



How To Read The Parables

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How To Read The Parables
by
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Editor's Introduction

This brief eBook contains a great deal of wisdom about understanding the parables in the Gospels.

The content of this eBook is an abridged form of three introductory chapters of Father Fonck's monumental work, *The Parables of the Gospel*. As Fr. George O'Neill says in his Preface to the English translation of that book, Fr. Fonck "occupies a supremely important position as a teacher of Holy Scripture." Fr. Leopold Fonck was a distinguished Catholic Biblical scholar at the beginning of the 20th Century. Pope Pius X appointed him as the first President and member of his Pontifical Biblical Institute, and also named Fr. Fonck as a consultor of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Both institutions were chartered to provide outstanding and faithful Biblical scholarship in service to the Popes. Fr. Fonck also contributed to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* numerous articles on Scripture.

This eBook provides Fr. Fonck's timeless and clear lessons on **how to read and understand the parables**. Since Jesus used many parables in his teaching, this knowledge is essential if we are to understand both Christ and his Gospel.

I have made minimal changes to Fr. Fonck's original text, although this work is somewhat shorter than the original chapters in his book. As a scholar writing for other scholars in the early 1900s, Fr. Fonck quoted original Greek and Latin sources frequently for background information of secondary importance. In a few places where these passages were necessary for understanding the main text, I have replaced them with English translations. I have removed those citations that were not essential.

I have also abridged a small amount of material to make it more readable to non-scholars, and have updated Scriptural references to use modern names of the Biblical books and the current notation for Biblical citations. But none of these changes reduce or alter Fr. Fonck's core text, and my hope is that I've made it more accessible to all.

Fonck's clear and faithful words are a great gift to we who live at a time when misinformation and bad scholarship about the Bible abounds. My hope is that this small eBook will help you to understand Our Lord's parables more easily, and lead you to deeper faith.

Michael Stapp
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Chapter 1: What Is A Parable?

The use of parables by ancient secular writers

The word parable comes from the Greek verb, *to throw*, or *to put by the side of, to place side by side*, hence *to compare*; consequently, the word taken in its literal sense means *juxtaposition*, and metaphorically, *comparison*. Plato and other ancient classic authors use the word in this sense.

According to Aristotle's interpretation, the truth to be demonstrated in the parable is illustrated by means of an analogous fictitious example taken from another order of things.

Seneca speaks of parables in a similar manner and describes them as being necessary to the proper demonstration of truths. On the whole, the parable used in this sense has always had a settled place in ancient rhetoric.

The use of parables in ancient Rabbinical writings

But it is especially in Oriental writings and in the ancient Jewish Talmud that we continually find the parable in the shape of a narration of an allegory or of a fictitious occurrence. Parables similar to a number of those in the Gospel can be quoted from the Rabbinical writings. We shall refer to them occasionally in our explanation of the various parables and similes.

St. Jerome says that this frequent use of similes is peculiar to the Syrians, and to the inhabitants of Palestine in particular.

But the fact must not be overlooked that the parables in the Old Testament, as well as in the similes in the Gospel, have had a great influence on the Rabbinical writings. The parables in the Talmud cannot be made use of, therefore,

without reference to those of the Old and the New Testament for the elucidation of the nature and the object of our Lord's figurative discourses.

The use of parables in later Christian writings

Finally, the writings of many of the ancient Fathers afford us information as to the manner in which the Church interpreted the nature and the object of the Biblical parables.

In determining the nature of the Gospel parable, it cannot but be regarded as injudicious to attach supreme importance to the views expressed by the ancient rhetoricians; some writers have exaggerated their authority while doing violence to the text of the Evangelists in a prejudiced and unscientific manner.

In recent times the resemblance between the parables of the Gospel and those in Buddhist writings has been repeatedly pointed out. They prove the Oriental predilection for figurative modes of expression, but they cannot bear comparison with our Lord's figurative discourses, and avail but little for the knowledge of the nature and the purpose of his parables.

Parables in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the word *parable* appears in connection with various synonyms, which bring us closer to its meaning: we find the terms *riddle*, *proverb*, *simile*, *comparison*, *fable*, *satire*, *sayings of the wise man*, and a *sign*.

In the Old Testament in general, the Hebrew word for parable, *Maschal*, signifies a speech which has a special purpose and contains a deeper meaning, such as, for example, Balaam's utterances (Num 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23), Job's discourse (Job, 27:1; 29:1), Solomon's lessons of wisdom, etc. Therefore a simile such as that spoken by the

Prophet Ezekiel (17:2 et seq.; 24:3 et seq.), which is fraught with meaning, is in particular called a parable.

It is precisely to this deeper import and to the meaning which lies hidden from ordinary observers in the parable that the Bible's sacred writers themselves, as well as the ancient translators, attach special importance. This is particularly noticeable in the words of Sirach regarding the parable: he everywhere connects with the word the idea of profound wisdom and special meaning (Sir 1:25; 3:29; 6:35; 20:20; 38:33; 39:2 et seq.; 47:15,17).

We may regard the parable as requiring two essentials: A parable, in the first place, must express a complete thought; it must be a maxim, or proposition, or speech, wholly independent and complete in itself, and not merely an idea or part of a proposition. Secondly, the parable has a deeper purport, mostly the conveying of some wise lesson which lies hidden in the words and which must be sought for as we seek the solution of a riddle. As a rule, it will be found that the parable has a third feature, namely, a comparison with some higher truth by means of a simile from nature or the life of man.

