

BIBLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By Robert C. Veil, Jr.

Question: I know that Jesus used parables in his teaching. What is a parable, and are there any particular rules for understanding them?

Answer: Jesus used parables very frequently in his teaching. Approximately 46 of these have been preserved for us in the New Testament. Many of them are very brief, but always pointed and memorable. They are often surprising or unexpected.

A parable is an extended simile, a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another, using the word “like” or “as.” Jesus would observe, for example, that the multitudes in his day were “as sheep not having a shepherd,” (Mt. 9:36). With that simile, he would paint a very vivid image. But, he would then enlarge or expand a simile into a story, known as a parable. For example, he told of a man who had 100 sheep, and one of them became lost. The man left the 99, and searched for the one lost sheep, (Lk. 15:3-7). This illustrates the immense value of each single, precious soul.

One rule for proper interpretation of parables is to remember that each parable generally has one main point. It is a mistake to press parables beyond what they were intended to teach. For example, the parable of the hidden treasure (Mt. 13:44) teaches the great value of the church, the kingdom of God. But we know from other passages that it would be a mistake to conclude that once we find this great treasure, we should keep it to ourselves or hide it. That is not the point of the parable.

Another rule for understanding parables is to interpret them in light of the other parables. They all fit together like a total package. It is a mistake to lift one parable out of context, and try to make it teach something which was not intended.

Parables have been referred to as “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” In a remarkable fashion, they take profound spiritual truths, and convey them in a basic, straightforward way, so they may be understood and obeyed by all. Such was the enormous influence and beauty of Jesus’ teaching.

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