



Weekly Study

Week 6: The Parables of Jesus, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Read Luke 15:11-32

This lesson is about two things:

- 1) An overview of the parables of Jesus
- 2) A look at the most famous parable, the Parable of Prodigal Son

Teaching in Parables

I once heard a comedian talking about how difficult it must have been to be a disciple of Jesus. She said:

Sure, Jesus taught about important things, and made you evaluate your life. Yes, of course that is difficult. Still more annoying would be his practice of speaking in parables....

“Simon Peter asks, “Hey Jesus, what do we want to have for dinner tonight”

Jesus answers, “There once was a man who went to the market to get a fish... “

The comedy bit highlights a key concept of parables. They do not give clear-cut answers. On the one hand, they allow great ambiguity. On the other hand, they pack a punch that hits at the very heart of the way we live. It is what makes parables so marvelous and yet so frustrating. Alyce McKenzie, in “The Parables for Today”, says it this way “Parables are short narrative fictions that seek to make us evaluate our lives. While we think we are interpreting them, they are actually interpreting us!” (McKenzie, Alyce M. The Parables for Today (p. 1). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.)

Jesus was a rabbi, and rabbis often spoke in parables. There are two kinds of rabbinic teaching: halachic and haggadic. The halacha is the collective body of Jewish religious laws from both the written Torah and the oral tradition. Halachic teaching is a simple statement of the laws—do this or don’t do this. Jesus uses this kind of

teaching, but when he does, he upends the tradition of the rabbis who preceded him. “You have heard it said do not kill. I tell you whoever is angry with his brother or sister is liable for the judgement...” This is a reformation and transformation of previous halachic teaching. The Haggadah or Haggadot, on the other hand, is a sort of collection of stories from across the ages that reveal the mysteries of God. (The title “Haggadah” is most often used today to refer to THE story, the defining story of the people of Israel, the narrative of the Passover, which is read at the Passover meal.) Rabbis teach by telling a story, and the listeners seek to understand the meaning of the story, but more importantly, see parallels to the story in their own daily living.

Jesus uses parables as a primary method of teaching. Approximately 43 percent of Jesus’ words in Matthew, 16 percent of his words in Mark, and 52 percent of his words in Luke are parables. The word parable occurs fifty times in the New Testament. All but two of those occurrences appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The gospels themselves point to parables not as teaching moments to lead people to faith. They are not designed to bring clarity to teaching by using examples from everyday life so that unbelievers might understand, but rather they are stories that show the mysterious ways of God that can only be fully understood by those who have faith. In that sense, just as we understood Jesus’ miracles as not spectacles to convert people, parables are not meant to initiate faith but to inspire, strengthen, and help those of faith to know how to live that faith. The disciples ask him why he speaks in parables, and he replies. “*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’*” (Luke 8:10) For example, to those who have no faith, it would not make sense to throw a party for the returning son but not for the one who remained loyal. But to those of faith, it makes perfect sense. Parables are designed to be “aha” moments on how to live for those who have signed on for the Kingdom of God.

Parables have one point of comparison

The word parable comes from a word that means “to throw alongside.” Parables compare one thing to another thing. In 1939, C.H. Dodd wrote a very short book on the parables, which became one of the most influential books in understanding their meaning. It is still studied in seminaries today. Dodd’s greatest contribution is that parables have primarily one point of comparison between the ways of the world and the ways of the kingdom. He makes the distinction between an allegory, in which every detail stands for something in particular, and a parable, in which the details of the story are there to add punch and power to the single comparison, and to draw in the listener. For example, Paul uses an allegory in his letter to the Ephesians:

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 13:13-17)

The allegory is a typical Greek method of teaching and writing, but is not typical for Jewish rabbis. Nonetheless, there are times it appears Jesus is using his stories in an allegorical way. The Parable of the Sower is the most significant example in that each type of soil is understood as a particular kind of person. (The atypical nature of this interpretation has led some scholars to believe that the allegorical interpretation was added by Mark rather

than being in the words of Jesus himself.) At any rate, this allegorical parable is an exception; the vast majority of the time, there is but one point of comparison.

