



# Parables

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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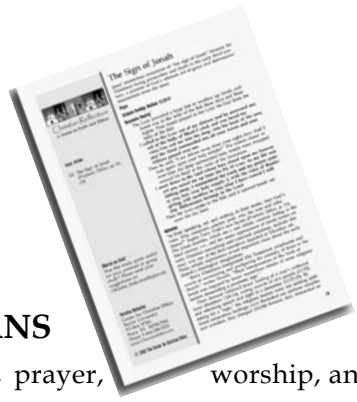


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## STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Parables* issue.

### THE CONTEXTS OF JESUS' PARABLES

Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. As we become more aware of these diverse webs of meaning, we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

### HEARING A PARABLE WITH THE EARLY CHURCH

What would it mean to hear Jesus' parables in their final literary form in the Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the "original" message of Jesus.

### HEARING IS BELIEVING

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect?

### VIOLENT PARABLES AND THE NONVIOLENT JESUS

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount instructs us to not return violence for violence; instead, we should be like God, who offers boundless, gratuitous love to all. But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate?

### WEALTH: HAZMAT OR GOOD GIFT?

Jesus' striking parables on wealth in the Gospel of Luke paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of money and possessions on our lives. These are clearly "hazmats," or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. They are also good gifts with an equally positive potential.

### HEARING PARABLES IN THE PATCH

Clarence Jordan was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**Jesus' parables teach us, spiritually blind and self-deceived as we are, to see reality beyond ourselves and to know God's love and loving demands on our lives. They also lead us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves.**

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Jesus loved to tell stories – perplexing, yet revealing stories. “To the others I speak in parables,” he once confided to his disciples, “so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand’” (Luke 8:10b). Jesus’ parables teach us, spiritually blind and self-deceived as we are, to see reality beyond ourselves and to know God’s love and loving demands on our lives. With their two levels of meaning – a story and the divine reality that the story reveals – the “parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” Kline Snodgrass has observed.

Yet they also lead us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves. “Parables invite the hearer’s interest with familiar settings and situations but finally veer off into the unfamiliar, shattering their homey realism and insisting on further reflection and inquiry,” Ron Hanson reminds us. Thus, “we have the uneasy feeling that *we* are being interpreted even as we interpret them.”

David Gowler and Mikeal Parsons offer guidelines for exploring the layers of meaning in Jesus’ stories. Since “Jesus’ parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments,” Gowler examines how stories in the Old Testament, rabbinic commentaries, and Hellenistic culture can help us interpret them. “As we become aware of these diverse webs of meaning,” he concludes in *The Contexts of Jesus’ Parables* (p. 11), “we can respond more fully to the message of our Lord who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.”

“What would it mean to hear the parables in their final literary form in the ancient Greco-Roman world?” asks Mikeal Parsons in *Hearing a Parable*



*with the Early Church* (p. 19). Early Christians read these stories as allegories about God, an approach that modern scholars often dismiss as an uncontrollable projection by the interpreter. But using the Parable of the Good Samaritan as his example, Parsons suggests “we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the ‘original’ message of Jesus.”

The parables represent about one third of Jesus’ teaching. While the Gospel of John does not focus on Jesus’ parables (indeed, only the discourses on the Good Shepherd and the True Vine in John 10:1-18 and 15:1-8 are similar to the story parables), each of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—presents a number of them arranged thematically. Our contributors explore some of these distinctive gospel themes.

Barbara Reid, O. P., examines the violent endings in the parables unique to Matthew. “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount instructs us to not return violence for violence; instead, we should be like God, who offers boundless, gratuitous love to all. But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers,” she writes in *Matthew’s Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables* (p. 27). “Which of the divine ways are we to imitate?”

The Gospel of Luke records Jesus’ striking parables concerning wealth. Together they “paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of money and possessions on our lives. These are clearly ‘hazmats,’ or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution,” notes Dorothy Jean Weaver in *Hazmats or Good Gifts?* (p. 37). At the same time, “Wealth is also a good gift with great positive potential for all those who are ‘rich’ toward God and their neighbors in the human community. This message shines through the words of Jesus in surprising but unmistakable fashion.”

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus rarely slows down enough to teach in parables. Why would this Gospel, which frequently calls Jesus “the Teacher,” so sparingly record his instruction? Mark is preparing us to *hear* Jesus’ teaching, James Edwards suggests in *Hearing is Believing* (p. 44). “The teaching of Jesus is like a precious gem that requires a proper setting to accentuate it. We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark’s mind, if we first see it demonstrated. The spoken word is, of course, necessary, but as an interpretation of what Jesus does rather than as a substitute for it.” Martha Sterne draws a similar conclusion in *Mark and the Biggest Parable of All* (p. 76). “Maybe Mark didn’t do much with the little parables because he was so committed to sharing the mystery of the whole life, death, and new life of Christ,” writes Sterne. “If the entire Gospel of Mark isn’t a parable, and particularly a parable about power, I don’t know what it is.”

Sterne and Edwards agree on the difficulty in hearing Jesus’ parables. “Today we are conditioned *not* to hear things—to reduce commercials, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to ‘white noise,’” Edwards warns. “But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?”

In Clarence Jordan's "Cotton Patch" translation, we hear Jesus' parables in a fresh way. "Not only Jordan's academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in the 'Cotton Patch,'" writes Joel Snider in *Hearing Parables in the Patch* (p. 80). Jordan compared Jesus' *narrative parables* (stories and simple comparisons) with his *dramatic parables* (acted out signs). "Included among these dramatic parables are the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper — any event where the message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action."

In *Go and Do Likewise* (p. 66), Heidi Hornik compares portrayals of the Good Samaritan by contemporary Chinese artist He Qi and sixteenth-century Italian painter Jacopo Bassano. He Qi's "distinctly Chinese paintings counteract the tendency to 'equate "Christian Art" with "European Art,"'" she writes. The artist reminds us that "Christianity is not 'only a Western religion.'" Then, turning to examine Guercino's *Return of the Prodigal Son* in *A Gesture of Reconciliation* (p. 62), Hornik explores why the Prodigal Son was a favorite theme in seventeenth-century Protestant and Catholic art.

The worship service by Mark Moeller (p. 54) calls us to hear once again Jesus' parables, and through them "to hear the story that uncovers our competitiveness and invites us to true community...and uncovers our need to hoard and exclude and invites us to share and include." In his new hymn "Christ's Parables" (p. 51), Moeller articulates the prayer that runs through this issue: "Give us ears to hear these stories, move us from complacency / with these heralds of your Kingdom, that both is and is to be."

Bill Shiell develops this theme in *The Hands of the Father* (p. 71), a meditation on Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. "We are afraid of losing something that we think is ours. It's the very reason the prodigal was lost in the mud and the elder brother remained in the field," he writes. Noting how the artist depicts the father's hands in a welcoming embrace, Shiell writes, "God's posture is so different from the way society teaches us to use our hands — to clasp ever more tightly to possessions and people."

"The parables of Jesus are tough hermeneutical chestnuts," Scott Huelin admits in *Interpreting Recent Interpretations of the Parables* (p. 88). He examines the strengths and limits of three distinctive ways of understanding them: Craig L. Blomberg's scholarly approach in *Interpreting the Parables*, Robert Farrar Capon's more pastoral style in *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, and Barbara Green's innovative comparisons in *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables Through Metaphor*. "Scripture is not only a means of truth, but also a means of grace," Huelin reminds us. "Perhaps the chestnut that is most difficult to crack is not Jesus' perplexing sayings but rather the soul of the interpreter who struggles to make them reveal their mysteries." ❖

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# The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

BY DAVID B. GOWLER

**Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments. As we become aware of these diverse webs of meaning, we can respond more fully to the message of our Lord who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.**

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**J**esus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. To continue our own dialogues with the parables, we must become more aware of the diverse webs of meaning in these narratives. In that way we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke these parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

Jesus of Nazareth taught primarily, if not exclusively, in Aramaic (though he likely knew some Greek and Hebrew). The Gospels, however, are written in Greek, which is clear evidence that the Jesus portrayed in them speaks and acts in roles that combine Jewish and Greco-Roman modes of words and deeds.<sup>1</sup>

Even as we recognize the importance of Greco-Roman contexts, however, we should not neglect the critical nature of Jesus' Jewish heritage. Since Hellenistic culture influenced all first-century Judaism to a certain extent, Jesus' Jewishness does not preclude the existence of Greco-Roman elements in his teachings and actions.

Therefore, I will examine briefly two Jewish and two Greco-Roman contexts that can help illumine the parables of Jesus.

## THE PARABLE AS A TYPE OF *MASHAL*

The Greek term for parable (*parabolê*) typically is used to translate the more general Hebrew term *mashal* (plural: *meshalim*). *Mashal* is extremely difficult to define, but a central aspect of its meaning is “to represent” or “to be like,” and it refers to a wide range of literary forms that utilize figurative language.<sup>2</sup> Here are some examples:

A *proverbial saying*, a popular and concrete comparison, is the archetypal *mashal*. For example, the question in 1 Samuel 10:12, “Is Saul also among the

prophets?” (cf. 1 Samuel 24:13), compares appearances with reality, and Ezekiel 18:2 compares the actions of one generation with the results seen in the next.

*Bywords* contain an implied comparison between present appearances (e.g., peace and prosperity) and future reality (e.g., when God’s judgment will come). The byword may refer to

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**The Old Testament tends to use *MASHAL* for whatever is “proverb-like,” with hidden or allusive truth, which means that the response of the reader or hearer is essential to the process of creating understanding.**

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Israel as a whole (Deuteronomy 28:37), part of Israel (Jeremiah 24:9), or those who turn to idolatry (Ezekiel 14:8).

Examples of a *prophetic figurative oracle* can be seen in the prophecies uttered by Balaam concerning Israel’s future in Numbers 23 and 24.

A *song of derision or taunting* describes a divine judgment that serves as an object lesson, such as the satire against the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4–23 or the taunt against the rich in Micah 2:4.

All *meshalim* have a teaching function, but *didactic poems* instruct Israel on the wisdom of living correctly (e.g., Job 29; Psalm 49).

The *wise sayings from the “intellectual elite”* have a riddle-like character whose hidden truth must be deciphered by those with the wisdom to interpret it correctly (Proverbs 1:5–6; cf. Sirach 39:1–3).

Finally, an *allegorizing parable* often uses imagery that serves as a warning, such as the allegories of the Eagle and the Vine (Ezekiel 17:3–10) or the Boiling Pot (Ezekiel 24:3–5).

A parable thus is just one type of *mashal*, although rigid distinctions are difficult to make (Luke 4:23, for example, uses *parabolê* for the proverb, “Physician, heal thyself”). The Old Testament tends to use *mashal* for whatever is “proverb-like,” with hidden or allusive truth, which means that the response of the reader or hearer is essential to the process of creating understanding.

Yet the *meshalim* of the Old Testament do not offer any definitive examples of parables like the ones Jesus created. The Old Testament does contain

some fables, such as Jotham's *mashal* of the Trees (Judges 9:7–15), Jehoash's *mashal* of the Thistle (2 Kings 14:9), and Ezekiel's *mashal* of the Vine and the Eagles (Ezekiel 17:3–10), but no Old Testament *mashal* serves as a direct parallel to the New Testament's use of parable as a short narrative. Isaiah's *mashal* of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–6) might qualify at best as an allegorizing parable. Of all the *meshalim* in the Old Testament, the closest we come to a narrative parable is Nathan's *mashal* of the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1–4). Although we see some development toward the narrative parables as Jesus used them, "parable has not yet emerged as a genre in the Old Testament."<sup>3</sup>

### PARABLES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

Parables play a prominent role in later Jewish literature, such as in rabbinic traditions, where the rabbis used them for preaching, interpreting Scripture, and providing guidance for daily lives.

Harvey McArthur and Robert Johnston find a fivefold structure is typical for the narrative *mashal* in rabbinic literature, although elements are sometimes omitted.<sup>4</sup> We can observe this structure in the rabbinic parable in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:24, which is a midrash (or commentary) on Deuteronomy 4:30 from the ninth or tenth century A.D.

Like most rabbinic parables, it has an *illustrand* that sets out the matter to be illustrated, proved, or explained by the *mashal*. Although the *illustrand* is not actually part of the parable, it provides a rationale for the parable's existence: "Another explanation [of] 'Thou wilt return to the Lord thy God' (Deuteronomy 4:30)."

Next, an *introductory formula* is prefixed to the story: "R. [i.e., Rabbi] Samuel Pargrita said in the name of R. Meir: 'Unto what is the matter like? It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways.'" Often these introductory formulas have three parts: (a) "I will parable you a parable," (b) "Unto what is the matter like?" and (c) "It is like a king who...."

The *parable proper* is an illustrative story (often about kings, animals, or wisdom sayings): "It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him, saying: 'Repent my son.' But the son sent him back to his father [with a message], 'How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.' Thereupon his father sent back word: 'My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?'"

The *application*, often introduced by the word *kak* ("even so" or "likewise"), attaches an explicit interpretation to clarify the *mashal*'s meaning: "Even so the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: 'Go, say to my children: Return.'"

Finally, a *scriptural quotation*, usually introduced by the formula "as it is said" or "as it is written," demonstrates the truth of the *mashal*: "Israel asked Jeremiah: 'How can we have the effrontery to return to God?' Whence do

we know this? For it is said: 'Let us lie down in our shame and let our confusion cover us' etc. (Jeremiah 3:25). But God sent back word to them: 'My children, if you return, will you not be returning to your Father?' Whence this? 'For I have become a father to Israel' etc. (Jeremiah 31:9)."

### **RABBINIC PARABLES AND THE PARABLES OF JESUS**

The rabbis commonly used parables to deliver sermons in synagogues and study the Torah in the academies, notes David Stern.<sup>5</sup> In fact, they

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**The rabbis commonly used parables to deliver sermons in synagogues and study the Torah in the academies. In fact, they became convinced that the parable form itself was created for studying the Torah.**

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became convinced that the parable form itself was created for studying the Torah.<sup>6</sup>

Stern defines the rabbinic parable as "an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose" — usually to praise or disparage a specific situation of the speaker/author and hearer/reader. It draws a series of parallels between the story recounted in the narrative and the "actual situation" to which the parable

is directed. These parallels, however, are not drawn explicitly; the audience is left to derive them for themselves. So the parable is neither a simple tale with a transparent lesson nor an opaque story with a secret message; it is a narrative that actively elicits from its audience the interpretation and application of its message. The social context, then, clarifies the parable by giving the audience the information they need to understand it.

One problem with Stern's approach is that a parable's "original context" cannot be reconstructed. As the context changes (whether in literary form, audience, or historical situation), a parable's meaning will also change, especially when a parable moves from oral tradition to being embedded in a larger, written narrative.

What, then, are the connections between the parables of Jesus and the parables in the rabbinic tradition? Because they share some compositional similarities, rabbinic parables can shed light on Jesus' parables. For example, the king and a wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14 (contrast the same parable in Luke 14:16-24, in which "a man" gives a "great banquet") resemble the portrayals of kings in rabbinic parables that symbolize God's actions.

Several scholars, like David Flusser, stress other similarities between rabbinic parables and Gospel parables, such as formulaic elements of diction, conventional themes, and stereotyped motifs. Flusser postulates that the rabbinic parables and the parables of Jesus stem from a common narrative tradition — they have affinities with the fables of Aesop, though the par-

ables were a development within Palestine. Jesus' parables are an older, non-exegetical, "ethical" type of rabbinic parable, he suggests, and the differences between Jesus' parables and later rabbinic parables are due primarily to a new rabbinic focus upon the explanation of biblical passages.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, there are striking dissimilarities in form, content, and application between Jesus' parables and rabbinic parables. First, Jesus' parables in the Gospels significantly predate parables in rabbinic literature. Second, the form of rabbinic parables seems to have changed over time, with various usages and in various contexts. Whatever their initial usage, rabbinic parables primarily serve as a means for interpretation of Scripture, and they assume a more standardized form with stereotypical features. In addition, rabbinic parables tend to exceed the Gospel parables in the degree of their explicit interpretation.

Many (Christian) scholars argue that rabbinic parables—in contrast to many parables of Jesus—tend to reinforce the conventional wisdom or the societal norms of various rabbis and their communities. A closer reading, however, indicates that some rabbinic parables critique society in a way comparable to many social critiques in Jesus' parables, and in their present Gospel contexts, the parables of Jesus are well on their way to being "domesticated." By that I mean the parables of Jesus, *as utilized in the Gospels*, begin to reinforce the conventional wisdom or the societal norms of the early Christian communities.

Unfortunately, the paucity of written evidence—primarily due to oral tradition—prevents us from detecting a trajectory between Jesus' parables and the rabbinic parables, should one exist. Just as it is difficult to recover the "original" words of Jesus in the Gospels, it is difficult to recover the "original" sayings of rabbis in rabbinic literature. For these reasons, we should not overstress the similarities or downplay the differences between the Gospel parables and rabbinic parables.

## THE PARABLES AND GREEK FABLES

When we cast our comparative nets beyond Jewish cultural waters, we discover many aspects in the broader Greco-Roman environment that expand our understanding of how the Gospel parables were spoken and heard, and written and read.

