

## The Language of Analogy

If we seriously examine the speech forms used in scripture we see that our Lord Jesus in his earthly ministry, as well as the writers of the New Testament books, all used various forms of the language of analogy. These are the communication modes which use comparison, resemblance, or correspondence (whichever term best expresses it) to lead us from familiar ground to new, unexplored realms of thought.

Analogy is "similarity in some respects between things otherwise unlike, a partial resemblance." Use of the language of analogy is seen in *parables*, *allegories*, and *types*, all of which employ this feature of resemblance, or correspondence. To my mind these represent the ultimate in pedagogy on God's part. In them he reveals truth in concealed forms, thus intriguing the human mind. He knows we all love a mystery, so he couches his truth in enigmatic terms. By this he also separates those who are merely toying with ideas from those others who are determined to pursue the clues to ultimate understanding of truth. Because of the very nature of these expressive literary forms, their interpretation is correspondingly more difficult and intensely challenging.

The word *parable* is from *para* (alongside) plus *bole* (throw), or, "to throw alongside." As we observe our Lord's use of this figure, we see that it is spiritual truth concealed in a story--the two being laid side-by-side.

Allegory is from *allos* (another, of the same kind) and *agoreuo*, "to speak" (originally in the Greek *agora*, the marketplace), thus, a story told in the marketplace. The dictionary says it is "a story in which the people and happenings have a symbolic meaning used for explaining or teaching ideas or moral principles."

*Type* is a term borrowed directly from the Greek *typos* (the mark left by a blow, thus, imprint). We get our word *typical* from it, also *typeface* and *typewriter*. The dictionary says a type is "a model, a symbol, a person or thing that represents or symbolizes another, especially another that it is thought will appear later." Here are these three figures in chart form, phrased a bit differently.

<b>Parable</b>	A story which is true to reality and teaches a moral or spiritual lesson.
<b>Allegory</b>	A story in which people or things have hidden or symbolic meaning.
<b>Type</b>	A <i>real</i> parable, the details of which are woven by God into the <i>facts of history</i> .

While I have attempted to give general definitions to these forms of expression, if we view their usage in the Bible we find that they seem to defy exact and specific classification but rather blend into each other. I would suggest that they are so normal to the expression of thought that they are not meant to be rigidly categorized. They so flow out of the normal analogies of life's realities that God has chosen to use them as normative for the expression of truth. It would appear that the Bible is not concerned to make exact, sharp distinctions between these various forms.

In his *Notes on the Miracles and Parables of Our Lord*, Trench comments on parable as compared to allegory: "It remains to consider wherein parable differs from allegory. This it does in form rather than in essence; in the allegory an interpenetration of the thing signifying and the thing signified finding place, the qualities and properties of the first being attributed to the last, and the two thus blended together, instead of being kept quite

distinct and placed side by side, as in the case of the parable." (1)

As I understand this statement, Trench is saying that the parable is a more direct side-by-side comparison, while the allegory is more an interweaving of parallel features blending together in the implied force of the words used. In other words, an allegory, with its implied comparisons is related to a parable, with its more formal, identifiable comparison just as a metaphor (an implied comparison) is related to a simile (a formal comparison). Add to this that a type combines the features of metaphor (as an implied comparison) with parable (a realistic story with a moral or spiritual lesson), the whole being implanted by God in historical fact. In this case, history is designed by God to teach a spiritual truth, and usually takes the form of Old Testament history as having an identifiable counterpart in the New Testament teaching of spiritual truth.

To illustrate: the Lord Jesus himself says to Nicodemus, "...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:15). Here our Lord is clearly referring to the incident in Israel's history recorded in Numbers 21:9, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten when he sees it shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live" (Num. 21: 8, 9).