Parables in the New Testament

In particular, we find in St. Matthew eight speeches or discourses recorded expressly as parables, namely, the similes of the Sower (13:3—9:18—23); of the Tares (13:24—30:36—42); of the Mustard-seed (13—31 et seq.); of the Leaven (13:33); further, of the Wicked Husbandmen (21:33—45); of the Marriage Feast (22:1—14); of the Signs of Summer (24:34); and finally, the instruction on what constitutes real defilement (15:10—20).

St. Mark, also, records five of these parables, to which he, likewise, expressly gives this name; they are: the Sower (4:2—20), the Mustard-seed (4:30—32), the Husbandmen (12:1—12), the Signs of Summer (13:28), and the instruction on real

defilement (7:14—23). St. Mark also calls our Lord's figurative instructions on the impossibility of driving out the devils by means of Beelzebub, parables (3:23—27).

St. Luke again records as parables the simile of the Sower (8:4—15), of the Husbandmen (20:9—19), and of the Signs of Summer (21:29—31). He adds to these ten new utterances and discourses under the same designation: the adage, "Physician, heal thyself" (4, 23), the lesson on Putting a New Piece of Cloth on an Old Garment (5:36), the Foolish Rich Man (12:16—21), the Thief in the Night (12:39—41), the Barren Fig-tree (13:6-9), the Choosing of the Lowest Seat at the Marriage Feast (14:7—11), the Lost Sheep (15:3—7), the Widow and the Unjust Judge (18:1—8), the Pharisee and the Publican (18:9—14), and lastly, the Ten Pounds (19:11—27).

Even if, strictly speaking, only these nineteen passages are expressly designated as parables, still it would be certainly incorrect to reckon these alone amongst the Gospel parables. St. Matthew himself, at the conclusion of the figurative discourse in the thirteenth chapter of his Gospel, points out to us that the whole matter of the discourse must be considered a parable: "And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there." (13:53).

Therefore, the four similes immediately preceding, the Treasure Hidden in a Field, the Pearl of Great Price, the Net Cast into the Sea, and the Householder, which were not expressly set down under this title of parables, still are characterized as belonging to that category. So also the example given of the Two Sons (Mt 21:28—32) is recognized as a parable owing to St. Matthew's words in v. 33 and 45.

In like manner the words of St. Mark, "with many such parables he spoke the word to them" (4:33), show that the preceding simile of the Seed Cast into the Earth belongs to the parables, although not described as such. Moreover, all three Evangelists are in accord in repeatedly stating that our Lord liked the figurative form of discourse and frequently

made use of it (Mt 13:3, 34; Mk 4:2, 33 et seq.; Lk 8:10). It was not necessary for them to explain more exactly which of his discourses and instructions in particular were to be regarded as parables, for the nature of such was universally understood.

We do not find the word *parable* in the Gospel of St. John, but he uses the term *figure* four times with regard to the discourse on the Good Shepherd and the Hireling (Jn 10:6) and to our Lord's mode of instruction in general (16:25, a, b, 29). This term does not occur in the three synoptic Gospels, but it denotes the same things. St. Peter uses it in a passage in which he quotes a Hebrew parable (2 Pet. 2:22; cf. Prov 26:11), and in the Septuagint it is used for the same Hebrew word.

St. Matthew gives us an important clue for the correct definition of the nature of a parable. After he has recorded our Lord's first three parables, he adds the words: "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'" (Mt 13:34-35), which is a quotation from the Greek version of Psalm 78 (c.f. Ps 78:2). It agrees exactly with the Hebrew text: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter propositions (hidden) from the beginning."

According to St. Matthew here, our Lord's figurative mode of speech, which he describes as *parable*, and of which he has given three examples in the preceding verses, corresponds to the *Maschal*, or the proverbial language of the Old Testament. The conception which the Israelites, who were familiar with the Old Testament, had formed of this term *parable* of the Septuagint is supposed to be generally known and is applied to the figurative discourse of our Saviour.

We may therefore apply our observations on the figurative language of the Old Testament to our Lord's parables also.

If we bear in mind at the same time the examples which the Evangelists record expressly as parables, we shall not err in defining the nature of a parable. Keeping before us these examples together with the *Maschal* of the Old Testament we consider that there are four elements necessary to the parable: (1) The discourse must have a certain internal independence and completeness. (2) It must contain a higher, supernatural truth. (3) This truth must be clothed in figurative language. (4) There must be a comparison between the truth and its image.

The first element does not require elaboration of the thought nor expansion in the expression of it. Thus, for instance, in Ezekiel the very brief expression, "Like mother, like daughter," is called a parable (16:44), and our Lord himself calls the brief saying in Lk 4:23 a parable, although he does not offer this as his own teaching, but, so to say, takes it from the lips of the Nazarites. Again, this element requires a thought which is wholly complete in itself, and we find this exemplified in all the examples in the New Testament. The greater or lesser minuteness of detail with which the thought is propounded has no decided effect on the nature of the discourse—as is said in botany, "large or small does not change the species."

As we are dealing exclusively with our Lord's parables in the Gospel, it follows, as a matter of course, that they are not deficient in the second essential element of a true parable. The figurative language of the parables which are the utterances and the teaching of our Saviour will of necessity lead us into the supernatural domain of the truths of religion and its duties. Therefore we find mentioned continually in these discourses the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, to which our Lord directs our attention and which is the center from which the parables send forth their various rays of light and in which they are again concentrated as in a common focus.

Our divine Lord presents this supernatural substance, these truths of religion respecting the kingdom of Heaven in the parables of the Gospel, under the most varied images. Even if the proverbial language of the Old Testament did not originally require a comparison, a simile, yet this figurative dress is never wanting in the Gospel parables, although it may not be always expressly pointed out by a word expressing comparison. It is so indissolubly connected with this manner of speaking, that in ordinary language, parable, simile, and figurative discourse may be regarded as synonymous.

