

New Testament History and Literature: John and the Parables

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores the distinct theological features of the Gospel of John and provides a hermeneutical framework for interpreting Jesus' parables. He highlights John's unique emphasis on the deity of Christ, the Logos concept, the "I Am" declarations, and eternal life, contrasting these with the Synoptic Gospels. Dr. Mathewson then addresses the interpretation of parables, critiquing both excessive historical allegorization and oversimplified single-point approaches in favor of a balanced method focusing on major characters and context.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Gospel of John

- A. Distinct character compared to Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke)
 - 1. Referred to historically as the "spiritual" or "theological" Gospel
 - 2. Differences in vocabulary, style, and content overlap
- B. Authorship and Purpose
 - 1. Strictly anonymous text; traditionally attributed to the Apostle John
 - 2. Explicit purpose statement (John 20:30–31): to engender and strengthen faith in Jesus as Messiah for eternal life

II. Unique Distinctives and Key Passages in John

- A. Key Discourses and Passages
 - 1. Prologue (John 1:1–18): The Logos (Word) made flesh bridging God and humanity
 - 2. Nicodemus discourse on God's love and kingdom entry (John 3)
 - 3. The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4)
 - 4. Upper Room Discourse (John 14–17): Teaching on the Holy Spirit as Jesus' continuing presence
 - 5. Post-resurrection restoration of Peter (John 21)
- B. Metaphorical "I Am" Statements
 - 1. Seven declarations pointing to Old Testament divine prerogatives and deity

2. Statements: Bread of Life, Light of the World, Door, Good Shepherd, Resurrection and Life, Way/Truth/Life, True Vine

C. Core Theological Themes

1. High Christology and overt emphasis on the deity of Christ
2. Preferred focus on "Eternal Life" rather than "Kingdom of God"
3. Dualistic themes: light vs. darkness, above vs. below, life vs. death

D. Historical Explanations for John's Uniqueness

1. Later date of composition (c. 90 A.D.) and unique audience/context
2. Author's theological summary in his own vocabulary rather than verbatim transcripts

III. Framework for Interpreting Jesus' Parables

A. Historical Context of Parabolic Teaching

1. Common instructional form among Jewish rabbis, not invented by Jesus
2. Unique content and message centered on the Kingdom of God

B. History of Hermeneutical Approaches

1. Early Church allegorical approach (e.g., St. Augustine on Good Samaritan): assigned spiritual meaning to every minor detail
2. 19th-century reaction by Adolf Jülicher: argued parables teach only one main point

C. Balanced Contemporary Hermeneutic

1. Recognizing parables as brief allegorical narratives
2. Focus on major characters and main events within their literary context
3. Application example (Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15):
 - a. Father: Symbolizes God who welcomes repenting sinners
 - b. Younger Son: Symbolizes the repenting sinner
 - c. Older Son: Symbolizes self-righteous observers (Pharisees) called to rejoice