

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

6-1-1955

Achieving Homiletical Skills and Techiques from Jesus' Use of the Parable

Ronald Starenko

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_starenkor@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Starenko, Ronald, "Achieving Homiletical Skills and Techiques from Jesus' Use of the Parable" (1955).

Bachelor of Divinity. 452.

<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/452>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

ACHIEVING HOMILETICAL SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

FROM JESUS' USE OF THE PARABLE

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

Ronald Starenko

June 1955

Approved by: Alex Amle Guibert
Advisor

Arthur M. Vincent
Reader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE NATURE OF THE PARABLE.	4
III. HOMILETICAL SKILLS FOUND IN JESUS' USE OF THE PARABLE	9
IV. THE PARABLE AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE TEACHING METHOD	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	38

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the area of public preaching there seems to be a greater need for a more complete understanding of the technique and skill with which Christ used the parable in emphasizing Christian truths. The territory into which the writer of this thesis enters has had only incidental and accidental pilgrims. While the ministry of Jesus has had large attention from scholars in questions of Biblical theology, there has not been published any adequate treatment of our Lord's technique in the area of homiletics. Jesus was distinctly the master preacher, but His ability to illustrate and skillfully present truth through the use of the parable has been largely neglected.

Much of modern preaching today has revealed a pathetic failure to present the abstract in concrete and intelligible terms. The trend toward speculation and a philosophical approach has resulted, not in a greater understanding of God's truths, but rather a degeneration deeper into the confusion and uncertainty of abstract thought. Parables deal with abstractions; yet, they focus the truth in concrete terms and they bring people into the picture. Now, if we are at all concerned about presenting the truths about God and His Word in a way in which we can see action and a functional relationship of people with their Lord,

then we might do well to see how Christ employed the parable in preaching. Certainly, if Christ used the parable and took an ordinary naked truth and put it into action and showed how that truth can be operative in the personal lives of people, then, unmistakably, that is an accepted method in preaching.

While there is a great abundance of literature dealing with the content of Jesus' preaching, the writer has failed to find much material specifically homiletical in its approach. It is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss the nature of Christ, nor the message of Christ, rather, attention is directed to the method with which He drew and held attention. To be sure His personality and message will occupy a necessary and important part of the research, but nevertheless we shall deal specifically with His personal mastery of His audiences and the skills and methods found in His use of parables.

Whenever we are confronted with the person of Christ, His life and His work, we have an example that is inexhaustible. And because the Lord is the example of utter perfection in all things, the writer finds himself trying to measure the immeasurable. Such a paper, however, though restricted by limitations, is not without value and definitely has its possibilities.

For the Christian preacher Jesus Christ the Lord is both the model and the message. Our purpose is concerned with Him as the model. Observation reveals that modern

preaching is desperately in need of such a model. This thesis may serve to stimulate interest and provide thoughts and hints concerning the preaching skill of the Savior that will lead to public preaching akin to His.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF THE PARABLE

Those who have sought to find out what a parable is and how it is defined have perhaps discovered that their search is a difficult one. In the New Testament, two Greek words have been rendered by this one English term. One is "paroima," almost peculiar to the fourth Evangelist, translated "proverb." Literally it signifies "something by the way" and its figurative use denotes a dark saying, in which more is meant than meets the ear, and into which much valuable, though hidden meaning, has been packed. The other, the more common term, is "parabolee," which, curiously enough, is never used by John, but is the only one employed by the other evangelists. It comes from a verb which signifies to throw or place side by side, and denotes a placing of one thing beside another for the purpose of comparison, or, more generally, an utterance which involves a comparison. Taking the New Testament word, "parabolee," we see that it is a metaphorical term, a comparing, a comparison of one thing with another, a likeness, a similitude. Thayer states it is "a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God's kingdom, are figuratively

portrayed."¹

Trench sums up several points he had made in the first chapter of his book by writing:

The parable differs from the fable, by moving in a spiritual world, and never transgressing the actual order of natural things--from the myth, because in that there is an unconscious blending of the deeper meaning with the outward symbol, the two remaining separate in the parable--from the proverb, inasmuch as it is carried out, and not merely accidentally but necessarily figurative--from the allegory, by comparing one thing with another, and not transferring, as the allegory, the properties of one to the other.²

The little girl was very near the mark, then, when she said that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning;" and we may not be far wrong if we define it to be a narrative true to nature or to life, used for the purpose of conveying spiritual truth to the mind of the hearer.

The use of the parable in this manner, says Taylor, is a source of great power.

Its force depends on the analogy which exists between God's works in nature and providence, and His operation in grace. The world of nature came at first from, and is still sustained by, the hand of Him who formed the human soul; and the administration of providence is carried on by Him who gave us the revelation of His will in the Sacred Scriptures, and provided for us salvation through His Son.³

¹Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), p. 479.

²Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), p. 5.

³Wm. M. Taylor, The Parables of Our Savior (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1886), p. 2.