Sometimes, that one point is interpreted directly in the text itself. For example, Jesus tells the parable of two sons, one who said he would go work in the vineyard and did not, but another who said he would not, but went anyway. This parable, addressed not to the disciples but to the Pharisees, is interpreted by Jesus (remember, they can't understand because they don't have the eyes of faith). He interprets it and makes clear the one simple point he is endeavoring to make: "*Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.'*" (Matthew 21:31)

Look for the Twist

One of the most helpful tools I have learned in interpreting parables is to look for "the twist." This is the place that the parable varies from what is expected. As one moves along reading the parable, it appears that there is a natural progression. A would lead to B, B would lead to C, etc. But then, the story takes a turn and heads in a direction the reader might not expect. This is the heart of the parable. In this twist is the essential teaching. For example, in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a man hires workers throughout the day, and some work three hours, some six, some nine, and some twelve. One would expect their pay to be proportional to their work. But instead, the owner of the vineyard pays them all the same. That is the twist. Often, this is the primary thing the parable is trying to teach.

A few weeks ago, in our lesson, we talked about Jesus' teaching that the Kingdom of God was being inaugurated, and that this kingdom was overtaking the kingdom of the world. The Kingdom of God operates with different laws and principles, and different values are assigned. The practices that are valued in the world are devalued in the kingdom, and the practices that are devalued in the world are most valued in the kingdom. Servants are glorified and masters are debased. Upward mobility is replaced by downward mobility. Very often, parables are designed to highlight that contrast. The "ordinary progression" of the parable is the way of the world. The twist points us to the contrasting way of the kingdom.

Let me give you a modern day example. Many years ago, there was a theft of some money from the church I was serving. A few days later, we sat in a meeting of the Committee on Finance wrestling with how to respond. I was angry. Some seemed worried about the financial loss. Others were worried about the lack of trust it would engender in the congregation. Some were fuming for justice, focusing on how we might catch the perpetrator. Others seemed to put it into perspective—it wasn't that much money. But one fellow had been fairly quiet through the discussion. As the conversation about the subject came to a close, he said, "I hope it helped whomever took it. God really has a heart for those who are desperate." BAM. This was a modern parable in real life. There was a twist, a place where the commentary made us uncomfortable, where the Kingdom of God stood in contrast to the kingdom of the world.

Types of Parables

Parables can be classified according to their literary form.

Similitudes are basic simple stories with very short plots. A woman looking for a lost coin is like God looking for a lost sinner. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that starts small and grows to be

huge. These are examples in which one thing that appears to be unlike another is “thrown down” beside the other. A searching woman is obviously not God, but wait...she is after all like God.

Parables proper are stories in which a plot develops that leads the listener along with wonderful details, until the story reaches a climax or twist that makes a comparison and contrast. (Yes it is confusing that the broad category of stories is called a parable and that the narrow classification of parables proper are also called parables.) The details in the stories give us many places of identification, and we will look at that later as we discuss the parable of the Prodigal Son. But when we study a parable proper, we should look for one primary point of comparison, often in a twist, and discover the one most significant lesson the parable is trying to teach.

Illustrations are stories that provide an example of right behavior. In this case, they do not use something dissimilar to describe something, but rather something similar. The best example is the story of the Good Samaritan—the Samaritan was the one who proved to act as a neighbor to the beaten and robbed man on the road to Jericho. Jesus follows the parable with “*Go and do likewise.*” (Luke 10:37)

Additionally, parables can be classified by their purpose or theme. It is important to note, however, that they are very particular, in that they are told by Jesus in a very particular place and time to a very particular audience. Most of the time we study the parables completely independent of their context, in which there is an event or a situation that leads him to teach something. Nonetheless, there are certain common themes that run through them. Let me lift up three of them:

Parables of Crisis or Warning: These parables warn that the Kingdom of God is coming, and we stand at a crossroads; we had better get ready. A good example is found in Matthew 25, the parable of the judgment of the nations.

Parables of Grace: These parables speak of God’s incredible love for the outcast, the sinner, and those who repent. The parables found in Luke 15 are perhaps the best examples, but there are many others as well.

