

Unit 2 Introduction

The Parables of Jesus in Luke

Anytime you begin to work with parables, you might imagine receiving a package that reads:

“Danger, handle with care.”

Parables, by design, often arrive with unexpected results. While they may not appear life-threatening (in a traditional sense), reading them can result in life-changing decisions. Luke’s cultivation and curation of Jesus’ parables prove no less challenging either for the ordinary Bible student or for the experienced teacher. Before getting to Luke’s account, it does help to review what parables represent and then ask how Luke organizes them in his gospel while emphasizing Jesus as storyteller.

Parables in General

Originally an oral style of communication, parables seem to problematize normal English categories of writing. Parables might be seen as extended admonitions, similes (describing how something is “like” another item), metaphors, or comparative explanations. A parable might incorporate any or all these terms.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle employed the term parable (translated as “to come alongside”) in his book *Rhetoric*. Aristotle used the term to describe a group of stories, or comparative illustrations, intended to prove a point. Aristotle did distinguish between these literal stories (drawing upon the experiential world of the hearers) from fables, those stories that include elements associated with fantasy, like talking animals. While children could draw simple principles from parables, Aristotle and other Greek philosophers did agree that parables ultimately were designed for adults since these illustrations troubled many customary understandings of how the world worked.¹

Parables serve as a form of indirect communication, sending a message that hearers did not originally expect through narratives, or stories. These stories intentionally “sneak up” on the reader to provoke action (stories with intent as Klyne Snodgrass calls them).² David A Neale, in the New Beacon Bible Commentary on Luke 9-24, states:

Parables are not a shortcut to wisdom. They foster wisdom through reflection, meditation, and emotional engagement. They challenge accepted norms and subvert attempts to assign simplistic meaning. In interpreting parables, one must work for the reward, and then own the result. Ironically, attempts to explain parables risk ruining their beauty. That Jesus’ parables continue to stimulate, even centuries after they were spoken, proves he was a master at the genre.³

It’s no wonder that the multivalent function of a parable complicates simple English grammatical rules. Still, parables really do

serve us best when read and heard in community, much like the very contexts where Jesus originally “spoke” the original words.

Luke and Jesus’ Parables

Luke employs Jesus’ parables in a remarkable fashion, often using longer stories that remain consistent with rhetorical guidelines, yet structures not seen as clearly in the gospels of Matthew or Mark. For the most part, Luke uses Jesus’ parables in a thematic arrangement between 9:51 and 19:27 as part of the travel narrative. In this section the Savior decides to “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). Luke probably employs a source containing Jesus’ telling of many of these parables, but allows them to serve as major teaching resources. Depending on how you define parables, 24 of Jesus’ parables occur in Luke’s travel narrative. Thirteen of the 14 parables unique to Luke’s gospel also occur in this travel narrative, including several famous parables.

- The Good Samaritan (10:25-37)
- The Persistent Friend (11:5-8)
- The Rich Fool (12:16-21)
- The Barren Fig Tree (13:6-9)
- Places at the Banquet (14:7-11)
- The Tower-Builder and the King Going to Battle (14:28-32)
- The Lost Drachma or Coin (15:8-10)
- The Prodigal Son (15:11-32)
- The Unjust Steward (16:1-8)
- The Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31)
- The Servants Reward (17:7-10)
- The Unjust Judge (18:1-8)
- The Pharisee and the Sinner (18:9-14)

Parables do occur elsewhere. Luke includes Jesus’ account of the new garments and wineskins in Luke 5:36-39 to illustrate people struggling with new ideas, and the parable of two debtors in Luke 7:41-43 to reflect the nature of true forgiveness. Often readers overlook these parables. Instead, they begin with Luke’s account introducing Jesus’ parable of the sower in Luke 8:4-15. In this narrative, Luke identifies the parable, and Jesus explains the story’s purpose for the sake of the disciples (a process Jesus’ rarely employed). In addition, Luke attaches two stories around the theme of light as witness (w. 16-18) and of family around those who both hear and do the Word of God (w. 19-21). At one level, Luke 8:4-15 provides a unique story that reminds us of the allegorical nature of some parables (where seed serves as an allegory for the Word of God). However, very few parables contain the same one-to-one correspondence of a physical item (seed) and a spiritual reality (gospel). As a matter of fact, Jesus only provides allegorical interpretation for four parables:

- The Sower (also in Mark 4:13-20 and Matthew 13:18-23)

- The Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:37-43)
- The Net (Matthew 13:49-50)
- The Sheepgate (John 10:7-18)

Luke seems to prefer to employ many parables as soliloquies on the lips of Jesus, where the Savior opens with a term like “a certain man,” or questions hearers with “Who from you?” before giving the story. Participants might also discover that Luke’s parables rarely refer to the kingdom of God, as compared to Mark’s, or particularly Matthew’s, use of parables.

