

# Preaching the Lucan Parables

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“Preaching a parable is a novice preacher’s dream but often an experienced preacher’s nightmare”.<sup>33</sup> One of the difficulties that parables present for preachers and teachers is the challenge of understanding their literary genre and its interpretation. They are designed not primarily to teach a cognitive lesson but to bring about a response; the power of the parable is not in revealing what is unknown but in recognizing what is known. They work like jokes. That which makes a joke funny is the shared experience, the common knowledge between the teller and the hearer, and then the unexpected punch line. Parables look harmless and therefore are received readily, only to shatter our way of looking at life (e.g. Nathan to King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-7). They are intended to challenge us and to change us.

We notice that the Gospel writers give the name parable to a variety of related literary forms, and in each of these applications there is a comparison between the parable and that which it signifies. Basically a parable uses concrete pictures to express truths, rather than stating them directly which would involve some abstraction. John is traditionally thought to have no parables, although there are figurative descriptions such as the good shepherd (John 10), and the true vine (John 15). None of the Synoptic parables occur in the Fourth Gospel. All of the major parables in Mark also occur in Luke or Matthew (along with many others). Mark states that parables were Jesus’ standard form of public instruction (Mark 4:33,34). Parables can be divided into five general categories,<sup>34</sup> but we will limit our discussion to two categories: similitudes and stories.

The first kind of parable we will discuss briefly is the similitude. This is a developed simile. Whereas a simple simile says that something is “as” or

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the literary forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 87.

<sup>34</sup> This follows the categories of Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with intent: a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 9-15: (1) aphoristic sayings, (2) similitudes, (3) interrogative parables, (4) narrative parables (5) “How much more” parables.

“like” something else, e.g. he is as stubborn as a rock, she swims like a fish; a similitude expands the picture to explain the basis for the comparison. Therefore, instead of a simple simile, such as "the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed", Jesus says, "it is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." Therefore the similarity is not with the first item of the comparison, be it a field, a merchant or a mustard seed, but the whole similitude says something about the nature of the Kingdom. In the case of the parable of the mustard seed, it is not a parable about smallness, but about growth from a small beginning.

The second sort of parable we will discuss is the story, with characters, plot, discord and resolution. Luke’s Gospel contains some of the best-known story parables, many of which are unique to Luke – e.g. the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35), the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Although stories are universally loved and are an effective means of communication, they are also difficult to interpret. A correct interpretive methodology, therefore, is crucial. It may be helpful to do an historical survey of some of the major interpretative methods of the story parables throughout the centuries

Until the nineteenth century, the predominant mode of interpretation was allegorical. An allegory uses hidden meanings within a story to convey meaning; each part of the story is then interpreted in line with this hidden meaning. An example of this form of interpretation is seen in the Fourth Century with Augustine of Hippo’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10. The parable is seen as a description of salvation history, from the Fall to redemption in the work of Christ.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The name “Jericho” is often associated with a Canaanite word (*yareah*) meaning “moon” and this is possibly because it was a place of the worship of lunar deities. Augustine believed that once this is understood, it unlocked the allegory. The man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam. Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell. Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Therefore the trip is an allegory of the Fall. Thieves are the devil and his angels; they

stripped Adam of his immortality, they beat him by persuading him to sin and they left him half-dead, in that as a man he lives, but he died spiritually. This situation requires a solution; Adam needs redemption. The priest and the Levite who pass by on the other side of the road are the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, and a solution is not to be found in them. The Samaritan who comes represents Christ. He binds the wounds of the man in the ditch, which in this context means the restraint of sin. Other parts of the story also need to be given a meaning: the oil is the comfort of good hope, wine is the exhortation to work with a fervent spirit. The man who was in the ditch is then put on the beast, a picture of the flesh of Christ's incarnation; the inn is the Church; the next day is the time after the resurrection; the two coins are the promise of this life and the life to come; the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul. In this way, Augustine used his understanding of redemptive history as a 'code' for unlocking the meaning of the parable. The majority of exegetes and preachers allegorized parables until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are some notable exceptions including Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and John Calvin.