A true parable is something more than a mere felicitous illustration. It is an outward symbol of an inward reality. It is not the creation of a new similarity, but the revelation of a similarity that has always existed. Trench is not overstating the case, therefore, when he says of the Savior's parables, that:

Their power lies in the harmony unconsciously felt by all men, and which all deeper minds have delighted to trace, between the natural and spiritual worlds, so that analogies from the first are felt to be something more than illustrations happily yet arbitrarily chosen. They are arguments, and may be alleged as witnesses; the world of nature being throughout a witness for the world of the spirit, proceeding from the same hand, growing out of the same root, and being constituted for that very end.⁴

To complete this not too extensive study of what a parable is, we add some thoughts of G. Heinrici, a contributor to the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, which are particularly important because of the manner in which he describes the parable as a teaching device. He writes:

Parables common to the Synoptics treat of the kingdom of heaven, its strength, its worth, its realization. Three of them draw their material from nature or agriculture (Mark 4, 26-27), the fourth is based on the opposition between Israel's conduct and the promises of God. All are in essence prophetic. The parables common to Matthew and Luke deal with the relation of man to God, man's disposition, duties, and work, and not all are carried out to completion. . . .The style and color of these narratives vary

⁴Trench, op. cit., pp. 12 f.

greatly. Most of them are simple, and the narrative is carried only so far as is necessary to convey the meaning.⁵

Furthermore, the same writer adds:

The pictorial discourses of Jesus proclaim what He brought and what He was, their purpose was to instruct by illustrating. His material He found in nature and in human life, which mirrored for Him the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.⁶

The parable used an incident taken from common life and rounded into a gem-like picture, to set forth some corresponding truth in the higher and spiritual region. It was a favorite Jewish mode of putting truth, but Jesus imparted to it by far the richest and most perfect development. About one third of all His sayings which have been preserved to us consists of parables. He changed happenings in nature and action of men into perfect pictures and made them the vehicles for conveying to the world immortal truth.⁷

Thus, we might conclude that a parable is a story. It is a story because it is a narrative about people and happenings which could probably be true to life. It is a narrative that takes into account the world of nature and the habits of men. But these two factors are important only

⁵G. Heinrici, Schaff-Herzog, Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson and George William Gillmore (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), VIII, 345.

⁶Ibid., p. 346.

⁷Cf. James Stalker, The Life of Christ (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1891), p. 70.

as they depict life and action in the Kingdom of God.

Parables are simple and interesting, and their aim is to lead the listener beyond their natural meaning and illustrate to them the high and spiritual values and activity in the Kingdom of God.

... in that point in his ministry Jesus appears not to have spoken in parables. ... of the words he preached in the synagogues, by the sea-side, and to the multitudes of Jews, disciples and pagans. He was simple and unassuming in the manner of the Nazarene and also direct. But there came a time when he suddenly changed his style. His simple precepts were often met with derision and scorn, and among the multitudes there were always some who were anxious to pervert his sayings. When the multitudes gathered by the sea of Galilee to hear him, he spoke to them many things in parables. His disciples certainly observed the change and asked him, why do you speak in parables? Our Lord's answer is remarkable for its blended use of metaphor, proverb, simile, was so pointed and connected with a prophecy of Isaiah², that it became in itself one of the profoundest of his discourses. Jesus explains that according to the prophecy of Isaiah people would see, but they don't see the truth; they listen, but don't hear the Lord's message and can't understand it. To such who have no desire to know

² Cf. Isaiah, 62: 11-12.

³ Cf. Is. 6: 9-10.

CHAPTER III

HOMILETICAL SKILLS FOUND IN JESUS' USE OF THE PARABLE

The special reason and purpose of the parables of Jesus are stated in Matt. 13:10-17. Up to that point in His ministry Jesus appears not to have spoken in parables. Some of the words He preached in the synagogue, by the seashore, and on the mount were direct, simple and plain. He used simile and metaphor in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. But there came a time when He notably changed His style.¹ His simple precepts were often met with derision and scorn, and among the multitudes there were always some who were anxious to pervert His sayings. When the multitudes gathered by the Sea of Galilee to hear Him, He spoke to them many things in parables. His disciples quickly observed the change and asked Him, Why do you speak in parables? Our Lord's answer is remarkable for its blended use of metaphor, proverb, enigma, was so combined and connected with a prophecy of Isaiah², that it becomes in itself one of the profoundest of His discourses. Jesus explains that according to the prophecy of Isaiah people observe, but they don't see the truth; they listen, but don't hear the true message and can't understand it. To such who have no desire to know

¹Cf. Trench, op. cit., p. 28.

²Cf. Is. 6:9 f.

the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, the parable will be of no help, but it will help those who sincerely wish to know and understand the truth and the will of God.

The great thought in this answer seems to be that the Lord had a twofold purpose in the use of parables, namely, both to reveal and conceal great truths.³ There was, first, that inner circle of followers who received His word with joy, and who, like those who shared in the secret counsels of other kingdoms, were gifted to know the mysteries of the Messianic reign, long hidden, but now about to be revealed. He who is gifted with a desire to know God, and appropriate rightly the provisions of His grace, shall increase in wisdom and knowledge more and more by the manifold revelations of divine truth. But the man of opposite character, who has heart, soul and mind to love God, but is unwilling to use his power in earnest search for the truth, shall lose even what he seems to have. His powers will become weak and worthless by inactivity, and like the slothful servant in the parable of the talents, he will lose that which should have been his glory.⁴ According to Bond, the most prominent reason why Jesus used parables was the desire to avert an

³The "hina" in the parallel passages of Mk. 4:12 and Luke 8:10 shows that our Lord teaches in these words the final end and purpose of His parables, not merely their results. The quotation from Isaiah evinces the same thing.

⁴Cf. Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1890), pp. 190 f.

immature crisis in His ministry. The writer feels that Bond's position is well presented, when he says:

Two classes brought the risk of a crisis to His ministry--the ill-informed enthusiast, who would crown Him king, and the bitter enemy, who would have caused His death. Jesus knew that the lines of His duties converged to the cross, but He would not let the enthusiasm of His partisans nor the hatred of His foes deflect Him from His course or hasten His plans.⁵

Through the parables Jesus could continue to preach to the actual and the prospective believer, while the critic would be baffled.

