

# Exploring the Simpler 3-Point Parables

Dr. Craig Blomberg

I've made the claim that almost two thirds of Jesus' parables fit into a triadic or three-pointed form, but is that true? How would one come up with thinking along these lines in the first place?

The parable of "The Prodigal Son" is the longest of all of Jesus' parables but it's not at the beginning of the context in which it appears (Luke 15). Jesus tells a trio of parables, the other two which we know as the parable of "The Lost Sheep" and the parable of "The Lost Coin." If I'm looking for passages that might prove similar to the story of the "The Prodigal Son," I only have to go back to the beginning of Luke 15 and notice these two.

## Significant Parallels to the "The Prodigal Son"

We didn't mention it before but there is an interesting detail in the parable of the "The Prodigal Son." The father does not leave home to search for his lost son, but he recognizes him at a distance when he is returning home (Luke 15:20). That could not have happened unless the father, on a regular basis, went to the edge of the town where his son had departed to experience life in a foreign country. There is a sense in the parable of "The Prodigal Son," even though it's muted, that the master figure is seeking that which is lost.

In the parable of "The Lost Sheep" and "The Lost Coins" it is clearly emphasized. Sheep who get lost don't find their way home on their own. Coins that have rolled away don't roll back on their own. The only way to save sheep and coins is for their owners to do all of the seeking. Throughout all three of these stories is a message about Jesus that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

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### **There is an Emphasis on Joy**

The shepherd finds the sheep, brings it home, and calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him (Luke 15:6). Is this over the top? It might be, but that's also one of the keys to the second level or symbolic meaning of the parables. Parables, although they are generally life-like, contain something that is a bit unusual that grabs our attention. We don't know what kinds of coins the woman has or how much each one was worth. It's a little more understandable that if you recovered 1/10 of your possessions you would rejoice with your neighbors, but we wonder if this too is quite realistic. However, at the spiritual level, the point is clear. There should be great rejoicing when one lost person is found—whether they have the ability to come back on their own, as the son did, or whether it's a case of snatching them out of the jaws of darkness and death.

### **Each Parable Contains a Foil that Serves as a Contrast**

Unlike the older brother, sheep and coins don't have the ability to begrudge God's generosity. The sheep and the coins cannot begrudge the shepherd's and woman's efforts at finding them. But there still is a contrast. There still is a foil: it is the sense that somebody will say that ninety nine sheep are enough or nine coins are enough. Now and then you'll lose one. But Jesus' point is that there is something about the value of each last and lost individual no matter how many are already safe. In this sense, I think we can say that these two parables have the same structure and a similar trio of lessons as “The Prodigal Son.”

## **Are There Any Other Stories Like These Parables? Where Would We Look for Them?**

### **“The Two Debtors”**

Beginning in Luke, the first parable that Jesus introduces comes embedded in a much longer narrative of Luke 7:36-50. Jesus tells a story about a man with two debtors, Luke 7:41-43. There's no surprise in it, the interpretation is so straightforward it can't be missed. Who is going to be more grateful if you have two debtors, one owing ten times as much money as the other, and the money lender forgives the debts of both? Of course it is the one forgiven more. Three prongs, but are there three points here? 1) God forgives all kinds of sins in amounts and natures. 2) Those rescued from a very wayward life may well be more grateful and respond in unusual and extravagant ways. 3) Others may respond more reservedly and they begrudge God's generosity to the wayward. Maybe they show they haven't really appropriated his forgiveness at all.

### **“The Two Sons”**

Consider Matthew 21:28 and following. This parable is essentially the entire story of “The Prodigal Son” with most of the details removed. The twist or the surprise is in Jesus' application, not unlike the little parable of “The Two Debtors.” Two despised categories of individuals, from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism, are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of the seemingly righteous.