The mention of Greek fables usually conjures up visions of stories with talking animals that illustrate a simple moral. Yet, in antiquity, the term *fable* denoted several kinds of brief narratives: Aelius Theon defined the fable as "a fictitious story picturing a truth."<sup>8</sup> The realistic portrayals in Aesop's fables, for example, are strikingly similar to the parables of Jesus. An Aesopic fable is even attributed to Jesus in the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* 102: "Woe to the Pharisees, for they are like a dog sleeping in the manger of oxen; neither does he eat nor allow the oxen to eat."<sup>9</sup>

Mary Ann Beavis discovered five basic similarities between fables and

the parables of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Fables and parables are *brief, invented narratives that shed light on aspects of human experience and behavior*. Fables usually *involve ordinary human characters and situations*—like quarreling siblings who are corrected by a loving father. Yet, despite their realism, many fables contain an element of extravagance. Some fables *illustrate religious and ethical themes*, such as the relations between humans and the gods, and most do not have

miraculous interventions.

Likewise only two of Jesus' parables have direct supernatural interventions (Luke 12:13–21; 16:19–31). Some fables have a *surprising or ironic element of reversal* that is reminiscent of Jesus' parables. Many fables have *morals, attached to their beginning or end, which often appear to be secondary*. Similarly, both Matthew and Luke tend to add such moralizing features either to the begin-

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**The Old Testament and rabbinic MESHALIM are not the ONLY appropriate comparative materials we have for the Gospel parables. Jesus and the Gospel authors probably were influenced by popular Greek fables, as well as by other Greco-Roman elements.**

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ning of a parable (e.g., Luke 18:1) or the end (e.g., Matthew 18:35).

Even if Greek fables and the Gospel parables are not overwhelmingly similar, one thing is clear: the Old Testament and rabbinic *meshalim* are not the *only* appropriate comparative materials we have for the Gospel parables. Jesus and the Gospel authors probably were influenced by popular Greek fables, as well as by other Greco-Roman elements.

### **THE PARABLES AND OTHER GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXTS**

Some scholars have suggested that the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) derives from an Egyptian folktale about the journey of Setme Chamois (led by his son Si-osire) through the realm of the dead. They believe Jesus adapted this Egyptian story for his own purposes and created the second half of the parable (16:27–31).<sup>11</sup>

A closer examination of the evidence, however, calls for a broader, Greco-Roman comparative framework for reading the parable. Ronald Hock, for example, provides an apt comparison from the Lucian texts, *Gal-lus* and *Cataplus*, where a poor, marginalized artisan named Micyllus goes hungry from early morning to evening and must bear the slights, insults, and beatings of the powerful.<sup>12</sup> When Micyllus and a rich tyrant named Megapenthes die, they both make the trip to Hades. Megapenthes, like the rich man in Jesus' parable, tries to strike a bargain to alter his situation, but to no avail. Finally, Micyllus and Megapenthes face Rhadamanthus, the judge of the underworld. Micyllus is judged to be pure and goes to the Isle



of the Blessed. Megapenthes's soul, however, is stained with corruption, and he will be appropriately punished. In Hock's opinion, both this story and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus betray the ancient Cynic philosophers' views on the problems with wealth and the virtues of poverty.

Another critical context that helps us interpret this parable is the worldview of first-century peasants. This parable gives evidence that Jesus agreed with his fellow peasants that a person like this rich man, who engages in sumptuous living while poor Lazarus lies at his gate, is evil and deserving of punishment. (This view is clearer in the Egyptian folktale that explicitly lists the man's evil deeds, but Jesus' parable assumes the same perspective.)

Peasants, though they comprised the vast majority of the population, were virtually defenseless in the face of Roman power and often struggled to survive on the meager resources that Rome and its client rulers allowed them to keep. In order to cope, they submitted in deference to patrons, who were more powerful persons that provided for them.<sup>13</sup> Peasants envisioned the patronage relationship as a moral obligation of the wealthy – that is, rich people had a moral responsibility to help those who were less fortunate (cf. Deuteronomy 15:7–11).<sup>14</sup> Since the rich man in Jesus' parable does not live up to this obligation, peasants would conclude that he amply deserves the punishment he receives.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, with its reversal of fortunes after death and the assumed rapacity of the rich man, thus partakes in the broader arena of the cultural life of ancient Mediterranean society. If we compare Jesus' parables *only* to other Jewish literature, we ignore the cultural contexts in which this parable was created, told, and heard.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1 See Vernon K. Robbins, "Interpreting the Gospel of Mark as a Jewish Document in a Greco-Roman World," in David B. Gowler, ed., *New Boundaries in Old Territory: Form and Social Rhetoric in Mark* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 219–242.

2 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 695. My list of the literary forms of *meshalim* is compiled primarily from Francis Brown, ed., *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978), 605; L. E. Sivers, "A Definition of Parable," *Theological Review* 9 (1988) 60–75; and John Drury, "Origins of Mark's Parables," in M. Wadsworth, ed., *Ways of Reading the Bible* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), 171–189.

3 Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 13.

4 Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

5 I am summarizing from David Stern, "The Rabbinic Parable: From Rhetoric to Poetics," in *The Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 25 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 631–643; David Stern, "Jesus' Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandman," in Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod,

eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 42-80; and David Stern, *Parables and Midrash* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

6 "So the parable should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes," the rabbis noted, "since by means of the parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of the Torah" (*Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* I.1,8).

7 Flusser suggests the antecedents of Jewish parables can be found in Greek philosophy. See David Flusser, "Aesop's Miser and the Parable of the Talents," in Thoma and Wyschogrod, eds., *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, 9-25.

8 Theon's quote is from *Progymnasmata* 3. In contrast to David Flusser's claim that the *mashal* was dependent upon Greek philosophy and Aesop's fables, the classicist Ben Edwin Perry argues the reverse: the Greek fable had its literary-historical roots in the Semitic East. In fact, he claims that the Hebrew *mashal* is the precursor of the Aesopic fable. See Perry's "Introduction" to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), xxiii.

9 Noted by Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19-20.

10 In this section I am summarizing from Mary Ann Beavis, "Parable and Fable," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (July 1990), 473-498.

11 This was the view of Hugo Gressmann in *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Königlische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918). Similarly, Joachim Jeremias argued that Jesus knew this folktale and also incorporated it into his Parable of the Great Supper; see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, Second Revised Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 183.

For a discussion of the Greco-Roman context of other Gospel parables, see David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000); and David B. Gowler, "'At His Gate Lay a Poor Man': A Dialogic Reading of Luke 16:19-31," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32:3 (Fall 2005), 249-266.

12 Ronald Hock, "Lazarus and Micylus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19-31," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (Summer 1987), 447-463. Others point to similarities between this parable and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as found in Virgil and Ovid; see Wim Weren, "Het dodenrijk. Een vergelijking van Lucas' verhaal over Lazarus en de rijke mer de mythe van Orpheus en Eurydice bij Vergilius en Ovidius," in *Intertextualiteit en Bijbel* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1993), 65-92.

13 John Davis, *The People of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 1977), 132.

14 James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 11, 27, and 51.

15 Substantial sections of this essay are adapted from David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 41-67. Used with permission from Paulist Press.



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# Hearing a Parable with the Early Church

BY MIKEAL C. PARSONS

**What would it mean to hear the parables in their final literary form in the ancient Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the “original” message of Jesus.**

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In 1910, Albert Schweitzer published the English translation of his survey of nineteenth-century liberals’ efforts to recover “the life of Jesus” under the title, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, historical Jesus research has flooded the religious market, and Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, John Meier, Marcus Borg, and Tom Wright, among others, are almost household names, a rather remarkable feat for religious academic scholars. This interest in the historical Jesus has also driven much of contemporary parable research from Joachim Jeremias to C. H. Dodd and, more recently, Brandon Scott, since (so the argument goes) the parables, properly recovered, constitute the “bedrock” of the historical Jesus tradition.

One of the hallmarks of parable research, understood within the larger framework of inquiry into the teachings of the historical Jesus, has been to strip away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the “original” message of Jesus. Once the allegories, or symbolic or referential meaning attached to specific and various details of the parable, were removed, then what remained of the parable presumably could be traced back to Jesus. And, generally, this “streamlined” version of the parable was intended to make only one point, a “heavenly” message conveyed through an “earthly” story. This time-honored approach has served us well, but it also has some serious limitations.

My first head-on encounter with allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ par-

ables went hand-in-hand with its rejection. As a young college student in a New Testament class for Religion majors, I “read” Augustine’s famous allegory of the Good Samaritan as it was quoted (and condensed) in C. H. Dodd’s classic work, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Dodd notes that while Augustine’s line of interpretation had “prevailed down to the time of Archbishop Trench,” “the ordinary person of intelligence” would nonetheless

find this kind of “mystification” “quite perverse”!

Dodd noted that “the parables in general do not admit of this method [of interpretation through allegory] at all.” Even when the Gospel writers betray such allegorizing tendencies (the classic case is the explanation of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:11-20; Matthew 13:18-23; and Luke 8:11-15), their efforts “rest on a misunderstanding.”<sup>2</sup>

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**Knowing something about the earliest reception of these stories in the patristic period may also provide important clues about how to read the parables of Jesus. And such reading demands knowledge of the Church’s allegorical tradition.**

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One of the casualties of this intense focus on things historical has been an adequate understanding of the parables in their final canonical form and within their larger Greco-Roman context. However important inquiry into the historical Jesus is (and it is important), understanding the way the first Greco-Roman audiences would have responded to the parables of Jesus, as they were set down in their Gospels’ contexts, is no less crucial for both the academy and the Church. Furthermore, knowing something about the earliest reception of these stories in the patristic period may also provide important clues about how to read the parables of Jesus. And such reading demands knowledge of the Church’s allegorical tradition.

### **THE GRECO-ROMAN AUDIENCE**

We may test this thesis by looking at one of Jesus’ most famous parables, the so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan, from these two angles of vision: (1) the first Greco-Roman reception of the final form of the parable in its literary context and (2) the subsequent reception of the story in the early church. The story commends itself because even the most skeptical critics – the members of the Jesus Seminar – accept it as authentically representing the *ipsissima vox* (the voice itself) of Jesus and because even those committed to reading Luke in its final literary form find the lure of the parable’s setting in the ministry of Jesus too tempting to resist.

For example, some have argued that only a Jewish audience could have understood the enmity between Jew and Samaritan presupposed in the par-

able. However, the attentive audience will have deduced that animosity from the disciples' question in the aftermath of the Samaritans' rejection of Jesus found in the chapter immediately preceding the Good Samaritan story: "And he [Jesus] sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him, but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village" (Luke 9:52-55).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it was commonplace in ancient thinking to assess persons' moral character in relationship to their places of origin. Hippocrates, for example, wrote: "Inhabitants of a region which is mountainous, rugged, high and (not) watered, where the changes of season exhibit sharp contrasts are likely to be of big physique, with a nature well adapted for endurance and courage, and such possess not a little wildness and ferocity" ("Air, Water, and Places," 24). Other common examples from the ancient world would include the stereotypes of "All Cretans are liars" and "All Corinthians are promiscuous." Thus, a Greco-Roman audience, even one that had never laid eyes on a Jew or a Samaritan, could easily understand the tension between those two groups, based both on Luke's text and the social conventions of their larger context.

So what would it mean to hear the Parable of the Good Samaritan in its final form in the ancient Greco-Roman world?<sup>4</sup> First, we note that the actions of the Good Samaritan dominate the narrative. Fifty of the total 106 words in the parable are used to describe the Samaritan's actions. Unfortunately, scholars have too readily described those actions with rather vacuous terminology like "goodness" or "neighborliness." The Greco-Roman auditor, however, would have understood the Samaritan's actions as an example of the social practice of "philanthropy" (*philanthropia*; cf. Acts 28:2). In addition to offering greetings or hosting dinners, philanthropy also was expressed through offering benefactions, especially in times of trouble (see *Diogenes Laertius* 3.68). Dio Chrysostom, an ancient philosopher, records the story of the philanthropic benefactions offered by a hunter and his wife to victims of a shipwreck:

This hunter came out and took us inside and lit a fire.... He himself rubbed one of us, his wife the other, with animal fat, since they had no olive oil. Next, they poured warm water over us until they revived us since we had been shivering with cold. Then, they made us recline, wrapped us in what they had, and set before us wheat bread to eat, while they themselves ate boiled millet. They gave us wine to drink (while they drank water) as well as roasted and boiled venison. On the next day when we wished to leave they held us back for three days. Then they escorted us to the plain, and when we left

them they gave to each of us meat and a very nice animal skin.  
(Discourses 7.56-58)

Understanding the Samaritan's actions as an example of ancient philanthropy is strengthened by the fact that some of the words found in the parable—e.g., “half-dead,” “take care of,” “neighbor,” and “showing mercy”

—are characteristic of ancient texts on philanthropy. In fact, “showing mercy” (both in its verbal and noun forms) is virtually synonymous with philanthropy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, an ancient audience would know that the parable was not about the “man in the ditch” or the “brigands” (as some scholars have argued), but rather was about the Samaritan and his benevolent assistance of one who had suffered a misfortune.

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**The phrase “showing mercy” is the key to understanding nearly two millennia of Christian exegetical tradition that typically identified the Good Samaritan as a Christ figure. In Luke’s Gospel, only God or God’s agent, Jesus, shows mercy.**

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### **THE GOOD SAMARITAN AS A CHRIST FIGURE**

The phrase “showing mercy” is also the key to untangling the emphasis of nearly two millennia of Christian exegetical tradition that has typically, if not uniformly, identified the Good Samaritan as a Christ figure.<sup>6</sup> Origen is the earliest writer whose comments on the Parable of the Good Samaritan have survived. At the beginning of his treatment of the parable he claims “the Samaritan is Christ” and then spends several pages developing this Christological interpretation (*Homilies on Luke*, 404, 408).

In Luke’s Gospel, only God or God’s agent, Jesus, shows mercy. In the infancy narrative, God is repeatedly described as “showing” or “doing” mercy. In the Magnificat, Mary sings, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his *mercy* is on those who fear him from generation to generation.... He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his *mercy*” (Luke 1:47, 49-50, 54). Zechariah strikes a similar theme: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David...and thus he has shown the *mercy* promised to our fathers, and remembered his holy covenant” (1:68, 72). Later, in Luke’s Gospel, as Jesus is passing between Samaria and Galilee he is met by ten lepers who cry out, “Jesus, Master, *have mercy* on us!” (17:13). In response to their plea, Jesus does show them mercy and sends them to the priest, “and as they went they were cleansed” (17:14).

Likewise, in response to the blind beggar from Jericho's repeated request, "Jesus, Son of David, *have mercy* on me!" (18:38, 39), Jesus complies and grants the man his sight (18:42).

The only exception is in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the rich man, suffering in the torments of Hades, pleads with Father Abraham to "show him mercy" (Luke 16:24). Abraham refuses, and the exception again proves the point: in Luke's Gospel only God or God's agent, Jesus, shows mercy.

As with "mercy," every instance of "compassion" is associated with acts of God or God's agent, Jesus. The phrase "he had compassion" is the dynamic equivalent to "have mercy," and it occurs three times in all of Luke/Acts; in the other two instances, only God's agent, Jesus (Luke 7:13), and a figure for God, the father of the prodigal (Luke 15:20), show compassion. In other words, "showing compassion" in the Lukan narrative is a divine prerogative and a divine action. Hence, this is our first clue in the text of Luke itself that the Good Samaritan, when he shows compassion on the man in the ditch, is functioning figuratively as God's agent. Within the immediate context of Luke's Gospel, the Good Samaritan, who "shows compassion" and "does mercy," functions as a Christ figure who ultimately acts as God's agent in engaging in benevolent acts of philanthropy.

The larger context of Luke supports this Christological reading as well. The question posed and answer given in Luke 10:25-28 govern the final form of Luke 10:29-11:13, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan must be read within that context. To gain eternal life, one must love the Lord and one must love the neighbor. The parables and stories that immediately follow in chapters 10 and 11 illustrate these points. Notice the pattern:

- A. *On loving neighbors* (Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37) – example: Samaritan as Christ figure
- B. *On loving the Lord* (Mary and Martha, Luke 10:38-42) – example: Mary
- B. *On loving the Lord* (the Lord's Prayer, Luke 11:1-4) – example: Jesus
- A. *On loving neighbors/friends* (Parable of the Friend at Midnight, Luke 11:5-13) – example: the friend seeking bread

Far from a loosely connected collection of sayings and stories (as some have argued), this section is intricately woven together. The lawyer's question and answer is followed by a section that sandwiches two parables around two scenes, which themselves present a narrative scene and a brief discourse. Furthermore, the stories provide examples of loving the Lord and loving the neighbor. Finally, and this is crucial for understanding the Parable of the Good Samaritan in its final form in Luke, the stories alternate between having Jesus (or a Christ figure) as the prime example of loving the Lord and loving neighbor and having another character make the same

points. So we have four examples, two in which Christ, actually or figuratively, shows how properly to love neighbor and the Lord, and two in which other characters, one in the narrative proper and the other in a parable, do likewise.

Thus, to label the Parable of the Good Samaritan an “example story,” as though the story were itself devoid of a Christological or theological referent, is to miss the point of the parable – or at least one of the points – and to miss it badly. The parable, in its literary context, does *not* primarily focus on the perspective of the man in the ditch. Rather, Jesus’ admonition to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise” (10:37), demands that the primary perspective be that of the Good Samaritan, whose example the lawyer is admonished to follow. And the example is that of bestowing philanthropic acts of mercy on those who have experienced misfortune. But the example is here enlivened by the fact that the Good Samaritan’s compassion and mercy is, as the text of Luke affirms, the example of none other than God and God’s agent, Jesus. Thus, we have in its canonical context a call by Jesus to imitate the philanthropic Samaritan and in so doing to imitate the compassion of Christ himself. Ethical admonition is grounded in a Christological basis.

