

Glimpses of Eternity

Contributed by Paul Earnhart
Sunday, 24 February 2008

Jesus was not a soldier or a statesman or a merchant. He was a teacher, unique and incomparable, but a teacher (Matthew 4:23). Those who heard Him were "astonished at his teaching; because he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29). Even His enemies reported that they had never heard a man speak as He did (John 7:46). And why not? He was heaven's message incarnate—the Word become flesh (John 1:14). In Jesus men saw, as well as heard, the truth. Word and thought and deed were marvelously one in Him. And in His voice were the confident echoes of eternity. He both knew, and was, the Truth (John 14:6). As a teacher, the mission of the Son of God was to reveal His father's heart to men, to cause them to know and understand His gracious will for their lives. Such understanding could not be created by divine fiat. The wonders Jesus worked were remarkable, but they served only to confirm His message (John 3:1-2) which, as the true source of God's saving energy (Romans 1:16), had at last to be accepted and understood to be effective (John 6:44-45). For all their magnificent display of divine power, miracles could not force that understanding. It had to be achieved by patient and often laborious instruction which, even after long hours, days, and months, was subject to complete rejection. But out of the persevering love of His heart Jesus sought to make all men understand, and chose approaches which were remarkable for their simplicity. He took men where they were and sought to lead them to where they needed to be. He used their knowledge of this world to teach them about the next. There is nothing in Jesus's style as a teacher that is a greater expression of this than His parables and those who would understand Jesus must come at last to understand those powerful illustrative stories which became the characteristic vehicle of so many of His lessons. The parables of Jesus have passed into history and become an intrinsic part of our culture. He could have been immortalized in the annals of literatures for them alone. But for all their celebrity, they are as little understood by this generation as by that one to which they were first addressed. "Parable," the anglicized form of the Greek word, *parabole* (*para-bow-LAY*), derives from a Greek verb which means "to place beside, to cast along side". A parable is a story which places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching. It is a comparison, putting the known beside the unknown. Memorably expressed, it is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." The Greek word for parable occurs some fifty times in the New Testament, only twice outside the gospels (Hebrews 9:9; 11:19), where it is translated "figure"; (KJV ASV). In Mark 4:23 it is construed as "proverb"; (KJV, NIV). It is characteristically understood of "a somewhat lengthy … narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson"; but it is also "used of a short saying or proverb"; (W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of NT Words, p. 158). Because of the uncertainty of what exactly constitutes a parable, the lists that have been compiled of Jesus's parables vary in length with the judgment of the compiler. The longer lists include such illustrations as "the good shepherd"; (John 10) and the "two builders"; (Matthew 7:24-27). The shorter lists exclude them. Trench, in his now classic work, *Notes on the Parables of Jesus*, lists only thirty. If we cannot determine with exact certitude whether some illustrations of Jesus deserve to be called parables, there are some things about parables that are beyond doubt. Parables are not fables or myths. There are no unreal elements or impossible situations in them. In fact their strength lies in the absolute conceivability and likelihood of the circumstances which they describe. They speak of familiar, real life situations. Parables are more than proverbs, though at times similar in design. In the gospels proverbs are sometimes referred to as "parables" — "Physician, heal yourself"; (Luke 4:23); "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"; (Matthew 15:14-15); "No man tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one"; "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins…"; (Luke 5:36-37). But a proverb is characteristically a short, pithy saying whose meaning is evident. A parable tends to be longer, more involved, and the meaning not so easily seen. Jesus, so far as we know, did not begin to teach in parables until near the end of the second year of His public ministry (there is a lone exception, Luke 7:41-42). It was in the presence of an immense multitude near the Sea of Galilee, and His illustrative comparisons came with a rush that started His disciples (Matthew 13). In marvelously concrete and simple stories, Jesus unfolded for His followers the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven. It was to be only the beginning. This is an invitation to study those wonderful narratives which invite us to look into the very heart of God.