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INTRODUCTION

Ever wonder how the movie industry can make millions of dollars on its films. Simple. It's the power of a well-told story. Great story-tellers throughout history have always been able to attract and hold a crowd. Aesop's fables have survived through the centuries because they are well-told stories containing a nugget of truth to be remembered.

We all like stories. We get lost in the adventures of the main characters who come to life from written pages or images projected on a screen. Stories sneak up on us and capture our minds before we realize it. We find ourselves really liking or totally despising a character – even though it's all make-believe. Maybe that's the key to the power of a story. A good story will "make us believe."

Luke obviously understood the power of a parable and recorded more of them than the other gospel writers. Let the stories of Jesus capture your mind and make you believe the truths that He offers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Key Verse:

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear (Matthew 13:16).

WARM UP



I had an eighth grade teacher who loved to use the phrase, “A hint to the wise is sufficient.” She would usually say that after she had just told us something that would be on tomorrow’s test. I had learned to listen for that phrase and take note of that nugget of truth. Unfortunately, there were some days that I had “zoned out” and wasn’t paying very much attention to the review. The magic phrase would shake me from my daydream, but I had no clue what hint she had just given.

Jesus used parables in a similar way – to grab the attention of the listener. Some listeners were alert and caught His meaning. Others were not listening as well and totally missed the point.



History of Parables

Parables weren't a unique invention of Jesus. In fact, they were commonly used in Middle Eastern cultures and were even included in Old Testament writings. One of the best-known Old Testament parables was one that the prophet Nathan told David (2 Samuel 12:1-4). David had sinned against God by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Nathan told David a parable of a rich man who took a poor man's only lamb. The simple story prompted David to demand that the rich man repay the poor man four times over. When Nathan's parable had worked to lower David's defenses, he bluntly stated, "You are that rich man."

Isaiah compared Israel to a vineyard that was planted and cared for by God. He had expected good fruit at the harvest, but instead found only wild grapes (Isaiah 5:1-7). This parable would make it easy for the Israelites to understand God's feelings of disappointment with His unfaithful people.

Parables of Jesus

Jesus often taught in parables. Luke recorded more of these parables than any of the other gospel writers. John's gospel contains no parables at all. The Greek word that is translated "parable" literally means "to throw alongside." The parables were sometimes stories that were thrown alongside more difficult teachings to help make them more memorable or understandable. The people recognized that Jesus didn't teach like the scribes of His day (Matthew 7:28, 29). Although He used stories (parables), His teachings carried a great authority.

Jesus' followers once asked Him why He taught with parables. This was more than just a question of curiosity. His devoted followers often had difficulty understanding what He was trying to say in a parable (Mark 4:10). Jesus provided a two-fold purpose in speaking with parables and used Isaiah 6:9,10 as the basis for His answer.

First, Jesus spoke in parables to make His teachings more understandable and accessible to those who were seeking the truth. The parables opened their eyes and revealed truth that may have previously been hidden. The common people, who were hungry for their Messiah to come, were able to see that God's kingdom was unfolding before their eyes.

However, the second reason for the parables was to confuse those who weren't seeking the truth. The scribes and Pharisees (who already had all the answers) were annoyed by Jesus' parables. They considered them frivolous little stories that were not worthy of a real teacher of God's Word. Because Jesus talked about farming, family life, fishing, treasure-hunting, and business deals, He couldn't be taken seriously as a teacher from God. They left Him alone to go about His ministry.

So the parables of Jesus had a dual function. As author, Warren Wiersbe says, the parables both reveal and conceal truth. The result depends on the heart of the listener.

How to Study Parables

There are several guiding principles that will help us get the most from studying the parables. These principles set the framework for proper interpretation.

First, each parable should be studied in its specific context. To whom was Jesus speaking? What problem did He seem to be addressing? For this reason, each Warm Up section of the following lessons will help set the context of that week's parable.

Second, we should search for the central theme or main truth of each of the parables. While some parables may contain several valuable teachings, there is usually one overriding message that comes through. Don't miss that main nugget of truth!

Third, be careful not to over-analyze any parable. The truth of the parable is rarely contained in the finer detail; it's in the panorama of the story. It is generally wasted effort to ask questions such as: *What is the significance of there being 10 lost coins? What does the Good Samaritan's donkey represent?* When it comes to the parables, these are trivial pursuits that do more harm to the teaching than good.

Fourth, realize that parables are not intended to teach new doctrine, but to illustrate old doctrine. As we study the entire Bible, we find that truth is clearly revealed in straightforward teaching. We should never have to rely on a parable as the sole basis for our doctrinal beliefs.

Find Yourself in the Parables

A thorough study of the parables need not stop at finding the main point or central theme. Take the next step in searching for your place in the story. Are you the Levite, the Samaritan, or the wounded man? Are you the searching shepherd or a lost sheep? Are you the returning prodigal or the older brother or the compassionate father?

The truth is that you may find yourself in several characters of a parable at the same time. We are all works in progress. We have areas of our lives that seem very on track with God. Yet, at the same time, we struggle with weaknesses and inconsistencies that make us feel like the needy character in the story.

Take your time to read through and pray through the parables. Ask for God's wisdom (James 1:5) to help you see new truths. The beauty of God's Word is that we can never fathom the depths of it. If we enter each new study with a fresh desire for learning, God will graciously reveal another insight.

COOL DOWN



We live in a great time for parables. There was a day when we could stack one Scripture on another and build monstrously powerful lessons that touched people's hearts. However, the times are changing and older methods don't always produce the previous results.

When the movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, was about to be released, a panic spread across our Christian nation. Many feared the potential damage that could come to those of weak faith as the movie questioned the integrity and believability of Scriptures. One very wise preacher sounded a timely alarm in a speech given to a gathering of fellow ministers.

"We now live in an age," he explained, "when truth can be easily trumped by a well-told story. We have the greatest story ever told. We need to be spreading it."

Truth aims for the head; stories aim for the heart. Jesus was wise enough to know that some people are "head people," some are "heart people," and some require both head and heart to be moved to respond. Jesus sought to reach everyone He taught by using every teaching method available.

May we be careful observers of Jesus' stories and learn how to use the power of the story to draw people toward God's eternal truth. May the parables be tools for personal and congregational transformation.

QUESTIONS

1. What advantages did Nathan gain by telling David a parable rather than directly confronting his sin?
2. What two reasons did Jesus give for using parables in His teaching?
3. Have the class name as many parables as they can think of and point out the everyday activity that is used in each.
4. Have a class member prepare ahead of time a brief report on the principle of hermeneutics. What basic principles of biblical interpretation guide our general Bible study? What special rules should apply to parables?
5. Why is it helpful to see ourselves as characters in the parables?
6. What percentage of the teaching/preaching in your congregation is aimed at the head and what percentage at the heart? Discuss the ratio. Is it healthy?