Parables of Participation: These are parables that talk about how we can access or participate in the work of the kingdom ourselves. Examples include the parable of the persistent widow who bothered the judge until he gave her what she wanted, or the tax collector who beat his breast in the temple. These teach us how we are to behave when we have signed on for the Kingdom of God.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, or maybe...

This is one of five parables found only in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In chapter 13, two chapters before this one, we read “*Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.*” (Luke 13:22) It would appear that this parable was told while Jesus was still in Galilee, because in Luke 17, two chapters later, we read “*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.*” (Luke 17:11) So Luke has Jesus on his way south, but not having entered the region of Samaria.

One of the marvelous things about some of the more elaborate of Jesus' parables is the ability to draw us in with the details and the characters. This is no exception. I can identify with all of the characters. Sometimes, I think I am the prodigal son. In my arrogance, I have wandered away from God. Sometimes, I am the elder son. I want God's recognition for my longstanding devotion and loyalty. Sometimes, I am the servant of the Father, and my job as pastor (and our job as a church) is to respond to the Father's command: '*Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*'²³ *And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;*²⁴ *for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!* (Luke 15:23-24) I must confess that there are days I feel like the fatted calf himself! I suppose there are some among us who feel like the Father. Each time I read it, I am nonetheless moved by this father who runs down the road, whose only desire is to have his children with him. So let's look at each of these characters.

The Younger Son

The younger son says to his father, "Father, give me my share of my inheritance." That would have meant one third of his father's possessions. The older son always got two thirds, a double portion because the older son's responsibility was to carry on the father's legacy. The younger son would have gotten half of that, so he would have received one third of his father's inheritance. And he said, "I want to take that." What he is actually saying is "I am not interested in being with you. I just want your stuff." I suspect that might be many of us. We are not so interested in loving God and being with God; we just want God's blessings, God's provision, God's stuff. Forgive us.

The younger son headed off and the Scripture says, "He squandered it on extravagant living." We like to believe that he squandered this on wine, women and song. In fact, his older brother accused him, "You've spent it on prostitutes." But the passage says, "He squandered his money on prodigal living." The Greek word is "asotos." It can be translated "wild" or "loose" or "dissolute" or "extravagant." The word *prodigal*—when we call him the Prodigal Son—doesn't mean he wandered off. Prodigal means "extravagant," like the word *prodigious* means "a lot of something." Or the word *prodigy* means "someone who's really good at something." Prodigal means "over the top."

Then the Scripture says, "*There arose a famine in the land, so he began to be in need.*" Bible scholar Mark Allen Powell asked a hundred American seminary students to read this story in the Bible and then he said, "Tell it back to me." And one hundred percent of them, all of them, spoke of the younger son's squandering his money. Only 8% of them said, "There was a famine in the land that arose." It was all about how he'd blown the money. Then he interviewed people in the third world. He asked them the same question, and of them 38% said he squandered his money. But 84% said that a famine arose in the land, and he began to be in need. Their perspective was that sometimes stuff happens to you. Nonetheless, his problem when the famine arose was that he was an extravagant, luxurious liver. He ran out of money, he began to be in need. And the Scripture says, "And when he came to himself..." He thought, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son.' And up he went and he went home." And when he came home his father threw him a party you would not believe.

The real problem with the younger son was not that he blew the money on prodigious living. The problem with the younger son was that he left his father at all. If he had taken the money and made a fortune in the oil business, and saved it all, it would have really been worse, because when the famine came, he wouldn't have come home.

I've been a younger son, and I suspect you have, too. But there's a time when you wander away. You might have done so rebelliously and turned your back on God in some sort of intentional way. You know, in the parable just before this of the Lost Sheep, the sheep nibbles his way away. It's like he said, "Oh, there's a little grass over there...and there's a little more grass over there...and more grass over there...." And one day he wakes up and looks around and thinks, "Okay, where is everyone?" I suspect that's how a lot of us wander away from God, right? We think, "There's that thing over there. I've got to see it. It's pretty cool." Then you get over there, and then you find yourself moving further and further away. Then you wake up one day, and you're so far away. Then you come to yourself, and you think, "What have I done?" Indeed, I have been the younger son.