In the second half of the nineteenth century a Dutch scholar, C.E. van Koetsveld, pointed out that the extravagant allegorical interpretations of the parables obscured rather than clarified the teaching of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> Van Koetsveld was succeeded by a German theologian, A. Jülicher, who observed that though the word “parable” is used by the evangelists, the word “allegory” never appears. Jülicher’s two-volume work on parables sounded the death knell to this allegorical interpretative method and led to many scholars arguing that there is only one point to be gained from a parable.<sup>36</sup> Jülicher regarded parables such as the sower and the wheat and the tares as early examples of allegorisation by the early church. He argued that Jesus’ purpose in parables was not to hide the truth with some allegorical code but to clarify.

Jülicher’s work was followed and modified by C.H. Dodd whose influence extends from around 1935 to about 1970. Whereas Jülicher saw Jesus as a teacher of moral principles, C.H. Dodd viewed him as a dynamic historical person who with his teaching brought about a crisis period. This crisis period was the arrival of the Kingdom of God, which for Dodd meant the rule of

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<sup>35</sup> C. E. van Koetsveld, *De Gelijkenissen van den Zaligmaker* (Schoonhoven: Van Nooten, 1869).

<sup>36</sup> A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1910).

Jesus at the time of his earthly ministry. Therefore the parables of Jesus must be understood to have a direct bearing upon the actual situation of the rule of God upon the earth.<sup>37</sup> The reader of the parables needs to understand the situation in which a parable was originally given and to link it to an understanding of the Kingdom of God fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.

J. Jeremias<sup>38</sup> continued the work of Dodd. Jeremias sought to discover the parabolic teachings that go back to Jesus himself rather than simply relying on the written testimony of the early church as recorded in the gospels. Jeremias believed the historical development of the parables occurred in two stages: orality and textuality. The first stage pertains to the actual situation of Jesus' ministry, and the second is a reflection of the way the parables were put to use in the early church. The task Jeremias gave himself was the recovery of the original form of the parables in order to hear the voice of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Such a division raises doubt on the text of Scripture as we have it, and to go behind the text is ultimately guesswork. Jeremias' work, however has been very influential due to his intimate knowledge of the land, culture, customs, people and language of Israel.

This trend to a one dimensional understanding of parables may have been a helpful corrective to the tradition of allegorisation, but it may have been an over-correction. Some parables are clearly multi-dimensional. The parable of the vineyard in Luke 20:9-17 can be read from many perspectives: the vineyard stands for Israel (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7), the owner of the vineyard is God, the tenants are the leaders of Israel in the Old Testament, the servants who collect the rent are the prophets, the son is Jesus, killing the tenants is judgement on Israel and the others to whom the vineyard is given are the Gentiles. Similarly in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-8) the farmer is the person who sows the word, the soils are those who hear, the birds are Satan, the rocky soil is a shallow response, thorny soil is a response of competing priorities and the good soil is an appropriate (and fruitful) reception of the word.

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<sup>37</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nesbit, 1935).

<sup>38</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963).

<sup>39</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963).

In order to arrive at an appropriate interpretation of parables the following five principles are suggested.

## **1. Identify the audience**

In the parable concerning those who are lost in Luke 15, the audience is clearly defined in Luke 15:1-2 as Pharisees and Scribes who were grumbling against Jesus for receiving and eating with sinners. This audience therefore defines those to whom Jesus told the parables: the religious leaders of the day. It is not primarily addressed to those who saw themselves as lost.

The three stories that are found in Luke 15 have a similar structure. Something is lost: a sheep, a coin, a son; that which is lost is found; there is great rejoicing. At one level the meaning of the parable is clear – the religious leaders of Israel should be rejoicing that lost sinners were being found. But the parable does not end with the prodigal son being found.

There is a possible interpretative key in the first two stories as to how we should understand the story about the two sons. In the first parable we have a lost sheep; it is lost a long way from home, it knows it is lost, and there is rejoicing when it is found. This is very much like the prodigal son who is lost a long way from home, and who knows he is lost. In the second story, however, the coin is lost while it is still at home and does not recognise that it is lost. This resonates with the older brother in the final story.

When we come to the end of the three stories, Who remains lost? The sheep, the coin and the prodigal son have all be found and have been the object of rejoicing. The older brother, however is still lost. The irony of the final story is that the prodigal son recognises that he has no right to be a son, when he resolves to go home, it is to be treated as a hired servant (v18). The older brother, however, who has every right to be treated as a son, chooses to adopt the attitude of a hired servant: in v29 he complains that he has not been paid for the services he has rendered, not even by a young goat. As long as he has this mentality of remuneration for services rendered, he will never know the freedom of a son.