So, while Jesus might employ parables that indicate what the kingdom of God is “like” (a similitude) in other gospels, Luke situates Jesus’ parables to include more of an imperative or command to act on what the people are hearing... and what we are reading. Allegories aside, most parables really function as a story, one that really moves more indirectly to draw us into the narrative and then surprise us with the conclusion and command.

Engaging Luke’s Parables

Christians love to read and research parables, often extrapolating underlying truths to follow. However, parables really problematize any attempt to reduce the story to a single principle or proverb. While all Scripture invites careful study, there are some steps teachers and students can take to try to preserve the original intent, and impact, of these remarkable stories.

1. First, parables, by design, should be told. The story-like quality of the parable really reflects a culture best understood with families, or friends, who grew up telling stories around dining room tables and campfires. Listening to the parable often provides a stronger connection to the ebb and flow of the story. Even in classroom settings, reading the parable aloud two or three times during the lesson really provides a context for being surprised.

2. Parables drew upon the culture of the Ancient Near East as the experiential backdrop for the stories. Luke 16:19-31 provides an example where the rich man’s descent to Hades and Lazarus’ ascent to be with Abraham. These images reflect the customary understanding of death and judgment for the Jewish people. However, parables also subvert typical cultural worldviews regarding ordinary customs and expected outcomes. So, the forgiving action of the father in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) or the acts of generosity by the Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) really surprise the original audience much more than in our day. While the stories need to be heard, we need to recognize we live in a different culture than those who originally encountered these parables and take the time to try to position ourselves in their world rather than reduce the parables to our own.

3. Nevertheless, parables can surprise us as well. Remember that parables connect to human experience, including our own. Rather than reducing characters to idealized heroes and villains in each story, they really do reflect the variety of our human experiences as well. Allowing for the tension between the characters, their circum-

stances, and even the surprising actions they take in their stories, can open our own lives. So, we have to resist reducing the time it takes to allow the story to unfold; or avoid overlooking what we do not understand.⁴ I remember teaching the parable of the prodigal son when a hardworking, practically-minded, father remarked at the end of the story: “Well I suspect I would take back my son as well, but he better not ask for the car keys!” Recognizing where our lives could appear in these stories helps us to understand their implications for our lives and opens us to continued surprises along the way.

Jesus the Storyteller

Luke provides a rich narrative environment by aligning so many parables in a condensed fashion within his gospel. Often stories fall upon stories, crafting a deeply complex and textured account (a story containing stories) that might remind literature students of similar efforts like the *Canterbury Tales*. When one navigates the jarring presentations of several parables addressing the lost being found in Luke 15, only to be confronted by the confounding story of the unjust steward in Luke 16, the reader realizes just how amazing, and perplexing, stories can become at the hand of Luke the writer.

In those moments students and teachers alike need to be reminded that Jesus, not Luke, remains the storyteller.⁵ Jesus’ use of parables really reflects His wisdom at work in providing stories that awaken us from our ordinary and customary way of life. As we hear Jesus tell these stories, we remind ourselves of the Savior’s mandate and mission for our lives and through our lives. When we attend carefully, we also recognize Jesus’ gentle prodding of our expectations, through His humor, His cautioning, His invitation... and we are moved to act. Jesus, the storyteller, never serves merely as an entertainer providing interesting stories for our enjoyment. We inevitably find ourselves inside these parables, with some commandment, or some commitment, we cannot avoid. In those moments we need to remember the label “handle with care” in hopes that our lives might be changed, transformed, by the gospel in story form.

1. Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, “A Closer Look at Parables,” in *The Gospel of Luke: The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: University Printing House, Cambridge, 2018) 233.

2. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Second Edition, 10th Anniversary Feb 16, 2018).

3. David S. Neale, *Luke 9-24, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013), 45

4. Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 1-10..

5. Stephen L. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller* (London: SPCK 2014; Louisville: WJK 2015).

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