The Elder Son

There's an elder son who's stayed home. He is waiting to receive his double share. He's coming in from the field, and he hears music and dancing. He says to the servants:

"Hey, what's up?"

And they said, "Hey, your little brother's home and your dad has thrown him a party. There's the fatted calf. There's the ring. There's the robe, the whole deal."

The elder son is just furious. "I can't believe he's doing this. I *cannot* believe he's doing this."

The parable says "And the elder son refused to go in." He refused to go in to the party. He stands outside saying, "I'm not going in." And when the father comes to him he says, "Look, you know I have been here for you always. I have been working for you. I've been slaving for you. And I didn't even get a goat, much less a fatted calf. How dare you!"

I've been an elder son, too. I've looked down my nose at other people, thinking that I am superior to them. Perhaps because you have been faithful in practicing the disciplines of faith, and have tried hard to live a life consistent with the faith, you find yourself annoyed at others who are not committed. Anytime we begin to think to ourselves, "I get it, but they don't get it." That's the elder brother rearing his ugly head in your life.

You see, both of the sons were lost. The younger was lost out of willful rebellion. The elder was lost out of self-righteousness, standing outside and missing the party.

The Father

Perhaps the most beautiful and ironic thing about the parable is that the party that the father threw for the younger son was a prodigal party. Maybe the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. The son was no different than the father, as both were prone to extravagance. Indeed, our God is an extravagant God. Our God is a God who runs down the road to meet a child, not even knowing at the time that the child is repentant. And don't miss the language related to the Father's treatment of the elder son: "*Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.*" (Luke 15:28) Our God is a God who pursues unrepentant, self-righteous Christians, wanting even us religious folk to be a part of the extravagant party as well.

The titles of the parables are given by readers and commentators themselves, and they are not part of the Biblical text. One way to try to determine the primary purpose of a parable is to give it a descriptive name yourself. The parable found in Luke 15:11-32 has been given many names, but is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. If this is indeed the best title, it assumes that the purpose of the parable is to encourage bad children to repent and come home, because they will be accepted and welcomed by their Father in heaven. This is certainly not an unreasonable interpretation of the parable. On the other hand, the context of the parable, which we find in the beginning of Luke 15, seems to be focused on the Pharisees and the Scribes. *“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable:...”* (Luke 15:1-3) If the “them” to whom he told this parable was the scribes and Pharisees, it might make you call this parable “The Parable of the Elder Son,” or maybe, “the Parable of the Two Sons.” It is clear that Jesus is challenging the scribes and Pharisees in their behavior. Personally, I prefer the title “The Parable of the Running Father.” The twist in the story is not that the younger son repented in his desperation and came home – that would be typical. Nor is it that the elder son was jealous. Again, that would be typical in the kingdom of the world. No, the twist in the story is that the Father put away his pride and pursued both sons! He ran down the road to meet the younger son, and he went outside the party to bring the elder son back in. What an amazing, prodigal God we have!

Questions for conversation and reflection

1. When you read the parables, do you find that you understand them? How do you find that they affect you?
2. Are you most responsive to halachic teaching or haggadic teaching? Why?
3. Is there a parable, similitude, or illustration, either from Scripture or elsewhere, which you find yourself turning to regularly as you make decisions in daily life?
4. How do you feel about the younger son? Do you think it was his “fault” that he ran out of money?
5. The elder son claims that the younger son has squandered his money on prostitutes. What does the Scripture actually say was the reason for the son’s predicament and poverty? What does this say about the elder son’s attitude toward the younger son?
6. In what way are you like the younger son?
7. In what way are you like the elder son?
8. In what way do we, as a church, act like the father (or the servant) who throws the prodigal party? In what way do we fail at this?