Again, this is similar to the parable of “The Prodigal Son.” The one who said “*I won't*” but then changed his mind is virtually identical to the prodigal who went off, disobeyed his father, squandered all of his inheritance, but then came to his senses and returned and was welcomed. The point, succinctly made by my colleague Elodie Emig, is that “performance takes priority over promise.” Performance, even without initial commitment, matters more than a promise without follow through. Weighing between those *two*, in terms of which one we should value, is the priority of this story. **Certainly, we should look for a way to encapsulate the three prongs of a three-person passage, but we should seek to do so in a simple and pithy way.**

### **“The Servant”**

Consider also Matthew 24:45-51. One could easily have had two separate servants in this passage to contrast them. However Jesus simply considers one servant from two different hypothetical vantage points. Here there's no surprise as to which one is considered good and which one is considered wicked. There's not even an application to surprise us. The teaching is very straightforward, but the surprise comes in the fact that the master is delayed. It's always important to keep parables in their larger context. In verses 42-44, Jesus commands alertness because Christ's return will be like a thief. Then we have the story where the master returns unexpectedly early followed by the parable of “The Ten Bridesmaids” where the return of the master figure is unexpectedly delayed. We can see what Jesus is doing. His return may simply be unexpected, or it may be sooner than some people are expecting, or it may be later than some people are expecting (see Matthew 24:36). We must be ready for the return of Christ *at any point* and therefore be like the servant who does his master's will and not like the one who thinks he has time to be wicked now and then change later.

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### **“The Ten Bridesmaids”**

In the parable of “The Ten Bridesmaids” we see for the first time more than a single individual considered as a subordinate. Instead, we see five wise bridesmaids and five foolish ones (Matthew 25:1 and following). We've been suggesting that parables are largely life-like to the culture of early first-century Israel. We've also been suggesting that there's usually at least one surprise somewhere in each passage, and that surprise is a key to the spiritual symbolism or level of meaning of the story. The surprise, the main shock of this passage, is that the groom won't open the door! What is more he says, *“truly I tell you, I don't know you.”* The impression is these are people who have been masquerading as true bridesmaids. Are there three points to derive from this story? 1) The end may come later than we expect. 2) Discipleship may be more arduous than we expect. 3) A day is coming when it'll be too late to make a genuine decision for Christ. These seem to form the message from the foolish bridesmaids who were unprepared for the long haul.

### **“The Rich Man and Lazarus”**

There is similar parable in Luke 16:19-31 which we call “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” and we find again that there is a surprise in terms of who's in and who's out. There is in fact a triangular structure here with Abraham at the top and Lazarus and the rich man as the pair of contrasting subordinates. A fair number in Jesus' audience would have expected, following the strand of Old Testament thought where riches were a reward for a good and godly life, that the rich man would be the one who would go to Abraham's side and that Lazarus the poor beggar is being punished for some sin. That's not at all what happens! We see a clear indication that the rich man had never truly repented. Those whom God helps, like Lazarus, will be born into his presence. Those who demonstrate that they have never repented by refusing to be even the least concerned for drastic human need show that they have no relationship with God.

### **“The Wheat and the Weeds”**

Let's look also at the parable of “The Wheat and the Weeds” in Matthew 13:24 and following. How many characters are there here? The story describes well beyond three main characters, but if we stop and think about the core plot it really is about a farmer confronted with wheat and weeds. Yes there are servants who are the harvesters but they represent the farmer. Yes, there is an enemy, who is identified as the devil, who is responsible for sowing the weeds, but he and the weeds can be associated together. The surprise is the command not to try to weed! The farmer realizes that the roots are so intertwined and perhaps the appearance of

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the plant is so similar that too much of the wheat the good seed will be picked out in the process. The surprise is the promise that there will still be enough for a good harvest and there is! The wheat triumphs after all.

### **“The Parable of the Net”**

Later in the same sermon or parables there is a much shorter version of virtually this same plot, Matthew 13:47-50. Just like “The Wheat and the Weeds” only instead of harvesting a crop, people are harvesting the crop of the sea. Just as with “The Wheat and the Weeds” there will need to be a sifting. Here you have fishermen, the good subordinates, and the bad subordinates with no surprise as to which falls into which category. There is hardly anything unusual in the development of the story itself except for the word translated in verse 47 kinds, all “kinds” of fish, *ethnē*. It's a word that normally means *all people groups*, suggesting even here Jesus' vision of having a universal impact.

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