This then raises the question, Who is lost? Having identified the audience as the religious leaders of Jesus' time, it is possible to affirm that the main character of this three-fold parable is the older brother. By the end of the chapter he is the only one who remains lost, even though he has not left home. He is lost in his legalism and desire for rewards for effort. He is so embittered that he refuses to join in the celebrations for his younger brother. The father reminds him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (v31), and implores his son to join in the celebrations for the younger brother. Will he come in? We are not told. For that is the challenge of the parable that is addressed primarily to the Pharisees and the Scribes.

## **2. Find the Point of Reference**

Any good story invites the reader to enter into the world of the narrative. Most stories give multi-perspectival approaches to their world by inviting the reader or listener to identify with different characters. In the parable of the lost sons, the person who identifies with the younger son will hear a very different message from the person who identifies with the older son. This multi-layered interpretation is seen very clearly in the parable of the two debtors in Luke 7:36-47. The parable is placed within a story from the life of Jesus when he visits the home of Simon, a Pharisee. The failure to offer Jesus, a visiting teacher, the ordinary hospitality of the day would have been interpreted as an insult. When a woman of ill-repute, probably a prostitute, finds her way into the presence of the diners and makes a fool of herself over Jesus by washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, it only strengthens the suspicions of the Pharisees. Jesus could not be a prophet and leave uncondemned this kind of public disgrace. In response Jesus tells a parable about two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, the other fifty. Both debts are cancelled, and Jesus asks concerning the debtors' relationships with the money-lender, Which of them will love him more?

The story needs no interpretation, although Jesus applies it with great force. There are at least three points of reference within the story: the money-lender and the two debtors, and their identifications are immediate. God is like the moneylender; the prostitute and Simon the Pharisee are the two debtors. How the parable is interpreted depends on the point of reference with which the

reader identifies. If the reader identifies with Simon, the parable is a word of judgment calling for a response; Simon could scarcely have missed the point that he, a recipient of grace, has not responded with appropriate love and acceptance. The effect of this is that Simon is humiliated. There is also, however, another point of reference: the woman. If one enters the parable through this point of reference, the effect of the parable is very different. The woman also would not have missed the point of the parable, but for her it is a message of acceptance and a challenge to renewal; it is not humiliation but inclusion. This multi-perspectival interpretation of the parable, however, does not make it an allegory. A true allegory is a story where the elements mean something foreign to the story itself, and where each detail needs interpretation, such as, What is the significance of the 500 denarii? The 50 denarii? Points of reference, however, are only those parts of the story that draw the hearer into it, with whom/what he or she is to identify in some way as the story proceeds. This parable becomes a word of judgment on Simon and his friends and simultaneously a word of acceptance and forgiveness to the woman.

### **3. Understand the cultural and theological significance**

The twenty-first century reader is at a significant cultural distance from the original hearers of the parables. It is important to understand as much as is possible about how the parables would have been heard in their original first century setting.

A good example of this is the so-called parable of the good Samaritan. It appears in Luke 10:25-37. With this parable we need to apply the first two principles we have established (identifying the audience and finding the point of reference) in conjunction with understanding cultural and theological perspectives.

The audience of this parable is a lawyer, who asks of Jesus, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” That is a strange question, especially for someone who specialises in the law. He should have known that people do not inherit because of what they *do*. In fact to *do* something in order to inherit an estate is abhorrent to most ears. The question therefore demonstrates the

lawyer's problem: he is controlled by his own self-righteousness and thinks that eternal life is something that can be earned rather than graciously received. As a lawyer, he was probably part of a pharisaic school, committed to the interpretation and the teaching of the law, and he believed that such observance of the law would merit eternal life. Jesus therefore challenged him at the level of his legalism with the question, "What is written in your law?" This man gives the perfect answer, summarizing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 he says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all you mind and your neighbour as yourself". At one level this is the perfect answer, and Jesus affirms this. This then raises the question of whether the lawyer has kept these laws, and before this can be answered, greater definition is needs in who are his neighbours. He needs this definition to justify himself (v29) as no-one could be expected to be neighbourly to everyone. It is in response to this request for definition that the parable is told. This may be our first indication that the primary meaning of this parable is not to do with social welfare, but an attack on legalism as a means of self-justification.

The story is well-known. A certain man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves who stripped him, took his possessions and left him half dead. A priest and a Levite each passed by the man without rendering assistance, but assistance was provided from an unexpected passer-by, a Samaritan, one who would not have been perceived to have been a neighbour.