Here is what I would call a type. Call it just an illustration if you will--whatever we call it, the important thing is to see the truth it is designed to convey. Clearly God ordered the event in Israel's history so that the Lord Jesus was prefigured in becoming God's remedy for sin. The coinciding features are too evident to be denied:

<b>In The Old Testament Story</b>	<b>In New Testament Truths</b>
Sin was the problem (Num. 21 :5)	Sin is still the problem (John 3:19, 20).
Serpent originated and personifies sin (Gen. 3).	That old serpent, Satan, still brings sin and death (Rev. 20:2).
God sent serpents (picturing sin) to bring death (Num. 21 :6).	Sin still brings death (Rom. 6:23).
God provided the antidote and remedy for sin and death (Num. 21 :8,9).	God provided the remedy for sin and death. As the serpent was lifted up so the Son of man (John 3:15). God so loved that he gave (John 3:16).
Serpent lifted up on a pole (Num. 21 :8).	Christ was lifted up on a cross (John 19:17, 18).
The result: the one who looked at the bronze serpent lived (Num. 21:9).	The result: whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).
<i>The Lesson</i> LIFE IN A LOOK BY FAITH	<i>The Lesson</i> LIFE IN A LOOK BY FAITH

I'm sure you have noticed that all of these figures, whether parable, allegory or type, are biblical terms right out of the Greek vocabulary of the New Testament. On that basis, if none other. we should seriously seek to gain what we can learn from these God-given expressions of truth. I hope you noticed, too, that all these words by their very definition express some form of correspondence, that is, the idea of laying one thing alongside another for the purpose of gaining additional understanding.

Now that we have this descriptive data, let's look at each of these modes of expression in more detail.

### **Parables**

In a parable, the lesson is always woven into a story which is true to reality. There appears to be a time in our

Lord's ministry when he shifted from the simple straightforward declaration of truth to the more veiled speech in parables. The transition is highlighted in Matthew 13:10-17, where his disciples, noting the change, asked him why he was speaking now in parables. Our Lord Jesus says, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 13:13 ). Then he adds a quotation from Isaiah, "...this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive...and hear...and understand...and turn for me to heal them" (Matt. 13:14, 15).

In our day we would say, "There's no way he can confuse them with the facts they've already made up their minds." So parables were, and are, designed to reveal the truth to those who really want to know it (as we see in the further questioning they aroused in the disciples), and to conceal the truth from men of casual curiosity or immovable commitment to their preconceived errors, such as we see in the Pharisees. Their having heard the truth, thus presented, becomes a judgment on their intransigence.

And though Christ's disciples were obviously puzzled at the time, it is certain that later events, in particular the death and resurrection of our Lord, must have unveiled much truth that had been stored in their memories through his parables. The same applies to the Pharisees. After his resurrection they must have spent some sleepless nights thinking of what Christ had said.

Fortunately, the Lord Jesus interprets some of his parables. This gives us a handle on our interpretive approach to them. The first one he interprets is "the parable of the sower" in Matthew 13:3-9. The explanation is in Matthew 13:18-23, in which Jesus identifies some of the pieces of the puzzle. Please follow it through in your own Bible.

The seed = the word of the kingdom

The birds = the evil one, the devil, who snatches away what is sown.

The soils = various heart responses to the Word.

(1) the path = hardened ground where the seed never takes root and is eaten by birds, thus hardened hearts.

(2) rocky ground = the shallow commitment which does not endure under stress.

(3) the thorny ground = the heart so preoccupied with worldly, material things that it allows them to choke out the seed of the Word.

(a) the thorns are worldly cares and riches.

(4) the fruitful soil = the heart that hears the Word with understanding, and responds.

It is clear that our Lord intends a definite correspondence of figure with reality, and from the immediate context it is clear that the issue focuses on the unbelief of the Jews as a pointed lesson to his disciples (and us). Essentially, he is saying, "Where is your heart?"

The next parable he interprets follows in this same chapter (Matt. 13:24-30) which Jesus' disciples call "the parable of the weeds of the field" (v. 36).

Again our Lord identifies the figures (Matt. 13:3 ~43):

The sower = the Son of man (Jesus himself)

The field = the world

The seed (now different) = the sons of the kingdom--now not the Word, but believers

The weeds = the sons of the evil one

The weed sower = the devil

The harvest = the close of the age (not before)

The reapers = the angels

Once again, the central point is clear. Christ's men are to allow the true and the false to exist side-by-side and let the sower (Christ) do the sorting out at the end of the age. Jesus is giving a preview of his role as judge and pointing up the seriousness of men's response to him and to his word. The prospect is either weeping and gnashing of teeth-or shining like the sun, in righteousness.

From here on it gets more difficult to interpret our Lord's parables, for he puts us on our own. However, we can formulate a few guidelines from these illustrations:

(1) We can expect to see a correlation of the physical features of the parable to the spiritual implications involved.

