, it basically implies that some would make preparation by heeding the call to repentance while others would not – half of them accepting Christ and half rejecting him. The principle of readiness may apply to all people of all ages, but that is not the primary teaching of the parable. This covers the period of "the last days" when opportunity for repentance was being extended to the Jewish people.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS (Matt. 25:14-30). This parable is similar to the parable of the pounds and extends the lesson of the parable of the barren fig tree. It applies specifically to the interim period from his ascension until his return / "parousia" / coming. God had entrusted much to Israel but they had not proven fruitful. John the Baptist called for them to bring forth fruit befitting repentance. Another opportunity was given for individuals to do those works promoting the kingdom. This parable is shocking to them as he demands, "And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." Have we not made many lessons of this parable while missing the primary one to be gained by Jesus' listeners?

THE SEPARATION OF THE SHEEP AND GOATS (Matt. 25:31-45). This is an amplification of the parables of the tares and the fishnet in detailing the basis of the separation. Some were commanded, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Why? Was it because they were doing insufficient meritorious works? If so, the parable teaches salvation by works instead of by faith. We preachers have burned much midnight oil preparing lessons from this parable implying that works of serving others will be the basis of our judgment. Is that what the parable teaches?

Jesus was sending out emissaries of the kingdom with the gospel, especially the apostles, until he should return. Treatment given to them would be counted as treatment given to Jesus who sent them. Those who extended compassion and help during their labor, trials, and persecution would be those who accepted their message and brought forth work indicating their repentance. Those who disdained or further resisted and persecuted them would meet the rejection of the King at his coming. There would be a separation. Heeding the warning of Jesus, the disciples would flee when the armies came, but many unbelievers would suffer or die in the great tribulation of Jerusalem.

Students have noted several things in this parable which seem to point to a final, universal judgment. I have not space here to deal at length with those evidences, but I will offer one thought. The strongest objection, in my opinion, is that “all nations” would be brought before the judge. In the previous chapter, referring to the coming in the clouds with great glory, Jesus had said, “Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn.” (Matt. 24:30). Evidently, Jesus is using “all the tribes” and “all nations” interchangeably. God promised to make Abraham a father of many nations. Those nations were the twelve tribes of Israel. So we are in bounds to infer that these are the same.

A comparison of two statements of Jesus refutes any thought that this parable depicts a universal judgment at the consummation of the universe.

Jesus definitely stated, “For the Son of man is to come with his ANGELS in the GLORY of his Father, and then he will REPAY EVERY MAN for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are SOME STANDING HERE who will not TASTE DEATH before they SEE the SON OF MAN COMING in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:27-28).

In the parable under study, it is written, “When the SON OF MAN COMES in his GLORY, and all the ANGELS with him, then he will sit on his glorious THRONE. Before him will be GATHERED ALL THE NATIONS, and he will SEPARATE THEM one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left” (Matt. 25:31-33).

Both passages speak of (1) the coming of the Son of man (2) in glory (3) with his angels (4) as King – “coming in his kingdom,” “sit upon his throne,” and “Then shall the King, etc.,” (5) to judge. (6) In both universality in some sense is indicated – “he will repay every man.” “Before him shall be gathered all the nations.”

Who can deny that these refer to the same coming event? Who can push it beyond the lifetime of Jesus’ listeners to whom he promised emphatically, “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”? Are any of those fellows still standing around?

A final note: The punishments described in these parables are not descriptive of punishment in hell. They are figurative indications of the great tribulations to be suffered by the Jews in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Much more could be added, and a summation would be in order, but this essay has become too long. I have tried to be brief by abridging passages which I hope you will read in their fullness. I am convinced that you will see the thread of prophecy that ties all these parables together. Recognition of this thread will disturb age-old interpretations. If it is too unsettling for you to consider these things, be at peace. These are not matters of eternal importance but this is a search for better understanding.

(Thanks to James Stuart Russell's "The Parousia" for many thoughts. -Cecil Hook, April 2001) []