Origen understood this long ago when he wrote:

The Samaritan, “who took pity on the man who had fallen among thieves,” is truly a “guardian,” and a closer neighbor than the Law and the Prophets. He showed that he was the man’s neighbor more by deed than by word. According to the passage that says, “Be imitators of me, as I too am of Christ,” it is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who “have fallen among thieves.” We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own animals, and bear their burdens. The Son of God encourages us to do things like this. He is speaking not so much to the teacher of the law as to us and to everyone when he says, “Go and do likewise.” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 34.9)

Rather than a “perverse” or “far-fetched” interpretation of the Good Samaritan, Origen’s basic Christological reading is more sensitive to the Lukan canonical context than most, if not all, modern interpretations of the parable!

Why then do modern commentators resist such a reading? Presumably this hesitation is because of the presence of the Samaritan. It is precisely in the use of the figure of the Samaritan as representative of Christ that the parable maintains its “edginess.” Whatever the historical reality of the Samaritans, Luke, in his Gospel, clearly understands them as “outsiders.” In the story of the ten men with leprosy (17:11-19), when only one, a Samaritan (v. 16), returns to thank Jesus for his healing, Jesus asks, “Was no one found to return and praise God except this foreigner?” (v. 18). Although this term is unique in the New Testament, it has a rich background in the Greek Old Testament, where it consistently refers to those who are “foreigners,”



“pagans,” or “non-Jewish outsiders,” often in negative contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for the Lukan Jesus to depict himself as a “compassionate Samaritan” has profound implications. And such scandalous identification is not unknown outside Luke’s Gospel. Consider John 8:48 where Jesus’ opponents say, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” In Luke, the identification fits with the generally acknowledged pattern of reversal in Luke’s Gospel, where the world is turned topsy-turvy: the rich and mighty are brought down and the lowly raised (1:51-52), and the kingdom disciples are called to love enemies, do good to those who hate them, and bless those who curse them (6:27-28). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus himself defies convention. Jesus is the Messiah who must suffer (24:46), an affront to traditional messianic expectation. He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (7:34).

Furthermore, the radical claims of the Parable of the Good Samaritan are not avoided when one excludes Jesus as the referent of the parable, since Jesus calls the lawyer to “act like a Samaritan.” Why should Jesus, a Jew, expect something of a Jewish lawyer that he is not prepared to do himself?

## CONCLUSION

It is in the offense of the image of the Samaritan as a Christ figure that the Parable of the Good Samaritan has its fullest evocative power. The exegetical tradition that understood the parable Christologically presents a more compelling reading in the context of Luke’s Gospel than the modern critical consensus.

This conclusion raises larger questions that cannot be answered in this article. While we should not abandon our search for the Jewish context of Jesus’ parables, how shall we incorporate into our interpretation the larger Greco-Roman context in which the Gospels circulated? What is the Christian to do with patristic and medieval interpretations of the Bible?

Specifically what are we to do with ecclesiastical allegory of Jesus’ parables?

What we should *not* do, I wish to insist, is simply ignore the exegetical tradition of the church that has accumulated over nearly two millennia. I realize this goes against every critical fiber of our being, and this is certainly no plea to return to the kind of allegorizing that agonizingly sees a referent for every detail of the text. Certainly our interpretation of the text will at

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**In the image of the Samaritan as a Christ figure the parable has its fullest evocative power. The Christological reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is more compelling in the context of Luke’s Gospel than the modern critical consensus.**

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times, perhaps often, disagree with the exegetical tradition. That is inevitable and surely as it should be. But to approach the Bible, and especially Jesus' parables, with a predisposition to dismiss the existing exegetical tradition as "perverse" or "far-fetched" (as some have done) without engaging it is unacceptable. Nor should we quickly sweep aside a time-honored interpretation before moving on to engage the "more important" scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

So let us take seriously not only the Jewish setting of the parables in the life of Jesus, but also the Greco-Roman reception of the parables in their Gospel context. And let us once again engage, even if antagonistically, the church's exegetical tradition. Occasionally, as in the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we may find that the Greco-Roman cultural and rhetorical contexts open up new vistas on Jesus' parables and that patristic readings are more sensitive to the literary and canonical contexts of the Christian Scriptures than their modern counterparts.

## NOTES

1 Schweitzer observed, "The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma." *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1910), 4.

2 C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, third edition (London: Nisbet & Co., 1941, first published in 1935), 11-13.

3 Scripture quotations are my translations.

4 The following argument is taken from pp. 129-137 of Ronald F. Hock's "Why New Testament Scholars Should Read Ancient Novels," in Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins, eds., *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 121-153.

5 For the use of these terms in other philanthropic contexts, see (for "half-dead") Chariton, 3.316; 4.6; 5.4; ("take care of") Chariton, 1.13.10; 2.2.2; Xenophon of Ephesus, 1.15.2; 2.2.5; ("neighbor") Chariton, 3.10.6; and ("showing mercy") Chariton 1.10.2, 4; 3.4.9-10; Longus 1.3.1; 1.6.1.

6 For a convenient collection of allegorical (and ethical) interpretations of Jesus' parables, see Stephen Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

7 The Greek word for stranger, *allogenes*, has a negative connotation in the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 22:10, 12, 13; 22:25; 1 Esdras 9:7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 36; and 1 Maccabees 3:36, 45; 10:12.



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# Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables

BY BARBARA E. REID, O.P.

**Jesus' Sermon on the Mount instructs us to not return violence for violence; instead, we should be like God, who offers boundless, gratuitous love to all. But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate?**

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**E**very citizen of the U.S. can tell you where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001. I was leading a three-month study tour in Israel. I was in my room in Bethany, preparing the next day's class lecture, when one of my students alerted me that something was happening at home. As we watched the unfolding events on television, our group's reactions went from shock, to dawning comprehension, to grief for the lives lost and the families left bereft, to gratitude for the outpouring of compassion from our hosts and even from strangers on the street. My own reaction then turned to icy fear that as a nation we would not have the courage to examine the root causes of what could lead to such an attack and that we would too quickly shift into retaliation, vengeance, and violent warfare.

When Christians struggle to know how to respond to violence directed against individuals or communities, we turn to the praxis and teaching of Jesus. One text that immediately comes to mind is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he teaches his disciples not to return violence for violence and to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:38-48). Jesus' followers are to behave this way because they are children of God who "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Just as God offers

boundless, gratuitous love to all—even to evildoers—so too must Jesus' disciples (5:48). But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Readers of the Gospel of Matthew are faced with a dilemma. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate? Is Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount absolute? Or are there situations in which violence is a moral response?

## NONVIOLENT RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

There are numerous references to violence in the Gospel of Matthew, especially that directed toward Jesus.<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning of the Gospel, Herod seeks to kill the infant Jesus (2:13-18). Joseph's response is to take the child and his mother to Egypt, where they remain until Herod dies (2:13-15). When Joseph learns, however, that the next ruler of Judea, Herod's son Archelaus, is as murderous as his father was, he avoids the danger and moves the family to Nazareth (2:19-23). *Avoidance or flight*, then, is the first nonviolent response to violence modeled in Matthew.

In a similar vein, when Jesus first speaks to his disciples about their mission and the violence they will suffer as a result of being his followers, he advises them to flee from violent persecution to another town (10:23). Later Jesus tells his disciples: "when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (24:15-16). The context here, however, is the violence that accompanies the apocalyptic coming of the Son of Humanity, from which none will escape. The chosen ones will be gathered up by the angels (24:31).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of three other possible nonviolent responses to violence and persecution. First, he instructs disciples to *rejoice over persecution*: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (5:11-12). Jesus is not encouraging disciples to seek out persecution, but if it comes as a result of speaking and acting like a prophet who advocates for those most oppressed, then persecuted disciples can rejoice in knowing they are being true to God's will for life as were Jesus and the prophets before him.

In the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples is a *supplication for deliverance* from evil: "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (6:13). In addition to other human responses to violence and evil, there must be reliance upon God's power. Similar petitions are found in John 17:15 and 2 Thessalonians 3:2.

In Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus gives the most elaborate of his teachings on how to respond to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors*. This teaching is in the section of the Sermon on the Mount that begins at 5:21, in which Jesus' interpretation of

Torah is set forth in a series of six antithetical statements. Jesus has said that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law, and he admonishes his disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17-20). Matthew 5:38-42 and 5:43-48 are the fifth and sixth in the series, with 5:48 summing up the entire section. Each unit begins, "You have heard that it was said....," followed by a command introduced with the formula, "but I say to you...." In each instance Jesus declares a former understanding of the Law inadequate as his interpretation places more stringent demands on his followers.

The fifth unit (5:38-42) concerns the law of retaliation: "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Leviticus 24:20). Based on the principle of equal reciprocity, the intent of this law was to place limits on retribution and to curtail escalating cycles of vengeance.<sup>2</sup> The response to an act of violence could not exceed the extent of the original offense. Jesus counters with, "but I say to you, do not resist [i.e., retaliate against] an evildoer" (5:39). The Greek verb for "retaliate" almost always carries the connotation of "resist violently" or "to use armed resistance in military encounters." Thus, Jesus is not telling his disciples to simply submit to or ignore an evildoer; rather, he advises them to respond – but not with violence. Jesus then gives four examples (verses 39b-42) of how one might concretely do this.

In the first three illustrations the advice is directed to one who is a victim of an injustice inflicted by a more powerful person. In each case, retaliating with the same action by the injured party is not a realistic option; submission is the expected response. Neither of these is what Jesus advocates. Rather, he gives examples of an alternate way for the injured person to respond that actively confronts the injustice with a positive and provocative act that short-circuits the cycle of violence and begins a different cycle, carrying with it the expectation that it will be reciprocated.<sup>3</sup>

In the first example (5:39b), a person is struck on the right cheek. Only the right hand was used to hit, so what is described is a backhanded slap, meant to insult and humiliate. It might be done by a master to a slave or a wealthy landowner to a poor farmer. For a subordinate to return the insulting slap would be suicidal, serving only to escalate the cycle of violence. But neither does submission restore justice. Turning the other cheek is a provocative response that robs the aggressor of the power to humiliate. Instead, the one who intended to shame ends up shamed. In this way a less powerful person is able to reciprocate – dishonor for dishonor. In so doing, the subordinate one interrupts the cycle of violence, which is the first step toward restoration of justice.

The second example concerns a debtor who stands naked in court, handing over both under and outer garments to a creditor who demands the very tunic from their back (5:40). This is a provocative, indeed, shocking act that places shame not so much on the debtor as on the creditor. Genesis 9:20-27 and Isaiah 20:1-6 show that it is the one who views another's nakedness

who is shamed. Stripping naked in court exposes the greed and injustice of the economic system to which the creditor ascribes and opens the possibility that such a one may now perceive the basic humanity that unites the two.

The third example (5:41) involves forced labor, likely a Roman soldier compelling a Palestinian subject to carry his pack. It is yet another illustration of how a subjugated person can refuse to be humiliated and can turn the tables on the oppressor. Seizing the initiative, the subjugated one destabilizes the situation, catching the soldier off guard, making him worry that he may face punishment for imposing excessive conscripted labor.

In the fourth illustration (5:42), the person in the superior economic position is addressed. In its literary context, it implies a situation in which there is injustice, presumably poverty and indebtedness exacerbated by exploitive taxes. Nonretaliation on the part of the lender would mean not asking for the return of the money or goods given. In this way, justice results from a more equitable distribution.

In sum, Matthew 5:38-42 commands nonretaliation as a strategy toward the restoration of justice in specific kinds of violent confrontations between persons of unequal power and status. Interrupting cycles of violence and initiating new cycles of generosity that can be reciprocated fulfills the intent of the Law to restore justice.<sup>4</sup> The examples in verses 39b-42, like parables, arouse the imagination in a way that enables the hearer to contemplate new possibilities of action when confronted with other situations of violence.

The sixth antithesis (5:43-48) deals with a related issue. It too begins with a statement of the Law, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'" (5:43), and is followed by Jesus' interpretation, "But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'" (5:44). The command to love the neighbor is quoted from Leviticus 19:18, but nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is there a command to hate the enemy. Leviticus 19:18 commanded Israelites to practice deeds of covenant fidelity toward one another, as compatriots and fellow believers. Such was not demanded in interactions with those outside the covenant community. "Hate your enemy" (5:44) can be understood as "love less," or, "love your neighbor *only*." Jesus' command, "love your enemy" redefines "neighbor" (as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37) and enjoins the same treatment for those outside the covenant community as for those inside (for a precedent see Leviticus 19:34 and Deuteronomy 10:19). Concrete examples of such love include praying for persecutors (5:44) and welcoming outsiders (5:47).

Verses 45-48 give the motivation for loving enemies: a disciple of Jesus must act this way because this is how God acts, making the sun rise on the evil and the good, sending rain on the just and the unjust (5:45). Because God's love is indiscriminate, children of God are to love their enemies and not retaliate toward an evildoer in kind. Interrupting cycles of violence, initiating new cycles of indiscriminate loving deeds (even if unreciprocated),

treating enemies as those bound by covenant relationship, praying for persecutors, and initiating relationship with outsiders is a sampling of how disciples of Jesus fulfill the Law, moving toward maturity (5:48) in imitation of God's righteousness. The word *teleios* in 5:48, usually translated "perfect," connotes not so much moral perfection, which is unattainable, but rather completeness, maturity, and full development. The *Revised English Bible* translation captures this nuance: "There must be no limits to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds."<sup>5</sup>

The focus is the resultant good for the disciple: the reward gained (5:46), or the extraordinariness of their righteousness (5:47), as they mature in relationship with God. A disciple must love enemies in imitation of God because it is the righteous thing to do. There is no assurance that the love will be effective or be reciprocated. What is also unstated, yet implied, is the effect on the evildoer or the enemy. Just as God's offer of indiscriminate love and graciousness to the unrighteous aims to bring them into right relation, so too does that of the disciple. It invites the estranged one away from enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.

#### **VIOLENT ENDINGS IN THE PARABLES**

The portrayal of God in Matthew 5:45-48 clashes greatly with eight of Matthew's parables that end with violent consequences for those who do evil. Four of these parables are unique to Matthew: the Weeds and the Wheat (13:40-43), the Dragnet (13:47-50), Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35), and the Final Judgment (25:31-46). In the other four – Treacherous Tenants (21:33-46), the Wedding Feast (22:1-14), Faithful Servants (24:45-51), and the Talents (25:14-30) – Matthew makes the evildoing and the ensuing punishments more explicit and intense.

The punishments God metes out to evildoers include throwing them into a fiery furnace, binding them hand and foot, casting them into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, putting them to

a miserable death, cutting and breaking them into pieces and crushing them, destroying murderers and burning their city, depriving them of the presence of God, and putting them with hypocrites or with the devil and his angels for all eternity.

What has happened to the boundless, unreciprocated divine love described in the Sermon on the Mount (5:44-48)? If disciples of Jesus are

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**Jesus' disciples must love enemies in imitation of God because it is the righteous thing to do. Such love invites the estranged one away from enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.**

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children of God who are supposed to emulate divine ways, which are we to imitate? Further, does God change? Is divine love not so boundless after all?

### **SEVEN POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

There are a number of ways to explain this tension in the Matthean narrative. I will offer seven possibilities and evaluate their merits.

One possibility is that Matthew did not sufficiently understand the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Missing the point that God's love is unconditional and boundless, even when not reciprocated (5:44-48), Matthew has capitulated to the prevailing myths about violence and portrays God as acting in violent ways toward unrepentant evildoers. It is from Matthew himself, or his special source of information about Jesus, that the bulk of the violent depictions in these parables comes.

The advantage of this explanation is that it makes Jesus' teaching about God consistent, but it does so at the expense of the evangelist's trustworthiness. Another difficulty with this solution is that it is not only in Matthew that we find such violent depictions (see, for example, Luke 19:27).

A second, and opposite, possibility exists: that the above interpretation of Matthew 5:38-48 is not accurate. A reading of Jesus as advocating active, nonviolent resistance to evil could be an anachronistic reading prompted by the movements of such modern figures as Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. From this perspective, the violent parable endings represent the authentic voice of Jesus, not Matthew's misconstrual.

Yet, this interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the ministry and death of Jesus. In the Gospels we have no examples of Jesus' use of violence, even toward those who brutalized and executed him.<sup>6</sup> Instead, in Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest, Jesus calls Judas "friend" (26:50) and admonishes, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (26:52). When Jesus is spat on in the face, struck, and slapped (26:67), he does not retaliate. In the resurrection appearances he says not a word about those who perpetrated the violence or the punishment they will meet, but only encourages his disciples not to be afraid (28:10), assures them of his presence with them, and sends them out to proclaim the gospel to all (28:19-20).

We would have difficulty explaining why the early Christians, by the second century, understood "love of enemies" as their universal guiding ethical principle. This was one important factor in their eschewing involvement in the Roman military for the first three centuries. One further consideration is that an example of successful nonviolent protest in first-century Palestine is known from Josephus, who relates Pilate's capitulation to the delegation of Jews who prostrated themselves and extended their necks to embrace death rather than allow Pilate's military standards to remain erected in Jerusalem (*Jewish War* 2.9.2-3 §169-174). Moreover, there is ample evidence in Greek literature and philosophy that nonretaliation and not hating the enemy was a topic of discussion in antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Nonretaliation and non-



violent resistance are not only contemporary strategies for confronting evil-doers; it is not anachronistic to think that Jesus employed and taught this.

