

Dear Friends,

How do you interpret Jesus' parables? Over the years, the most frequent misinterpretation was that people interpreted a parable as if it were an allegory. In an allegory every detail introduced into the story had intentional meaning by the author. The most well-known allegory in Christian literature is likely Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. In contrast a parable typically teaches one primary lesson. Jesus created His parable stories, giving them sufficient detail to convey His intended lesson. But the parable should be viewed as communicating one primary spiritual lesson by comparing the intended spiritual truth to a common natural situation, such as shepherds and sheep, or farmers. We should not impute meaning onto every detail in the parable story. In my spiritual youth, a very wise man counseled me, "Joe, never teach a Bible lesson on its all-fours." His intent was to never teach any Bible lesson as if it might have one or another of multiple meanings. If you introduce a passage in preaching, give a specific explanation and application of the lesson. To leave a lesson with multiple possible meanings would be equivalent of setting a dish of food before a guest in your home and saying, "This could be steak. It might be salmon. Or it could be lemon pie."

Biblical truth is not relativistic or private opinion. It is established and affirmed by Scripture. And Scripture requires that it be understood and held distinctly, "...precept upon precept...line upon line, here a little and there a little." (Isaiah 28:10, 13 KJV) When Jesus referred to the householder bringing forth "new" things, He did not intend variations of truth, error. He may have intended variety, something essential for every person responsible for feeding a family. Something may be your favorite dish, but you don't want it and nothing else day after day for the next year, do you? You like and need variety in your diet. You likewise need variation in your spiritual diet. The pastor who always preaches "Doctrine" only or "Duty" only starves his congregation and gives them spiritual malnutrition.

A caring "Householder," pastor, must work and study long and hard to equip his mind to truly feed the people when he speaks to them. (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 KJV) You can't study hard in your youth and remain fresh and edifying in old age. If a man is devoted to feeding the Lord's sheep, he will constantly study prayerfully, long, and hard as long as he carries the responsibility of teaching, of feeding, the Lord's "Household of faith" under his care.

We stand today at the beginning of a new year. Let us commit our hearts, minds, and lives to more diligent study of the Lord's word than we've ever studied it in our lives. If we do this, we shall end 2022 far more full of grace and peace than many of us ended 2021.

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## **Wise Use of Parables**

*Jesus saith unto them, Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea, Lord. Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old. (Matthew 13:51-52 KJV 1900)*

If we consistently follow Jesus' personal description of His intent with the parables, how should we interpret them? Very early in my ministry a wise man gave me counsel that proved invaluable for a lifetime. In studying and interpreting the Bible, always focus on the literal passages. Use them to define all basic doctrinal truth. Use the symbolic passages to support those literal texts, but never use a symbolic lesson to interpret a literal text. I am persuaded that preaching would be far more edifying if we preachers would faithfully follow that wise counsel. We've all heard—perhaps preached—sermons that focused too much on the symbolic lessons at the sacrifice of the literal. Speculation and unbridled imagination are not acceptable tools for Biblical interpretation or sound teaching.

In our study passage Jesus teaches us to look for profitable, edifying truth to teach, whatever passage we choose, parables included. I honestly acknowledge that I am far more cautious than most when I approach either Old Testament lessons or New Testament symbolic lessons, such as the parables or Revelation. I do not trust my creativity to read an Old Testament lesson and conclude, "This is a type of..." unless I find a New Testament passage that supports the idea. I've talked with many good preachers and Bible students who followed this "Type and shadow" path. They have taught me much. However, I've also observed among those who approach the Bible with this outlook that ten men may offer ten quite different explanations of a text, all very sincerely saying, "This is a type of..." Undoubtedly, no text has ten different meanings, type or not. If I read a text in the Old Testament and find a New Testament inspired passage that explains it, I have solid ground on which to conclude its meaning. Hebrews, Galatians, or 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, as examples, provide us rich insight into many Old Testament lessons that we may understand and teach without indulging at all in private speculation.

*Have ye understood all these things?* Jesus introduced His thought with this question. If the disciples understood all the lessons Jesus intended by the parables we've studied in Matthew 13, how would they use that knowledge? I can't be nearly as persuaded that I understand all that Jesus intended in these parables, and I'm equally persuaded that many of the good men who've taught highly creative ideas from them also do not understand them as well as they think. Whatever we come to understand of Jesus' teaching in these parables, He wisely directs us how to use that knowledge, and we should wisely heed His words.

*Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder.* A "householder" is the head of a household, typically in the first century, the husband and father. This relationship is Jesus' first point in teaching His right way to interpret and teach these parables.

What might we learn from this word? ***Biblical, edifying preaching must be approached in a "Relational" manner.*** The preacher who talks to himself when speaking to the church (Or to the walls, windows, ceiling, or floors) loses a vital connection with the people in the congregation. Preaching is not a philosophical dissertation taught indifferently to a gathering of indifferent people. The edifying preacher must always keep foremost in his mind that he is speaking to his and the Lord's "Family."