Finally, in a real parable the image is placed in comparison with the truth to be demonstrated, not merely shown forth for this purpose by itself alone. Hence the usual introduction to a parable: The kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard-seed, etc. If this introduction and the express comparison are wanting sometimes, as for instance in the parable of the Sower, still, as we learn from the explanation which our Lord adds, such a juxtaposition of the image and the truth compared to (its *antitype*) is, as a matter of fact, present. The hearer must first bring the image vividly before his mind so as to realize what happens to the seed in the ground; then, when he compares the fate of the Word of God with this image, he will grasp the supernatural truth underlying our Lord's lesson.

It follows from what has been said that the Gospel parable is *the illustration of a supernatural truth by means of a simile*—an image is placed in comparison—*given in a complete self-dependent discourse*.

The Form, that is to say, the completeness of the proposition or discourse, the Substance, which is the supernatural truth, the Image or simile from the order of nature or man's life, and the Comparison of the truth with the image—these sufficiently distinguish the parables from other discourses of a similar kind.

Owing to the want of completeness of *Form*, figurative phrases or comparisons which are used in a proposition or a discourse are not to be classed as parables, as for instance when our Lord says: "I saw Satan like lightning falling from Heaven" (Lk 10:18), or when it is said of the people: "They were distressed, and lying like sheep that have no shepherd" (Mt 9:36). Yet it would not be quite consistent with the Gospel usage to limit the proper use of the term "parable" to complete narratives of occurrences from nature or from human life. "Parables in the stricter sense" these may well be called, but the application of the words in the more comprehensive sense which we have explained is more in accordance with the usage of the Evangelists.

The Gospel parable is distinguished from the *fable*, especially by its supernatural *substance*. According to the usually conceived idea of a fable, it only embodies some purely natural truth. Lessons of practical personal experience and of natural morality are vividly illustrated by means of fictitious narratives or descriptions. The fable is of a profane nature, whilst the parable on the sacred lips of our Lord is wholly religious.

Our Lord's parables in the Gospel owe their special character to the *image* or simile, because by means of it they are elevated above the ordinary discourse. The figurative illustration of a truth of religion can be accomplished in different ways: sometimes by a simple comparison, as with a fruit-tree and its fruit, or with a house set on a hill, and so on; and again by the presentment of a simile from nature or from the life of man, such as the Mustard-seed, the Sower, the Fig-tree, the Vineyard, etc.; at other times by the relation of examples, such as the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the Publican, and so forth. The divine Master, by this alternation of the images, knew how to invest his parables with their manifold diversity and their special charm.

The final distinction of a parable from a metaphor and an allegory is the *comparison* between the image and its antitype

(the truth that is compared). St. Augustine explains the concept of metaphor briefly and pertinently: “the usurped transferring of any word from its proper object to an object not proper”; and he adds as an example: “waving corn-fields, vines putting forth gems, the bloom of youth, and snowy hairs” (“Against Lying”, 24). In the metaphor the word used in its figurative meaning is set down directly as the image for the intended truth; there is no juxtaposition nor comparison of the image with its antitype, although such comparison and presumed similarity are to be regarded as the groundwork of every metaphor. If several such metaphors are joined together so that a proposition or a number of propositions are formed of expressions used in a purely figurative sense, then we have a genuine allegory.

Our Lord in his figurative language, besides comparisons, often makes use of various metaphors and allegories, as in his warning against the leaven of the Pharisees (Mt 16:1; Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1), in the describing of Herod as a fox, in his description of the Pharisaical nature (Mt 23:4), and of his own mildness: “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:30), etc.

Of course, this distinction is not practically observed, because both forms of speech are often intermingled, and the theory is not strictly carried out in practice. Hence it seems doubtful to many commentators if the figure of the Vineyard and the Vine in Ps 79:9 *et seq.*; in Is 5:1 *et seq.*; Jer 2:21; Ez 19:10 *et seq.*; Hos 10:1; and in John 15:1 and the following, are to be regarded in the various passages as parables or allegories.

But although we may describe such passages as “allegorical parables,” or may exclude them generally from the class of parables and treat them as allegories, because in them the figure and the antitype are not kept distinct from each other, at the same time we must not pass them over unnoticed, on account of their close affinity to those parables of our Lord which are universally acknowledged as such.

The early Church writers give especial prominence to the figurative character of the parables, while at the same time they emphasize the abstruse and enigmatic nature which is peculiar to many of them owing to their figurative wording.

Chapter 2: The Object of Our Lord's Parables

In determining the object of our Lord's parables, we must bear in mind that, according to the Gospel, his hearers were divided into two classes: one comprising the Apostles and all the other disciples who were loyal to their divine Master and faithfully accepted his teaching, while the second class was composed of unbelievers whose minds were wholly fixed on earthly things, who rejected the exhortations of our Saviour and daily more and more turned away from him in avowed unbelief.

Our Lord's object in the parables in general, as far as his faithful disciples were concerned, was obviously, having regard to the generally conceived idea and the nature of this form of discourse, the immediate one of illustrating for them, by means of a simile, some supernatural truth. The sublime truths and lessons which the Son of God wished to impart to them from the boundless treasures of his divine wisdom were to be brought home to them by means of images from the world of nature and human life. Their understanding would thus more easily and clearly recognize these truths, their will would embrace them with greater firmness and decision, and their memory would retain a deeper and more lasting impression of them.