A third approach is to recognize that Matthew, like the wise scribe, brings out things old and new from his storehouse (13:52), weaving together in his Gospel traditions from various sources and with varying theologies. Thus, a strand of tradition that portrays God as extending graciousness to the unrighteous can stand alongside another strand in which God violently punishes the unrighteous, without any attempt to reconcile the contradictory portraits of God. The problem then confronts the believer: how to know which one to emulate in any given situation?

Another solution is to see Matthew as an ethical teacher who approaches disciples at the level at which they can apprehend the gospel. Thus, the frightening scenarios in the parables are aimed at disciples who operate at the stage of moral development where they are motivated by reward and punishment. More mature disciples are offered advanced teaching in the "love your enemies" segment of the Sermon on the Mount. But there is a problem with this suggestion: what in the Gospel flags these teachings as higher and lower? How is one to know from the narrative that disciples are to progress toward love of enemies, and not go in the reverse direction—that is, resort to violence if love does not work?

A fifth possibility is that the powerful males in the parables are not meant to be metaphors for God. Rather, these parables unmask the violence of these characters so as to lead the hearer to conclude that action must be taken to undo the unjust systems they perpetuate. In the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30), for example, if the hearer places his or her sympathies with the slave who hides the one talent (and presumes a worldview of limited good rather than a capitalistic stance of the possibility of unfettered increase), then the servant is not wicked except in the eyes of greedy acquirers or those who are co-opted by them, as are the first two servants. The third slave is the honorable one who blows the whistle on the wickedness of the master. The parable functions, then, as a warning to the rich to stop exploiting the poor and encourages poor people to take measures that expose such greed for the sin that it is. The violent ending (25:30) is a sobering, realistic note of what can happen to those who oppose the rich and powerful.<sup>8</sup>

A difficulty with this line of interpretation is that in two of the parables this meaning is not possible for the final redaction of the text. In the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat the one who sowed good seed is explicitly identified with the Son of Humanity (13:37). And in the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor the king who hands the slave over to the torturers is explicitly equated with the heavenly Father (18:35).

Another explanation is that the kind of nonviolent confrontation of evil that Jesus advocated in the Sermon on the Mount is not applicable to the kind of situation envisioned in these eight parables. All of them portray an

end-time setting with a reckoning that is final. As Matthew describes it (so this theory goes), nonviolent confrontation of evildoers is not pertinent to scenes of end-time judgment. The teaching in the Sermon on the Mount applies to what disciples do in the here and now to confront perpetrators of evil in such a way as to convert them and to safeguard against becoming an evildoer oneself by not imitating the violence of the aggressor. The violent

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**God does not become vindictive and violent at the end time. But those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence and, by their choice, become victims of this violence themselves.**

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endings in the parables are speaking about a different situation entirely. They depict what happens when the time for conversion is past and the moment of final reckoning has arrived. They portray in figurative language the dire consequences of not becoming a disciple. Judgment is real and it is final. For those who have acted uprightly, the end is not a time to be feared, but a welcome relief

as they are embraced into eternal life in God's realm with the righteous. Not so for evildoers.

This interpretation satisfactorily resolves the tension: there is no longer a difficulty for disciples about which manner of divine action to imitate. The final separation of good and evil depicted in violent ways in the eight parables takes place at the end time and it is to be done by God, not by human beings. The problem is that often Christians are tempted to apply this end-time dichotomizing of evildoers and righteous ones in the present. Disciples can easily hear an assurance that they belong to the saved while others who they perceive as evildoers are condemned. Making rigid demarcations between good and evil in the present time does not allow them to face the mix of righteousness and wickedness within each person and each community in the present. Not perceiving one's own capacity for evil is one sure step toward being able to regard another as enemy and as the embodiment of evil that must be rooted out, even by violent means if need be. Reading that God punishes evildoers violently, human beings in positions of power may understand the Gospel as giving divine approbation to their meting out violent punishment, even execution, to those judged as evildoers.

The seventh and final interpretative possibility is that God does not change from being all loving and gracious to becoming vindictive and violent at the end time. If divine love remains constant, God does not actively mete out cruel punishment, but those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence, and thus,

by their choice, become victims of this violence themselves. The Parable of Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35) best illustrates this. The first servant who is forgiven a huge amount is expected to understand the king's behavior and to replicate it. Instead, he does the opposite with another slave who is his underling. If that is the preferred tactic of the first servant, then the king obliges him by treating him in the very manner he has used toward the second servant. Love and graciousness are freely given by God, but the price tag is to go and do likewise.

## CONCLUSION

While each of these solutions has value, it is the last two that most satisfactorily resolve the tension of how God acts, as exemplified and taught by the Matthean Jesus. The gift of love, even of enemies, and the command that this be emulated by disciples, stands at the core. Precisely how that is to be enacted remains to be discerned in each specific circumstance. The Sermon on the Mount gives examples that serve to jog the imagination into new possibilities of action toward perpetrators of violence that neither ignore the wrongdoing nor retaliate in kind. What it does not provide is a ready-made solution for all occasions.

It does not give immediately apparent answers to how Christians are to respond when they are victims of violence with little or no power of choice to respond. Matthew 5:38-48 implies that the disciple has a certain measure of power to choose how to respond to an aggressor. What is to be done when this is not the case?

Another question concerns the disagreement in Christian tradition over whether "love your enemy" applies to international foes. Two streams of tradition have held sway: just war theory and Christian pacifism.<sup>9</sup> Can both be correct interpretations of Matthew 5:38-48? As Christians today try to resolve these difficult questions, it is most important to take into consideration the stance of Matthew's community: responding to violence with violence is not a moral option.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1 By "violence" I mean the exertion of force – physical, mental, emotional, psychological, or economic – that is injurious or abusive toward another. By this definition there is no "good" violence. All violence hurts not only the victims, but the perpetrators as well (see Gerard A. Vandelaar, *Beyond Violence* [New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998], 32-33). In this article I confine my remarks to interpersonal violence.

2 See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

3 For more on this interpretation, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 175-184.

4 Other New Testament sayings move in the same direction, including Romans 12:17, 21; 3 John 11; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; and 1 Peter 3:9. There are also examples in the Old Testament, and in Greek literature and philosophy. See William Klassen, *Love of Enemies:*

*The Way to Peace, Overtures to Biblical Theology* 15 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 12-71.

5 From the Revised English Bible. Copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989. Reprinted by permission.

6 Some object that Jesus acted violently in the Temple incident (Matthew 21:10-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; and John 2:13-17). But this cannot be the case when violence is understood to be the exertion of force that is injurious toward another. In Matthew's account, the emphasis is on Jesus exercising his authority over the Temple as the authentic Teacher who fulfills Scripture; furthermore, he heals the blind and the lame who come to him in the Temple (21:14). Likewise, Jesus' harsh language toward the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23 is not an act of violence, but is a prophetic denunciation that names their wrongdoing with the intent to convert them.

7 For example, Plato presents Socrates as arguing against requiting evil with evil (*Crito* 49a-e). Epictetus records as a principle of the Cynic philosophers: "While enduring a flogging one must think as a brother and love his very floggers" (*The Discourses* 3.22.54).

8 For this approach, see William R. Herzog II, *The Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

9 See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994). Also see the articles and study guides in *Peace and War, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 10 (Summer 2004), available online at [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws).

10 Parts of this essay are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and an End to Violence," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66.2 (April 2004), 237-255. I thank the editor for permission to use the material.

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# Hazmats or Good Gifts?

BY DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER

Jesus' striking parables on wealth in the Gospel of Luke paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of money and possessions on our lives. These are clearly "hazmats," or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. At the same time, they are good gifts with an equally positive potential.

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If you have been to Jerusalem, you know the spot – Jaffa Gate, one of seven large entrances in the sixteenth-century wall surrounding the Old City. The gate is well known to tourists since it leads into the Christian Quarter and to David Street, Jerusalem's tourist street *par excellence*. It is also a natural entrance into the Old City for local people coming from West Jerusalem. One way or another, there are always lots of people at Jaffa Gate.

Everyone knows this, including the beggars. The long, paved walkway leading to Jaffa Gate regularly is peopled with folks sitting on the ground beside the path, their hands outstretched as they call out softly to the passersby. And for me the questions persist: What should I do? How should I respond to their pleas? From where should I take my cues? What does Scripture have to teach me?

I find myself thinking of Jesus and his story about the rich man and the beggar outside his gate. Jesus had a lot to say about money and possessions, the "stuff" that we collect with such urgency and hang onto with such tenacity. And Jesus' words about "stuff" were always memorable.

The Gospel of Luke brings us three striking parables of Jesus concerning money and possessions: the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). All three parables paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of "stuff" on human lives. As Jesus tells the stories and as Luke recounts them, money and possessions are

clearly “hazmats,” or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. At the same time these stories point to equally positive potential in money and possessions.

### **STUFF IS GOOD AND ENABLES GOOD LIVING**

This is perhaps the single most obvious conclusion to be drawn from these Lukan parables. The rich farmer of 12:13-21, who has an “abundance of possessions” (12:15) and “ample goods” (12:19), anticipates a life of luxury and ease in which he can “relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry” (12:19). And the rich man of 16:19-31 is depicted as living in just such luxury. This man is “dressed in purple and fine linen” and “feast[s] sumptuously every day” (16:19).<sup>1</sup>

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**Possessions can close our eyes to the world around us and obscure our vision of people in need. In the end, this inability to see others becomes an impassable barrier that separates people one from another and prohibits meaningful interaction.**

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And the good life is indeed “good.” Abraham reminds the rich man of 16:19-31 that during his lifetime he has received his “good things” (16:25). By stark contrast Lazarus, the poor man – who is “covered with sores” (16:20), afflicted by dogs (16:21), and perpetually hungry (16:21) – has received “evil things” during his lifetime (16:25). Money and possessions and the lifestyle they enable are “good things” in the world of Jesus’ story, while poverty and its associated ills are “evil things.”<sup>2</sup>

### **STUFF IS TRANSITORY**

As Jesus depicts them here, money and possessions are not evil. But wealth is clearly a transitory reality, one that can disappear far more quickly than it comes. The rich farmer, who has spent a lifetime “storing” his worldly possessions (12:17, 18) and now has “ample goods laid up for many years” (12:19), discovers that his diligent efforts to prepare for a luxurious retirement will be wiped out in a single night, the night of his death (12:20). All the things that have belonged to him – “my crops,” “my barns,” “my grain and my goods,” and “[my] ample goods” (12:17-19) – will in an instant belong to another whose identity he does not even know (12:20).

In similar fashion the rich man of 16:19-31 discovers to his dismay that the “good things” he has received during his lifetime are not gifts that he can carry with him into the afterlife. The luxuries he once enjoyed day by day disappear when he dies and are nowhere in evidence in Hades, the afterworld to which he has come (16:23; cf. 16:24, 25, 28).<sup>3</sup>

And the dishonest manager, who has been “squandering” his master’s property (16:1) and no doubt living well at his master’s expense,<sup>4</sup> suddenly

finds himself facing bleak economic and social prospects (16:3): “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.”<sup>5</sup> As Jesus makes clear in these stories, money, possessions, and the good life that they bring with them are at best ephemeral in character and in the end completely untrustworthy.

### **STUFF OBSCURES MORAL VISION**

If money and possessions are transitory, they are also harmful to moral vision, obscuring the sight of others in need. Throughout his luxurious life the rich man of 16:19-31 scarcely notices Lazarus, the poor man lying outside his gate. While the rich man knows this beggar by name and reputation (16:24-25),<sup>6</sup> his eyes evidently glaze over day by day at the pathetic sight in front of his gate. Clearly he does nothing to relieve the hunger and heal the wounds of Lazarus. No crumbs “from the rich man’s table” satisfy Lazarus’ persistent hunger pangs; nor does the rich man rescue Lazarus from the dogs that “lick his sores” (16:21). As long as he is wealthy and self-sufficient, the rich man has eyes only for himself and cares nothing for the welfare of others.

Likewise the rich farmer of 12:13-21 considers no one but himself as he ponders the dilemma of his expanding wealth. His private monologue is filled with “I-statements,” “my-statements,” and “you-statements” addressed to his own soul:

And he thought to himself, “What should *I* do, for *I* have no place [where *I* can] store *my* crops?” Then he said, “*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and [*I* will] build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, ‘Soul, *you* have ample goods laid up for many years; [*you* must] relax, eat, drink, be merry.” (12:17-19, emphasis and bracketed retranslations mine)<sup>7</sup>

Here, as with the rich man of 16:19-31, the rich farmer exhibits no need for anyone beyond himself. He does not consult any outside parties, but speaks only to himself. Neither does he consider alternative options for resolving his difficulties. Sharing his wealth with those who have need is nowhere in his thinking. His vision extends only to himself and his personal retirement fund. The possessions of the rich farmer have closed his eyes to the world around him and obscured his vision of people in need.

### **STUFF CREATES CHASMS BETWEEN PEOPLE**

In the end, the inability to see others becomes an impassable barrier that separates people one from another and prohibits meaningful interaction. During his lifetime the rich man of 16:19-31 scarcely notices the poor man lying at his gate, but after his death he discovers that the visual barrier he once erected to shut out unpleasant sights has now turned into an impen-

erable wall. While the rich man now has perfect vision, so that he can “[look] up and [see] Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side” (16:23), he is incapable of bridging that distance.

In the midst of his “torment” and “agony,” the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water for his tongue (16:24). But Abraham turns down the rich man’s plea with a stern reminder that fortunes are now reversed (16:25). And he likewise explains that Lazarus cannot do the rich man’s bidding: “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us” (16:26). The rich man’s inability to see human need during his lifetime has ultimately created a “great chasm” between himself and others that now isolates him from human contact and comfort in his own time of need.<sup>8</sup>

### **STUFF DESTROYS MORAL CHARACTER**

If money and possessions obscure moral vision and create “chasms” between people, they also destroy moral character. Jesus introduces the story of the rich farmer (12:13-21) with a warning to the crowd about the dangers of greed: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (12:15). The story about the rich farmer then illustrates the greed which is his own ultimate downfall and leaves him empty-handed at the end of his life. The implications of this story are clear. To spend one’s life worrying about possessions and building “bigger barns” to house them is literally, in the vernacular of the text, to lose one’s “soul” without any ultimate gain: “You fool! This very night your [soul] is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (12:20, bracketed retranslation mine).

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), in spite of its surprise ending, paints a similar picture with regard to the corrosive impact of money and possessions.<sup>9</sup> The manager of this parable, when entrusted with his master’s “property” (16:1), succumbs to the temptation to help himself to the largesse and to live the good life at his master’s expense. The lure of money and possessions overwhelms all instincts to do what is “right” (*dikaion*)<sup>10</sup> and pulls the manager inexorably into a moral quagmire, where one “dishonest” (*adikias*) deed follows another as he tries desperately to preserve his life and his lifestyle. Jesus then follows up the parable with a series of aphorisms contrasting those who are “faithful” in handling possessions with those who are “dishonest” (*adikos*) (16:10), or “not faithful” (16:11, 12). As Jesus tells the story, it is clear that money and possessions present humans with an often irresistible temptation to engage in dishonest living, a lifestyle that then becomes increasingly more dangerous and risky as one dishonest act leads to the next.

But the ultimate image of the moral decay brought about by money and possessions lies in Jesus’ parting words to his disciples: “No slave can serve



two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. *You cannot serve God and wealth*" (16:13, my emphasis). In the end the greatest moral degradation caused by money and possessions is the destruction of the human capacity to serve God. And this, Jesus says, is the direct consequence of "serving wealth." For Jesus' disciples, faithful Jews who live daily with the scriptural command, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him" (Luke 4:8, cf. Deuteronomy 6:13), the alternatives are stark and the challenge is profound.

### **STUFF IS A GOOD GIFT**

As Jesus illustrates in these parables, money and possessions are truly "hazardous materials." But wealth is also a good gift with great positive potential for all those who are "rich" toward God and their neighbors in the human community. This message shines through the words of Jesus in surprising but unmistakable fashion. Take the story of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), for example. Here Jesus tells a sad story about a rich farmer "who stores up treasures for [himself]" and is "not rich toward God" (12:21). In the end this farmer faces stern judgment and ultimate loss (12:20).

But Jesus' words suggest the potential of a very different story, one about a rich farmer who *is* "rich toward God" and generous to his neighbors. This story, the one that Jesus hints at, is a joyful one, no doubt very similar to the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus, a high-ranking Jewish tax collector, has made a career of "defrauding" others (19:8b), becoming "rich" at their expense, and without question earning their intense hatred (19:2, 8b). But when

Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, his money and possessions do so as well. And now his wealth becomes a good gift that enriches the "poor" and provides extravagant restitution for those who have been "defrauded" (19:8). In response to this astonishing transformation in Zacchaeus and his money, Jesus announces, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9).

In similar fashion, the puzzling little story of the dishonest manager (16:1-13) points to the positive potential of money and possessions. By revising the bills of his master's clients, the dishonest manager enriches the lives of others by reducing their indebtedness (16:5-7). And in this way he builds human relationships that ensure his own "welcome" into the "homes"

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**Wealth is also a good gift with great positive potential for all who are "rich" toward God and their neighbors in the human community. This message shines through the words of Jesus in surprising but unmistakable fashion.**

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of others (16:4). In response the master “commends” the manager for his “shrewdness” (16:8); and Jesus likewise urges his disciples to “make friends for [themselves] by means of dishonest wealth” so that they may find a similar “welcome” in the “eternal homes” (16:9).