There are, of course, many other reasons why Jesus employed the parables in His preaching. Every great preacher and teacher of truth usually has something notable in his method. The method is so important and contributes so much to make way for the truth, that we often perceive a preacher's success to be chiefly due to what we call his "way of putting things." We may expect, then, to find the method of Jesus greatly worth our study. Probably, it will baffle us to apprehend it fully, or to discover all its reasons; but what we can trace of it will certainly be instructive.

Other great teachers had given slight attention to the parable as a literary form, but it remained for Jesus to make it a specialty. At first glance we can cite several notable reasons why He found the parable so helpful

⁵Albert Richmond Bond, The Master Preacher (New York: American Tract Society, 1910), p. 99.

in preaching. By it He gathered up the analogies between the natural and the spiritual laws and experiences. Another reason for its use was found in the quick impression that it made upon the minds of the audience. The crowds along the roadside or street, in the homes and synagogues, in the fields or upon the beach would be lethargic and restless, therefore, powerful illustrations were needed to hold them. A third reason makes the parable the medium for statement to His disciples, who might gradually arrive at the true meaning and purpose of the parable where the crowds and the critics would remain in ignorance. Furthermore, the parable was employed to give His truth a communicative form. Men could easily recount the parables when they might not have been able to repeat learned discourses and doctrines.⁶

One of the more important features of His method, then, was His invariable adaptation to His hearers. This is the quality, for want of which, perhaps, preaching most frequently fails. His adaptation to the audiences who heard Him resulted in permanent significance. Coupled with that ability is another feature, popular character, which accounts for the usefulness of His method. About both of these features Robertson comments:

We do not speak of it in any vulgar sense. It was as far as possible from being suited to flatter the people, or to tickle their ears by oratorical device. But it was fitted in the highest degree for popular apprehension, and "the common people heard Him gladly."

⁶Cf. Ibid., pp. 98 ff.

(Mark 12:37). It had this fitness because He, more constantly than any other great teacher, directed His appeals to the instinct for truth and right that is common to man, and to respect of which rich and poor, learned and unlearned, are on the same level.⁷

The parables of Jesus, for the most part, are simple in language and profound in meaning. So it was a wonderful breadth of adaptation at once to great minds and to the simple in understanding. It is at once popular and universal. To achieve what Wendt calls, "popular intelligibility and rich significance,"⁸ every preacher desirous of presenting his message Sunday after Sunday, should certainly note the remarkable way in which Christ employed the parable. The very perfection of His method leads to its being unobserved. The result of this perfection is that the whole impression the mind receives is of the greatness and preciousness of the truths conveyed. The very design of parables is to embellish and set forth ideas and moral truths in attractive forms. Many a lesson, if spoken in naked, literal style, is soon forgotten; but, clothed in parabolic dress, it arouses attention, and fastens itself in the memory. Many rebukes and pungent warnings may be couched in a parable, and thereby give less offence, and yet work better effects than open plainness of speech could do.

⁷James Robertson, Our Lord's Teaching (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895), pp. 7 f.

⁸Hans Hinrich Wendt, The Teaching of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1899), p. 190.

In this connection, it might be added, that some of our Lord's most pointed parables against the Jews -- parables which they perceived were directed against themselves--embodied reproof, rebuke, and warning, and yet by their form and drapery, they served to shield Him from open violence.

It is easy, also, to see that a parable may enshrine a profound truth or mystery which the hearers may not at first apprehend, but which, because of its striking or memorable form, abides more firmly in the mind, and so abiding yields at length its deep and precious meaning.⁹

It is quite evident from the Gospel records that Jesus used the parables as a sword piercing the armor of His foes. Through this approach He looms as an artist of polemics. The world that the Christian preacher faces today is not different from the world of Christ's time. The Pharisees and infuriated leaders of the Jews taunted the Lord; scoffers and skeptics today are no less gentle. When Christ confronted these people "pretense of piety, pride of public approval, arrogance of position, and contempt for the sinner were arrainged with piercing sarcasm, fitting rebuke, and sparkling illustration."¹⁰ They could not fail to understand Him in His thrusts, though they did not perceive His spiritual truths. The masterful polemist could not be answered, therefore, the remaining method of

⁹Trench, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁰Bond, op. cit., p. 100.

silencing Him by death was planned. The parable, then, came as a polemical expedient. His enemies forced Him to adopt this form of instructing.

The parable gave Jesus the opportunity to condemn His enemies, who caught some of His hidden meaning and knew that He criticized them, and to instruct His disciples, who could better appreciate the veiled truths and could seek personal help from the Preacher.¹¹

The age in which we live has led us away from the direct and simple. Ours is a complex and complicated civilization. The important issues of society and government are deeply involved ones. The machines and vehicles, designed to make production and transportation simpler, have led us into more complicated problems, where specialized and technical training is needed. This atmosphere has made inroads into a preacher's life too. As we think of the Gospel intrusted to us and the responsibility imposed on every true preacher, we must learn to understand that a truth is never made more noble by involved arguments and irrelevant jargon. We must learn from the example of Christ, that simplicity is not only good, but is also dynamic and powerful. Once a preacher gets away from this false notion that the more he expounds in intellectual areas beyond and above his hearers, once he sees the value of preaching simply and directly he will notice that his message will be more pertinent, more effective, to the

¹¹Ibid., pp. 266 f.

needs and wants of his hearers. One of the wonderful features of the parables is the clearness of style and thought. Admittedly, some of the parables are difficult to understand, not because of the parable itself, but because of the subject and theme. To be sure, the truth is hidden from scoffers and skeptics, but is revealed to the pure and humble in heart. They are, however, understandable chiefly because they are simple. "The preacher must have clear conceptions of his message if he would attain his object through simplicity. Perhaps haziness and obscurity of thought will impress themselves upon the style."¹² Even the choice of words guarantees or debars simplicity of style. Certain words convey the impression of heaviness, ornateness, involution of simplicity. Jesus did not make adornment of style a primary factor in His choice of words. Their beauty is incidental to the greatness of His mission and message. The parables of the Kingdom and their spiritual depths were not always appreciated by His audience, but that was due more to dullness of heart rather than dullness of head. His exalted truths did not meet full acceptance because the people preferred their own debased ideals of the Messiah and His Kingdom.

