

Dealing with Parables

There seems to still be some confusion regarding the interpretation of parables (Parables have often been abused by false teachers because they can easily be twisted in order to deceive the unsuspecting). This is especially true of the relation between the main point of the parable and the local details of the story itself. In an effort to further illuminate this relationship, I will restate some general guidelines, illustrate this relation in a number of ways and summarize what this means for interpretation of parables.

General guidelines

- The purpose of a parable is to make a single point. (In rare cases a parable may teach a number of similar truths that all combine to make a larger point.)
- The details of the story are not meant to have significance on their own, but only serve to make the main point. The details set the stage for the story, illustrate and reinforce the main teaching, but do not have significance on their own.
- The details may or may not correspond to something in reality (e.g. in the parable of the sower, the seed is the Word of God). Context is the sure guide to what details only provide color to the story, and what details have points of reference. A correct interpretation of points of reference serves to strengthen the main point in the original context. (Obscure and esoteric interpretations are ruled out. A text can never mean what it never could have meant.)

However, One further point needs to be made, that has not been made yet, the lack of which could cause misunderstanding.

- The details of the story are all necessary and strengthen the story. None of the details are superfluous or detract from the story.

Illustration of principle

I want to illustrate the last principle in a few ways.

- Think about the Mona Lisa.
The hills in the background obviously are not the focus of the painting. However, if these hills were not there, the painting would not be the masterpiece that it is. The hills give the background, the setting, the context of the focal point.
Now imagine that behind the girl in the painting, there was a green monkey picking his nose in front of a convenience store. Such a detail would be so out of place as to detract from the main focus of the painting. Not only wouldn't a monkey add to the painting, it would actually take away from the quality.
Because DaVinci is a great painter, he does not add unnecessary details that take away from his painting. He only adds those things that contribute.
In the same way, Jesus is a master story teller. His details add to the setting and impact of the story and there are no details that detract and sidetrack from the point.
- Imagine that you were telling a joke about 3 guys on a bus.
In order to draw your audience into the joke, you may describe the men or the bus. You may even mention that the bus jerks and screeches to a stop. However, you would not describe what the driver had for breakfast or the daily specials at the cafe the bus just passed. If you talked about the driver, I would expect that the driver had something to do with the punchline. If however, you described the driver and he had nothing to do with the joke, I would think that you were a lousy joke teller. Such details would only detract from the joke.

Application for interpretation.

- First we need to pay attention to the details. Not to find significance in every detail, but to ask how the detail contributes to the story. Does it set the stage? Does it draw the reader into the story? Does it illustrate or reinforce or somehow expand the main point?
- Most importantly, the details can serve as a check on our interpretation. If our understanding of the main point leaves some or many details unaccounted for, we should recheck our understanding of the main point. If details detract from our hypothesis like a green monkey at 7-11, we should rework our hypothesis. Remember we make our interpretation fit to the text, we do not make the text fit to our interpretation.
- For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are many details about the hero giving first aid, taking the victim to a hotel, paying his way and making provision for his continued care. These details don't have separate significance of their own, but serve the main point. Now suppose we conjecture that the point of the story has to do with racism- about the hero being Samaritan. If that were the case, why did Jesus tell about the first aid or the hotel? If the point were about racism, not only do these details not make sense, they take away from the point. Therefore we conclude that the parable is not just about racism. Jesus' description of the Samaritan taking care of the man must in some way strengthen His point. Therefore we conclude that the point of the parable has something to do with helping those in need. In this case, also, the details serve to check an incomplete understanding. Why then was the hero a Samaritan, and not the good tax-collector or good Pharisee? Once again we must revise our understanding because of what the text actually says (exegesis). This process gets us closer to the real point of the parable that probably has to do with prejudice *and* helping those in need around us, no matter the cost, no matter who they are. (Remember the story was told to answer the question "who is my neighbor?")

A final note.

Remember these two important rules for interpretation.

- Read *carefully*
- **Context, context, context.** The historical context in which the parable was spoken, and the literary context of the words and paragraphs and our own context in a church where brothers and sisters challenge, correct and refine our understanding and the way we live out that understanding.