Understanding the cultural and theological background of the lawyer will help us understand this parable. A lawyer would have been a member of one of the non-priestly pharisaic schools. The Pharisees regarded the priests as corrupt, and so a lawyer would not have been surprised when a priest and a Levite crossed to the other side of the road and avoided the man who had been bashed. There may have been ceremonial reasons for this, as if a priest came in contact with a person who was deceased, he would be rendered ceremonially defiled and thereby precluded from his priestly functions for a certain time. Whether this was the reason he passed by is not discussed; a first century Pharisee or lawyer would have expected this sort of behaviour from the Jerusalem priesthood. After the priest and the Levite pass by, there is an air of expectancy that the third person will render assistance. One would



expect this person to be a teacher of the law, or maybe a Pharisee. The surprise comes when the person is identified as a Samaritan.<sup>40</sup>

Samaritans were hated by Jews. The Jews believed that the Samaritans find their origins in the account in 2 Kings 17:24-41, when, following the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they repopulated the land with Gentiles who adopted the Israelite's faith alongside their own religion. This produced a mixed race, quasi-Jewish group. It was not the racial mix that led to their disdain by the Jews, it was theologically heterodox. Samaritans did not accept the entire Hebrew Bible, but only the first five books (the Pentateuch). They did not recognize the centrality of Jerusalem nor its temple as they claimed that Jerusalem was not mentioned in the books of the Old Testament which they recognized. It is therefore a shock when the man who renders assistance is a Samaritan.

Jesus challenges the lawyer to identify which of the three passers-by was a neighbour. The answer is clear. Jesus then challenges the man to go and do likewise. At this point the modern day reader underestimates the overwhelming demand that this is. To have this sort of compassion is to be neighbourly to all people, regardless of race, colour, political persuasion, gender. The requirement to be neighbourly never ends, and the person who thinks they are capable of this is as deluded as is the lawyer in the story.

At this point we are reminded that the Samaritan is not the only point of reference in the story. There is someone in the story who gains life and that is the man in the ditch who has been robbed. He does not receive it by obedience to the law, he does not do anything to inherit life; he is the object of grace. At this point our broader understanding of New Testament theology and Lucan themes should inform our interpretation of the parable. Good works are the result of grace, not the means to inherit grace. And so there is a juxtaposition between the lawyer and the man in the ditch: the former is motivated by morality and the latter is motivated by grace. Once we have understood that we are the recipients of grace, we can start to understand the motivation to go and do likewise; short of that understanding, we cannot begin to enter into what motivated the Samaritan.

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<sup>40</sup> For background on Samaritans, see H. G. M Williamson and C. A. Evans, "Samaritans", *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 1056-1061.

#### 4. Parables are about the Kingdom of God (not about me)

As we have seen, many readers import themselves into a story through various points of reference, and this may be an appropriate response as the author wishes to invite the reader or listener into the story, but this is not always the case. Not all parables are about us, some parables are specifically about the Kingdom of God. In Luke 8:10, in the context of the interpretation of the parable of the sower, Jesus says something strange: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.” This verse has caused much confusion as it seems to say that Jesus told parables in order that his listeners would not understand. The parallel passage in Mark is even more specific as it adds, “lest they should turn and be forgiven” (Mark 4:12). Several interpretations of this verse have been offered.

C.H. Dodd maintains that this explanation was added by Mark but this explanation was never Jesus’ intention. Dodd makes this claim by the use of language in these verses.<sup>41</sup> Such arbitrary excision from the text, however, is not a valid way to exegete difficult passages. T.W. Manson points out that the quotation is from Isaiah 6:10 and that it has been mistranslated. He says that Mark is quoting from an Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament known as a Targum and thus “who” is a possible rendering of “that”. He translates the verse:

“To you is given the secret of the Kingdom of God;  
but all things come in parables to those outside who  
see indeed but do not know  
and hear indeed but do not understand  
lest they should repent and receive forgiveness”.<sup>42</sup>

J. Jeremias believes these words are misplaced and belong to another tradition; they must be interpreted without reference to Mark 4. According to

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<sup>41</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana, 1961) 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931) 78.