Preachers today must learn that profoundness of thought never requires involved and complicated language. That simple presentation, as Christ Himself showed us, is still

¹²Ibid., p. 184.

the grandest and humblest way of setting forth the magnificent truths of the Christian Gospel. If preachers can in some way attempt to present their message without scholarly pedantics they will soon understand that in an age of confusion and complexity of living, simplicity is of the greatest importance. Concerning the art and skill of the Lord's method that should be every preacher's ideal, Wendt expounds:

. . .the characteristic features of Jesus' method of teaching proves what a wonderful art and power of popular eloquence He possessed. He avoided pedantic modes of teaching the petty arts of the scholastic learning. . . .A rich fancy and an acute judgment were His equipment,--a fancy which provided Him with ever fresh material for His examples, pictures, and similitudes; acuteness of judgment, which enabled Him to grasp the essential point in the instance on hand, and to find the fittest phraseology and forms of presentation whereby the weightiest thought should be most forcibly expressed. . . .The examples and parables of Jesus, by their typical memorable forms, preserve even yet their living freshness of illustration and lucidity of demonstration. . . .How immensely higher in popular efficiency stands Jesus' method in its plain simplicity, which yet detract nothing from its depth of thought.¹³

Related to simplicity of language is the manner in which Jesus displays His expert method of forming word pictures for His audience. The human mind is not a debating hall, but a picture gallery. Around it hang our similes and our concepts. Jesus was a master of soul-capturing imagery. It is a problem today to get people to think, to put thoughts into their proper sequence, to con-

¹³Wendt, op. cit., pp. 148 f.

concentrate on uncomfortable things. Preaching must be able to put intangibles into word-pictures. Mental images are vitally important for the hearer's sake. Christ realized this, and so He used parables. He could think the way people think. He could get them to make value judgments and to push secondary things aside and aim at the primary. He got people to think by simple pictures. This is the preacher's task also. A criticism of modern preaching, however, very often voiced, deplures sermons which are composed of words without meaning--words, just words. We need words to communicate; we would be lost without them. To use them effectively requires skill. To achieve this technique in preaching we must ever hold up before us the example of Christ and His parable.

Jesus was a preacher whose ear was attuned to the music of words. . . . Jesus knew the words which repeat a certain sound or combination of sounds like music, and He selected them. . . . So supremely did He regard the truth He had to communicate to men that He strove to commend it to them in the most effective manner.¹⁴

These were words He spoke, not coldly, abstractly, or matter-of-fact like; but He used them with a plan and a design. He spoke in word-pictures. Three inseparable mental characteristics were interwoven in the fabric of our Lord's mind. His thoughts were always concrete, not abstract; His intellectual processes were intuitive, not argu-

¹⁴Francis J. Handy, Jesus the Preacher (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), p. 60.

mentative; His views were ever positive, never negative. "word pictures enabled Him to put the truth He desired to stress into concrete rather than abstract form. He dealt with one fact or person by itself or himself."¹⁵

That words, their use and their phrasing, require skill and forethought, has been clearly established. The writer, however, sometimes shudders to think of the many preachers who haphazardly throw thoughts together and carelessly deliver a sermon unconscious of the vital necessity of presenting material with words that stick, words that live, phrases that carry a punch. It is obvious that the words which the Lord used, and the way He used them, were a deciding factor in the impact His message had on the hearts of His hearers. His imagery was always within the limits of popular information, but His own genius was required to unite the familiar form to the spiritual truth. "Jesus was an artist whose pictures were those of words rather than of canvas and pigments. His message abounded in picture words, His parables were specially thus characterized."¹⁶ Christ was perfectly familiar with His message and was master of any occasion that might arise. "He did not hesitate or wander in His themes. His great mind had arranged His material for preaching. He left to the moment

¹⁵Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶Bond, op. cit., p. 102.

the selection of the proper forms."¹⁷

The parables of Jesus are definitely supreme examples of the use of imagination. Through the imagination one may forecast conditions and plan for their attainment. Through it the pioneer work of blazing the trail of thought is to be done. Jesus had this power highly sensitized and developed. The parables prove this beyond a shadow of doubt. Perhaps the great skill shown in His imagination was the ability to be pictorial. It takes a vivid imagination to speak in pictures, to present spiritual truths in a language free of abstractions and worn-out phrases, and to garb a message in words and phrases that can be seen and thus understood. Bond says this about Jesus' ability to talk in pictures and use His imagination, and still be concrete, when he writes:

The intellectual life of Jesus dealt in concrete objects. It lay within His power to think abstruse thoughts, but He preferred to cite examples, actual and created. The students of His day might have listened with some interest to difficult and abstruse dissertations, but Jesus chose to win the ear and heart of the common people by His objectified truths. He Himself was the concretion of God, and so delivered His message as to put God into concrete touch with men.¹⁸