A wise devoted "Householder" cares deeply for the people in his "Household." They are his personal responsibility. If they suffer malnutrition, if they eat spoiled food and become ill, he is responsible. If they eat a poorly balanced diet, for example, all sweets and no protein, their long-term suffering the bad diet is his responsibility. The man must care deeply for the people to whom he speaks, and that affection must be prominent in his preaching. To underscore this essential truth of godly preaching, years ago I read a quip, ***"I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care."*** Pastors should print this thought and paste it in a visible location in their pulpit and review it before beginning every sermon.

A man who accepts his charge as a wise householder will manifest constant care for the people under his care. He will not think of ministry as a vehicle to gain anything for himself. If a man thinks of entering the ministry for personal gain, he needs to find a different work in the church. He is not qualified—Biblically—for ministry. Pulpit time, one minute or one hour, is not an entitlement. It is a privilege granted to us by the Lord with His charge to use that time for the benefit and instruction of His people. It is fairly common for a young preacher who is allotted ten or fifteen minutes of speaking time, to say, “If I had more time, I’d...” No sir. Use the time you have wisely and to edification. Prove by your use of that time that you are equipped to use more time for edification, not for personal indulgence or gain. Seasoned or newby, every man who speaks to the church should use the time appropriately given to him to edify the people, be it five minutes or an hour. A “What can I gain?” attitude in a man who speaks in the church will render every word he speaks non-edifying and no different than spoiled food on the family table. He will give the people spiritual indigestion, not healthy spiritual food.

Jesus had specific business with Peter when He confronted Peter with those probing three questions. (John 21:15-17) But we should not ignore the link between a man’s love for the people in the church and his teaching function. If the man has any doubt regarding his love for the people, he needs to stay out of the pulpit till he has settled that Biblical prerequisite. Logically, Jesus required Peter to carefully assess his love for Jesus before admonishing Peter to feed His (Not Peter’s) sheep and lambs. And John takes this point to its right conclusion.

*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21 KJV)*

On one occasion many years ago, when asked to deliver the charge to a man being ordained to the ministry, I used Jesus’ three questions to Peter as my text and charged the man to be faithful to his love for Jesus and for His sheep and lambs in his ministry. The dear man took the charge to heart. His preaching consistently exhibited both love and respect for his audience, and the Lord richly blessed his ministry to the end. Sadly, I have also observed preachers who tried to preach to people when they did not either love or respect their congregation. And that situation always ended in disaster for the man and for the church. If a man undertakes ministry, he must take seriously his grave responsibility as the “Householder” responsible for the care of the Lord’s “House” committed to his charge.

*...which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.* The Lord directs a wise course for the spiritual health of a spiritual household. If a man tries to become a “Showman,” always teaching novel ideas, he fails the “Old” test. If he only repeats what other men taught him, he fails the “New” test.

The idea of “new” in this verse in no way excuses, much less urges a man to ignore the faith of the church and the clear teaching of Scripture. The Lord designated His church, not a preacher, to be the “...**pillar and ground of the truth.**” (1 Timothy 3:15 KJV) If a preacher decides he is the pillar and ground of the truth, he sets up himself and the church he serves for spiritual shipwreck.

The longer I study the Bible the more my profound respect for its content grows. If we dig into its content and prayerfully study it, the Lord has a way of adding grace and insight into its teachings. Bringing for “things new” in this lesson does not at all suggest departing from established truth and teaching different ideas that contradict the established truth historically held and taught by the Lord’s “...**pillar and ground of the truth**.” It rather means we discover richer and broader insights into its established meaning that often makes its teachings “Come alive” in our own minds, and in the minds of those who hear.

Consider the logical contrast in Jesus’ description of His “Kingdom” householder with the typical scribes or rabbis of the time. They prided themselves in knowing and repeating the old, both old and respected Jewish scholars and Moses Himself. In the process they fell prey to their own devices and snared themselves in an errant attitude toward the law. Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord depicted Himself as Israel’s “Husband.” First century Jews failed to grasp that relationship and thought themselves as “Married to Mr. Law,” not to the Lord. (Romans 7:1-4 KJV) Remember the passage in which these leaders questioned Jesus; why did His disciples violate the tradition of the fathers by gathering food on the Sabbath. How did Jesus answer their question?

*But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? (Matthew 15:3 KJV)*

In the Romans 7 symbolism, they regarded the Law God gave to Moses higher than they regarded Jesus. Factually, all those traditions they created were not at all part of the law. They were legalistic creations imagined by their ancestors to supplement their private understanding of God’s law.

We should be cautious that we do not fall prey to the same legalistic snare that these people followed above Jesus. They regarded many of these traditions as “Fences.” Their common defense of these fences was that failure to honor them “might lead to” sin. When we follow our own ideas and become overly restrictive, we are likewise prone to defend our ideas as “It might lead to....” Does Jesus’ teaching not provide us with sufficient safeguards against sin? Do we think our own inventions can better protect us than Jesus’ own words?

The gospel contains ever new fresh truth, along with old established truth, but all its content, when it faithfully honors Jesus’ teachings in Scripture, is true. We need not invent anything or add anything to it to make it better. We can’t make it better. After all, Jesus personally taught it. It can’t get better!

Elder Joe Holder