

NOTES ON PARABLES

* * * SECRETS DIVINELY-REVEALED BY JESUS * * *

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INTRODUCTION. It is often asserted that not every detail in a parable has significance, that parables are fictitious stories intended to each a moral/spiritual lesson¹, and that only the overarching spiritual lesson is important. R. C. Sproul illustrates this kind of thinking in an article on understanding Jesus' parables, where the first of his four interpretive guidelines is: "Don't treat parables like allegory".

An allegory is most often completely filled with symbolic meaning. Every detail means something that can be traced to the overriding principle that is being illuminated. Parables usually have one basic, central meaning. Trying to oversymbolize them can have the effect of tearing them apart. A person doesn't understand the beauty of a flower by disassembling it. Like a blossom, a parable is best understood by seeing it in its simple and profound entirety.²

This approach to interpreting parables is common among Bible scholars and commentators, but it is simply an unsupported assertion that is not Biblical.

According to the Bible, Jesus' purpose in speaking in parables (which only began after his formal rejection by the nation of Israel³) was to reveal "things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt13:35). Those things "kept secret from the foundation of the world" are called **mysteries** in the N.T. (Cp., Rom16:25-26; Eph3:3-5; Col1:26). When Jesus spoke in parables, He fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 78:2.

The 7 parables concerning "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt13:11) given in Matthew 13 are particularly important, since Jesus Himself provides the interpretation of two of them. His interpretation of these two parables illustrates how all of His other parables should be interpreted.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER. The parable of the sower is given in Matthew 13:3-9, and Jesus provides its interpretation in Matthew 13:18-23. This parable makes use of seven symbols: 1) the "sower", which is the "Son of man" (Cp., Matt13:37), 2) "seeds", which is the "hear[ing of] the word", 3) "fowls", which is "the wicked one", 4) "stony places", which is "tribulation or persecution", 5) "thorns", which is "the care of this world", 6) "good ground", which is "he that heareth the word, and understandeth it", and 7) "fruit", which is "[brought] forth, some an hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty".

¹ This is the definition of a *fable*, not a parable (cf. 2Pet1:16).

² R.C. Sproul, "4 Interpretive Guidelines for Understanding Jesus' Parables", Ligonier Ministries, <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/interpreting-parables-of-jesus>, June 6, 2012.

³ In the Gospel of Matthew, the formal rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the nation of Israel occurs in Matthew 12:24-32, after which He addresses the multitude exclusively in parables (cf. Matt13:3,34).

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES OF THE FIELD. The parable concerning the wheat and the tares is given in Matthew 13:24-30, and at the disciples' request Jesus provides its interpretation in Matthew 13:36-43. This parable makes use of 9 symbols: 1) "a man who sowed", which is the "Son of man", 2) "good seed" (also "wheat"), which are "the children of the kingdom", 3) a "field", which is the "world", 4) the "enemy", which is the "devil", 5) "tares", which are "the children of the wicked one", 6) "wheat", which is the result of the "good seed", 7) the "harvest", which is the "end of the age", 8) "bundles to burn", which is the judgment of the wicked at "the end of this age", and 9) "wheat [gathered] into barn", which is the entrance of the "righteous ... into the kingdom".

CONCLUSIONS. Note two important characteristics of parables learned from the interpretations provided by Jesus. First, every symbol used in the parable has significance. Second, the meaning of the symbols remain consistent between parables (thus a symbol defined in one parable will have the same meaning/significance when used in other parables; e.g., the "sower" in both the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Tares of the Field is the "Son of man").