We have no greater example of this practise in His preaching than His use of parables. Each parable provides a concrete expression of thoughts and ideas which, by themselves, are

¹⁷Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 150.

nothing but cold facts and concepts difficult to attain relevance in a hearer's mind. But Bond further states:

The imagery of gentleness characterized the preaching of Jesus. From the finer sensibilities came His pictures. The parable of the Lost Son yet remains without equal in all literature for tenderness. . . .¹⁹

Bond continues:

Jesus, the artist, was a preacher all the time. He preached on any and every day of the week, for He had the one consuming passion of the artist--to create. . . . So Jesus, the artist, went and mingled with the multitude. . . . He dealt with truth concretely. . . . So He preached to the crowd in parables. . . .²⁰

In Jesus we see the consummate artist, for in working out His material Jesus has shown how important it is for the preacher to get hold of his ideas and with thought and design and imagery preach that way all the days of his life. "The imagination may do for the preacher, in a limited way, what it did for the Lord Jesus Christ in a supreme way. . . ." ²¹ Bond, in his Master Preacher, has well spoken of the power of imagination as exhibited by Jesus Christ, when he writes:

It was highly sensitized and developed. His imagination was dramatic in its concepts and manifestations. The dramatic moment, when the interest of the occasion culminated, never failed to appear to Him.²²

¹⁹Ibid., p. 183.

²⁰Roland Cotton Smith, Preaching as a Fine Art (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), pp. 22 ff.

²¹Bond, op. cit., p. 258.

²²David R. Breed, Preparing to Preach (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, George H. Doran, 1911), p. 258.

Practically everybody is agreed that the parables taken as a whole bear an unmistakable stamp, and one may with confidence say that a parable in the Gospels is a work of art whose author can never be in doubt. They show perfectly definite, recognizable characteristics. First, a poetical and imaginative quality which is quite distinctive. Secondly, the realism and close observation of the pictures which they draw even in a few strokes. Thirdly, there is their dramatic quality by the way in which an idea is expressed in action, concretely; recognizable human action, in a realistic setting.²³

Even brevity was an important feature in His method. Be as brief as possible is the advice any public speaker receives today. This applies also to preaching. Here brevity is really a virtue. While the thirty and forty-five minute sermons were in vogue twenty-five years ago and earlier, anything over twenty minutes today is almost frowned upon. On the basis of the method of Christ, it is sound advice for the preacher to be clear and to the point in the briefest possible way. To this Menut writes:

If the copious employment of examples and parables on the part of Jesus was designed to make His mode of teaching popularly intelligible, so also the way He selected and amplified them was wholly governed by the purpose of giving them an impressive pregnancy. One can speak of a fixed principle to which He had regard

²³Cf. C. H. Dodd, Gospel and Law (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 54.

in the shaping of His examples and parables for that purpose: I might designate it as the principle of aiming at the greatest clearness in the briefest compass.²⁴

Thus, in the parables of Jesus this principle of brevity is evident. By attending to this principle found in Jesus' use of the parable, we are led to avoid entirely the pitfall of using more words than are absolutely necessary. For, at all events, we may justly assume that Jesus, whose mode of teaching is so pregnantly expressive, did not interweave meaningless details into His parables for the mere purpose of embellishment.²⁵ To achieve what Christ Himself mastered in this type of preaching demands strict adherence to rules that will make the preached message intelligible, simple, dynamic and brief.

²⁴Wendt, op. cit., pp. 129 f.

²⁵Cf. Ibid., pp. 135 f.

CHAPTER IV

THE PARABLE AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE TEACHING METHOD

It is an interesting commentary that Jesus hardly ever spoke except in connection with a parable and that modern preachers hardly ever use one. In the Scriptural sense, as noted above, a parable was a story, either imaginary or true to life. Jesus filled His hearer's minds with them, and, strange as it seems, present-day preachers rarely, if ever, present truth in this manner. Presumably, then, parables are rare because most preachers are incapable of inventing them. There is no reason why preachers today should not know how to use the parabolic teaching method or employ the use of illustrations as Jesus did.

It was the general aim of our Lord to teach something by His parables. He wanted to illustrate or to prove, and thus to make clearer, the truths which He had in hand.

Trench says:

The parable, or other analogy to spiritual truth appropriated from the world of nature of man, is not merely illustration, but in the same sort, proof. For the power of such analogies lies in the harmony unconsciously felt by all, and by deeper minds plainly perceived, between the natural and spiritual worlds; the world of nature being throughout a witness for the world of the spirit.¹

¹Trench, op. cit., p. 7

The preacher who would find his way to the hearts and understandings of his hearers will never keep down the parabolic element of his teaching, but will make as frequent use of it as he can. To do this effectually the preacher will need a fresh effort of his own; for while all language is more or less figurative, yet long use has worn out the freshness of the stamp, so that, "to create a powerful impression, language must be cast into novel forms, as was done by the Savior."² Jesus gave no doctrine in an abstract form, but clothed them all, as it were, with flesh and blood. He acted Himself as He declared to His disciples they must act; He brought forth out of His treasure things new and old; but with the help of the old, making intelligible the new. And thus in His own example He has given us the secret of all effectual teaching and preaching. One wonders sometimes if our Lord had spoken naked spiritual truth, how many of His words would have entirely passed away from the hearts and memories of His hearers. But, by presenting His truth in the form of some lively image, or in some brief but interesting narrative, they awakened attention and excited inquiry.

