

Sunday School Lesson

(Continued from Page 2)

compare with those of the Gospels?

Did Jesus' parables have a special purpose? Did he have an unusual flair for getting past the defenses of his hearers, getting through to the target, even when these hearers were hostile?

Practically speaking, how can we find some criteria for knowing just what Jesus intended to say in his parables? Is each person's opinion just as good as the next? If parable can be interpreted in more than one way, how can we avoid falling into the trap of reading our own meaning into them? How can we decide which is the most authentic approach?

With such a formidable list of questions before us, let us return to the question first asked by those who heard him in Galilee.

Finding Help

With Your Questions

"Why do you speak to them in parables?" the disciples are reported to have asked Jesus. His answer, as given in Matthew 13:10-15, is a rather startling one to us. Yet we must somehow come to terms with it.

First, Jesus' quotation is from Isaiah, who was trying to account for the stubbornness of his people and their insensitivity to what he as a prophet was declaring to them. Such blindness must have caused the prophet great anguish.

Jesus, too, must have been struck on more than one occasion by the blindness of the spiritual leaders of Israel in his own time. To many who heard him, he must have seemed to be using a kind of double talk to fool the opposition, while conveying a secret meaning to his disciples.

In telling the parable of the soils, which immediately precedes the first passage printed above, Jesus recognized that there were always hostile or critical forces. These were like weeds that might choke out the truth he was seeking to spread. Therefore in verses 10-15 he could have been saying that no good purpose is served by unnecessarily exposing truth to ridicule (casting pearls before swine). Thus he may well at times have used parables to veil the truth from hostile eyes while revealing it to his friends.

Nevertheless such an interpretation of Matthew 13:10-15 goes against most of what we know of Jesus' methods. Says George A. Buttrick: "He came to illumine lives and not to darken them; and because lives were self-darkened He spoke in parables, well knowing that the rays of a parable will penetrate 'where truth in closest words shall fail.'" He chose to teach in parables because he could in

this way make the truth luminously clear even to simple minds.

Earlier Parables

Broadly defined, the parable can include the proverb, the simile, the metaphor, or even the allegory. In general it is an extension of the figurative language used by the people of the Bible, who customarily thought in vivid pictorial terms. Thus the preacher of Ecclesiastes can say, "He who digs a pit will fall into it" (10:8). It would not be hard to build that into a parable.

Among the parables of the Old Testament one of the most effective and memorable is that told by the prophet Nathan to King David. (2 Samuel 12:1-14)

It is the story of a rich man with abundant flocks who stole from a poor man his one beloved lamb. Little thinking of its application, the king denounced this act with indignation. Said the prophet Nathan, "You are the man," charging him with having stolen Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah.

Down through the generations Jewish rabbis have told stories to illustrate their teachings. For example, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai told of a man on a boat who took a drill and began boring a hole beneath his own seat. When his fellow travelers protested, he replied, "What does that matter to you? Am I not boring under my own place?" The rabbi was saying,

Such is the man who refuses to accept responsibility for his brother's welfare. We are all in the same boat, and we disregard this fact at our peril.

Jesus' Aim

However common the parable form may have been, the undeniable fact is that Jesus so impressed them upon the minds of men by the power of his own personality that his parables still live. The shepherd seeking his lost sheep and the good Samaritan tending the wounded traveler on the Jericho road have become a part of our lives.

Unlike the allegory, the parable concentrates upon one main point of comparison. The details are not significant, as they are in John Bunyan's *The Pil-*

grim's Progress, for example. Here is an allegory in which each character represents a trait (Christian, Faithful, Mr. Facing-both-ways) and each place is symbolic (the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, and so on).

By contrast, Jesus' parables, with few exceptions, forcefully illustrate a single idea. To lose sight of this central point is the most common error we shall need to avoid.

Scenes of Real Life

A further uniqueness of Jesus' parables is to be found in the amazingly realistic picture he gives of commonplace things. He is true to nature and to life.

Someone has said of John Wesley's Journal that no clearer

(Continued on Page 8)

Real life calls for real taste.
For the taste of your life — Coca-Cola.

Coke

It's the real thing.
Coke.

Bottled under the authority of The Coca-Cola Company by the people in your town who bring you Coca-Cola.

"COCA-COLA" AND "COKE" ARE THE REGISTERED TRADE-MARKS WHICH DISTINGUISH THE SAME PRODUCT OF THE COCA-COLA COMPANY.