

Exploring the More Complex 3-Point Parables

Dr. Craig Blomberg

Triangular Parables

“The Talents” / “The Minas”

Let's look at two pairs of parables that are similar enough to each other but in both cases the pairs are narrated in different gospels and in completely different contexts. The first of those pairs is the parable called the parable of “The Talents.” In Matthew 25 we have the most straightforward plot. This is the story of a man who is going on a journey and entrusts his wealth to his servants to invest. To one he gives five talents, to another, two, and to a third, one. He leaves, and the first two servants put his money to work. However, the man who had received one talent merely hid his master's money. It's the third servant who grabs our attention. This is only a slight variation from the simple three-point parable model. It has a master figure and two good, slightly different subordinates, perhaps to remind Jesus' disciples that not everybody has the same natural abilities or spiritual gifting. But there's the contrast with the man who refuses to obey, refuses to take a risk.

In Luke 19, we see a parable that is very similar but with some additions. Most of the story follows the same plot, but again the climax comes with the third servant who makes no attempt to make any money with what his master has given him. Inserted into this story is what appears to be a second complicating plot where the citizens of that nobleman oppose him and try to have him removed from his kingdom unsuccessfully.

This story looks like the parable of “The Talents,” but the focus is much more on the bad example. There appears to be two different ways that one can turn out to be a wicked servant. One can do so more subtly through neglect or overtly through the kind of opposition the noble man received. Either way one is judged as outside the kingdom.

“The Great Banquet” / “The Wedding Feast”

A similar pair of passages again is found in Matthew and Luke. Luke contains the simplest version in chapter 14, in the parable of “The Great Banquet.” Jesus tells a story about a man who has invited many guests for a banquet. When the time has come to summon them, all the guests make excuses so they do not attend. The man is upset, but his purposes are not thwarted; he sends the servants out to find the rag-tag people of the town and countryside so that his banqueting table is full. He promises that none of those originally invited, who refused to come, will get a taste of the banquet—another reminder that all excuses for rejecting God’s Kingdom overtures ultimately lead to judgment. God’s purposes will not be thwarted.

But compare that story with the similar passage in Matthew 22, often called “The Wedding Feast.” Here the cost of refusing the invitation is even harsher. The servants are sent to go and burn the city from which those people come. But the complicating feature here is the little sub-plot after the replacement guests have been identified; a man attends without the proper attire. This appears to be a deliberate spurning of the king, and again the parable ends in judgment. Just like the parable of “The Talents” illustrated two ways one can be a wicked servant, here we see two ways to not end up in the wedding hall. One is the more overt rejection, the other is simply trying to come but not on the king’s terms, or not the way God would have you come.

“The Sower”

The parable of “The Sower” appears in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In this parable we have three elements, three seeds that all fall on inadequate kinds of soil. The seeds go absolutely nowhere. Only the seed properly planted produces a crop. The only genuine disciple here is the one who hears the word, accepts it, and produces a crop, a transformed life of some kind. The passage boils down to a sower, three kinds of inadequate seeds (inadequate soils), and one kind of seed that produces a variety of crops, producing the fruit for which it is sown. Be sure that you are like that third kind of seed!

“The Workers in the Vineyard”

This parable is found in Matthew chapter 20. In it, Jesus tells us a story of workers in a vineyard who are all given the same amount of pay, a day’s wages, regardless of how long or short they worked the fields. Knowing this, those who worked a full day complain that those who worked less were paid the same as if they labored in the fields the entire day. We see

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that even when we receive what is absolutely fair, like those who worked a full day and were paid for a full day, we begrudge those to whom God shows His grace. We see in the three points that God is fair, but he is also gracious and generous. We also see the equality of the field owner (God) among the workers; the last gets the same as the first, the first gets the same as the last, and all those in between get the same. Ultimately God's people are all equal in His sight. However we interpret this story we must make sure that we hold onto God's absolute justice. But don't stop there! We must also understand his marvelous grace and the fundamental equality of all true believers.

“The Wicked Tenants”

There is one last parable of Jesus that fits, up to a point, our three-point paradigm, the parable of “The Wicked Tenants” (Mark 12, Matthew 21, and Luke 20). The body of this story describes the results of a harvest and the refusal of the tenant farmers to give the produce to their landlord. A whole series of servants are sent, but they are mistreated, until a beloved son is sent. Climactically, he is also killed and thrown out of the vineyard. Intriguingly, Jesus’ immediate audience here, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders, understood that he had spoken the parable against them.

