

Exploring the Parables: Themes and Conclusions

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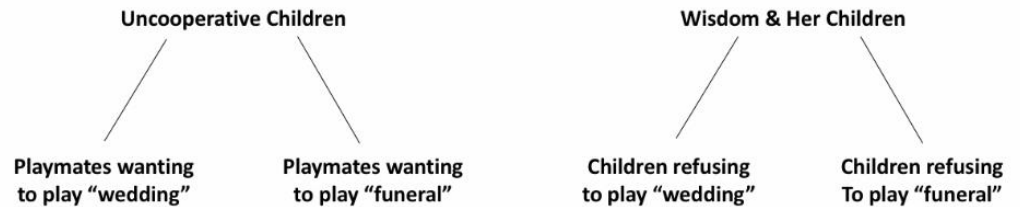
Two Final Parables

“The Children in the Marketplace”

There are two more significant passages from the gospels that we have not said anything about. The first is often called the parable of “The Children in the Marketplace” and is found in Matthew 11 and in Luke 7. Jesus is responding to the growing skepticism about his ministry. He creates an A-B, B-A structure: John was the one who came in an austere mode, fasting out in the wilderness living a very rigid lifestyle, and people rejected that as inappropriate. Jesus came and was frequently invited to banquets, sometimes thrown for him by tax collectors and those who were seen as the outcasts of society, and was accused of partying too much. Yet a good portion of Israelite society rejected him as well.

How would you diagram the structure of this? On the one hand you might imagine the uncooperative playmates as the unifying figure because they reject both of two contrasting options. Or maybe we should put the playmates suggesting the games at the center and then put the uncooperative playmates at the bottom twice, reacting to each of the two proposals. However we diagram it, it's not a classic triadic model of a master with contrasting subordinates. Yet there is something three pointed about it.

The Children in the Marketplace



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The application that Jesus draws comes first from the populace's general reaction to John. The second application is to the populace's general reaction to Jesus. And the third prong comes in this somewhat cryptic proverbial statement at the end of the passage, "but wisdom is proved right by her deeds." Luke says "by her children." This may be Jesus' way of saying that what doesn't seem like a wise plan, God sending John and Jesus because a majority of people rejected them, will be proved right to have been a very wise plan based on the long term results of their ministries.

"The Sheep and the Goats"

The other passage that is often included in studies of parables is the story that's referred to as "The Sheep and the Goats" in Matthew 25:31-46. What's different about this story is that it really only starts as if it's going to be a parable; it begins as a story about earthly characters and animals and quickly gives way to talking about the righteous and the unrighteous. The application begins before the parable is even half over. What's especially uncommon here is how the sifting, the process of judgment, is described. There's nothing here about being a disciple of Jesus or believing or trusting in Christ, but we have to remember that like every passage in Scripture this one comes in a context. It comes in a context of a series of parables, all of which we have looked at before, about the timing of the return of Christ. Jesus is stating some of the crucial ways that faith in Jesus transforms a person, how they live out that faith in helping the neediest of our world with practical actions. It may even be that he has a particular focus on the needy Christian. "Brothers and sisters" is used consistently throughout Matthew for literal biological kin or spiritual kin. If someone

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Non-Canonical Parables

There is no authorized canonical or official list of Jesus' parables. Only about half of the stories that we've looked at in this course have the word *parable* somewhere in the text of Scripture, but we recognize a unifying literary and a rhetorical form. We've been focusing on those that can be thought of, however succinctly, as a narrative with some kind of beginning, plot development, and a conclusion. If we ask, are there any other parables that Jesus told that we know about that fit that definition—a short, metaphorical narrative that have at least enough of a plot to be able to discern a beginning, a middle, and an end—the answer is “not anywhere else in the New Testament.”

