

# **“Now You Are Speaking Plainly”**

## **Why Jesus Spoke in Parables**

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

### **Introduction:**

- A. Jesus' self-revelation in the Gospel of John has a cryptic or symbolic dimension to it. Consider His three “I AM” statements:
  - 1. John 8:58 - I am God
  - 2. John 10:7 - I am the Savior
  - 3. John 10:14 - I am known by the righteous
- B. Yet He cloaks much of His message in puzzles, proverbs, and parables
  - 1. Why? If His purpose is to reveal the whole truth of God's will, why does He appear to obscure elements of that message?
- C. Both Jesus' enemies and His disciples ask the same question
  - 1. John 10:24
  - 2. John 16:17-18
  - 3. John 16:25- 31

### **I. JESUS' WORDS CONFUSED MANY**

- A. John 10:19-21 - His words divided His hearers
  - 1. The Greek word for division is "skismos": Jesus' words produced a "schism" among his hearers.
  - 2. So it was and so it will probably ever be. If Jesus' words aren't producing some kind of "division in the house," perhaps we really aren't hearing what he is saying.
  - 3. Luke 6:35 - He taught a revolutionary approach to living. Naturally His words are going to divide His hearers. They bring a lot of emotional baggage and inhibiting preconceptions to the table
- B. John 10:22-27 - His hearers demanded that He speak openly
  - 1. The Jews pressure Jesus to "speak clearly" to them about whether or not He is the Messiah.
  - 2. To His disciples in John 16, Jesus says that the hour is coming when He won't have to speak to them in figures but He will speak openly (parresia).
  - 3. When Jesus is questioned by the high priest about His teaching, He says: "I have spoken openly to the world..." (John 18:20).
  - 4. John is trying to show that those who have ears to hear will hear and discern his voice speaking plainly to them. (John 10:27)
  - 5. The fact that Jesus spoke in parables had more to do with the hearers than it had to do with the message
  - 6. Matt. 13:10-17

### **II. HOW TO INTERPRET JESUS' PARABLES**

- A. In the Greek New Testament, the word parabole is found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Letter to the Hebrews.

1. This word is composed of the Greek preposition para, meaning 'alongside,' and bole, meaning 'to throw.'
2. Literally parable means throw something alongside of something else.
  - a. Came to mean an earthly story with a heavenly meaning
3. It is not found in John. God inspired John to use another Greek word, paroimia, three times in his Gospel account: John 10:6, 16:25, 29.
4. Paroimia means 'brief saying' or 'proverb.'

#### B. Jesus' use of parables

1. Up to a certain point in Jesus' ministry, He did not use parables. He began to use them when crowds began to gather to hear Him speak. His change in teaching style was noticed by the Twelve who raised the question about why He taught in analogies (Matthew 13:10-16).
2. His answer shows that he had two purposes in doing so. Jesus was there to reveal but also to conceal at that point in His ministry. He intended that those who wanted to understand what He was saying would find the analogies effective vehicles to convey the truth.
3. On the other hand, He did not want His enemies to understand His message and perhaps end his ministry before the right time. The enemies, therefore, would 'hear without understanding' and 'see without perceiving.' The motivation and objective of Jesus' opponents to find fault with Him blocked the possibility of their really hearing what He was saying. They did not want to understand His message of a new way to understand religion. Many wanted to preserve their traditions and some wanted to preserve their positions of power in society.
4. If Jesus intended for His followers to understand His message, why did the disciples seem to have had such a hard time understanding what Jesus was telling them? Here we see the humanity of the disciples. They had their own traditions and cultural predispositions.
5. Secondly, what He was saying was often opposite of what they expected and wanted to hear. Jesus could have spoken plainly and given them the message all at once, but they needed time to develop their relationships with Jesus and to process the new way of thinking.

#### C. The essential role of the context

1. The correct approach to interpreting what has been said or written begins with understanding of the context in which it was said or written.
2. The word 'context' is composed of 'con' meaning together and 'textus' meaning woven. The context of a statement or group of statements is literally that with which it or they are woven. These factors are what we may call the immediate context:
  - a. The circumstances in which the statement was made
  - b. The subject under discussion
  - c. The relationship between the speaker or writer and those to whom the message is directed
  - d. What has been said and/or done by both the speaker or writer and those to whom the message is addressed before the statement(s) was made

3. In studying the Bible, there is also the larger context:
  - a. The book in which the statement or statements are found
  - b. The testament (Old or New) of which they are a part
  - c. The total harmonic message of the Bible
4. When all of this is applied to the parables of Jesus, it means that, to be understood correctly, these parables must not be treated as if they were isolated religious or moral teachings. They must be studied in the settings in which Jesus spoke them.
5. We must remember that when a parable is used, the similarities between the two things that are comparable are limited. Too many people assume when interpreting parables one must look for every detail to mean something. The result is that ideas about what Jesus taught have arisen that are contrary to the rest of the New Testament. If we want to know what the New Testament actually teaches, we must interpret the parables by the rest of the New Testament's teachings, not interpret the New Testament by what a parable can be made to mean.
6. Secondly, we must recognize that we are most likely trying to understand parables from a 21<sup>st</sup> Century American point of view and style of learning. Jesus was using an Eastern style of learning.
7. Third, we must keep in mind that Jesus was using this method to accomplish specific purposes. A parable usually has only one point. It is just an illustration to make a point. Not every detail of the things being compared in the analogy is comparable with something.
8. Fourth, sometimes Jesus clearly exaggerated or used hyperbole to make his point - Luke 18:25
9. Figures of speech can be good communication, but they may be confusing to persons from another society. Think of how confused persons from one culture are when confronted by 'slang' or expressions in a different culture even when they speak the same language, i.e. Americans in Australia or a New Yorker in rural Texas.

### **III. DID JESUS SPEAK CLEARLY?**

- A. The answer to that question depends on you and what you believe about Him
- B. Mark 4:9-13, 22-25; Matt. 17:5; Acts 10:33; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 3:7-8; Rev. 13:9