Brad H. Young offers a helpful analysis of this story based on first-century Palestinian cultural understandings:

The original hearer of the parable knew that the primary characteristic of the wealthy master is generosity. The householder in the story must be magnanimous.... [And] because the landowner is wealthy and magnanimous, he forgives the debts and commends the steward. All the people are blessed by the steward’s cleverness. The master will be praised throughout the land for his noble generosity. The landowner is full of grace. He shows compassion. The village is alive with the praise of the generous landowner. He will not try to punish the dishonest steward. Instead he acknowledges the steward’s cleverness.<sup>11</sup>

The implications of Jesus’ story are clear. Money and possessions, even when depicted as “dishonest wealth” (16:9), are good gifts with positive potential for blessing others and opening the door to one’s own blessedness. Just as the story of Zacchaeus concludes with a word of “salvation” (19:10), so the story of the dishonest manager concludes with words of “welcome” both earthly and “eternal” (16:4, 9).

## **STUFF IS A CALL TO FAITHFUL LIVING**

Jesus’ teachings about “stuff” are neither simple nor simplistic. The portrait he paints of money and possessions is multifaceted and complex. Wealth can build “great chasms” between humans (16:26) and lead people to ultimate “torment” (16:23, 28) and “agony” (16:24, 25). But wealth can also become the source of blessing for others (16:5-7; cf. 19:8) and an open door leading to ultimate “welcome” (16:4, 9) and “salvation” (19:10).

Jesus’ parables about “stuff” are above all else a call to ongoing faithfulness in the everyday use of money and possessions. He implicitly commends those who are “faithful in a very little” and depicts them as “faithful also in much” (16:10).<sup>12</sup> The faithfulness that Jesus commends takes both broad and specific shape. In broad terms, Jesus calls his followers to “serve God” instead of their wealth (16:13) and to be “rich toward God” rather than “storing up treasures for themselves” (12:21). In specific terms, Jesus challenges his followers to open their eyes to the needy on their doorsteps (16:20-21) and to bless others with their wealth (16:5-7; cf. 19:8).

If any questions remain as to the faithful use of “stuff,” Jesus sends his followers to “Moses and the prophets” for ongoing instruction (16:29, 31). Faithfulness with money and possessions grows ultimately out of faithful “listening” to Scripture. It is a challenge of a lifetime.

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## NOTES

1 Purple dye was very expensive in the ancient world. Consequently only royalty and wealthy people could afford to wear purple. "Fine linen" was also a luxury item, associated in Revelation 18:12 with gold, silver, jewels, pearls, purple, silk, and scarlet.

2 While Jesus elsewhere depicts money as "dishonest wealth" (16:9), the characterization of money in that instance emerges from a focus on the "dishonest" character of the manager who handles the money.

3 Though the narrative line of this parable speaks about the afterlife, it would be a mistake to read the parable as doctrinal teaching about the afterworld. The details of the story surely reflect first-century Jewish concepts of life beyond the grave, but this parable of Jesus concerns itself above all with the world of present human existence and the ethical decisions that people make within this world.

4 Cf. Luke 15:13, where the younger son in similar fashion "squanders" his inheritance in "dissolute living."

5 In the "honor-shame" culture of first-century Palestine, where public "honor" is the greatest good in society, the "shame" of begging for a living is a prospect too demeaning even to consider.

6 The rich man refers to Lazarus by name (16:24); and Abraham calls the rich man to "remember" what he already knows, namely that Lazarus received "evil things" during his lifetime (16:25).

7 The dishonest manager carries on a closely parallel monologue as he ponders his options: "Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that *my* master is taking the position away from *me*? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what [I will] do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome *me* into their homes'" (16:3-4, emphasis and bracketed retranslations mine).

8 The reminder in footnote #3 applies to this parable too.

9 Many think this is the most difficult to interpret of all Jesus' parables, for he appears to applaud the shady business dealings of a dishonest manager who cooks the books of his master and reduces the bills of his master's clients to get himself out of trouble. See the discussion of this parable later in this article.

10 Thus, for example, "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57).

11 Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 247.

12 Conversely, Jesus warns those who are "not faithful with the dishonest wealth" or that which "belongs to another" that they will receive neither "true riches" nor that which is "[their] own" (16:11-12).

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### **DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER**

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# Hearing Is Believing

BY JAMES R. EDWARDS

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect? The answer, repeated throughout Mark 4, is that we enter parables by hearing.

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One of the ironies of the electronic revolution is that the more we are bombarded with noise, the less we hear. Concert halls can be carried around in iPods, movie theaters in laptops, and libraries in PDAs. We need never be alone or out of touch, whether we are on top of Mount Everest or stuck in a traffic jam. Public surround sound necessitates, however, that we become selective hearers in order to protect ourselves from auditory overload. We do not need to work at hearing; we need to work at *not* hearing. Next time you are on an airplane, watch people during the seatbelt demonstration. They are intent not to hear a spiel that is intended to save their lives.

We inevitably bring these hearing filters into public worship as well. In worship we thus need to condition ourselves to do the exact opposite of what we do in the public square. We need to *work* at hearing. Unless we make a conscious effort to listen differently, to listen with uncommon attentiveness to the reading of Scripture, the singing of the anthem, and the preaching of the sermon, we may very likely do to public worship what we do to the seatbelt demonstration in the airplane.

## **JESUS' LIFE PREPARES US FOR HIS WORDS**

The Gospel of Mark has a lot to teach about hearing. Indeed, it can teach us how to hear the gospel, which Mark 4:11 calls "the mystery of the king-

dom of God.” Ironically, Mark’s Gospel does not initially seem to be about hearing at all. Its fast-paced narrative puts one episode after another, like a row of bricks with little if any editorial mortar between them. Mark portrays Jesus as a man of action and determination, “immediately” going there, “again” doing that. Mark seldom tells us what Jesus taught, however. In so far as possible, Mark allows the narrative – the account of Jesus’ deeds, movements, encounters, and travels – to carry the weight of the message he wishes to convey. If Mark were an American he would hail from Missouri, the “Show-Me State.” In Mark, the essential truths and convictions are *demonstrated* rather than spoken.

Jesus was, of course, an itinerant Jewish teacher, and Mark must inevitably present a body of Jesus’ teaching. He presents two bodies, in fact. In chapter 4 we find a collection of Jesus’ parables in typical Markan fashion, set one after another like beads on a string. And chapter 13 preserves Jesus’ teaching on matters related to the end of the world and the events preceding it, commonly known as eschatology. But compared to the long discourses of John’s Gospel, or to Jesus’ many parables and teachings in Matthew and Luke, Mark pares Jesus’ teaching to the bone.

Why is the actual content of Jesus’ teaching in Mark so minimal? It is certainly not because Mark was unacquainted with Jesus’ teachings. His most frequent designation for Jesus, after all, is “Teacher.” Mark is sparing with the content of Jesus’ teaching, rather, because he wants to prepare readers for Jesus’ teaching. The teaching of Jesus is like a precious gem that requires a proper setting to accentuate it. We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark’s mind, if we first see it demonstrated. The spoken word is, of course, necessary, but as an interpretation of what Jesus does rather than as a substitute for it. Mark’s vigorous narrative is designed to prepare us to hear what Jesus has to say. But hearing is difficult, and especially so when it is our first contact with Jesus. Mark postpones the teachings of Jesus until our familiarity with him puts us in a position to *understand* him.

### **HEARING FROM THE “INSIDE”**

In this article we want to focus on the first body of teaching, the parables of Mark 4. Parables are deceptive. A common understanding is that parables are simple earthly stories with heavenly meanings. That is a common *misunderstanding*. Parables cannot be understood by standing outside them and peering in. They can only be understood by getting out of our seats and entering into the drama. Jacob had to wrestle with his mysterious opponent in order to receive a blessing from God (Genesis 32:22-32), and we must likewise wrestle with parables if we are to receive God’s blessing through them.

In order to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is like, Mark includes three parables in chapter 4. All three parables have two things in common.

The first thing they share in common is that they are about seeds, and the second thing is that they are surrounded by the admonition to *hear*. We need to consider both elements, but let us begin with seeds. In themselves, seeds are unremarkable. If we knew nothing more about them, we would value them no more than we value a handful of dirt or a few grains of sand. We know from experience, however, that seeds have tremendous potential. They may become giant firs or stately Delphiniums or golden grains of wheat. But they must be planted and watered – and waited for expectantly. This is an important first clue to the gospel. Like seeds, the gospel can be easily overlooked and underestimated. All sorts of things in the world seem more powerful and important. Like seeds, however, the negligibility of the gospel conceals a surprise, for the gospel has the potential to grow into something entirely unexpected.

The three parables in Mark 4 illustrate this truth in different ways. In the longest and best known of them, the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-9), a farmer sows seed widely and indiscriminately. Some of the seed falls on pathways, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Farming in Palestine was a hazardous livelihood, and the farmer sows unsparingly – even wastefully – in hopes of reaping a harvest. Even so, according to the parable, three-quarters of the seed is lost to rocks, thorns, and the elements.

Those are discouraging odds. But the parable, ironically, does not end on a discouraging note. Far from it! Some of the seed falls on good soil, and it grows and produces a harvest of thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. In a part of the world where a harvest of tenfold was better than average, that is a breathtaking harvest. Indeed, it is no human harvest at all. A harvest so abnormally high indicates the hand of God. The irony is typical of Jesus' parables, upsetting our expectations and stock responses. A farmer hoping to eke out a meager harvest, at best, ends up reaping a bumper crop!

A parable, of course, is a story about one thing by likening it to another. The Parable of the Sower is not really about farming and harvest yields, but about the ministry of Jesus and the fate of the gospel. Until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' ministry has met with opposition and rejection from religious leaders, misdirected enthusiasm from crowds, and misunderstanding from his disciples. So far, not a single person has understood – nor seems close to understanding – the Kingdom of God that Jesus is introducing. The prospects of Jesus' mission look as precarious as the prospects of the Palestinian farmer. The hardpan, rocks, and thorns of the parable seem to symbolize the hard-heartedness, false hopes, and misunderstandings of Jesus' hearers.

Nor do things seem to have changed much today. Anyone who prays earnestly for "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven" cannot help but be distressed by the self-interest and hedonism, materialism and militarism, evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the gospel

and Church today. The facts of first-century Palestine seem to be the facts of the twenty-first century as well. The Parable of the Sower is about more than human facts, however. It is about the power of seeds, the power inherent in the ministry of Jesus and in the gospel to supersede “the facts” and do something wholly unexpected.

A second parable furthers this point. Another farmer sows seed in the ground and then attends to other matters (Mark 4:26-29). He goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning, he tends his flocks and mends his equipment, all in confidence that the seed he has sown will sprout and grow and produce fruit “automatically,” as the original Greek suggests. The farmer does not need to dig up the seed and inspect it; he does not need to stand over it and wait; he does not need to worry or coax or fret. Indeed, once he has sown the seed the only thing the farmer must do is allow the seed to do what is inherent in it—to grow of its own accord.

God’s work through the gospel is like the seed. Human agency plays a role in introducing it, but human agency does not determine its effect. The role of the farmer is like that of a messenger or a midwife: both mediate a process, but the messenger is not the message delivered, and the midwife is not the child delivered. The farmer, likewise, does not determine the seed, and human goodwill and intentions neither assist the gospel nor do human failures render it ineffective. We too may go to bed each night and get up each morning assured that this world belongs to God, and that God is secretly, mysteriously, and ineluctably working out his redemptive purpose in the world, despite everything to the contrary.

The third parable is about a mustard seed, proverbially the smallest of seeds (Mark 4:30-32). Though insignificant, indeed almost invisible, the mustard seed grows into a shrub large enough for birds to nest in. That something so large could come from something so small is

unfathomable. That is an analogy of the gospel. When we first hear the gospel, when the gospel is first declared to the world, it seems small and insignificant. How many other things seem more pressing and important! There are plans to be made, careers and investments to be considered, proposals and marriages and children to reckon with, houses to build, relationships to pursue, and entertainments—yes, in our world always entertainments to

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**We cannot help but be distressed by the evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the Church today. Yet the Parable of the Sower is about the power inherent in the gospel to supersede “the facts” and do something wholly unexpected.**

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enjoy. In comparison to such things, the gospel seems like a dark speck in the palm of one's hand, something to be looked over for a moment, and then overlooked for good.

But, remarkably, the gospel will not be relegated to insignificance. If it were only a human work, it could perhaps be dispensed with. But it is something more than a human work. It is the seed of God's creative, redeeming, and restoring presence. Its beginnings, to be sure, are inauspicious, but slowly and inescapably it grows and intrudes in our lives. Like a bush or tree, it becomes something we can no longer ignore, despite the many other things in life that at first seem more important. The transformative power of the gospel produces the qualities of love and joy, peace and patience, goodness and kindness that we most long for, but that most elude us.

### **HEARING, RECEIVING, AND BEARING FRUIT**

The imagery of seeds in the parables of Mark 4 is thus meant to convey the surprising power of the gospel to grow from small and seemingly insignificant beginnings to something mature, deeply rooted, and lasting. But how does this growth become real and effective in our lives? The answer to this question is given in the second thing the parables of Mark 4 have in common. Parables, as we have seen, cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, by allowing their stories to lay claim on us. But how do we "enter" and drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect? The answer is repeated throughout Mark 4—ten times, to be exact. We enter parables by *hearing*.

"Hearing" brings us back to the special challenge with which we began this article. Today we are particularly conditioned *not* to hear things. We have trained ourselves to reduce advertisements, commercials, background music, television, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to "white noise." But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?

Fortunately, in the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in 4:13-20, Mark instructs us *how* to hear the gospel. In the interpretation, the reception of the seed is likened to four types of hearing. The seed sown on the beaten path, says Mark, is like people who hear, "but immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown among them" (4:15, all translations of Scripture in this article are my own). Likewise, the seed sown on rocks is like people who hear the word "and immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root in themselves and are impermanent. When tribulation or persecution comes because of the word they beat a hasty retreat" (4:16-17). Again, the seed sown among thorns is like people who hear, "yet the concerns of the world and the deception of wealth and their desire for all sorts of things come and choke the word, and it becomes fruitless" (4:18-19). Finally, the seed sown on good soil is like those "who hear the word and receive it and



bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (4:20).

In all four instances the word is heard, but in only one instance does it bear fruit. In the first three instances the beginnings of the word—even very promising beginnings—falter, fade, and fail. Why? The Greek text gives us a very important clue that is lost in English translations. In the first three hearings the verb “to hear” is in the aorist tense. In Greek, the aorist denotes something that happens once and is done with. The aorist tense is symbolized by a dot or point. With reference to hearing, the aorist connotes a casual hearing that fails to register, a quick and superficial hearing, “in one ear and out the other.” The hearing that results in a good harvest in 4:20 is not in the aorist tense, however, but in the present tense. The Greek present tense signifies an ongoing, sustained activity. The present tense is symbolized not by a dot, but by an extended line. That is to say, the fourth kind of hearing is not quick, easy, and casual. The hearing that bears fruit, rather, engages the gospel, ties up with it, even wrestles with it. When we really *hear* it, then it bears a harvest in our lives. Active hearing, hearing that leads to *heeding*, is how we “enter” into the parables. The Parable of the Sower promises that those who hear the gospel in this way receive it, and “it bears fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20).

### **RIGHT CONFESSION LEADS TO RIGHT DISCIPLESHIP**

In Mark 4:13, Jesus prefaces the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower with these words: “Do you not know this parable? How, then, will you know all the parables?”

This rhetorical question suggests that the Parable of the Sower plays a key role in understanding Jesus’ parables. If we get this parable right, we can understand all the parables.

What, then, do we need to understand? We need to understand that the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:3-9 and its interpretation in Mark 4:14-20 combine the two essential keys of the Christian life: Christology

and discipleship. The parable itself teaches about the ministry of Jesus, and its interpretation teaches about a proper response to it. A proper understanding of the ministry of Jesus is essential for a proper understanding of discipleship. Mark will stress this central truth at the midpoint of his Gospel in the all-important teaching on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Once Peter

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**Today we are conditioned NOT to hear things—to reduce commercials, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to “white noise.” But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?**

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confesses Jesus as the Messiah of God, then Jesus can explain to Peter and the Twelve what it means to be his disciple (Mark 8:27-38). That is to say, once Peter and the Twelve stop being mere observers but enter into the life and mission of Jesus by authentic confession, then they can begin to learn what it means to belong to Jesus and follow him as disciples. As Jesus must go to Jerusalem and die on a cross, so too must Peter and all who would follow him deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus. Right confession leads to right discipleship. The cost of being the Messiah determines the cost of discipleship.

The Parable of the Sower combines both of these key and seminal truths of Mark's Gospel. Though Jesus' ministry is beset by misunderstandings, obstacles, and even rejection, his ministry will, by God's grace, produce a harvest beyond imagination. Disciples, too, will be sent to sow the word, and in so doing they will experience misunderstanding and opposition. Chances of any harvest will seem remote, and chances of a good harvest remoter still. But when disciples hear and heed the word, by God's grace it finds expectant soil in their lives, and they too will bear fruit – thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

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# Christ's Parables

BY MARK L. MOELLER

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For Christ's parables that spur us  
to reflect in fitting ways  
on your faithful love and judgment,  
God, receive our prayerful praise.  
Give us ears to hear these stories,  
move us from complacency  
with these heralds of your Kingdom,  
that both is and is to be.