Jeremias, the writer inserted the passage from the other tradition because of the catchword “parable”. He then states that in Mark 4:11 “parable” is to be understood as “riddle” and that it is not related to the parable that precedes it.<sup>43</sup>

All of these explanations have significant problems. When we understand, however, that this parable is not primarily about us, but about God’s covenant purposes for Israel, and it should be read in the light of salvation history, the meaning of Jesus’ explanation of the parable becomes clearer. The explanation of the parable of the sower is a quote from Isaiah 6:9-13. This passage is about Judah being taken into exile. This exile is likened to the uprooting of trees and the land becoming desolate. At the end of this image of desolation, there is the promised hope of a remnant, a holy seed. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 so that people will recognise what is happening in his ministry. His declaration of the Kingdom of God is the replanting of that which was lost through exile. The people may have returned from Babylon after Cyrus’ decree in 538 BC, the temple may have been rebuilt under Zerubbabel, but the people of Israel were still waiting for the visitation of the Messiah and the forgiveness of the sins that led to the exile. The parable of the sower is primarily about the return from exile in the ministry of Jesus.

Some people did not recognise this aspect of Jesus’ ministry, and so for them the replanting of the seed in the land was like seed falling on a path, it was quickly snatched away. Others may have been prepared to hail Jesus as the Messiah, to cry “Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, but their responses are shallow and they are fickle when they do not receive the messiah of their expectations. Others are enjoying the benefits of Roman occupation, have positions of status, power and wealth, and so the trappings of this world make them unable to recognise the significance of the ministry of Jesus. But the point of the parable is that there are some who do recognise that Jesus’ ministry is about the promised replanting of the Kingdom, and such people are like good soil, and the seed planted in them produces a bountiful harvest. This is a parable that is about what God is doing. Its primary meaning is not that we need to listen better to sermons, even if that is a secondary meaning; its primary meaning is about what God is

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<sup>43</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1963) 15-17.

doing in the ministry of Jesus, and therefore we need to recognise that. Therefore William Lane says in his commentary on Mark that it is not an explanation of why Jesus speaks in parables; it a commentary on the contemporary situation. Those outside are excluded from further instruction in the secret because of their own unbelief. The presence of the Kingdom of God in Jesus can only be discerned through faith. Therefore Jesus' presence means disclosure and veiling; grace and judgment.<sup>44</sup>

When we understand that the most of the parables are primarily about the Kingdom of God, they become sharp and punchy commentaries on the ministry of Jesus. There is an urgency for Jesus' listeners (and for us) to understand the nature of the Kingdom. It is the Kingdom that is to take priority, and excuses such as are seen in Luke 14:7-24 such as "I have just bought a field" or "I have bought five yoke of oxen" or "I have married a wife" are not to be tolerated. The return from exile takes priority. In fact the most foolish thing someone could do in the light of this is, to tear down barns and build larger ones (Luke 12:13-21).

This understanding of urgency helps us to understand one of the most confronting sections of Luke's Gospel: the parable of the dishonest steward in Luke 16:1-8, a story about a steward who reduces the debts that were owed to his master. This is not a commendation for dishonest business practices, but an example of someone who understands the danger of his predicament. We are meant to be shocked by the story. We are meant to realise the urgency of the hour and that everything is at stake. This includes our approach to money and any other asset. If the people of this world need to be shrewd in the light of coming consequences, how much more should the people of the Kingdom be shrewd in the light of the coming judgement of God! In a similar manner, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is not designed to teach fine details about the nature of the after-life (e.g. whether people in Hades can see Abraham in Heaven) but to bring about a response in people's attitude to wealth. Most of the parables are primarily about the nature of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>44</sup> See W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 156-160.

## 5. Look for sub themes- harmony lines.

As parables are multi-dimensional stories, they are not restricted to one meaning. Even if the parable of the lost sons is primarily about the attitude of the older brother, this does not negate the minor theme that God will embrace the repentant prodigal. The parable of the good Samaritan does call for social justice, but a proper understanding of the parable will require this call to be motivated by grace. The parable of the sower and the soils does speak to us as listeners of the word within the context of the significance of Jesus' ministry. Each of these meanings, however, are to be understood within the context of the primary meaning of the parable. As with good music, these sub-themes are like harmony lines that accord in some way with the melody line.

The point of a parable, then, is to call the listener to respond. In doing so, the parable draws on things that are familiar to the listener. By means of comparison, a parable communicates a challenging theological message. Parables are not primarily didactic; they are intended to make an impact on the listener and call for an appropriate response. They therefore need to be heard both in their content and in their impact, and a proper response will call for appropriate Kingdom living.

### For further reading:

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