

Editorial: Preaching and Teaching the Parables of Jesus

Stephen J. Wellum

KENT HUGHES BEGINS his book on Mark's Gospel recounting what happened to E. V. Rieu, one of the world's famous scholars of the classics, a number of years ago. After having completed a translation of Homer into modern English for the Penguin Classics series, he was then asked by the publisher to translate the Gospels. At this time in his life, Rieu was sixty years old and a self-avowed agnostic all his life. Hughes recounts that when

Rieu's son heard what his father was about to do, he said, "It will be interesting to see what Father will make of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of Father." By God's grace, within a year's time, Rieu responded to the Gospels he was translating by committing his life to the Lord Jesus. As Hughes rightly notes, Rieu's story is a marvelous testimony to the transforming power of God's

Word. As the author of Hebrews rightly reminds us, "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the divi-

sion of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12, ESV).

In fact, it is precisely because Scripture is what it is, namely God's Word written, and that it is by his Word that our Triune God discloses himself to us, convicts us of our sin, and conforms us to the image of the Son, that every year *SBJT* devotes one issue to the specific book or portion of Scripture which corresponds to Lifeway's January Bible Study. We do so not merely to increase our knowledge of the Scripture—as important as that is—but also more significantly to bring our thought and lives under the microscope of God's Word so that we learn anew to be those who not only hear the Word but are doers of it—who do not seek to stand over God's Word but under it—and to allow the Scripture to do something to us instead of the other way around. Learning more about God's Word must always lead us to a greater knowledge of God in the face of Christ, which in turn must lead us to a greater enjoyment of God in trust, love, devotion, and obedience. Apart from these results, our study of the Scripture is not doing for us what God intends for it to do.

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This year we have the privilege of thinking more deeply about the parables of our Lord within the overall presentation of Matthew's Gospel. Even though the parables of Jesus are probably one of the best known literary forms in Scripture and that about a third of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels comes in parabolic form, throughout the history of the church there has been much debate over how best to interpret and apply Jesus' parables. There are a variety of reasons for this debate. For example, defining exactly what a parable is has not been easy since the word "parable" (Heb: *mashal*; Gk: *parabolē*) can refer to such things as a proverb (1 Sam 24:13; Luke 4:23), satire (Ps 44:11; Isa 14:3-4), riddle (Ps 49:4; Prov 1:6); figurative saying (Mark 7:14-17; Luke 5:36-38); extended simile (Matt 13:33; Mark 4:30-32); and story parable (Matt 25:1-13; Luke 14:16-24). Hence, disagreement over the kind of genre to which a parable belongs has led to disagreement over how best to interpret and apply the parables throughout the ages. In addition, there has been a huge debate over whether parables should be interpreted allegorically or literally, or whether parables have one point or multiple points. Once again, dispute over such matters has led to the parables being interpreted in diverse ways.

Furthermore, even when we ask the basic question, "What was Jesus' purpose in using parables to teach the people?"—a question his own disciples asked him (see Matt 13:10)—his response is quite different than a lot of people think. Many people teach that Jesus uses parables to simplify his teaching and to communicate basic truths in a folksy kind of way. However, even though there may be truth in this, Jesus is clear that he uses parables both to teach and reveal truth to believers and to hide truths from those who stand outside the kingdom. That is why it is a bit reductionistic either to say that Jesus taught in parables merely so that everyone would more easily grasp the truth, or solely to condemn unbelievers. If Jesus wanted to hide the truth from unbelievers he would not have spoken to them at all! Rather, parables are used to

accomplish what God's Word does every time it is preached and taught: to give light and life to those who receive Christ and to harden and judge those who reject him. In this way, the parables spoken to the crowds do not simply convey information, nor mask it, but they challenge the hearers (and us!) with the claims of Christ himself as he comes as the Lord, inaugurating his Kingdom, and calling all people to follow him in repentance, faith, and obedience.

Given the importance of Jesus' parables and how, at their very heart, their purpose is confront us with the glory of Christ as the Lord and King, it is worthwhile to spend some time reflecting on how best to interpret and apply the parables. In fact, that is what all the articles in this issue are attempting to do. It is my prayer that this issue will not only lead to that end, but it will also confront us with our glorious Redeemer, the subject of these parables, and that they will do to us what they are intended to do—to cause us to know and follow Christ who is life eternal.