(2) The point of the parable is designed to speak to the situation at hand, observable by the context, thus we should seek to gain one solid point of application to the problem evident in the hearers, as we relate parable to context.

(3) Our Lord revealed the hidden meaning to believing hearts then; he will do so for us now, if we seek enlightenment from him as did these early disciples.

(4) If we have understood what seems to be the central teaching of the parable, let's apply that truth, and not strain to make all the details fit some esoteric personal slant.

## **Parables about Lost Things**

Now, let's try our hand at a parable the Lord has *not* interpreted for us. As a matter of fact, let's tackle *three* of them in Luke 15. Our Lord joins these together: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. So we see that these three comprise one subject, a parable about lost things.

I am not going to reproduce the text here, but I assume that you will read it from your own Bible, as if we were studying together. And as I read "the parable of the lost sheep" I note first it is set against the complaint of the Pharisees about the fact that "Jesus receives sinners and eats with them."

To this the Lord Jesus replies with these parables. The lost sheep story (Luke 15:3-7) highlights the value of the sheep to its owner and the joy he expresses at its recovery. The application of the story makes it clear that the Lord Jesus is the shepherd of the sheep, and his concern is to seek the lost ones. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). This punch line must have hit hard at the self-righteous Pharisees who didn't lift a finger to help lost sinners only criticized the one who did. But even stronger than this is the revelation of God's attitude toward sinners, and the obvious value he puts on each of us--so much that heaven rejoices when one lost one is rescued by the Savior.

## **The Lost Coin**

The next one, the lost coin, needs a bit of Hebrew cultural background. The ten coins were probably part of the woman's marriage dowry. As Fred H. Wight points out:

Since a divorced wife in the Orient is entitled to all her wearing apparel, for this reason much of her personal dowry consists of coins on her headgear, or jewelry on her person. This becomes wealth to her in case her marriage ends in failure. This is why the dowry is so important to the bride, and such emphasis is placed upon it in the negotiations that precede marriage. The woman who had ten pieces of silver and lost one was greatly concerned over her loss, because it was doubtless part of her marriage dowry. (2)

So we start by recognizing that the coin in some measure represented this woman's security, since in her Oriental culture she was practically defenseless against divorce for any capricious reason. In losing the coin, she lost some of her security.

In application, our Lord says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). The joy is the same in heaven, but the added element of restored *security* (for one who was distraught) is the cause of rejoicing.

### **The Lost Sons**

Looking at the third parable in this trio, the lost sons, we discover another addition. (This parable is usually called "the parable of the prodigal son," but if we look carefully there were two sons, each lost in his own way.) The issue here is *enjoyment*, for the wandering son had sought pleasure, only to forfeit the joy of his father's house, while the stay-at-home son had apparently never known the joy that was there with the father, being filled with self-centered, legalistic resentment (I see this from his statement in verses 28-30).

The closing scene is one of enjoyment--love, fellowship, music, being expressed in a merry party. The key figure here is the father, who is clearly representative of the heavenly Father. The better title for the story is "The Waiting Father," for the yearning heart of God filled with concern for his lost ones is beautifully expressed in the narrative. We don't know whether the older son ever joined the party. He could have done so at any time, but the Lord Jesus, as the master storyteller, leaves this an open question.

Can you see how these three stories were designed to hit the Pharisees right where they lived? They portray the heart attitude of God toward lost ones. He desires for each of us *safety* in his fold, *security* against all that threatens our peace of mind, and *enjoyment* of all the good things of a loving Father's house. His program is all profit, no loss, for his people. There is much more we could gain from these beautifully expressive stories, but we have seen, I trust, that it is possible for us to understand parables.

To add to my own personal observations of parables, I worked through a basic textbook on the subject, Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and the Parables of Our Lord*, seeking to condense and summarize his conclusions on this subject. Here is what I learned:

### **Why Jesus Taught in Parables**

Our Lord used parables to teach spiritual truth through well-known physical counterparts. Parables are not just happily-chosen illustrations from a library of storybooks; they have their ground in the nature of reality. The corresponding images belong to each other, as Trench says, "by an inward necessity; they were linked together long before by the law of secret affinity.