we see, then, that the Lord used this form of instruction as a means of attracting attention. Every one knows how the interest of young people is awakened and sustained

²Ibid., p. 11.

by the telling of a story. But in this respect we are all only children of a larger growth. This is made abundantly evident by the fact that when a public speaker descends from abstract reasoning to concrete illustration, and clinches his argument by a pat and parallel anecdote, an immediate hush of eager interest stills his audience into a breathless silence. Now, knowing well this peculiarity of our nature, the Lord secured the attention of His hearers by the beautiful parables which He introduced into His discourses. Taylor comments:

The effect was heightened by His selection, for this purpose, of the scenes, incidents, and objects with which men were familiar in common life. He never introduced recondite subjects, or went out of the region with which His hearers were acquainted; but He lifted up that which lay at His hand, making it magnetic, in its attractiveness, and luminous in its application.³

This, indeed, was one of the reasons of His popularity as a teacher. The sower going forth to sow; the fisherman casting his net into a lake; the woman kneading her dough or sweeping her house in search of a piece of money which she had lost; the growth of the mustard plant from a tiny seed; the shepherd going after his sheep; the father receiving back his long-lost son; the details and incidents of a marriage procession; the hiring of laborers in the marketplace,--all were turned by Him to profitable account. And this helps to explain how it came, that with a Joseph and a

³Taylor, op. cit., p. 10.

Nicodemus among His disciples, it was also true that "the common people heard Him gladly"; for here, in their liking for a story lying in the sphere of daily life, the rich and poor met together, and both alike are attracted by the spell of its influence. The people who saw in His parables nothing but a story, would turn away from it as trifling and unimportant. But those who had the insight to perceive that the narrative was rehearsed for a high moral and spiritual purpose, would be stirred up to inquire into that, and would be rewarded by the discovery of its hidden meaning. To this Taylor continues:

The form of His expressions, whether He uttered parables, proverbs, maxims, or apparent paradoxes, was intended to spur men's minds to profounder thought, to awaken the divine consciousness within, and so to teach them to understand that which at first served only as a mental stimulus. . . . His doctrine was not to be propagated as a lifeless stock of tradition, but to be received, as a living Spirit, by willing minds, and brought out into full consciousness, according to its import, by free spiritual activity.⁴

To be sure, the use of the parable was an ancient method of teaching, but through the artistry of Jesus the stories became jewels. The world will never lose one of them. In every parable we see a picture of God and His ways with men. Weatherhead's comment is pertinent here:

The familiar lights up the profound. The profound is remembered through the familiar. Further, in the eyes of Jesus, every earthly story has a heavenly meaning.

⁴Loc. cit.

The story of our lives, humdrum and obscure as they may seem to be, lights up with divine significance.⁵

No wonder the common people heard Him gladly. What a challenge the phrase is to the modern preacher. The preaching of Jesus was so profound that men have been discussing it ever since. Great minds, some of the greatest, have given a lifetime of study to His words and found at the end that they could have wished for another lifetime to continue the quest. Yet, nineteen hundred years ago, simple village people with no education were thrilled by His words. They changed their way of looking at life and believed the good news. Preachers should follow where He has led, study to be simple, and light up their message with homely stories taken from the lives which their hearers lead.

There are two statements in the Gospel according to St. Mark which while they are separated by eight chapters surely are closely related to each other. The first is: "And without a parable spake He not unto them."⁶ The second is: "And the common people heard Him gladly."⁷ There is no getting away from the fact that the common people like a parable--a story. Nor is there any getting away from the fact that many a "common person" who would

⁵Leslie D. Weatherhead, In Quest of a Kingdom (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), p. 56.

⁶Cf. Mark 4:33.

⁷Cf. Mark 12:37.

not be "able to hear" the finely spun argumentation of a theological treatise is able to catch the drift of an everyday story which illustrates the very same point. That is why the Savior again and again reduced the profound abstraction of His message to a simple narrative. In a sense He made them visual. For instance, to explain God's attitude toward the lost and straying sinner, He delivered no formal dissertation on what dogmaticians call soteriology, but He told them three short stories in quick succession: The stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Indeed, anyone who reads the four Gospels is bound to remember the master teacher as the master storyteller.⁸

However stimulating it may be personally, abstract thinking cannot hold the interest of individuals whose emotional and educational backgrounds differ sharply. The preacher's primary task, therefore, is to establish a common denominator for a truth which must be expressed significantly to all ages and groups. This means that he has to find forceful ways of translating Christian doctrine and practise into the practical experiences for the widely diversified congregation which sits before him week after week. To address an audience so as to be individually helpful and at the same time corporately inspiring, Baker concludes:

⁸Cf. Herman W. Gockel, "Telecasting the Gospel Net into the Deep," This Day (October, 1953), V, 13.

Centuries ago Jesus. . . did so by His use of the parables. No man ever had a more heterogeneous following than He. Now has any man ever had more avid listeners. . . . The world could never forget His message. For His pictures, simple enough to appeal to the vivid imagination of children, challenged the wisdom of age with their presentation of elemental truth.⁹

Little investigation into the contents of sermonizing today will reveal that preachers often tell stories just for the sake of telling stories. One will also find that many sermons are nothing more than a chain of stories linked by transitional sentences. There is no value or virtue in that type of preaching, and above all, it is far from imitating our Lord's method. Since He drew those pictures from the experience of His hearers and used them, not as an end, but as a means to an end, He laid hold of a valuable and indispensable homiletical skill--the art of illustrating. Certainly, then, one of the most vital factors for effective preaching is the preacher's proper use of illustrations. He must discern, like Jesus, that illustrations are more than entertaining stories. Telling stories, for their own sake, will mean absolutely nothing in preaching, where everything in the sermon should be used in terms of reaching a goal.