It may be then that this is a slightly more elaborate parable with as many as four prongs, but we can still diagram it with a triangle. The son, and for that matter the servants, represents that top vertex of our triangle—God and messengers from Him. The new tenant farmers and the original disobedient ones representing the good and bad subordinates at the bottom. If this is a unique four-pronged parable, then our message can be summarized in some way as God delegating service. Initially, he delegates this service to Israel, whereby Israel's leaders have reached a point of disobedience during the first-century. Now God's reign, or rule, is embodied in Jesus followers—people of all ethnic groups. In this story we see an additional point, one foreshadowing the crucifixion of Jesus through the death of the beloved son.

Non-Triangular Parables

“The Good Samaritan”

“The Good Samaritan” in Luke 10 represents a horizontally structured three-point parable with a person in a position of powerlessness who is able to judge between good and bad subordinates. There is something about the story that's meant to answer the question, *“Who is my neighbor?”*

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Of course, the answer is *the one who had mercy*, the Samaritan. But if the focus is just on the Samaritan, and the only lesson from the story is that we should imitate his surprising mercy, then the story does not require a priest and a Levite as a foil. There must be a second prong that says something about not allowing religious duty, position, or status to get in the way of true obedience and love. Yet even that point could have been made with a story about a priest, a Levite, or an ordinary Israelite. The biggest surprise in the passage is that *the Samaritan* is the hero, the one who is viewed as an enemy. And so, we must thirdly add the lesson: even my enemy is my neighbor. If not, we may have missed the most central and the most convicting point to this story.

"The Unforgiving Servant"

We come now to two parables whose diagram is vertical—a master figure, a subordinate, and a sub-subordinate. The first of these two parables comes in Matthew chapter 18. The text speaks of ten thousand talents, the largest numeral in the Greek language. A talent was worth about twenty years of a day laborer's wages; multiply that by ten thousand and you get the idea of how exorbitant a sum this was. If there's anything unrealistic about this passage, it's that somebody could even accumulate so massive a debt and that the king forgives him! If you're trying to depict lavish forgiveness, amazing grace, extraordinary generosity and mercy, this is the epitome of that picture, and that's the first prong of the story. That's the basic character of this King, who by now we expect is going to resemble God.

When the servant who was forgiven his debt approaches another servant who owed him money, about three month's wages, he reacts diametrically opposed to how we would expect someone to react with the experience he's just had. How absurd for someone forgiven so much to turn around and react that way! That's the second prong of this passage. Because of the first servant's mercilessness, we see that he is the one thrown into jail to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. And now, the sting in the tale is how God will treat each of us unless we forgive our brothers or sisters from our hearts. If you've truly grasped the enormity of your sin and the extravagance of God's grace, there is nothing anyone in this life can do to you, however evil, that can't and shouldn't be forgiven in comparison with the forgiveness we've already received.

"The Shrewd Manager"

The other top-down, three-pronged parable appears in Luke 16. It's a very puzzling passage because it seems like God is commending injustice, but I think that interpretation is wrong. When confronted with his dismissal for

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mismanagement of his master’s funds, the manager goes to his master’s debtors and reduces their bills, ingratiating them to the master. The master commends the manager, not for his *dishonesty* but for his *shrewdness*. That’s one of the prongs—that we should appreciate the master’s commendation.

But Jesus continues by saying, ironically, that unbelievers are often more shrewd in dealing with other unbelievers than those who are God’s people do! People who think this life is all that there is will put more effort into planning their futures than the Christian will in exhibiting carefulness about their futures. That’s what we should learn from the steward’s behavior. From the perspective of the debtors, we learn that we are to use our material possessions for Kingdom purposes, to make and nurture disciples and do God’s work on the earth, so that when we die we will be welcomed by those who preceded us into God’s presence.

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Craig Blomberg, PhD

Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

Dr. Craig Blomberg is Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado. He holds the B.A. from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, the M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and the Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Craig is the author of fifteen books and has co-authored or co-edited ten more, along with more than 150 journal articles or chapters in multi-author works. His books include four on the historical reliability and interpretation of parts or all of the Bible (esp. the Gospels), two on interpreting and preaching the parables, three commentaries (on Matthew, 1 Corinthians and James), a textbook on Jesus and the Gospels and another on Acts through Revelation, a handbook on exegetical method, and three books on material possessions in the Bible. He is a member of the Committee on Bible Translation for the New International Version and on the committee tasked with producing the 35th anniversary edition of the NIV Study Bible.

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