It must be clear to every one on serious reflection how deeply the foundation of this primary aim or object of the figurative discourses is grounded on the nature of the human mind and on the order of Creation as willed by God. The activity of the powers of our soul, owing to its union with the body, is naturally dependent on the capabilities of our sense faculties: as Aquinas says, "all knowledge originates in sensation." This dependence makes itself most felt precisely with regard to the most exalted and sublime truths, for in this the saying of Aristotle holds good: "As the eyes of night-birds are blinded by the clear daylight, so it is with our understanding

regarding the things which of themselves are clearest of all." Precisely, then, with respect to these truths does the understanding need the help of thought-inspiring images by means of which it can by the comparison of points of resemblance and of contrast form a conception of those supernatural things which are beyond its unaided comprehension. The more vivid the conception formed by the intellect, the deeper will be the impression on the will and the memory.

That such images and comparisons for the illustration of the supernatural order exist everywhere in the natural world is in accordance with the relation which the divine Creator willed should exist between the visible and the invisible world: "for the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made . . ." (Rom 1:20). The school of Socrates, indeed, had already recognized this fundamental law of the Creation and had learned to regard the visible world as an image of the invisible.

To the all-seeing Eye of him who beholds all things from end to end and who searches equally the visible and the invisible world a wealth of manifold images offered itself, quite spontaneously, by means of which he could illustrate and bring home to his disciples the lessons of his eternal wisdom. To attain this end was the supreme object of our Lord's figurative discourses.

That our Lord in some parables was obliged to explain the image in order to lead his disciples to a knowledge of the truth of which it was the type is not inconsistent with this object. Even if the chosen simile was, in itself, clear and intelligible to all, and if it also bore a striking resemblance to a supernatural truth and so was excellently adapted to illustrate the same, still it was not necessary that this resemblance should be perceptible at once everywhere, nor that this relation of the image taken from the natural order should be clearly conceived on the instant by every one as

bearing on the supernatural lesson. In such cases the elucidation had to come from the Teacher himself. He had to reveal the relation which existed between the truth and its image, and so only by means of his explanation was the object of his figurative lesson attained.

The parables did not, by any means, all require this explanation; for instance, the example, taken from life, of the Good Samaritan did not need it, and certainly the simile of the Fig-tree, which is expressly described as a "parable," did not require any explanation on our Lord's part to lead the disciples to the understanding of the truth it contained. Similarly, many other images must certainly have been clear and intelligible to the disciples without further explanation, despite the fact that our Lord very often had reason to complain of their slowness and difficulty in understanding his instructions.

This proves, moreover, that the necessity for explanation arose, in most instances, from the want of intelligence on the part of the hearers. The band of believing disciples had been accustomed from childhood to share in the earthly expectations which their Jewish compatriots had formed regarding the coming of the Messiah. Hence the sublime lessons on the true nature and the real value of his kingdom and his claims on mankind did not readily come home to them. Many of the parables, therefore, held what were for them obscure and unsolved riddles, although they were in themselves calculated to bring home to them in the clearest manner the truths of the kingdom of heaven.

Hence, although the divine Master was obliged to explain some of his figurative discourses to his disciples in order to attain the object for which they were delivered, this is by no means a proof of any imperfection in the Teacher, much less does it prove that he did not seek by means of these parables to attain his object, which was the illustration of the divine truths to his disciples.

We can very well understand from some of the parables that our Lord's specific object in employing the figurative mode of speech was to adapt himself to the capacity of his disciples. He had, indeed, many sublime truths to communicate to them, but truly, on more than one occasion he might have applied those words to them: "You cannot bear them now" (Jn 16:12). For this reason, the parable was a very suitable means of bringing home to them, according to the measure of their capacity, his sublime lessons. Even if they could not grasp the truth in its full significance they could at least recognize, more or less clearly, certain outlines or features of a mystery.

Thus it is that we find our Lord so frequently speaking in parables to his own particular disciples. Even in his farewell discourse he thus recapitulates a portion of his former instructions: "These things I have spoken to you in proverbs," and he contrasts this method of teaching with the undisguised communication of his mysteries: "The hour is coming when I will no more speak to you in proverbs, but will show you plainly of the Father" (Jn 16:25). And on account of the unmistakable announcement of his going away to the Father, which he at once added, the Apostles said to him:

"Behold now you speak plainly, and speaking no proverbs" (Jn 16:29). And Our Lord's words after the Resurrection also show us that the divine Master wished to adapt himself by means of his parables to the capacity of his disciples.

At the same time, the regards of the Son of God certainly went out beyond the narrow circle of his immediate hearers to the Faithful who in his Church throughout the ages to the end of time would hearken to the words of his divine wisdom. He had entrusted the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to his Apostles for them all; for them all it was fitting that he should make use of parables in order to communicate to them his divine truths. Just because this method of teaching was wonderfully adapted to the unchanging nature of man's mind and the eternal harmony of the visible and invisible creation, so it was suited to bring home the eternal truths to all nations

in all ages, to the great and to the lowly, to the wise and to the simple, according to their individual capacity.

We shall not err if we regard the attainment of this end also as included in the object aimed at by our Lord in his parables addressed to believers.

Respecting the unconverted multitude to whom he offered his parables, we may say that in a portion of these similes our Lord had the same end in view as he had when he addressed parables to his disciples. For if we accept the parables according to the meaning of the Evangelists as figurative illustrations of supernatural truths, we must also admit with reference to the people that in many of his similes our Lord intended this precious gift for all his hearers. He would attain in their regard the selfsame object which was the underlying motive of the figurative mode of speech. Thus, for instance, if we take into consideration the parable of the Fig tree, we must include the simile in the Sermon on the Mount of the Fig tree and its Fruit (Mt 7:16-20) amongst the parables, and in like manner, keeping in view the "parables" of the New Piece on the Old Garment and the New Wine in Old Bottles (Lk 5:36-39), we must include the comparison between the House built on the Rock and the one built on sand (Mt 7:24) amongst the number also. Certainly, in these and other figurative discourses the comparison between the truth and its image which our Lord drew for his hearers was sufficient to render his lesson clear, intelligible, and interesting to all. There is no need for us to exclude the direct object of similar parables and to substitute another.