The Gospel of Thomas

There is, however, one other early document that comes from a religious blend of Christianity and Greek philosophy that scholars call *Gnosticism*. By far the best known document that we have recovered from ancient Gnostic circles is the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is not a narrative; it's not a story containing things from various parts of Jesus' life. It's merely a collection of one hundred and fourteen sayings attributed to Jesus. Could it be that there are some teachings of Jesus that were reasonably accurately recorded in the Gospel of Thomas that we don't know of from any place else? It would be extraordinary, with the impact Jesus and his first followers made, if some teachings of Jesus weren't preserved outside of the inspired gospels. But do any of the sayings in Thomas reflect what Jesus taught?

Consider the parable in Saying 8: *Jesus said, “Man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea. He drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them he found a large good fish. The wise fisherman threw all the small fish into the sea. He chose the large fish without difficulty. He who has ears to hear let him hear.”* It starts out like the parable of “The Dragnet,” but this isn't about good fish and rotten fish. This is about all the fish being small except for one good large fish, the Gnostic one who has the elite and esoteric knowledge. It appears that Thomas, whoever this second-century Gnostic writer was, has taken a parable from the canonical gospels and turned it in a Gnostic direction.

But now consider Saying 20: *The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like." He said to them, "It's like a grain of mustard seed. The smallest of all seeds but when it falls on tilled ground it puts forth a great branch and becomes shelter for the birds of heaven."* That sounds almost exactly like the parable in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Although if you read carefully and know the Bible very well you might have seen a unique word, when it falls on *tilled* ground, cultivated ground. Is that a hint that this writer is thinking of human preparation for Gnostic truth?

Consider also Saying 63: *"There was a rich man who had many possessions. He said, 'I will use my possessions to sow and reap and plant, to fill my barns with fruit that I may have need of nothing.' These were his thoughts in his heart and on that night he died."* End of story, dramatically abbreviated. Was that the original form as some critics have suggested that Luke has elaborated? Probably not given the parallel in Saying 65 to a passage that is found in the canonical gospels, the parable of "The Wicked Tenants." Saying 65: *"This good man had a vineyard. He leased it to tenants that they might work in it and receive the fruits from them. He sent his servant that the tenants might give him the fruits of the vineyard. They seized his servant, beat him, all but killed him. The servant went away and told his master. His master said, 'Perhaps they did not know him.' He sent another servant, the tenants beat the other also. Then the master sent his son and said, 'Perhaps they will have respect for my son.' Those tenants, since they knew that he was the heir of the vineyard, they seized him and killed him."* It's an abbreviated version of the canonical form, but if you look in the Gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 20 and Luke's version of "The Wicked Tenants," he is the only one to have the master say, "Perhaps, they will listen to him. Perhaps they will follow my son." Why does Luke have that? Once you apply the master figure to God, people might ask the question, did God not know what was going to happen? Could he not have planned for it? Would he have declared "they will respect my son"? So Luke clarifies by saying "*perhaps*." Since Luke is editing Mark and Thomas parallels Luke, that almost certainly means that Thomas knows Luke's later form and does not reflect an earlier form of the story.

But now let's come to two passages that are not paralleled in the gospels at all. Saying 97: *Jesus said, "The Kingdom of the Father is like a woman carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking on a distant road the handle of the jar broke in the meal poured out behind her on the road. She was unaware; she had not noticed the misfortune. When she came to her house she put the jar down and found it empty."* Should that be given an orthodox meaning and attributed to the historical Jesus? What about Saying 98: *Jesus said, "The Kingdom of the Father is like a man who wanted to kill a powerful man. He drew his sword in his house and drove it into the wall that he might know that his hand would be strong enough then he slew the powerful man."* You could give that an orthodox interpretation, but in

light of everything else that we've seen those are probably Gnostic creations about Jesus. You might not want to be too convinced that the Gospel of Thomas contains legitimate words of Jesus.

Themes and Theology

How can we summarize, theologically, doctrinally, thematically, what we've learned? Apart from each individual passage, is there any value to hold to these parable triangles? If you were to summarize the entire message of God's revelation, from the beginning to the end of the Bible, how would you summarize it and be true to the narrative? I suspect there is a triangle at the heart of the biblical narrative. God creates a universe with humans at its apex, but they rebel against him. The rest of this story is about God initiating an unfolding process of making it possible to bring people back to himself, redemption.