Daily Readings

Week 6: The Parables of Jesus, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Week 6, Day 1

Mark 4:1-20

Commentary

These are people who make their living off the lake. It's where they spend their workday, and here is Jesus showing up in their office. There would have been a crowd, like any busy day in your office if everyone showed up at the coffee pot all at once. But while Jesus' teaching is meant to be *heard* by a crowd, it's meant to be *listened* to by individual hearts. There's a difference between hearing and listening: the first is surface-level and doesn't require much effort, and the latter is deep, and will require some work to understand. That's why Jesus teaches in parables. Parables are a form of teaching that is easily broadcasted to a large group of people but not so easily digested. Parables by their very nature require work on the part of the hearer, so that the hearer becomes a listener. Jesus doesn't want a following of hearers who haven't wrestled with his teaching. He wants a following of listeners who have absorbed his teaching into their very hearts.

Reflection Question

Think of a story, maybe a fable or tall tale from your childhood, in which you didn't understand the lesson until someone taught it to you. What was the lesson?

Week 6, Day 2

Luke 10:25-37

Commentary

The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" It's not a question of inquiry or curiosity but a question of self-defense. He wants Jesus, in the hearing of the audience around him, to reinforce his pre-convinced, flawed belief of what a neighbor is. The lawyer is trying to pick and choose his neighbors, like someone moving into a new neighborhood can pick and choose who lives next door, and he wants Jesus to back him up publicly.

But Jesus doesn't. Jesus doesn't even answer his question. Instead Jesus gives three possibilities of what being a neighbor could mean, and the lawyer, dumbfounded, is forced to give agree with one of them. By switching up the

question, Jesus changes the entire conversation. Jesus doesn't just change the game; he changes the very court on which the game is played. A neighbor is not someone you can pick or choose. A neighbor is whoever shows you mercy, regardless of nationality, neighborhood, or ethnicity. We must go and do likewise.

Reflection Question

When was someone a neighbor to you and it was not who you thought it would be?

Week 6, Day 3

Luke 15:11-32

Commentary

Typically this story is called the Parable of the Prodigal Son because we focus on, and many of us identify with, the younger brother. He lived a hard and wasteful life, he finally came to himself, and he finally came home where he could be loved exactly as he was. But what if we called this story the Parable of the Celebrating Father? The father in the parable represents God our Father, who throws a party in heaven whenever one of his lost children comes home. He is quick to celebrate, lavish in gifts, and over-the-top in rejoicing. Or we could name it the Parable of the Bitter Brother. The elder son resents his younger brother so much that he doesn't even call him brother. He is "this son of yours." His bitterness actually limits the party's joy. The party is not complete without him. Will he go in and celebrate or will let the party be a little worse without him?

Reflection Question

Which of the three characters in the story do you most identify with right now and why?

Week 6, Day 4

Matthew 25:14-30

Commentary

Parables, like any genre of Scripture, must be read in their literary context. This one, the Parable of the Talents, comes right before a much more familiar story about the judgment of the nations: "just as you did it to the least of these [the hungry, the thirsty, the sick], you did it to me" (25:40). A talent was a way of measuring gold. One talent weighed about as much as the average person. But Jesus is not talking about gold; he's talking the totality of a person's resources: our material wealth, our assets, our time on earth, our very lives. The parable means we should not hoard or play it safe with our lives but instead make ourselves useful to the least of these. Jesus will not judge us on what we stored away but on how we used this one solitary life.

Reflection Question

Which of your "talents" are you not putting to use for the least of these? How might you?

Week 6, Day 5

Luke 18:1-14

Commentary

In the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the judge is not God. The judge is harsh, rude, and deaf to the cries of his people. This is a judge who just doesn't care. But even this terrible judge will answer the non-stop pleas of a widow who won't leave him alone. She wants justice, and she will be the judge's shadow until he gives it to her. So are we to be in our prayer life. We are to be God's shadow, praying without ceasing, beating down God's door with our prayers. God is not the judge: he will be quick to respond.

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector is about humility in prayer. We are not to pray like the Pharisee. When we pray, we should not cite our privileges or tout our good deeds and good-standing with God. God will know if you're righteous or not. You don't have to tell him. Instead we should pray like the Tax Collector. He's not righteous and he knows it. But he knows the correct posture of prayer: it is to bow down low in body and heart, asking for mercy, thirsting for a grace we cannot produce on our own. May our prayers be likewise.

Reflection Question

How do your prayers compare to the prayers in these parables?