

The Problem and Power of Parables

According to the Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, a parable is both a 'work of art' and a 'weapon of warfare'¹.

The problem with **works of art** is they speak to the viewer without merely using words, and often move the heart before engaging the mind. The person can describe *how* they are being impacted by what they hear and see, but not always explain *why* it has that effect on them. The power inherent in most works of art is that they reach into the human soul and demand a response. You cannot stay neutral, and even so, you have chosen to respond. Parables are powerful because they demand a response and this creates change. The purpose of the parable is not to punish the listener by asking - "What have you done?" Rather, it provokes them to ask, "What kind of person am I becoming?"

The problem with parables being like **weapons of warfare** is that "*an offended friend is harder to win back than a fortified city*" Proverbs 18:19. The words and illustrations used in the parable hits the heart so swiftly and surprisingly, that there's very little time to dislodge the effects in your mind. On the other hand, the parable is powerful because it qualifies the hungry and draws them into a search for satisfaction. The person that is willing to overcome an offence for the sake of knowing the truth is the one who will be set free indeed. Parables are powerful growth engines for the spiritual pilgrim and help them to navigate life in an invisible kingdom.

Most of Jesus' parables either directly or indirectly relate to the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed as both present and future. Indeed, a full third of Jesus' teachings in the Synoptic Gospels were parables, with more than 67 examples of similes and metaphors in the Gospels.²

Parables are meant to **inform** and **impact** the hearer. The parable describes reality using a concrete real life example, and provides a picture of an outcome that is often unexpected or unpredictable. Jesus often shattered the expectations of his listeners by reversing their cultural or religious norms, leading them to an unexpected destination.

Parables must be brief enough to be memorized. They must linger long inside the person to finish its work. Parables were Jesus' way of breaking into resistant minds with insights that stunned his hearers, not only with a surprise and twist but also with shocking wisdom. For those who reject God's life in Jesus—as did the religious leaders—the parable ends up as a judge, and as they continue to reject his insights and claims, the more they are unable to understand him and their hearts are further hardened.

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (p. 1606). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

² Stiller, B. C. (2005). *Preaching parables to postmoderns* (p. 9). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.