It starts in the garden with the animal sacrifice that provided skins to cover Adam and Eve. It progresses through the preservation of Noah and his family line despite the flood. It begins in earnest with the call of Abraham and the promise to give him a unique land and legacy and progeny, a people that would emerge from his descendants, the people of Israel. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of the ups and downs and the apparent thwarting of that promise, with God in each case overcoming the obstacles, until you reach Jesus who is the full and final atonement for the redemption of humanity, so that God can declare that His Kingdom has arrived in new and remarkable ways. But still there is one final stage one final episode, Christ's return which then leads to ushering in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Why did I say that was a triangle? Because you have God and God incarnate in Christ at the apex of the triangle with rebellious humanity, some of whom accept his offer of redemption and become the good subordinates while others refusing it and become the evil subordinates. Jesus' parables are consummately about God's Kingdom, reign and power. The Kingdom is also present, has been present throughout history, and became present in new and dramatic ways at the time of Jesus, but not yet in all its fullness. That's what the gospels call the mystery of the Kingdom. The theology of the parables involves the arrival, but without yet the fullness of God's Kingdom. It's something we can enter into, but it's something we look forward to in the future as well. It's something that clearly has a spiritual component, but it also has a social dimension.

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“The Sower”

There's a passage that we've said nothing about during this entire series called the parable of “The Sower” (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8). The assumption of this course thus far is that the parables were meant to be understood by people in Jesus' culture. Do these verses contradict all of that? Do they say that parables are meant to conceal rather than reveal? No, I don't think so at least not in a cognitive sense. Recall Mark 12:12 where Mark says Jesus' opponents, the Jewish leaders, went away plotting to kill him because they understood he had told this parable against them. No true biblical understanding goes beyond the intellect. It goes to a heart attitude, it goes to a matter of the will. The real understanding that some never grasp is the understanding that leads to taking the next step, the step of discipleship.

Christology

It would seem fitting in this final lesson to talk more specifically about the parables' *Christology*, the doctrine of Christ, and what they teach about Jesus. There is a long history of overly detailed “Christologizing” of the parables. People have rushed too quickly to see Jesus too explicitly in these stories. As Jesus' followers became more and more convinced that he was God incarnate, it was completely natural to put him in that same corner of the triangle with God. The problem with that line of reasoning is that we have jumped too quickly away from the original context. A Jewish rabbi, addressing a Jewish crowd in Israel, at the beginning of the first-century, talking about masters, kings, shepherds, fathers, will lead his audience to assume he's talking about God, not himself. Jesus' message in its original context is that not everyone who thinks they are among God's true people in the land of Israel truly are God's people. In fact, some who are most self-confident and who are among the leadership are the ones who most clearly are not. Many of the outsiders either are or can become insiders. If we start there, we will get the parables right.

There have also been attempts to align Jesus with characters in parables other than the master or the unifying figure. That may have a measure of plausibility, but they lose focus on the structure of the parable where the master figure is—the father, the king. Yes, if you want to put Jesus somewhere, you have to put him at the top, not with one of the other vertices—but don't put him at the top too quickly!

There's still another way that the parables have been abused. That is to miss the significance of placing some rather unsavory characters as the master figures. A good example is the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard.” Interpreting this parable, there are commentators who fail to

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capture the very genius of Jesus' teaching. They say that God cannot be unfair, therefore this master cannot be a symbol for God. But how else could we explain the story? There is always something about a master figure that makes him an appropriate symbol for God, but that does not mean that we are to read everything else that the character does as a literal representation of divine action. The master equalized all of the workers by giving everyone as much as he had agreed to give the first group of workers, as if all of them worked a full day. God is so often so gracious, we dare not ask him to be *only* fair because, when we apply that at the spiritual level, that's a request to be damned. If we ask God to give us our wages, Paul says in Romans 6 that “The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life.” We love to complain to God in so many situations in life, “but God that's not fair!” No, we never want God to be fair because we do nothing to merit his justice or favor. All we want from him is grace and that demands that we allow him to be gracious to others, even when it doesn't seem fair to us.

About Denver Seminary

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