

# Parables: The Words of Jesus

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Jesus was a master storyteller and enjoyed telling short stories or narratives. People gathered from miles around to hear Jesus' stories. In his narratives Jesus was seeking to communicate a certain message to the listeners. One of his favorite methods for conveying a message was a parable. Most of us have heard Jesus' parables so many times that we may not give them much thought, because a parable usually speaks for itself. Or does it?

## What Is a Parable?

The word *parable* is derived from the Greek term *parabolē*, which means to place items side-by-side or to juxtapose two things for the purpose of comparison. Parables, which were common in antiquity, including Jesus' time, are a form of ancient oratory and classic rhetoric. Parables have a wide range of representations: through simile, metaphor, maxim, pithy saying, symbol, or riddle.<sup>i</sup> For the most part, though, a parable is a succinct story that has one point, and one point only.<sup>ii</sup>

A parable also tries to convey a message through narrative by painting a picture in one's mind. The parable draws in the listener by the vividness or strangeness of the story, all the while leaving the mind with sufficient doubt about the precision of the message.<sup>iii</sup> The parable can stir the imagination as well as tease the typical thought process of the listener.

## What Is the Intent of a Parable?

A parable is intended to produce an atypical behavioral response by stirring the imagination and puzzling and even challenging the audience. A parable's primary intent is to affect the listener with a simple, but often profound, moralizing message that he or she is to reflect on, internalize, and react to. The exact manner in which someone reflects on, internalizes, and reacts to the parable is different for each person. Although the core message of a parable is the same for everyone, the way it is interpreted and the impact it has is different from person to person.

The substance of a Gospel parable is both theological and spiritual, but Jesus situated his parables in common cultural settings. For example, the parable of the good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29–37) uses a commonly understood hostility between two cultures of the time to illustrate something about compassion. The parable of the ten virgins (see Matthew 25:1–13) uses a custom familiar to Jesus' audience—escorting the bridegroom to the wedding feast—to advise them how to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom. Sometimes the core of the parable can be confusing; usually in such cases the literary convention used in the parable is typically metaphor or allegory, either of which is couched in religious language, symbolism, and experience.

Not all metaphors are allegorical, but all allegory is metaphorical. This merits a bit of explanation. A *metaphor* describes one concept in terms of another concept. Usually a metaphor correlates some similarity between two concrete ideas, such as "the lamp of the body is the eye" (Matthew 6:22). Biblical metaphor affects the imagination in a way that regular, everyday speech does not.<sup>iv</sup> *Allegory* is a type, or subset, of metaphor in which the actions, persons, and objects in a story all serve as symbols for meaning outside the story itself. For instance, in the Gospel of John, allegorical texts include the vine and



the branches, or the good shepherd. Allegory serves a deeper symbolic meaning underneath the passage. Metaphors and allegory were both part of public speaking during Jesus' day in ancient Israel, and Jesus would have been comfortable telling stories using both literary conventions.

## Jesus' Parables: Novelty and Paradox

In the Synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—Jesus teaches predominately in parables. Teaching in parables was characteristic of Jesus' style, especially his proclamations concerning the Kingdom of God. Though Jesus' teaching style used storytelling conventions that were common in that time period, what he taught was novel. Jesus taught with newness and purpose, offering people a fresh perspective about God and the Kingdom of God. The novel twists in what Jesus taught in his parables made his audiences take notice, then and today;<sup>v</sup> they captivate the imagination. A given parable's significance appears when the realism or surface meaning of the story begins to break down, allowing the deeper meaning to penetrate the interior life of the hearer or reader.<sup>vi</sup>

It may be beneficial to briefly examine the Parable of the Good Samaritan, one of Jesus' best-known narratives.

But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came down to the place, and when he saw him, he passed on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:29–37)

To fully appreciate the good Samaritan parable, as mentioned earlier in this article, one needs to know the cultural context: that is, the Jews and Samaritans were typically quite unfriendly to each other. Thus the real meaning of the parable is not simply a matter of goodness, kindness, and compassion but is a moral challenge to see the good and perhaps even the godliness in those people whom we consider our enemies. And if that is not enough to consider, the twist of this particular parable centers on how the audience almost always identifies with the good Samaritan. In fact, Jesus is really telling us that many of us act like the pretentious priest and the selfish Levite: not helping others in need, especially total strangers, as we ought to do.

The good Samaritan parable, like Jesus' other parables, is counterintuitive to human nature. It requires us to think and act beyond normal circumstances and the status quo. The novelty and paradox of Jesus' parables also have to do with the manner in which Jesus subverts the typical worldview by offering open-ended challenges to his listeners. These challenges are invitations waiting for an action or response.<sup>vii</sup>



# The Theological Quality of Jesus' Parables

Theologically the parables of Jesus in the Gospels are concerned with conversion and *metanoia* but also with the Kingdom or Reign of God.

## Metanoia and Conversion

The Greek term *metanoia* simply means “repentance.” However, my favorite definition for *metanoia* reads this way: “(1) a radical change of mind and heart and (2) a total turning away from sin and the world to embrace God.”<sup>viii</sup> Therefore, Jesus’ parables move people to *metanoia*. Pope John Paul II echoes this line of thought in his apostolic exhortation *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)*, saying that *metanoia* is not only a changing of the mind and of the heart of a person but also a reorientation of a person’s mentality.<sup>ix</sup> Closely connected with *metanoia* is conversion.

