

“People build what seem to be adequate foundations for their lives on all kinds of specious alternatives to Christ’s Word and the truth of the gospel, which alone is an adequate foundation carved into solid rock to support us now and for eternity.”

Exploring 2- and 1-Point Parables

Dr. Craig Blomberg

Horizontal Two-Point Parables

“The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

The parable of “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” found in Luke 18, is the first of these horizontal two-pronged parables. The Pharisees in Jesus’ world, of all the leadership groups, were the most beloved because they were laypeople. They were not the ordained rabbis, they were not the people in charge of the temple, they were not the wealthy priests whose wealth made them susceptible to corruption, and they were not the Sadducees who made a living based on the temple cult and its aristocracy. Tax collectors were Jewish traitors who sold out to the Roman government, working for the hated occupying enemy forces, coming annually to collect exorbitant taxes from Jewish people at sword point, if necessary with a Roman guard with them. Between the two, there is no question Jesus’ audience would relate to the Pharisee and identify with him and assume that he will be the hero. The two prongs are spelled out as clearly as possible in the second half of verse 14, “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled,” the point we should learn from the Pharisee, “And those who humble themselves will be exalted,” a point we should learn from the tax collector.

“The Wise and Foolish Builders”

The other two-point parable that can be diagrammed with a horizontal line with contrasting figures is found at the end of Matthew 7 and Luke 6. There is no surprise in this passage as to who the good model is and who the bad model is. There is no surprise here in terms of the story. The surprise is how patently obvious it is and yet how often we defy this wisdom to build on a solid foundation. And if that’s true at a literal level, how much more is it not tragically true at the spiritual level? People build what seem to be adequate foundations for their lives on all kinds of specious alternatives to

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Vertical Two-Point Parables

"The Servant and the Master"

Consider the parable found in Luke 17. Even the most generous of masters is not going to invite his servant to eat with him and he's certainly not going to offer the servant to make their meal first and then serve him later. But what's the spiritual application? Verse 10, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" If there is a lesson to be learned from each main character then we don't have to choose between two points. We can acknowledge that God has the right to command us to do whatever he wants, but secondly no matter how arduous the task, no matter how faithful we've been, we're still simply responding to God's gracious overtures to us in the first place. He commands us after he saves us, and we should say, "We're only unworthy servants; we've just done our duty."

"The Growing Seed"

A second passage similarly structured, and maybe not much better known, occurs in Mark 4. If you're just looking for a single point of comparison, you can endlessly debate whether the focus is on the farmer or on the results of the seed. If we focus on the farmer, we see learn that there is a time when we must prepare the ground and cultivate the seed and trust in the process of God's cultivation. If we focus on the results of the seed, we learn that the seed does in fact ripen and becomes harvested, useful for the purposes for which it was planted. I think we should admit that both of those are genuine spiritual lessons of this two-pronged passage that focuses both on the farmer and on the seed.

"The Rich Fool"

There is a slightly longer story found in Luke 12 often called "The Rich Fool" set in a context of Jesus' teaching about economic matters. Why is there a dispute in the first place? He intuitively it has something to do with greed. We need to review the cultural context of first-century Israel within the Roman Empire. There was no middle class as we think of it today. One to two percent of the people in the ancient Roman Empire owned up to fifty percent of the property including land. Up to ten percent of the people at any time were literally in danger of dying if their lot in life didn't improve,

due to inadequate food or medicine or health or disability. There may have been anywhere from five to generously fifteen percent of the people who had enough access to resources that if one growing season, or one season of sales in the market place, went sour they could still survive. Almost everybody else hovered just above a poverty line such that if circumstances deteriorated they would fall down into that bottom ten percent. So if you had an unexpected bumper crop, of course you should preserve some of it but you should be generous in giving large amounts of it away. That was understood. That was Old Testament teaching and it continues to be New Testament teaching.