Tales of treasured coin and lost sheep,  
tale of precious son astray,  
tales of tenants, slaves, and bridesmaids,  
rich young fool who chose his way.  
Give us ears to hear their stories,  
minds to know what they convey;  
with these glimpses of your Kingdom,  
teach and nourish us today.

As we gather in your worship,  
Father, challenge us anew  
to repeat your wondrous story,  
calling humankind to you.  
May we, quickened by your Spirit,  
loved by Jesus Christ your Son,  
yield our hearts to live your story  
'til your holy Kingdom comes.

# Christ's Parables

ATTR. B. F. WHITE

MARK L. MOELLER

ARR. JACK SCHRADER

*Unison*

1 For Christ's par - a - bles that spur us  
 2 Tales of trea - sured coin and lost sheep,  
 3 As we ga - ther in your wor - ship,

2  
 to re - flect in fitt - ing ways  
 tale of pre - cious son a - stray,  
 Fa - ther, chall - enge us a - new

4  
 on your faith - ful love and judg - ment,  
 tales of ten - ants, slaves, and brides - maids,  
 to re - peat your won - drous sto - ry,

6  
 God, re - ceive our prayer - ful praise.  
 rich young fool who chose his way.  
 call - ing hum - an - kind to you.

Tune: BEACH SPRING 8.7.8.7.D.

8

Give us ears to hear these sto - ries,  
 Give us ears to hear their sto - ries,  
 May we, quick - ened by your Spir - it,

10

move us from com - pla - cen - cy  
 minds to know what they con - vey;  
 loved by Je - sus Christ your Son,

12

with these her - alds of your King - dom,  
 with these glimp - ses of your King - dom,  
 yield our hearts to live your sto - ry

14

that both is and is to be.  
 teach and nour - ish us to - day.  
 'til your ho - ly King - dom comes.

# Worship Service

BY MARK L. MOELLER

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*As the congregation gathers for worship, a woman gives each worshipper a penny.<sup>1</sup>*

## *Prelude*

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: We are gathered by God's Spirit to hear the story

**People: that uncovers our competitiveness  
and invites us to true community,**

uncovers our wrong centering

and invites us to a right centering,

**and uncovers our need to hoard and exclude  
and invites us to share and include.**

We give thanks for this story that exposes our assumptions  
and challenges us to turn them around.

**We give thanks for this story that overcomes our timidity  
and invites us to risk all for the sake of God's Kingdom.**

**All: We will hear the story**

**that uncovers our self-centered despair and distrust  
and invites us to hope.<sup>2</sup>**

## *Hymn*

"Tell Me the Old, Old Story" (verses 1, 2, 4a, and 3b)

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,  
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,  
for I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.

*Tell me the old, old story; tell me the old, old story.  
Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*

Tell me the old, old story that I may take it in—  
that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.  
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;  
the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

## *Refrain*

Tell me the same old story when you have cause to fear  
that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.  
Tell me the story always, if you would ready be,  
in any time of trouble, a comforter to me.

*Refrain*

*A. Katherine Hankey (1866)*

*Tune: EVANGEL*

*Unison Invocation*

Loving Father, Creator and Sustainer of all,  
as a hen gathers her young, you gather us to yourself.

Remind us that all that we say and do this hour  
is not of our own making.

For all that we offer is in response to your story —  
a story that reminds us that you made us,  
and we chose to fall away from you into sin.

Yet, you did not leave us in our sin.

In your mercy and grace, you gave to us Jesus the Christ  
in whom we have redemption.

Remind us that what is said and done in this hour  
is not for our own sake.

Rather, it is for the sake of your Kingdom,  
and for the world you love.

To you, Holy and Triune God, be  
glory,  
majesty,  
dominion,  
and authority  
now and forever. Amen.

*Silence and Meditation*

Never despise homeless people who are stretched out on the ground  
as if they merit no respect. Ask who they are and discover their worth.  
They bear the image of our Savior. The Lord in his goodness has given  
them his own image in order that his image might cause the hard-  
hearted to blush with shame.

*Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-after 394)*

## *A Story from Our Community*

*(This monologue is read aloud in the voice of a marginalized person – perhaps a homeless, poor, and forgotten member of the community.)*

Today, you will hear the story about a woman who lost a coin. I've heard this story before and I'm guessing you have, too. It's the story of a woman who had ten silver coins. She lost one and turned the house upside-down to find it. When she found it, she called the neighbors and shared the good news.

I'm looking at all the people in this room today and I just wonder what you would do if someone in this crowd went missing. Would you search and search until you found the missing person? Would you call everyone else in this room and have a big party after finding the lost one? I'm guessing you would – because you belong to each other.

I'm wondering if you would go looking for me if I went missing. I know this is a strange question because you don't know me – you don't have me in the same way you have each other here today.

I think you know and have each other because you know one another's stories. I wonder if you would know and have me if you heard my story. Speaking of stories, *will you, can you* really get the meaning of the story of the lost coin if you refuse to hear my story? Are you afraid that you just might enter in my story and find yourself? Do you think you might see Christ in my eyes, feel him in my embrace, hear him in my voice?

The next time you see me on a street corner, know that I would appreciate a bottle of water and something to eat. What I would really like is to tell you my story – and maybe you'll tell me yours.

## *Solo*

"The Servant Song"<sup>3</sup>

*Richard Gillard (1977)*

*Suggested Tune: NETTLETON*

## *Prayer of Confession*

Loving and merciful One,  
we thank you for the community in which you have placed us,  
for the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love.

We are quick to share our own stories  
while we ignore the stories of others.



We fail to see your Kingdom in parables  
because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other.  
We push aside those  
whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom.

Form in us a new vision of community in which there is  
neither East nor West,  
neither South nor North.

Challenge our assumptions,  
and instill in us a holy *disease*  
until all have heard your story.  
For the sake of your Kingdom that is and is not yet. Amen.

### *Assurance of Pardon: Colossians 1:13-14*

The Father has rescued us from the power of darkness  
and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,  
in whom we have redemption,  
the forgiveness of sins.

### *Silence and Meditation*

Our forbears' belief that the slow digestive process of cows was well-suited to describe the process of engaging with Scripture stands in marked contrast to the language and expectations of a fast-food generation. Their wisdom calls us to a more gentle rhythm of prayerful reading in which patience, silence and receptivity are vital ingredients. In a world of sound-bites we need to learn again the art of listening with the ear of the heart.<sup>4</sup>

*Robert Atwell*

### *Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 8-10*

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable:

"What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## Hymn

“Christ’s Parables”

Mark L. Moeller (2006)

Tune: BEACH SPRING (pp. 51-53 in this volume)

## A Prayer for Illumination

God of light and not of darkness,  
we thank you that in times past you spoke to your people  
and led them through a wilderness.  
Today, we find ourselves in our own peculiar wilderness.  
Shed light on our path and lead us by your Spirit,  
for without your guidance  
we will surely lose our way.

Bless now the reading and hearing of the gospel.  
As your servant speaks,  
give words to utter,  
ears to hear,  
and hearts to respond.  
Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

## Sermon: “Once Lost, Now Found”

## The Giving of Tithes and Offerings

## Hymn of Response

“We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations” (verses 1 and 4)

We’ve a story to tell to the nations,  
that shall turn their hearts to the right,  
a story of truth and mercy,  
a story of peace and light,  
a story of peace and light.

*For the darkness shall turn to dawning,  
and the dawning to noonday bright,  
and Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth,  
the Kingdom of love and light.*

We’ve a Savior to show to the nations,  
who the path of sorrow has trod,  
that all of the world’s great peoples  
may come to the truth of God,  
may come to the truth of God.

### Refrain

H. Ernest Nichol (1896)

Tune: MESSAGE

### Sending Forth

Go now to love and serve the world  
loved by Christ our Lord.

As you go, be the feet of Christ,  
the hands of Christ,  
the voice of Christ.

As you go, share stories of a sheep, a coin, and a son gone astray,  
tell tales of tenants and talents, slaves and masters,  
and a rich young fool.

Yes, tell these stories.

Share your own story.

And listen to those of others. Amen!

### Postlude

#### NOTES

1 Too often our worship is a purely linguistic affair and we ignore the realms of sight, touch, smell, and taste. But worship centered on Jesus' parables offers many possibilities to engage worshippers more fully. This service based on the Parable of the Lost Coin begins with each worshipper receiving a penny. For the Parable of the Foolish Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13), we might adorn the vestibule with bridesmaids' dresses, or for the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:12-24), we might place in the sanctuary a Crock Pot cooking a roast. The things we touch, see, and smell can be avenues for hearing and sharing the salvific stories of God in Christ.

2 The anchoring points of this prayer are drawn from William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), chapters 5 and 6.

3 Words and music by Richard Gillard, copyright © 1977 Scripture in Song, a division of Integrity Music Inc., CCLI Song No. 72673. For other permission to reprint the hymn, contact Integrity Music ([www.integritymusic.com](http://www.integritymusic.com)). An alternate tune for this hymn is NETTLETON.

4 Robert Atwell, "Introduction," *Celebrating the Seasons: Daily Spiritual Readings for the Christian Year* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), v.



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## ❖ Other Voices ❖

Parables are best defined as stories with two levels of meaning: the story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood. In effect, parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.

**KLINE SNODGRASS**, “Parables,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (1992)

Then the students came and asked [Jesus], “Why are you giving it to them in Comparisons?”

“Because,” he said, “they have not been let in on the secrets of the God Movement like you have. When a man has them, he’ll be given more and will have plenty; when a person doesn’t have them, he’ll lose even what he has. The reason, then, that I give it to them in Comparisons is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or catching on. This passage from Isaiah applies to them:

‘They strain their ears and never catch on;  
for the hearts of these people are hard,  
and their ears are dull,  
and their eyes are dim.  
Otherwise, their eyes might see,  
and their ears might hear,  
and their hearts might understand,  
and they might turn around,  
and I’ll make them well.’

But you, you should be truly thankful that your eyes see and your ears hear. For indeed many sincere and just men of God would have given their eyeteeth to see and hear what you are experiencing, but they never had the chance.”

**MATTHEW 13:10-17** (Clarence Jordan, *Cotton Patch* translation, 1970)

Conversation takes place when one party has something new and interesting to say to the other.... One must say something engaging and original, something with an element of mystery. The Church must sound strange to the world if it is not to be dull.

**KARL BARTH**, *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (1963)

Evangelization for Jesus was generally by means of parables that were often so bewilderingly allusive that his disciples would ask further explana-

tions of his meanings.... Parables invite the hearer's interest with familiar settings and situations but finally veer off into the unfamiliar, shattering their homey realism and insisting on further reflection and inquiry. We have the uneasy feeling that *we* are being interpreted even as we interpret them.

**RON HANSEN , *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (2002)**

The language of metaphor or poetic images yields not one-dimensional meaning but an expansive suggestiveness or elasticity of meaning. Though parables are not Rorschach tests for undisciplined free association, we can rightly think of a certain polyvalence of meaning in them. They may invite us to more than one trajectory of reflection, more than one possibility for decision.

**PAUL SIMPSON DUKE , *The Parables* (2005)**

The exploration of Jesus' parables in conjunction with comparative texts from both Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman narratives is not merely an exercise in literary and historical "priority" or "superiority." Instead what we can learn is that the parables of Jesus were not told in a literary, cultural, social, and historical vacuum. The parables were created and preserved in conversations with their cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in that dialogical social discourse.

**DAVID B. GOWLER , *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (2000)**

Parables are metaphors for God. Speaking them, Jesus was "throwing alongside" (*para-bolē*) the Infinite these earthy images and strange plots.... Such an enterprise has its limits: "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike?" (Isaiah 46:5). No image encapsulates God; no metaphor is adequate to divine mystery. This is why Jesus, like the prophets, sages, and psalmists before him, could not limit his figurative speech for God to one or two metaphors, but sang out a superabundance of them. He did not "throw alongside" God an image and say, "There it is!" He flung great sprays of them, like stars, and left us looking up in wonder.

**PAUL SIMPSON DUKE , *The Parables* (2005)**

Michel Quoist reminds us that "If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer." Yes, that is precisely what we want to have happen. We want to *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer. Jesus told parables precisely to get people to do so.

**E. GLENN HINSON , "Improving our Seeing and Listening," in *Mysticism, Christian Reflection* (2005)**

This photograph is available in  
the print version of *Parables*.

**Guercino's RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON reminds us that  
the central figure in this parable and, indeed, in many  
of Jesus' parables, is God.**

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# A Gesture of Reconciliation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

AND MIKEAL C. PARSONS

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The return of the prodigal son to his father was a popular subject in seventeenth-century Christian art, both north and south of the Alps. The Counter Reformation embraced it as an example of forgiveness and healing between family members; Protestants viewed it as a return to God the Father despite their break from the Roman Catholic Church. Both of these meanings can help us interpret Guercino's *Return of the Prodigal Son*.

This image of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is a visual exegesis less of the Lukan parable than of the Counter-Reformation emphasis (in response to Protestant critique) on the necessity and benefits of true contrition. The father receiving the penitent prodigal refers not only to God, but also to the Church that, as God's representative on earth, receives the genuinely contrite through its sacraments and ministry.

The artist Gian Francesco Barbieri was born in Cento, a small town outside the metropolis of Bologna. He became known by the nickname "Guercino," the squint-eyed, probably because of a childhood accident. He was apprenticed to Benedetto Gennari the elder, whose brother later married Guercino's sister and they had two sons who worked with Guercino. The artist left these nephews his entire estate as he did not marry and had no children.

Despite the apprenticeship with Gennari, most scholars agree that Guercino was practically self-trained as an artist. In 1612, at the age of twenty-one, the artist had his "big break" when his work came to the attention of a Bolognese cleric, Canonico Antonio Mirandola, who held an ecclesiastical position in Cento. Mirandola helped Guercino secure several important commissions that were noticed by Bolognese patrons. A colleague, Ludovico Carracci, described Guercino as a "great draughtsman and a most felicitous colorist: he is a prodigy of nature, a miracle...who astonished the leading painters."<sup>1</sup>

Painting in the third-generation Bolognese style, Guercino preferred a pictorial and rather violently Baroque manner. He visited the artistic centers of Venice (1618), Ferrara (1619 and 1620), and Mantua (1620), but his late style is the result of a two-year stay in Rome (1621-1623).

Guercino painted the subject of the Prodigal Son at least seven times in

his career. His earliest version was created in 1617 and the Timken painting illustrated here is the last.<sup>2</sup> The patron of this painting is believed to be Girolamo Boncompagni, archbishop of Milan, who commissioned Guercino in 1654 to do a painting of the Lukan narrative with three figures. The archbishop presented the painting as a gift to Prince Colonna and its provenance in the Colonna Collection is well documented.<sup>3</sup>

The artist was able to return to a much loved and often painted subject with a fresh interpretation at different phases of his life. Each time he skillfully varied the composition. This version includes the contrite son, his forgiving father, and an observant servant. The figures' conventional gestures, which would be known to his audience through (among other things) sacred and secular theater productions, become the focus of meaning in this painting.

The hands of the father and son, for the first time in a Guercino Prodigal Son, are "entwined in a classic gesture of reconciliation and, as carriers of meaning, are positioned at the center of the composition. The hands allude to a subsequent and theologically significant verse from the Gospel of Luke in which the Father grants his forgiveness: 'for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (Luke 15:24)."<sup>4</sup> The son wipes his tears as an act of contrition and thankfulness for the forgiveness shown to him by his father—a gesture of climax and catharsis.

The classicizing elements of the composition create a painting less of emotion and passion than of recognized rhetorical gesture of reconciliation. Comparing Guercino's painting with ancient rhetorical tradition was not unknown in the artist's day. In 1646, Commendatore Giovanni Battista Manzini (1599-1646) wrote a letter to a Benedictine monk about this characteristic of Guercino's work. Earlier, Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), in a famous treatise on painting after the Council of Trent, had compared the painter with the orator and claimed that the goal of the Christian painter (like that of the orator) was to be found in "persuading the populace and moving it to embrace something"; for the Christian painter, that "something" should be "pertinent to religion."<sup>5</sup> Guercino learned the gestures of rhetoric through his work with the intellectual Barberini family in Rome and the religious theatre of the Jesuits. The *Return of the Prodigal Son* by Guercino was able to instruct its audience, an integral component of proper rhetoric and goal of Counter-Reformation propaganda.

We may be tempted to read Jesus' parables in light of our own changing contexts. Yet the Gospel of Luke and Guercino's painting remind us that God is the central figure in this parable and, indeed, in many of Jesus' parables. God, the loving Father, stands with open arms ready to receive both prodigals, the one who left for "a distant country" and the one who stayed behind. God invites all of us to the eschatological banquet, which is prepared both for prodigals returned home and elder siblings resentful of their return.



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**NOTES**

1 Denis Mahon, ed., *Guercino: Master Painter of the Baroque* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 156.

2 For further study of Guercino's paintings of the Prodigal Son, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 134-164.

3 Mahon, 298. Using extant documents such as the artist's meticulous account book, especially for the years 1629-1666, a large number of correspondences between the artist and his patrons, and the work of his first biographer, Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-93), who knew him personally, scholars can trace many of Guercino's works back to their original commissions.

4 Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, "Ma c'hanno da fare i precetti dell'oratore con quelli della pittura?": Reflections on Guercino's Narrative Structure," in *Guercino: Master Painter of the Baroque*, 75-110.

5 *Ibid.*, 196.

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This photograph is  
available in the  
print version of *Parables*.