Besides, we must not, right off, regard all our Lord's hearers, with the exception of his disciples, as unbelievers. Even if the greater number of the people daily turned away from our Redeemer in ever-increasing stiff-necked obduracy, still, surely, there were, apart from the twelve Apostles and the seventy-two disciples, many good people among the crowd who were not adverse to further instruction. Perhaps St. Mark in the expression "those who were about him with the

twelve” (Mk 4:10) does not refer to the disciples alone, but may also include the better disposed amongst the people. In any case, our Lord had, with reference to these well-disposed hearers, the same object in view in his parables as he had regarding his disciples.

Still, the fact that the greater number of the people would not acknowledge their Messiah and that they continued in their unbelief notwithstanding all warnings and all miracles, became precisely a reason for our Lord to make known that He had a further object in his parables.

It was on the lovely shore of the Lake of Gennesaret. The divine Master had just delivered a long discourse which he closed with the simile of the Sower recorded by the Evangelists. Then the disciples, drawing near their Master, asked him the meaning of this simile and his motive for the long figurative discourse which he had given to the people without any explanation.

The three Evangelists record the incident in the following passages:

Mt 13:10-15—

And his disciples came and said to him: Why do you speak to them in parables? He answered and said to them: Because to you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven: but to them it is not given. For he that has, to him shall be given, and he shall abound: but he that has not, from him shall be taken away that also which he has. Therefore do I speak to them in parables: because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in them, who says: By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand: and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive. For the heart of this people is grown gross, and with their ears they have been dull of hearing, and their eyes they have shut, lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.

Mk 4:10-12 —

And when he was alone, the twelve that were with him asked him the parable. And he said to them: To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but to them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand: lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

Lk 8:9-10—

And his disciples asked him what this parable might be. To whom he said: To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to the rest in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing may not understand.

We see from the context in the three Evangelists that the people's unbelief in our Lord's previous lessons and miracles had manifested itself in the saddest manner. According to St. Matthew and St. Mark, the leaders of the people in the case of the man with the withered hand had set a trap for Jesus "that they might accuse him" (Mt 12:10; Mk 3:2). "They had made a consultation against him, how they might destroy him" (Mt 12:14; Mk 3:6). When he healed the man who was blind and dumb and possessed with a devil, they said: "This man casts out devils by Beelzebub the prince of the devils" (Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22), and they also said: "He has an unclean spirit" (Mk 3:30). After he had worked countless miracles before them, they wanted a sign from him (Mt 12:38).

Furthermore, from our Lord's lament over the want of faith in Israel (Lk 7:9); over the impenitence of the cities in the neighborhood of the Sea of Galilee (Mt 11:20-24); over the wicked generation which on the day of Judgment shall be condemned by the people of Ninevah and the Queen of Sheba for their unbelief (Mt 12:40-45)—the generation which said of the Son of Man: "Behold a man that is a glutton and a drinker of wine, a friend of publicans and sinners" (Lk 7:34)— from

these lamentations, we see that not only the leaders, but a great part of the people also remained unbelievers.

Even his “friends . . . went out to lay hold of him. For they said: he is become mad” (Mk 3:21). Even if one or other of the details should be given another place in the historical sequence of events, still the picture of the situation would remain unchanged in its principal features.

Thus it became more and more clearly manifest that the people of Israel were unworthy of their destiny as God’s chosen people. They had brought upon themselves the sentence of reprobation pronounced against them by the justice of their offended God. Therefore, only to a few chosen witnesses from amongst them should the decrees of the eternal Wisdom and Love regarding the new kingdom of God amongst men be made known. Not through the people as a nation but only by means of these chosen instruments was the realization of those eternal decrees to be accomplished.

Our Lord in the words referring to his figurative mode of instruction, which we have quoted, announced to his disciples this sentence of reprobation decreed by divine Justice. As a comparison of the three Evangelists reveals, they had a twofold object in their question: They wished to know why our Lord spoke thus in parables to the people, and, secondly, they wanted to know the meaning of the parable of the Sower.

The first part of their question, which alone concerns us, did not by any means refer to all the parables in our Lord’s discourses. He had used this figurative mode of speaking before the instruction given on the shore of the lake, and the Evangelists expressly describe some at least of the earlier similes as parables (Mk 3:23; Lk 5:36; 6:39. Cf. 4:23). But we do not read of any such question as the “Wherefore?” on these earlier occasions. Besides, such a question would have been out of place, for the obviousness of such similes as the driving out of Satan (Mk 3:23-27), or the house built on a rock and the one built on sand, which were spoken at the close of

the Sermon on the Mount, left no doubt as to the object of such a mode of speech.

But it is otherwise with the figurative discourses which our Lord spoke from the ship. Here we have not mere incidental figures and similes casually brought into the discourse for the illustration of a truth, but an instruction of which the greater part, or rather the whole, consisted exclusively of parables (Mt 13:34; Mk 4:34). Even if we set aside the question of whether the seven similes recorded by St. Matthew were spoken one after the other in the same instruction or not, still on account of the preliminary remark "he told them many things in parables" (see Mt 13:3; Mk 4:2)

and of the "when he was alone" (Mk 4:10) at the end of the example of the Sower, we must necessarily admit that our Lord, in addition to this parable, also proposed a series of others in sequence.