Among the intelligentsia or in learned discussion illustrations may be regarded as "as crutch for limping

⁹Gordon Pratt Baker, "Effectively Illustrating the Sermon," The Expositor and Homiletic Review (April, 1948), L, 163.

intellects," a simple rhetorical device by which minds incapable of sustained thought may be led to conclusions which can otherwise be reached only as the result of elaborate trains of reasoning. But this half-patronizing attitude is entirely out of place in preaching--as out of place, in fact, as the cold, profound, academic, aloof mind is out of place in the pulpit. After all, says Handy:

The aim of the preacher is to seek and to save, to win and to enlighten, and to him the pictorial method is an art to be cultivated. His illustrations ought to be both explicative and stimulative. As a teacher of geometry uses diagrams, and the lecturer in architecture displays his drawings, so the preacher uses his parables or illustrations.¹⁰

In this respect, our Lord's parables fall into this classification. His parables were, as we have seen vivid, interesting and arrestive as stories. Many listeners were probably charmed with the surface meaning and found pleasure in listening to them, but the deeper meaning was there for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus was not unmindful of those whose grasp was limited, but who were anxious to learn. He adapted His methods to their gradually expanding intelligence.

Except in two instances, the parable of the Sower and the wheat and the Tares¹¹, Jesus never had need to explain His parables. A well-made illustration well told needs no explanation. Nor will the thoughtful student of our Lord's

¹⁰Handy, op. cit., p. 67.

¹¹Cf. Matt. 13:3-23 and 3:36.

parables miss their homeliness; not one of them is far-fetched. Nor will he miss the amazing economy in words that Jesus excersized. Every word,--every little word--carries its own freight of added and pithy meaning. Consider, for example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son the force of the words "far," "great," "ran," "best," and in the same parable, the subtlety and point of such contrasted words as "kid" and "calf" and "thy son" and "thy brother". In reference to this, Sangster observes:

The peerlessness of these parabolic examples will prove something of a deterrent to the normal student. He will say--and say truly--"It is high, I cannot attain to it." But then he will go on. . .and find this: that for some homiletic purposes no illustration can surpass the parable, and--piecing together this and that, using bits of experience and bits of imagination--he will grow in power to make his own parables and to portray truth in this divinely employed manner, finding an entrance for it at lowly doors.¹²

Jesus realized that nothing is more effective in preaching than apt and skillful illustration. Speeches and argument today, as we have already had chance to notice, are often delivered under a barrage of fact and statistics. But, "the truth our Lord expressed in parables is infinitely deeper, of more consequence, and nearer to our need than the citation of a million facts."¹³ His parables were His illustrations of the heavenly truths which He proclaimed; and

¹²W. E. Sangster, The Craft of Sermon Illustration (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), pp. 34 f.

¹³Ibid., p. 31.

they were more, much more, than mere anecdotes. His parabolic teaching was the application of a profound principle. Every earthly thing has its heavenly counterpart. There are two worlds--the natural and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen; and each is the counterpart of the other, and without the other neither is complete. Smith defines this principle in this way:

The eternal world is the real world, and the world of sense is but the shadow which it casts. And hence emerges a principle: If we would know the eternal world, then we must consider its shadow and from the shadow pass to the substance. That was our Lord's method. It is the principle underlying His parabolic teaching. He pointed to each familiar thing, and bade His hearers recognize it as an image of the unseen and eternal.¹⁴

This is the rationale, as Smith coins it, of homiletic illustrations. An evangelical truth is never a remote mystery; it is always the heavenly counterpart of an earthly experience; and an illustration is an exhibition of the connection between the earthly and the heavenly.¹⁵ Thus, the art of illustration has at once a homiletic and apologetic use. Our Lord's parabolic teaching is the supreme example of the former. The Gospels bristle with incidents of our Lord's mastery in this area of preaching. No one need look for any other Exemplar in this branch of the art of illustration. The perfect is in full view.

¹⁴David Smith, The Art of Preaching (New York: George H. Doran, n.d.), pp. 152 f.

¹⁵Cf. Ibid., pp. 154 ff.

It has been sufficiently established that Jesus was an illustrator of truth, unsurpassed by anyone. He did not use pen or brush, but His words left fadeless pictures that charm and stir the heart. We have also established the fact that for Christ the parable was His favorite medium of teaching, and from His method we can deduce numerous pointers for the necessity and utilization of illustrations in our preaching. Before we can achieve this we must understand the origin of the Lord's illustrations, and we must know accordingly where and what to look for as material for our illustrations.

Jesus was well acquainted with the life and times of His age. He knew how the common people lived and He sensed the interests of the upper class. In short, He knew what illustrations and parables to use to capture the interest of His hearers. He was a carpenter, He travelled a great deal, and He mingled with people of all sorts. And so, from His wide experience and keen intellect He was able to support His message by setting it in a practical and existential situation in His hearer's life. There is no doubt that Jesus was observant and a keen watcher of the stirring life around Him.

Customs, habits, laws, current events, and accidents came under His notice and were made to contribute to His message. . . His mind was alert, His supreme interest in human affairs compelling His constant attention to the details of life governed by sordid aims, base ambitions, hopeless drugery, and holy

aspirations.¹⁶

Every good, would-be preacher can find a remarkable example in the Savior's efforts by being constantly observant, and by making full use of all illustrations and examples that can relate all events and situations and conditions to the Gospel message.