It's not the *possession* of riches that is inherently bad but what one does or does not do with them. It's clear by this man's hoarding that he is not rich towards God. He has no true relationship with God. Here the second person in the parable is God himself, not represented by anyone. God alone knows when we will die. We have to be prepared, the second prong of the passage, to meet him whenever that should happen and show that we have a relationship with him because we have been good stewards of the resources he has merely loaned to us.

"The Fig Tree"

Another fairly little known or little discussed passage appears in Luke 13, the parable of "The Fig Tree." Throughout time in religious circles, including too often in Christian circles, the assumption is that people who suffer are doing so for their own personal sin, and many times that is completely wrong. When there is a natural disaster, when there is a man-made tragedy, the temptation is to blame the victims. What Jesus is saying is that we should remind ourselves it could just as easily have been us. It might be in the future, and we need to make sure we're right with God. In that context the parable of "The Fig Tree" makes very good sense. Throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets, a man enjoying life sitting in peace and prosperity on his land under his own fig tree is a recurring motif or a way of designating Israel at peace enjoying God's blessings. Should the focus be on the farmer's command, "Cut it down," the threat of imminent destruction? Or should the focus be on the vinedresser speaking on behalf of the tree which can't speak, pleading for a little bit more time to produce fruit? The answer is yes, that's where the focus should be, on both of those points. Destruction is imminent if there isn't repentance but there's a little time left so take advantage of it.

"The Unjust Judge" or "The Persistent Widow"

In Luke 18 we read the story of "The Unjust Judge" or "The Persistent Widow." There's an unjust judge who doesn't fear God, doesn't care what

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people think, and there's a widow, a paradigm of powerlessness in a patriarchal culture without a husband, perhaps too old to still have her father alive to represent her. There's no reason for this unjust judge to grant justice against her adversary. He refuses repeatedly but the widow is persistent—persistence that annoys him, that tires him. God is like the judge, but not in the way that he is unjust. If even an unjust human authority can be badgered into granting justice, how much more is God eager to dispense justice? Is the parable about God being willing to grant justice even more so than this judge did? Or is it about the need to have persevering, clingy, tenacious faith as the widow did? Once again, I think the answer is yes, both!

“The Visitor at Midnight”

We find in Luke 11 a parable that is strikingly similar to this last one but with a few interesting twists. Jesus says, “Because of your *persistence* he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.” However we translate this word—persistence, boldness, shameless audacity—it’s about God’s willingness to give and it’s about our needing to ask. We need not be afraid to come to God, especially when it’s for the sake of helping others, with a little bit of an edge. God can handle that, he has handled it for centuries.

Single-Point Parables

“The Mustard Seed” / “The Yeast”

Examples of these single-point parables are the twin parables of “The Mustard Seed” and the parable of “The Yeast” in Matthew 13. So, what’s Jesus doing? He’s illustrating with well-known objects that are proverbially small. He is saying that these very small things can grow, when it is a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven, into something big—surprising endings out of small beginnings. It’s not any more complicated than that. These parables are meant to encourage the disciples who were far enough into the ministry to which Jesus has called them but were facing increased opposition. The arrival of the Kingdom that Jesus keeps talking about is very miniscule, insignificant, and without much power, but it will grow!

“Building a Tower” / “A King Goes to War”

Another pair of parallel short, single-point parables come in Luke 14. The first story talks about counting the cost of starting a project and not being able to finish it; the main problem that Jesus points to is ridicule from the public. But then, he ups the ante. What about going to war against an army that’s twice the size of yours? Now, you risk much more than ridicule, you

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risk the loss of huge amounts of lives, perhaps including your own. The one simple message that binds the two parables together is *count the cost*.

“The Hidden Treasure” / “The Pearl of Great Price”

Finally, we return to Matthew 13 to look into two even shorter passages. Again, they're not absolutely identical; here we have what are largely parallel passages. In the first case, it appears that the man stumbles across the treasure. In the second case, the merchant is an oyster fisherman and he's seeking after fine pearls. But whether accidentally stumbling across a treasure or intentionally seeking and finding it, the point is the same: *give up everything that is necessary so that you can claim it*. The Kingdom of God is so valuable that we must be prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes in order to be a part of it.

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