**“We servants of the holy Samaritan with the talents we  
have been given, that is the charity of God and of our  
neighbor, can and should come to the aid of [our neigh-  
bors’] bodily and spiritual misery.”**

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# Go and Do Likewise

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The sixteenth-century Italian artist Jacopo Bassano thoroughly enjoyed parables as a source of inspiration for his paintings and a mode of communicating with his audience. So, too, does twenty-first-century Chinese artist He Qi (pronounced huh-chee), who combines Chinese folk customs and painting techniques with western modernism. His works on paper are recognized by their bright colors and flat, mosaic collage form.

Jacopo dal Ponte was born in Bassano del Grappa. After apprenticeship to his father, he frequently traveled to nearby Venice to train with Paolo Veronese (c. 1487-1553). There he was influenced by the paintings of Titian (c. 1485-1576) and drew inspiration from artists working in the style of the day known as *La Maniera* or Mannerism. The Mannerism of Jacopo Bassano featured elegant forms, rich color, textured fabrics, drawing from nature, and an attention to compositional organization that differed from that of the High Renaissance.

The artist married Elisabetta Merzati from Bassano and they had four sons, who became painters, and two daughters. Archival scholarship has revealed that "Jacopo Bassano was an avid reader, especially of holy scripture, and had a rigorous moral code, such that he would never paint scenes or figures that might arouse scandal."<sup>1</sup> He lived a secluded life in the town in which he was born. He declined invitations to hold public office and to work for foreign princes.

Jacopo frequently portrayed biblical narratives and especially favored the Gospel of Luke and parable scenes.<sup>2</sup> In the London *Good Samaritan* (c. 1557), he depicts the major characters in Christ's parable (Luke 10:30-35) just as the Samaritan rescues the traveler who "was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers" (10:30). The traveler is positioned on an elevated rock that enables the Samaritan to get behind him to hold him up. Bandages, applied earlier by the Samaritan, already are stained red with the man's blood. The two move toward the Samaritan's donkey, the lighter color of the saddle allowing its outline to be found in the darkened space on the right side of the painting. The flasks of oil and wine used to cleanse the traveler's wounds catch the light in the foreground.

Behind the Samaritan, in the middle distance on the left, are two other figures; according to the narrative, they are a priest and a Levite (10:31-32).

The second man, the Levite, holds two sticks and appears to be reading. Both passersby are dressed in dark secular garb. In contrast, the Samaritan wears a bright, rose-colored peasant garment with a flask attached at his waist.

The distant city has been identified as the artist's hometown of Bassano. Like other northern Italian cities, it was overrun with beggars. The message

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**He Qi's distinctly Chinese paintings counteract the tendency to equate "Christian Art" with "European Art." The artist reminds us that Christianity is not "only a Western religion."**

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of Christ's parable, that we should emulate the mercy of the Samaritan (and of Christ), was poignantly captured in contemporary Dominican preaching: "we servants of the holy Samaritan with the talents we have been given, that is the charity of God and of our neighbor, can and should come

to the aid of [our neighbors'] bodily and spiritual misery."<sup>3</sup>

Like Jacopo Bassano, the contemporary Chinese artist He Qi uses his art to speak for the poor and suffering. His family – his father taught mathematics at Nanjing University and his mother was an elementary school teacher – was driven into the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). Though all the Christian churches were closed and Western missionaries sent home, He Qi discovered Christianity through a portrait of the Madonna and Child. To earn a living, he taught himself to paint. During the day he painted pictures of Chairman Mao, but late at night he secretly copied paintings by Raphael and other Old Masters of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>4</sup>

He Qi earned a Ph.D. in religious art at Hamburg Art Institute, and spent another year studying medieval art in Germany in 1991. While he was serving as the 2005-2006 Paul T. Lauby artist-in-residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, his work was exhibited at the Yale University Institute of Sacred Music. A twenty-seven piece tour of his paintings based on Old Testament stories, titled "Look toward the Heavens," began touring the United States. He Qi has been creating modern Chinese Christian art since 1983. Recently he moved to America after teaching for many years at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

*The Good Samaritan* reflects He Qi's "peaceful message" of Christian charity through a flat but colorful style that the artist describes as "color on paper." The composition depicts the Good Samaritan putting the wounded traveler on his donkey in order to take him to an inn for further care (Luke 10:34). In the background we see the priest and Levite walking away, their hands outstretched from their sides. Just as Jacopo Bassano modeled the



He Qi. *THE GOOD SAMARITAN*, 2001. Gouache on Rice Paper, 32" x 32". Photo: © He Qi ([www.heqiarts.com](http://www.heqiarts.com)). Used by permission of the artist.

biblical characters on figures from his world, so He Qi depicts them as contemporary Chinese figures.

Concerned that “ordinary Chinese people...associate Christian art only with certain Western images taken from Renaissance religious paintings,” He Qi tries to bridge the gap between East and West.<sup>5</sup> This change, he says, must start within the church itself, particularly the Chinese church. “We need to produce Christian art in a Chinese indigenous way so that people will know the Gospel message also belongs to Chinese people, and not just to foreigners,” he writes, for Christianity is not “only a Western religion” – and his distinctly Chinese paintings counteract the tendency to “equate ‘Christian Art’ with ‘European Art.’”

Over the centuries, artists as diverse as Jacopo Bassano and He Qi have lifted up the Samaritan as a model of mercy for their contemporaries. Of course, when Jesus told the lawyer who wondered “Who is my neighbor?”

to “Go and do likewise” in imitation of the Samaritan (Luke 10:37), Jesus wanted him to imitate the Samaritan’s *character* and not merely his *actions* in this story. To be merciful like the Samaritan (and like God) means we do more than assist the suffering individuals whom we encounter. We must care deeply enough about their misery to work toward structural changes in unjust systems that lie behind their suffering.<sup>6</sup>

Bassano’s and He Qi’s paintings can inspire us not only to examine our individual actions of mercy, but also to critique our social institutions and make them more merciful.

## NOTES

1 Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 For more information, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 82-109.

3 Bernard Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public: Moralizing Pictures in an Age of Reform ca.1535-1600* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 48-49.

4 He Qi, Keynote Speech at 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) Global Mission Event in Amherst, MA. Video online at [www.heqiarts.com/Photos/pages/Speech.html](http://www.heqiarts.com/Photos/pages/Speech.html), accessed 19 September 2006.

5 Interview with He Qi, online at [www.asianchristianart.org/profile/HeQi/pages/HeQi-interview.html](http://www.asianchristianart.org/profile/HeQi/pages/HeQi-interview.html), accessed 21 September 2006.

6 See, for example, Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002).



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# Hands of the Father

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

**No one will be able to snatch us out of his Father's hand, Jesus said. The hands of God welcome us with a loving embrace when we return. Indeed, God's posture is so different from the way society teaches us to use our hands—to clasp ever more tightly to possessions and people.**

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*Luke 15:11-32*

**T**wo brothers: one older, one younger. The younger, setting off on the journey of a lifetime, treats his father as no better than dead. He treats Dad like a banker signing over the boy's inheritance. The younger brother leaves for the life he wanted, the alternative lifestyle, the conduct that we see on television. The father can only wave goodbye.



“That’s what little brothers do, that’s what spoiled brats do,” Jesus’ first listeners are thinking. “They don’t know the sacrifices others have made, they take them for granted. They didn’t have it as hard as we did.”

The story is so familiar to them. They remember another pair of estranged brothers, Jacob and Esau—the younger brother, Jacob, flees after cheating Esau out of the inheritance; and father Isaac remains blind to the brothers’ anger and hostility. They recall ten brothers ganging up on young Joseph and selling him into slavery, while their father Jacob mourns the loss of his favorite son. They think of those royal sons, Absalom and Adonijah. This time the older Absalom kills Adonijah and carries out a coup to dethrone King David, and all they can hear is the royal father’s sobbing for the son who betrayed him.

For Jesus' first Jewish audience, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is an old, familiar story about brothers and their father's tears for them.<sup>1</sup>



By the time the younger son realizes what he has done, he has only carob beans to eat. But he cannot have them because the new boss says the pods are for the pigs. He cannot even get the boss to give him pigs' food – how's that for Jewish luxury dining? Those same hands that seized the inheritance as fast as they could are filled with the dirt of swine.

"He comes to himself," Jesus says, and goes back to his father with speech in hand. Surprisingly the father, though he had been rejected by his younger son, now welcomes him home. He embraces his son and invites him to work for him.

Toward the second son the father is just as gracious. The older son is in the field, working hard, slaving away like a hired hand. He is much more than that of course: he stayed home when Daddy worried, and he labored in the field. Now he proudly states how much he has done for everyone else. He's waited for the runt to return after squandering the family fortune. And we're not surprised at the father's reaction: he extends his arms to the older son too, saying, "All that is mine is yours as well."



One thread that weaves the story together is the use of hands: the father's hands waving to his lost son, the son's hands picking up the beans to make a meal for himself, the hands of the father embracing one son and inviting the other to join the party, and the elder brother likely replying angrily by crossing his arms.

Rembrandt van Rijn depicted this thread best in his famous painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Long lines still form at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to see the original. A church member gave me a print of this piece, and it hangs on my office wall.

Whenever I glance at the image during a meeting or counseling session, I notice the hands. The light falls on the hands of the father embracing the son. They are disproportionately larger than the other parts of the father's body. They remind me of the love that flows from a father's hands outstretched to a wayward son.

For the artist, the painting represented his life. Rembrandt spent a good portion of his life like the prodigal. His artistic success at age thirty was followed soon by grief, misfortune, and financial crisis. Within seven years he lost to death a son, a daughter, a second daughter, and his wife. The paint-



This photograph is  
available in the print  
version of *Parables*.

*Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669). THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON, 1668-1669. Oil on canvas, 265 x 205 cm. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

ing is a self-portrait: the artist is the old man, the father; but he is also the young prodigal kneeling at the feet of the father. The focus for Rembrandt, however, is the hands.<sup>2</sup>



The Psalmist uses the imagery of angels' hands to explain how God sustains us (91:12). Isaiah announces that God engraves his people on his palms (49:16). Jesus said that no one will be able to snatch us out of his Father's hand (John 10:29). In the parable and the painting, the hands of God welcome us with a loving embrace when we return.

God's posture is so different from the way society teaches us to use our hands—to clasp ever more tightly to possessions and people. If we have money, we clutch it. If we have a retirement account, we build it as large as we can and keep it for ourselves. We do the same with relationships. A boyfriend smothers a girlfriend with jealousy because he is afraid of losing her. A father does not want to see a daughter take the first steps into freedom, so he holds her fast.

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**We are afraid of losing something that we think is ours. It's the very reason the prodigal was lost in the mud and the elder brother remained in the field.**

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We are afraid of losing something that we think is ours. It's the very reason the prodigal was lost in the mud and the elder brother remained in the field.

God, however, does not grab us as if we were about to jump out of the nest or hold us down to keep us from falling. He gently sustains us so that we can have the freedom to choose. The hands that welcome us back are the hands that wave goodbye when he knows we will land in the pig sty. The hands that embrace us are also the hands that let go long enough so that we can learn true love. These are God's kind of hands: they hold us but don't control us.

God, however, does not grab us as if we were about to jump out of the

When we understand the way that God holds us, we are less likely to attempt to control others. When we trust God, we more easily release our possessions, the relationships that we call our own, and the people we try to conform to our wishes. God says, "If you'll hold tight to me, I'll help you find the true freedom that comes from love. You won't have to hold on so tight to the relationships of this world if you'll cling to my life in my way."<sup>3</sup>

Craig Barnes writes of a learning experience he had with an engaged couple he was counseling. Jeff looked at his fiancée Beth and said, "I just have to get something off my chest. I'm terrified.... I'm not afraid of being married to you. I'm afraid of losing you. When my mother died it took me years and years to recover, and I still miss her like crazy. I just can't stand the thought of losing you as well."

Barnes wanted to reply, "You're young; don't worry about it; you have a bright future ahead, and that's a long way off." But that would have only made things worse. He knew that when we are madly in love, we grasp harder to those we love. We grip them tighter and tighter; and when we must let go of that person, we tend to blame God for our loss. Barnes told the young couple that they needed to release each other symbolically to God and live each day as if it were their last. In doing so, true love and devotion could begin. He told them to give each other to God now and hold the other with open hands, rejecting a feeling of entitlement to the other. Then they

could live in gratitude for each day they had.<sup>4</sup>

When did the father in Jesus' story decide he was going to let go of the son? In my view, it was long before the son left. When the son decided to take his inheritance, the father was willing to let him go. When the son returned, the father received him and generously extended love to one who had been entrusted to him a second time.



Rembrandt depicts the moment of the son's return. The father generously clothes his son with a robe, the true sign of restored status. He offers him a new pair of shoes. He gives him a ring—from his hand. The father's hands brought him there, released him, and demonstrated love.

Our choice is simple. Either we hold open hands under the ones we love, or our hands become calloused from trying to control others.

You probably noticed the hands of everyone else in the painting. While the father embraces the younger son and he, in turn, clings to his father, the older brother stands to the far right, dressed like a Pharisee (ironically) with his hands and arms folded. Another man sits with his arms proudly folded. They are afraid to love as the father does.

They represent the choice that is ours. When we understand how God holds us, we can extend that kind of freedom and sustain one another with the hands of the father.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 112. I am also grateful for the insights from John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35b (Waco, TX: Word Books: 1993), 780-791, and Alan Culpepper, "Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 300-305.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Henri Nouwen's classic reflection on the painting and parable, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday), 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Kyle Matthews expresses this sentiment in the lyrics of "Hold on Tight" on the CD *Sing Down* (© See for Yourself Music, 2002), available online at [www.kylematthews.com](http://www.kylematthews.com).

<sup>4</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of our Longings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 60-61.



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# Mark and the Biggest Parable of All

BY MARTHA STERNE

If the entire Gospel of Mark isn't a parable, and particularly a parable about power, I don't know what it is. Maybe Mark didn't do much with the little parables because he was so committed to sharing the mystery of the whole life, death, and new life of Christ.

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**A** small insight for what it's worth: When a nice person asks you to write a little sermon inspired by a parable in the Gospel according to Mark, stop and think. You have drawn the short straw. Luke is the guy you want or maybe Matthew. They own the parable gold mines. Mark...ehhhh...not so great. Outside of your seed here or your sower there and of course your wicked husbandmen, Mark's not a parable kind of guy. Sure, Mark says that Jesus taught the crowds many parables (Mark 3:23; 4:2) and that Jesus really only taught them in parables (4:11, 33-34), but then Mark doesn't actually deliver the goods except for a couple of measly stories and some good metaphors.

There is of course in Mark's favor the well-known fact—well-known, at least, in East Tennessee—that if you want people to quickly get the power of the gospel, you hand them Mark and just read with them the whole wondrous strange and scary thing in one fell swoop. You stand there with them in Chapter One when they hear John yell *Somebody's Coming!* And then you just hang on with them for dear life through the hour and a half that it takes to go with Mark from Jesus' baptism and the dove and the heavens torn apart through all the healing and teaching and turning-upside-downing to the betrayal and the trial and the death and the curtain of the temple rent asunder. And finally the empty tomb. And then you stand there at that empty tomb with people while they hear that the women "fled from the

tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). And then boom, there you are with your people with that sly and holy and open-to-eternity-so-not-really-an-ending. And you ask them *Now What?*

Here's my take. If the entire Gospel of Mark isn't a parable, and particularly a parable about power, I don't know what it is. Maybe Mark didn't do much with the little parables because he was so committed to passing on to us the immediacy and power and mystery of the whole life, death, and new life of Christ Jesus—giving that to us in one huge parabolic arc and then leaving us with the joy and wonder of figuring out *What was that?* What is that now to me? How is this power in this person who talks and lives as if the reign of God is over and around us even now, even when we are so captivated by the powers and principalities of this age?

Until Jesus came along, people understood just one kind of power—the one-up power—and we still seem to be hard-wired to think that one-over-another power is the most real, and well, the most powerful. The prophet Isaiah actually pictures God sitting high above the circle of the earth. So nothing on earth can hurt God—Him being so far up above it all—which provides God with not just a bird's eye view of the world but an incredibly great angle if He wants to aim and smite somebody. With an understanding of the divine like that, what kind of power do you learn to expect from political and economic and religious leaders?

When you think about the way religious people were taught to think about power (and still are taught to think about power), it is no wonder that Jesus has been a problem, particularly for power people. He never did do power right. Not at all.

He didn't get born into the power class. He didn't approach folks the power way, which is to terrify them with what will happen if they don't please you or to seduce them with what will happen if they do please you—although certainly the Church has tried

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**Jesus didn't gather power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people, and it's my observation that he still does.**

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upon occasion to pull that stuff in the centuries ever since. He didn't gather other people's power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people, and it is my observation that he still does. And Jesus didn't stay in one place long enough to build a power structure—I mean, what are you going to do with somebody who keeps moving on to the next village just when he's got this village eating out of the palm of his hand? And he didn't protect himself. And that is the first rule of being powerful, isn't it? Cover your...self.

Scientists say there are many realities—a blood vessel, a river, a cloud, a snowflake, a fern—called “fractals,” which stay true to their pattern or shape no matter how small a piece you take of whole. I believe this is true of the life of Jesus. You can look at the whole parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day and you find that the power and the glory radiate the same.