These parables according to their nature were to serve the great object of bringing the divine truths by means of earthly images within the grasp of man's feeble understanding. Nay, more, in these similes our Lord did indeed choose the greatest and most sublime truths which he had to communicate to mankind: "the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven," the vicissitudes of his kingdom on earth in its foundation and its extension, its all-conquering might and its divine dignity. But he so chose the images and similes that without a special explanation they were unintelligible to the hearers. They heard the words and saw the earthly image, but they were unable to penetrate through the veil of this image to the eternal truth. The explanation was then given, not to the people, but to the faithful disciples only; indeed, our Lord acted similarly with regard to all the parables which he spoke on this occasion (Mk 4:34).

Hence we can and, in fact, we must say that our Lord had a special object in these parables regarding the unbelieving people. The clear and concurring words of the three

Evangelists leave no room for the least doubt on this point. Our Lord in his answer to the disciples' question emphasizes this clearly: "To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to the rest in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing may not understand" (Lk 8:10). The word *that* in "*that* seeing they may not see", which we find in St. Luke as well as in St. Mark, does not merely express a simple effect as some commentators on these words have maintained and still less does it imply only "because". On the contrary, it means the special aim and object which our Lord had in view when he spoke to the people in these parables. This object was: That the Jews might see the image and not recognize the truth; might hear the words and not understand their deeper import. The instruction on the mysteries, the true nature and the value of the new kingdom of the Messiah, was to remain disguised to them.

We can rightly understand those seemingly hard words of the divine Master only by means of the connection which we have explained. They imply the professed unbelief of the leaders and of a great part of the people. The just punishments of God necessarily followed this willful guilt. His justice must execute the sentence which men by their own deliberate sin have merited.

Ages before, the Lord by means of his Prophets had admonished the people of Israel, and had called upon them to repent and to amend, but, again and again, he found only defiant insubordination and stiff-necked impenitence. Now the only Son of God had come upon earth and had exhausted every means in the effort to bring his people to believe. He had continually admonished and instructed them. He had proved by countless undeniable miracles that he was the Messiah. And yet avowed unbelief and defiant desertion were manifested more and more in Israel. Thus it was that the rejection of the people followed, and according to the measure of each one's guilt each individual had to bear the just punishment. Inasmuch as they had been deaf to the clear, plain admonition of their Messiah and, at most, had only

manifested barren admiration but no real amendment, so now the understanding of the clear and undisguised Word of God concerning the kingdom of the Messiah was withheld from them. The grace of the instruction was withdrawn from them, and they had now to experience the punishment of their hard-heartedness.

If, therefore, we find our Lord's words recorded in St. Matthew in the milder form: "Therefore do I speak to them in parables: because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Mt 13:13), we are here introduced to the explanation which underlies the form of words recorded in St. Mark and St. Luke. That St. Matthew was glad to bring into prominence this presupposed fact of the unbelief to which our Lord on this occasion certainly referred is explained to us by the fact that his Gospel was intended for the Jewish Christians in Palestine. It is with regard to these latter that he adds, according to his wont, the reference to a prophetic utterance in the Old Testament. "And the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in them" (Mt 13:14). What Isaiah said of his contemporaries is now once more fulfilled in Israel in the days of the Messiah. St. Mark does not, indeed, quote the whole of this prophecy (Is 6:9), but has it in view whilst repeating rather the substance than the literal text of its beginning and the end (Mk 4:12).

The Fathers of the Church interpret the words quoted concerning the object of the parables in this sense of a just punishment of God. They rightly point out that the Jews by their non-observance of the Old Law rendered themselves unworthy of the New and so, by their own sin, lost both, according to our Lord's words in St. Matthew: "For he that has, to him shall be given, and he shall abound; but he that has not, from him shall be taken away that also which he has" (Mt 13:12). (See St. Cyrillus of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, Theophylact, St. Euthymius, St. Augustine, St. Bede, St. Druthmar, St. Thomas Aquinas, etc.)

The reference to the words and the context in Isaiah (6:9 *et seq.*) declare quite clearly the intention, and not merely the consequences; and the obstinate unbelief and impenitence of the people are plainly enough pointed out in the context as the hypothesis for the penal judgment of God.

Some commentators, together with the argument of the justice of God, also bring forward the merciful goodness of our Lord, who by means of the disguise of the parable would not only humble the proud unbelief of the Jews, but would also at the same time save them from still heavier punishment, for if they heard the undisguised Truth and still contradicted it, they would only incur still greater guilt and punishment

Hence it was, Euthymius believed, that the Lord spoke to the people in parables.

Besides, mercy had its part in the object of these parables, even with regard to the people. One or another of the exhortations could be understood by all, and the obscure, figurative discourse contained at least, an invitation to seek and inquire further after the Truth. Thus our Lord spoke, "And with many such parables he spoke to them the word, according as they were able to hear" (Mk 4:33), because they were no longer capable of being instructed by any other method in the nature and the dignity of the kingdom of the Messiah.

On account of its twofold object, the parables have been well compared to "the husk which preserves the precious grain as much *for* the industrious as *from* the idle."

Chapter 3: Fundamental Principles for Interpreting the Parables

A glance at the history of the exegesis (explanation) of the parables shows us that both ancient and modern commentators have fallen into many errors.

Some thought that every feature of the image must indicate a higher truth, and hence they were ever discovering fresh mysteries in the parable details. Others maintained on the contrary that we should be satisfied with one essential truth in the parable, and they derided any interpretation of the details as contrary to our Lord's intention. In more recent times, even the interpretations of some of the parables given to us by the Evangelists themselves have been rejected as later inventions, misconceptions of our Lord's words, "well-meant but more or less complete blunders," whilst every explanation of a simile is declared to be "nonsense".