Conversion is the larger theological category that addresses *metanoia* more comprehensively. The well-known Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard J. F. Lonergan (1904–1984) establishes categories of human operations of consciousness and maintains that there are fundamentally three levels or types of conversion that a person can experience: (1) intellectual conversion, (2) moral conversion, and (3) religious conversion. *Intellectual conversion* occurs when the human person experiences liberation from stubborn, false, misguided, and deceptive myths about reality, objectivity, and knowledge.<sup>x</sup> *Moral conversion* is an affective change that shapes human decision making through symbols, images, and rituals that eradicate hatred, jealousy, prejudice, and racism through new images and authentic moral decision making.<sup>xi</sup> Finally, *religious conversion* is the denial of worldly pleasures, pursuits, and realities that keep one from turning totally toward the transcendent God.<sup>xii</sup> Hearing Jesus’ parables can move us toward a change of mind and heart if we allow the words of the parable to penetrate our interior lives. Ultimately, then, the parables of Jesus call us to *metanoia* and conversion.

## Kingdom of God

Another theological point of Jesus’ parables addresses the significance of the Kingdom, Reign, or Kinship<sup>xiii</sup> of God. The Reign of God is the central theological symbol and message of Jesus’ preaching and teaching ministry.<sup>xiv</sup> The phrase “Kingdom of God” has three constitutive dimensions that Jesus used throughout his parables. The Kingdom of God as Jesus described it is (1) an experience of salvation, (2) an eschatological event, and (3) a theological revelation.<sup>xv</sup>

As an *experience of salvation*, the Reign of God was witnessed by those who experienced firsthand Jesus’ prolific teaching and healings. Jesus’ parables are part of this experiential and realized salvation and are word-events in themselves, inviting conversion and transformation.<sup>xvi</sup> Through their hearing the parables, people come to know God and experience his salvation.

As an *eschatological event*, the Kingdom of God has two dimensions that Jesus addressed in his parables: (1) it is “at hand” or is present, in our midst (see Luke 17:20); and (2) it is coming or it is futuristic, yet to come (see Luke 11:2–4). Jesus’ parables tell of God’s unmerited grace, which helps humanity to comprehend the temporal, special, and celestial categories that are at play in eschatology.<sup>xvii</sup>

As a *theological revelation*, the Kinship of God is revealed in and through Jesus the Christ, who is the self-communication and self-revelation of God.<sup>xviii</sup> As a direct result of Jesus’ teaching ministry and parables, God’s Revelation to the world can be encountered. The parables of Jesus testify vividly to the



presence of God and emphasize God's closeness and revelatory message.<sup>xix</sup> Several parables represent God's theological revelation: the parable of the lost sheep (see Luke 15:3–7), the parable of the lost coin (see Luke 15: 8–10), the parable of the lost son (see Luke 15: 11–32), and the parable of the little ones (see Matthew 18:10). The theological revelation that is demonstrated through Jesus' parables includes compassion, empathy, and justice.

Much theological content can be found in Jesus' parables. The two overarching theological themes are *metanoia* (conversion) and the Kingdom of God. Each of these themes is rich in meaning and affects not only our theology but also our pastoral practice.

## The Pastoral Nature of Jesus' Parables

The Gospels include approximately fifty-seven non-repeating parables (parables that are found in only one Gospel). Pastorally many of these parables can bring great comfort to those who hear and study them. A parable's pastoral impact can be powerful, as parables are an artistic medium, having the ability to lead the audience to new insights and to expand awareness. As a form of literary art, the parables are evocative, innovative, creative, and inspiring, and they are not intended to be stagnant.<sup>xx</sup> The spiritual significance of a parable very much depends upon a person's situation in life and her or his ability to hear the parable, internalize it, and be moved into action. Pastorally perhaps the best way to encounter a parable is one-on-one: just you and God, alone together, reading, reflecting, and enjoying the message and each other's company.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Wilfred Harrington, OP, "Parable." In Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, editors, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999, p. 740.

<sup>ii</sup> Harrington, p. 740.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert W. Funk, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 553.

<sup>iv</sup> John R. Donahue, SJ, "The Parables of Jesus." In Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy editors, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990, 81:68, p. 1366.

<sup>v</sup> Donahue, 81:74, p. 1367.

<sup>vi</sup> Donahue, 81:75, p. 1367.

<sup>vii</sup> Donahue, 81:78, p. 1367.

<sup>viii</sup> Arthur D. Canales, "The Spiritual Significance of the Nicodemus Narrative to Youth Ministry, *The Living Light*, 38:3 (Spring 2002), p. 25.

<sup>ix</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Church in America*, Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Publishing, 1999, p. 44, no. 26.

<sup>x</sup> Bernard JF, Lonergan, SJ, *Method in Theology*, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1994, p. 238.

<sup>xi</sup> Lonergan, p. 240.

<sup>xii</sup> Lonergan, pp. 240–241.

<sup>xiii</sup> Many contemporary liberation theologians and feminist theologians prefer the phrase "kinship of God" over the traditional "Kingdom of God" because the word *Kingdom* has negative connotations associated with it, such as power, coercion, male dominance, patriarchy, and control. In contrast, for these theologians, the term *kinship* represents equality, fairness, and friendship between believers. This author maintains that all three words can be used interchangeably and are significant to the academic disciplines of theology and biblical exegesis.

<sup>xiv</sup> Donald Senior, CP, "Reign of God," in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, editors, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999, p. 851.

<sup>xv</sup> Senior, pp. 857, 858, 860.

<sup>xvi</sup> Senior, p. 858.

<sup>xvii</sup> Senior, p. 859.

<sup>xviii</sup> Kark Rahner, SJ, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York: Crossroad, 1978, pp. 116–117.

<sup>xix</sup> Senior, p. 860.

<sup>xx</sup> Harrington, p. 742.