The illustrative material that Jesus used reveals His close association to human life and His keen intellect which selected materials that would appeal to His hearers. Many of His parables deal with farming and fishing, with merchants and landowners, with nature and social events. There is scarcely a department of contemporary life not mentioned in His preaching. He was alert to, and aware of, everything going on about Him. His references cover a wide range--home and domestic life; pastoral and agricultural pursuits; trade, business, commerce; civil and national affairs; religious and national customs. Oliver, in his fine book, Psychology of Persuasive Speech, observes:

. . .all through His ministry wherever He preached to the people, He supported His teaching from two major sources: 1) from the common, everyday experiences of His hearers which formed the substance of His parables; 2) from the sayings of the old Hebrew prophets, which He quoted and interpreted freely. Both of these forms of support gave to His new message an atmosphere of familiarity which made easier its explicit acceptance. If "new wine" is not to be served in "old bottles", it should at least be proffered with old labels. Only

¹⁶Bond, op. cit., p. 146.

by such methods is the instillation of a new proposal likely to succeed.¹⁷

It is significant to note also that in nearly all His references in the parables human need is either the subject or the object of His concern. Nature's fact and laws were analogous to spiritual facts and laws. The cold, impersonal attitude of the scientist in observing natural phenomena was foreign to Him.

The blunt fact is that Jesus was neither a scientist nor a philosopher--He was a preacher. His knowledge was limited to that of the Palestinian Jew of the first century. His interest was a preacher's interest. . . . This, pre-eminently, is the preacher's outlook.¹⁸

The source material which Jesus used in His parabolic teaching is the same, fortunately, for the modern preacher who wishes to achieve the skills and techniques mastered by the Lord. For Jesus, nature was a favorite source of His for illustrations. That same world of nature surrounds us, and it still offers numerous illustrations to support the preacher's message today. Although Jesus drew countless illustrations from the world of nature, yet it is most interesting to note that the word "nature" is not found in our Lord's vocabulary. To Him the world was alive with God and wherever the Father was at work, there was nothing that was not supernatural in the sense that we may know how it happen-

¹⁷Robert T. Oliver, Psychology of Persuasive Speech (New York: Longmans, Green Co., 1942), pp. 307. f.

¹⁸Handy, op. cit., pp. 71 f.

ed, but how it happened no one can tell us.¹⁹ And so,:

From these illustrations of the methods of Jesus in teaching we gain some impression of the real simplicity, concreteness, and pointedness of His instruction. Though, unconventional and levelled to the needs and understanding of plain men, it dealt with the loftiest spiritual truth. It remains to all time the peerless model of religious teaching. No wonder that the common people listened eagerly to His words; no wonder that the multitudes, who had been accustomed to the subtleties and sophistries of the scribes, were astonished at His teaching.²⁰

Our Model is written throughout the pages of the Synoptics. This preacher's Preacher has laid down homiletical principles that will endure for all time. It is our task now to achieve the skills and techniques revealed in His use of the parable. If having done his utmost, the preacher still fails, it may comfort him to remember that the divine Son of God did not always succeed in lodging the truth in people's minds.

¹⁹Cf. J. Alexander Findlay, Jesus and His Parables (London: Epworth Press, 1950), pp. 121 ff.

²⁰George Barker Stevens, The Teaching of Jesus (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), p. 46.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker, Gordon Pratt. "Effectively Illustrating the Sermon." The Expositor and Homiletic Review, L (April, 1948), 163-65.

Bible, Holy. Authorized Version.

Bond, Albert Richmond. The Master Preacher. New York: American Tract Society, 1910.

Breed, David R. Preparing to Preach. New York: Hodder & Stoughton, George H. Doran, 1911.

Bryan, Dawson C. The Art of Illustrating Sermons. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1938.

Curtis, William A. Jesus Christ the Teacher. London: Oxford University Press, 1943.

Dodd, C. H. Gospel and Law. New York: Columbia University Press, 1951.

Findlay, J. Alexander. Jesus and His Parables. London: Epworth Press, 1950.

Garvie, Alfred Ernest. The Christian Preacher. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1921.

Gockel, Herman W. "Telecasting the Gospel News into the Deep." This Day, V (October, 1953), 13.

Gwynne, J. Harold. He Spake in Parables. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1937.

Handy, Francis J. Jesus the Preacher. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949.

Heinrici, G. "Parable," Schaff-Herzog, Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. Edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson and George William Gillmore. VIII. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950. Pp. 344-48.

Oliver, Robert T. Psychology of Persuasive Speech. New York: Longmans, Green Co., 1942.

Richardson, Alan., editor. A Theological word Book of the Bible. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1951.

- Robertson, James. Our Lord's Teaching. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895.
- Sangster, W. E. The Craft of Sermon Illustration. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950.
- Smith, David. The Art of Preaching. New York: George H. Doran, n.d.
- Smith, Roland Cotton. Preaching as a Fine Art. New York: Macmillan Co., 1922.
- Stalker, James. The Life of Christ. Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1891.
- Stevens, George Barker. The Teaching of Jesus. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913.
- Taylor, Wm. B. The Model Preacher. Cincinnati: Poe & Hitchcock, 1861.
- Taylor, Wm. B. The Parables of Our Savior. New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1886.
- Terry, Milton S. Biblical Hermeneutics. New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1890.
- Thayer, Joseph Henry. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901.
- Trench, Richard C. Notes on the Parables of our Lord. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948.
- Weatherhead, Leslie D. In Quest of a Kingdom. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944.
- wendt, Hans Hinrich. The Teaching of Jesus. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1899.