The nature and the object of the parables, as well as of our Lord's explanations, as set forth in the Gospel, afford us important clues to the correct method which, as usual, lies between the two extremes.

The nature of the parables as vivid illustrations of supernatural truths by means of images from the natural world and man's life shows us that our interpretation must in the first place concern itself with that truth which our Lord willed to teach in the similitude. And that truth must not be regarded as a figurative sense of the words of Scripture, but as the actual literal meaning of the parabolic mode of speaking.

The explanations which our Lord appended to certain parables prove that, very often at least, the relation of the image to the truth was not limited to one point merely, but could be extended in manifold ways to different parts of the

parable. Besides these general guidelines, we have to consider in our interpretations some special instructions, many of which have been given to us by the Fathers of the Church. With the help of these we can try to fathom our Lord's teaching in his similes, "just as gold is sought for in the earth, the kernel in the nut, and the hidden fruit beneath the prickly husk of the chestnut" (St. Jerome).

In the first place, naturally, those rules which are observed in the explanation of every text hold good with regard to the parables. It will therefore be useful to recall them briefly.

The first condition, the *sine qua non* for a correct interpretation, is knowledge and right comprehension of the text and its various words. Such knowledge and such understanding must form the foundation of the whole edifice unless it is to be raised on sand or rubbish.

As many of the parables have been recorded by two or three Evangelists, we must compare these with one another in order to arrive at a knowledge of the whole text. Further, in each separate text we must especially consider the concordance and particulars of the time, the place, the occasion, etc. In this way we shall sometimes find that in what is apparently one and the same parable, these particulars refer to wholly different circumstances. From this we see that our Lord, for some special object, at times repeated a simile under different circumstances. In saying this we are not giving him a "certificate of poverty," nor are we supposing that he repeated every eight days instructions which were above the heads and the hearts of his hearers. In case of repeated parables it would be absurd to employ offhand the exposition which suits one situation for another quite different in its circumstances.

A comparison with similar images and forms of speech in Holy Scripture will help very much to the understanding of our Lord's words. Apart from the general usefulness of such a comparison, the choice of many parables was certainly

influenced through the use of the same or similar images in the sacred writings of the Prophets, in the Psalms, and in other parts of the Old Testament. Hence, very often such utterances will throw more light on a similitude. Similar examples and comparisons found in profane writings, though of less value, are not to be passed over wholly. Oriental writings in particular, as we have already remarked, are very rich in such figurative forms of expression.

Besides these specified means, which are of more or less importance for the interpretation of every text, there are some particular points in connection with the explanation of the parables which can help us to a right understanding of their meaning.

The parable is intended to illustrate a supernatural truth by means of contrast with an image or simile; therefore in our interpretation we must, in the first place, keep this image in view. The more closely we realize it with all its various features, the more it will help us to understand the words of our Lord.

Now the images in the Gospel parables are taken partly from the natural world and partly from man's life, both, furthermore, being given in that particular form under which they appeared to our Lord's hearers in Palestine. Although the world of nature and the life of man are in all places and in all ages governed by the same laws, yet their exterior forms present great diversity. It is not right to pass over this diversity of appearances altogether, and to fix our attention solely on what is common and general. Fields and seed and sowers are indeed to be seen everywhere, but it was not everywhere that there could be seen a field such as that which our Lord pointed out to his auditors, nor a sower similar to the one who at that moment was striding before their eyes through the fields, nor yet seed like that which he was scattering.

In considering the words of the parable in the Gospel we must by no means regard it as a matter of indifference how we represent to ourselves the different parts of the image. Of this we shall meet evidence at every step of our interpretation of the parables. We must therefore strive to reproduce for ourselves as exactly as possible, the image in that form under which it represented itself to our Lord and his hearers, in Galilee, or Samaria, or Judea.

Hence it is necessary for the similes taken from the world of Nature that we should keep in view the physical features of the Holy Land in the time of our Lord, and also turn our attention to its flora and fauna. St. Augustine, indeed, held that the contemptuous neglect for such apparently small matters was the cause of the figurative language of the Sacred Text being so badly understood: "Ignorance of things, too, renders figurative expressions obscure, as when we do not know the nature of the animals, or minerals, or plants, which are frequently referred to in Scripture by way of comparison." ("On Christian Doctrine" II, 16:24).

Perhaps this advice upon a point so perfectly obvious will be considered unnecessary. And yet, many commentaries of ancient and modern scholars leave a great deal to be desired on this very point.

A knowledge of the social and political aspects of the Holy Land and the usages and customs of its inhabitants in the time of our Lord is equally necessary for the images taken from man's life, in order to understand properly the features chosen for the comparison in the different parables.

But the image in the simile is always only the husk. If we would find the kernel, we must seek the truth which our Lord wishes to teach us by means of the image. We can discover this truth without much difficulty, as a rule, from our Lord's words and from the context.

But with regard to the interpretation the question arises, how far we may go in the application of the image to the truth. The answer is easy in those instances where our Lord himself gives us the explanation. But where, as in most of the parables, this is not the case, we must provide ourselves with some rule by which we can apportion correctly what belongs solely to the image and what to the truth pointed out to us by the image.

The principal rule laid down for us by the Fathers of the Church is precisely the one which arises most naturally from the essence of the parable. This rule requires that we should keep in view, above all, in every simile our Lord's principal intention and fundamental idea. That is, we should reflect upon the motive which he had in bringing a truth into relation with an image, but we are not to seek after such explanations of the incidental features of this image as would divert us from the principal matter at issue.