It is not merely that these analogies assist to make the truth intelligible...their power lies deeper than this, in the harmony unconsciously felt by all men...between the natural and spiritual worlds, so that analogies from the first are felt to be something more than illustrations. They are arguments, and may be alleged as witnesses; the world of nature being throughout a witness for the world of spirit, proceeding from the same hand, growing out of the same root, and being constituted for that very end. (3)

Parables employ a visible world to lead us to understand the invisible things of God. Here God communicates in terms of human relationships and natural phenomena--the ordinary stuff of which life is made. Again quoting Trench:

...besides his revelation in words, God has another and an older, and one indeed without which it is inconceivable how that other could be made, for from this it appropriates all its signs of communication. This entire moral and visible world from first to last, with its kings and its subjects, its parents and its children, its sun and its moon, its sowing and its harvest, its light and its darkness, its sleeping and its waking, its birth and its death, is from beginning to end a mighty parable, a great teaching of supersensuous truth, a help at once to our faith and to our understanding. (4)

Even the fallenness of God's creation sounds forth its clear but unhappy truth about the imperfection of the present order; poisonous reptiles, natural catastrophes, diseased and deteriorating bodies, poison oak and gadflies--all testify of the fact and results of man's fall. And all point to the need for a better order of things.

In parables, Christ moves our thought processes from familiar ground to new concepts, from the known to the unknown, from the physical to the spiritual. In parables he appeals not just to the intelligent reason of man, but to his imagination and to his feelings. They have all the appeal of a human interest story. Truth imparted in this form has a lingering quality not always true of more abstract modes of expression. To quote Trench again (5):

His words, laid up in the memory, were to many that heard Him like the money of another country, unavailable for present use, --the value of which they only dimly knew, but which yet was ready in their hand, when they reached that land, and were naturalized in it. And thus must it ever be with all true knowledge, which is not the communication of information, the transfer of a dead sum of capital of facts or theories from one mind to another, but the opening of living fountains within the heart....

### **Rules for Interpreting Parables**

The values of parabolic teachings seem evident, but we need help in understanding them. How do we get out of them the truth the Lord intends to teach? Here are some suggestions:

1. *Seek to understand the one central truth the parable teaches*, as distinguished from the corollary truths or facts which relate to it.
2. *Relate all the peripheral details to this central truth*, seeking to grasp how they contribute to the central truth to make it shine more clearly.
3. *Relate the parable to the context which introduces it and that which follows*. Here we often find the key to its meaning--in seeing how the parable applies to the situation at hand. Again, Trench has a pertinent word on this subject:

These helps to interpretation, (that is, the clues derived from the context) though rarely or never lacking, are yet given in no fixed or formal manner; sometimes they are supplied by the Lord Himself (Matt. 22:14;25:13); sometimes by the inspired narrators of his words (Luke 15: 2,3;18:9;19:11)- sometimes, as the epilogue, they follow (Matt. 24:13; Luke 16:9). Occasionally a parable is furnished with these helps to a right understanding both at its opening and its close; as is that of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23), which is suggested by the question which Peter asks (ver. 21), and wound up by the application which the Lord Himself makes (ver. 35). So again the parable at Matt. 20:1-15 begins and finishes with the same saying, and Luke 12:16-20 is supplied with the same amount of help for its right understanding. (6)

4. *A parable should not be the primary, much less exclusive, foundation for any doctrine*. Do not use parables to establish a doctrinal base; establish your doctrinal foundations from the clear teaching of scripture elsewhere, then parables will serve to illustrate and confirm, adding light and color to truth already discovered.
5. *Avoid strained interpretations*. If you have to work hard at justifying your interpretive opinion, it's

probably not worth contending for. A correct interpretation is not easy to arrive at, but having been discovered, should be easy to live with. It should have a sense of fitness.

6. *Extremes of interpretation should be avoided.* One extreme is to seek only the most general, limited significance, the other is to make every minute detail say something.

7. *Hard -and -fast, absolute rules for interpreting parables have not been given to us.* The best we can do is to observe the way our Lord interpreted the parables in Matthew 13 and seek to learn from him. *Much that we gain from parables will be determined by our own reverent approach to Scripture as God's Word, our total grasp of biblical truth, and our spiritually -minded common sense.*

### **References:**

1. R. E. Trench, *Notes on the Parables and Miracles of Our Lord* Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), p. 8.
2. Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs in Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.) p. 128.
3. R E. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and Parables of Our Lord* (Old Tappan, NJ.: Revell Publishing Co., n.d.) pp. 12 and 13 on parables.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 16 and 19 on parables.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 26 on parables.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39 on parables

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