The basis for this rule and its justification are not hard to find. If the chief purpose of the parable is to illustrate for us a supernatural truth by the image taken from the natural order, then the principle which is to be adhered to in every comparison holds good in this also—namely, in a comparison the question hinges before all on the point of comparison. Above all things we must keep in view the motive for setting before us the image and its antitype, the point of comparison. This is decisive for the interpretation of the comparison. It is the center from which the rays spread equally over the whole image. This point of comparison in the parables we find to be the principal intention and fundamental idea which our Lord in each case had; these give us the key to the interpretation of the simile.

St. Irenaeus referred indirectly to this rule when he was combating the false Gnostic interpretations of the parables. He said that these heretics wanted to make ropes out of sand when they sought to make our Lord's parables and other parts of the Scriptures agree with their propositions—with

propositions which contradicted the teaching of Christ as it was transmitted by the Apostles.

Origen also had this rule in view when, after a comparison to pictures and statues, he continues: "Let it be observed in the Gospel Parables that the kingdom of Heaven is not compared with the image in all its parts, but only with some features, according to the matter concerned."

The words of St. Basil are more explicit still regarding this essential requirement: "The parables do not correspond to the exterior image in all parts of the subject to be considered, but direct the attention to the principal truth."

St. John Chrysostom lays down the same principle repeatedly: "We must not interpret the parables word for word. We must much rather seek to discover the reason why they were propounded and keep to this without troubling ourselves much about anything else." We see from another passage how this is to be understood: "As I have always said, we must not interpret the parables word for word, for, if we did, many inconsistencies would result." In proof of the correctness of his rule he adduces our Lord's own method. "He wanted to teach us this, and therefore he thus explains the parable (of the Cockle). He does not tell us who the servants are who appear on the scene, but passes over this part to show us that he has only brought them forward for the sake of consistency, and to amplify the image. On the other hand he explains the principal and most important points by showing that he is the Lord and Judge of all—which was his motive in proposing the parable."

In order to apply correctly this rule to discover the fundamental idea of a parable, we shall have to take into special consideration the introduction and the conclusion of the Gospel account as well as the general context. These commonly give us a clear intimation of our Lord's intention. If we add to these the interpretations which he himself gave of some of the parables, we shall be able to say with Tertullian:

“There is not a parable which you will not find to be either explained by the Lord Himself, as that of the sower; or else cleared by a preface from the writer of the Gospel, as in the parable of the arrogant judge and the importunate widow, which is expressly applied to earnestness in prayer; or capable of being spontaneously understood, as in the parable of the fig-tree, which was spared a while in hopes of improvement—an emblem of Jewish sterility.” (“On the Resurrection of the Flesh”, 33).

Very often the application of this rule will result in the discovery that the motive for which the truth and its image were contrasted does not merely concern one isolated point, but extends to many features of the image. Our Lord himself teaches us, as we have already pointed out, in his explanation of the parable of the Sower, and of the Tares, to pay attention to the various parts of the simile, and even to learn salutary lessons from the stones and the thorns. And so in other cases also we shall have to examine every word of the divine Teacher in order to overlook none of his lessons. We must seek to discover these lessons, not by searching after the allegorical explanation of all the features of the image, but by carefully considering which of the features of the simile, according to our Lord’s intention, had reference to the truth which it is intended to illustrate.

Even if the interpretation of many of the Fathers of the Church and other ecclesiastical writers lighten the labor for us, still, in individual cases, it is often difficult to come to a right decision upon all points. Hard and fast rules cannot be laid down. But it certainly would be injudicious to reject an interpretation which, without straining, finds in any one feature of a simile a relation to our Lord’s fundamental idea and to the truth which he taught, more particularly if this interpretation has been already given by the masters of the early Christian ages.

We have seen that in the early Christian ages the strict limitation to one fundamental idea was regarded as an

important rule for the interpretation of the parables. It is by no means due to modern scholars, as some would have us believe, that this principle has come into honor in the interpretation of the similes of our Lord. But when it was a question of the practical utilization of the parables, that is to say, in the homiletical instruction of the Faithful, then the early Doctors of the Church did not confine themselves to the tracing out of one fundamental idea. In all our Lord's utterances, but especially in his figurative discourses, they found, apart from the fundamental idea, very many characteristics which they employed in a most beautiful manner in the teaching of faith and morals. Can we blame them because they did not heedlessly pass over these points? We may refrain from doing so, and yet not approve of all the fantastic explanations of details which were permitted by the fashion of allegorizing, especially in the school of Alexandria.

If we hold fast to the necessary distinction between the exact interpretation of the literal meaning of our Lord's similes and the allegorical explanations which simply serve for edification, we shall surely not venture to reject contemptuously those mystical applications to the truths of religion and the life of a Christian. Even though some fashionable modern scholars may smile contemptuously at such applications, it seems quite reasonable that we should keep them in view, just as the Fathers of the Church and the Doctors of the early ages did not despise them.

How far, however, we may agree with such interpreters in regarding the allegorical interpretations as coming within the scope of our Lord's intention is a question hard to answer. We, therefore, in order to be on the safe side, will not try to find in them evidence of any truth, nor to make them serve for the proper explanation of the parables; but We shall rather seek to pay due attention to them in respect to their homiletic value.

It is not necessary to remark here expressly that in many of the parables the relation to the teaching of Christian faith and

morals is rendered a necessary one by the fundamental idea and the intention of our Lord. In such cases the explanation of the literal meaning naturally includes the exposition of these relations and thus affords us very convincing arguments for the truth of our religion.