Look at just twenty-four hours in the life of the guy when he gets to Capernaum in the first chapter of Mark. New in town—and immediately

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**Scientists say many realities are “fractals” that stay true to their shape no matter how small a piece you take of the whole. This is true of Jesus. In the parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day, the power and the glory radiate the same.**

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Jesus wows the natives with the power of his teaching and healing. But you sense what’s coming. Why did he go and heal on the Sabbath? And the healing he did on the Sabbath wasn’t even just healing a broken arm or getting somebody over a dread disease. It was the healing of a man with a demon. Now maybe we don’t think we know anybody with demons but we do. It is not too hard for us

to recognize the pain of sexual obsession, the chaos of terrible anxiety, the demons of self-destructive living, the emptiness of pathological lying to oneself and to others, the horrible weight of hopelessness, the exhausting need to control others and everything that happens, the splitting apart of the very self which reads sometimes as self-disgust and sometimes as self-adoration—although in almost twenty years in this soul business I have never seen a huge ego that was not erupting out of an even huger molten lava lake of self-hate. So demons—yes we know about those. And if I read the apple and Adam and Eve in the Garden right, at one time or another every single person on earth knows the business end of demonic possession.

It’s always struck me as strange that especially in Mark, Jesus tells the demons not to talk about him. That bothered me until I thought, why on earth would you want the unhealthiest, neediest, craziest part of people talking about you? Which is of course the way power usually grabs hold of folks. Somebody gets hold of our neediness and our weakness and our fears and touches those off and gets us obsessing about them and talking about them and wow—we’ll give away power to just about anybody. And Jesus wouldn’t go there.

Instead of acting like a power-person, with a mapped out strategy of who will get him where he needs to be, Jesus just heals whoever crosses his path—the demoniac one minute and a few hours later the mother-in-law with a fever. She is such a wonderful real touch. He went to Simon Peter’s

house and she was sick and he healed her and then she could fix a meal. I used to think that was kind of rude of Jesus and the rest of the men to expect her to get out of a sick bed and fix supper. In Mississippi where I was raised, we used to like to recover for a while and get rested up. But now I have known so many East Tennesseans, women and men, who hunger to be able to do the little tasks of their lives – fix supper, mow the lawn, vacuum the house, pay the bills, walk the dog, whatever the little tasks of lives – for those are pleasures that you yearn for when you are too sick or weak or distracted to live your life.

And so Jesus healed the sick and the lame and the other people that showed up with demons. And instead of sitting way up there out of the pain of the human experience with a map and a tracking system targeting who to smite and who to skip until maybe they get out of line and then it is time to smite ‘em – instead of all that, he just went around healing and telling people the good news.

Which turns out to be that God loves us. That God knows that most of us, most of the time, do not need a god to smite us. We need a savior with a way, a truth, a life. We need a way to have thankful hearts. We need the truth that helps us be less self-absorbed. We need a life that includes reaching out to our neighbors and we need them to reach back toward us. We don’t need someone stirring up our demons. We need someone healing us of them.

All those people Jesus healed in that twenty-four hours in Capernaum before he moved on, well, they are all dead now. Jesus didn’t cure them of what kills us all – the mortal truth of being human. But in that twenty-four hours he showed them and us what is more powerful than death – love – and what is more real than any kingdom we can cobble together.

For the message Christ came to live into us is that God is not out there, out of the circle of life, sitting on a throne ready to take aim and smite. God loves us and God is here within us and among us and through us – ready to silence our demons, heal our souls, and enlarge our lives. That is why Jesus came all this way to live and die a new kind of power – the power of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. What if we help each other to live in the Kingdom of the Power of that Good News just for today and then again maybe just for tomorrow and see what happens?



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# Hearing Parables in the Patch

BY JOEL SNIDER

**Clarence Jordan was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."**

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**E**ven a casual reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus, though a carpenter by trade, used a large number of farming images in his teaching. Rural scenes and small-town settings provide the background for much of his message. He talked about the difficulty of plowing in a straight line as an illustration of discipleship (Luke 9:62), described evangelists as harvest workers (Matthew 9:37), and interpreted his rejection at Nazareth in terms of small-town dynamics (Mark 6:4). Consequently, some of the cultural keys to understanding Jesus' message lie in the rural and small-village life of ancient Palestine.

This fact is particularly true when examining his parables. Like much of his other teachings, the stories of Jesus often reflect rural scenes and small-town dynamics. He spoke about a tenant farmer's good luck as an analogy for discovering the gospel (Matthew 13:44) and described different types of soil as means of understanding various ways people receive the gospel (Mark 4:1-9; Matthew 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8). Noxious weeds highlighted more than one of his stories (Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:31-32). You can easily think of other examples.

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) became an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' narrative parables, I am convinced, not only through his academic study of the New Testament, but also because his own small-town background shaped his ability to understand them. After looking briefly at



Jordan's rural roots and academic preparation, we will let him guide us to hearing Jesus' parables in "the Cotton Patch."

### **JORDAN'S RURAL ROOTS**

Clarence Jordan is best known for the establishment of Koinonia Farm in the 1940s and for his Cotton Patch translations of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Farming and the Bible were his twin vocations. He earned his undergraduate degree in agriculture, graduating in the same class as Senator Herman Talmadge at the University of Georgia. Jordan later complemented his degree in "scientific farming" with a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Jordan's amazing intellect, sensitive spirit, and rural upbringing provided a unique background against which he read and interpreted the New Testament, including the parables of Jesus.

Often called a prophet, revered as a Bible scholar, and respected for his views on race, economics, and war, Clarence Jordan was reared in a small town surrounded by a rural economy that was grounded in agriculture. Jordan's perception of small-town dynamics and the agrarian ethos uniquely contributed to his understanding and interpretation of Jesus, including the parables. "His was a theology of the working class, of the farm worker, the most neglected laborer in the United States—like Jesus, from the peasant class," G. McLeod Bryan notes. "Clarence was himself such a farm worker, all his life, a man of the soil who, in the years before blue jeans became a symbol, wore his dirty overalls with pride."<sup>2</sup>

Jordan's hometown, Talbotton, Georgia, provided many of his early lessons on small-town life. Recordings of his sermons and teachings contain many references to how participation in Talbotton's status quo blinded its leading citizens to the spiritual truths of the gospel. This rural-flavored blindness particularly demonstrated itself in hypocrisy on matters of race and economics, always preserving the place of the privileged.

On more than one occasion Jordan told the following story about how the status quo manifested itself in racial division in his hometown. He and his Sunday school classmates were taught to sing "red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world," but he noted that his classmates were always white. Later in life he described the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in America.

Perhaps the most famous of his stories told of the warden of the local penal farm, who could sing "Love Lifted Me" at a revival meeting and then go to the penal farm and inflict brutal punishment on inmates. Reflecting many years later, Jordan said that particular incident was a crisis of faith for him. "That nearly tore me to pieces," Jordan remembered. "If He was love and the warden was an example of it, I didn't want anything to do with [God]."<sup>3</sup>

Life in Talbotton included economic division as well. A privileged class of citizens—all Caucasians—owned and operated the businesses critical to the town and surrounding county. These business owners—including Jordan’s father, J. W.—made a decent living trading with each other and by controlling the resources on which other members of the community depended. During the depression, when J. W.’s bank failed, Clarence noted in a letter to his mother: “A good many of our people seem to have forgotten that the church is the place of worship and not the bank. Their money has become their god. And it may teach them to put their faith in something more substantial.”<sup>4</sup>

The entrenchment of the status quo and resistance to change on matters of race and economics reappeared later in Jordan’s life, after the establishment of Koinonia Farm. Incidents of intimidation and violence are well recorded in books and articles about Jordan. Neither the Ku Klux Klan nor the local Baptist church was open to the beliefs and practices of Jordan’s interracial farming community. Crosses were burned, shots were fired, and their membership at church was withdrawn.

When threats and violence proved ineffective in forcing the residents of Koinonia Farm to leave the county, opponents to Koinonia implemented an economic boycott. Jordan had a hard time buying supplies or selling his agricultural products. Local merchants who feared for their businesses joined the boycott by pressure and would not challenge the status quo. Jordan told a story of confronting a local butane gas dealer who had cut off service to Koinonia Farm:

We asked if his [participation in the boycott] was due to any fault on our part, and he said no, and that was what made it so hard. We asked why he had done it and he said he was afraid of the pressure. We asked how many customers he had lost on account of us—he said, None!” We asked who was putting pressure on him—he said “Nobody...yet!”<sup>5</sup>

The perceived pressure was all it took for him to boycott Koinonia farm. The strength of the small-town status quo was evident in its implied threat. Its invisible grip made it that much more insidious.

### **JORDAN’S SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON PARABLES**

Jordan’s homespun style in the Cotton Patch translations might lead the uninformed to think that his interpretations were simply designed to be clever. Such a belief grossly underestimates his scholarship. All of his translations were based on an extensive knowledge of the original language of the New Testament, *koine* Greek.<sup>6</sup> He gleaned cultural background for the parables from reading such authors as Josephus.

Based upon his study, Jordan taught that parables are a subset of allegory. They are different from fables, which are patently fiction and have

animals as the main characters. Parables are also different from myths, which Jordan described as stories about gods. Yet, Jordan taught that parables are allegories in that characters and action disguise the truth, which must then be deduced by the hearer. The story changes the scene and the setting in order to throw the audience a bit off guard until the point can be made. Jesus often used parables when the situation was delicate or dangerous – when he could not speak directly to the issue at hand. If a frontal assault against emotional or spiritual defenses was likely to fail, Jesus used a parable to bait people into listening. In other words, parables were the perfect rhetorical tool for challenging the resistance of the status quo.

These convictions about parables led Jordan to develop one of his most familiar concepts related to biblical studies: the Trojan horse parable.<sup>7</sup> Deriving its name from the tactical weapon employed by the Greek army in Homer's *Iliad*, a Trojan horse parable is particularly effective in communicating an unpopular message. This type of parable tells a story in such a way as to slip past the listeners' defenses in order to release the message on the unsuspecting. Jordan used Nathan's parable against King David as a graphic example of the Trojan horse parable. As Nathan tells his story about the man who stole his neighbor's sheep (2 Samuel 12:1-4), King David never sees the trap laid for him in the story until he is caught in it: "Old King David, he's looking and looking," taught Jordan, "but don't [*sic*] hear anything. He's listening and listening, but doesn't see anything."<sup>8</sup>

A parable speaks powerfully but it speaks obliquely, until it shatters the defenses of the person who is listening. In his book on Jordan's interpretation of Jesus' parables, Bill Lane Doulos correctly points out that Jesus effectively used parables to get his message past the emotional defenses of people caught in the status quo: "The parables of Jesus help us see two realities: the reality of a world whose values must be rejected, and the reality of a new world whose values must be accepted."<sup>9</sup>

According to Jordan, Jesus employed two major types of parables: *narrative parables* (which include all the stories Jesus told, as well as his simple comparisons) and *dramatic parables* (which are acted out signs with meaning deeper than the overt actions involved). Included among these dramatic parables are the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper – any event where the message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action. Jordan's broad

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**Jordan's homespun style in the Cotton Patch translations might lead the uninformed to think that his interpretations were simply designed to be clever. Such a belief grossly underestimates his scholarship.**

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definition of parable, when applied to such incidents as the virgin birth, created some controversy.<sup>10</sup>

### HEARING THE “NARRATIVE PARABLES”

The influence of Jordan’s farming knowledge on his ability to interpret and communicate Scripture is especially evident in his readings of the “seed parables.” In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Jordan saw that the gospel is not sterile like an inert grain of sand, but rather is full of life and potential. The mustard seed provides a graphic image of the power of the Kingdom of God. Though small and easily overlooked, it will explode with life if given the proper treatment. And a seed, as it sprouts, has enormous power. Jordan told of planting peanuts and watching a single one push back a clod of dirt that weighed many more times than the tender shoot the seed was producing. Just as nothing could stop that seed from sprouting up, nothing can stop the Kingdom of God from growing.

In the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), Jordan explained that the farmer intended to plant “certified seed” – seed guaranteed to have no more than a limited amount of noxious weed. Here is his Cotton Patch translation:

Then [Jesus] laid before them another Comparison: “The God Movement is like a man who planted certified seed in his field. Then after everybody had gone to bed, his enemy came and overplanted the wheat with zizania. When it all came up and started to grow, the zizania was clearly present. The farmer’s fieldhands came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you plant certified seed in your field? Then how come it’s got zizania in it?’ He replied, ‘An enemy did that!’ The fieldhands asked, ‘Do you want us to go and chop it out?’ The farmer said, ‘No, because you might dig up the wheat with the zizania. Let them both grow until harvest time. Then I’ll say to the harvest workers, “Gather all the zizania first and pile it up for burning, and then harvest the wheat and put it in my barn.”’”<sup>11</sup>

“No farmer plants the bag of seed until he’s read the tag [on the bag],” Jordan taught.<sup>12</sup> Along came an enemy who over-seeded the original crop with zizania, the very kind of weed the farmer had paid *not* to have in his certified seed. This zizania (which Jordan also called “pigweed”) closely resembles wheat, but it is a weed that inhibits the growth of the true crop. As Jordan goes on to interpret the parable, he describes the “enemy” as members of the Ku Klux Klan, who did their work at night. He and other members of Koinonia Farm knew about the nighttime tactics of the Klan from residing in rural Sumter County, Georgia.

In an unusual reading of another of Jesus’ narratives, Jordan linked the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) to the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-38).<sup>13</sup> In Jordan’s telling, the demoniac *was* the prodigal

son who had wandered to the far country, and the herd of “hogs” that Jesus cast into the sea (Luke 8:33) were the very animals tended by the prodigal son (Luke 15:15-16). Agricultural images and rural dynamics are critical to Jordan’s recounting of these two stories.

For instance, modern readers steeped in Western culture, for whom country-cured, hickory-smoked ham is a delicacy, will have difficulty understanding the moral crisis faced by the prodigal son in this situation. Jordan explained, however, that tending the nearby hogs made the young man lose his mind. This young man had been taught that touching hog meat or “smelling red-eyed gravy” was blasphemy. How much more did getting into the trough and eating “slop” with the hogs present a religious crisis!

A key to Jordan’s telling of the story was the fact that the herd of pigs represented “bootleg hogs” – that is, a herd kept just across the sea from Galilee, which was a “hog dry” country. All the hams, shoulders, fatback, headcheese, and pickled pigs feet represented by this herd was a huge financial investment for the owner. In Jordan’s mind, the herd epitomized religious hypocrisy at its highest form: making profit from the very items forbidden by religion.

### **INTERPRETING A “DRAMATIC PARABLE”**

Jordan’s concept of the virgin birth provides a look into the Georgian’s views on the dramatic parables, as well as insight into how Jordan’s agricultural knowledge contributed to his interpretation of them. In Jordan’s understanding, the virgin birth was the New Testament’s symbolic way of expressing that God “sired” Jesus spiritually. When alluding to the virgin birth, the Gospel writers were not reporting about biological functions from which Jesus was conceived; rather, they were reporting the theological truth that God had come in human form.<sup>14</sup> The virgin birth says to the world that the incarnation has begun.

Jordan’s symbolism in the “siring” image becomes even more apparent when

he applied the concept to the spiritual life of believers. He claimed that God is the father of Jesus Christ in a unique way. However, just as God’s actions in the beginning of Jesus’ life may be spoken of in terms of divine impregnation, the action of God in the initiation of the spiritual life of believers may be described with a similar analogy. Jordan’s scriptural basis for this teaching is found in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, when Jesus proclaims,

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**In an unusual reading of another of Jesus’ narratives, Jordan linked the Parable of the Prodigal Son to the story of the Gerasene demoniac. The demoniac was the prodigal son who had wandered to the far country.**

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“You must be born again” (John 3:3, 7). Jordan noted that the *koine* Greek has a word for “birthing” (*tikto*), but Jesus instead uses the word *gennaio*, which describes the male’s impregnating role in pregnancy. Thus, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “You must be sired from above.”

One may disagree with Jordan’s teaching that the virgin birth is a parable or with his interpretation of this theological concept. What matters here is that the farming image of “siring,” which is familiar to anyone who has bred livestock, is Jordan’s key interpretive point. It is his familiarity with animal husbandry *and* the nuances of the Greek language that make his interpretation possible.

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**The “parables in the patch” were ingeniously crafted by a unique individual with degrees in agricultural science and the *KOINE* Greek of the New Testament, and a genuine love for both farming and Scripture.**

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### CONCLUSION

Clearly, parable study has transitioned since the

time Jordan gave parables the blanket description of “allegories.” Equally apparent is the broadening of our understanding of God, which today could easily include feminine characteristics when describing how God works in the life of believers. We must admit that Clarence Jordan’s approach to interpreting parables reflects his particular time and historical setting.

Yet we should not succumb to the belief that his interpretations of the parables came about simply because he had a mastery of the homespun language of the rural South. He did not simply paraphrase parables in agricultural idioms in order to give them the cotton patch flavor. The “parables in the patch” were ingeniously crafted by a unique individual with degrees in agricultural science and the *koine* Greek of the New Testament, and a genuine love for both farming and Scripture. The “parables in the patch” will not be duplicated easily or soon.

### NOTES

1 For more information on Jordan’s life and work, see Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) and Henlee H. Barnette, *Clarence Jordan: Turning Dreams into Deeds* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1992). Jordan’s Cotton Patch translations are available with new introductions from Smyth & Helwys Publishing ([www.Helwys.com](http://www.Helwys.com)).

2 G. Mcleod Bryan, “Theology in Overalls: The Imprint of Clarence Jordan,” *Sojourners* (December 1979), 11.

3 Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 9.

4 Clarence Jordan, Letter to Maude Jordan, April 1, 1933, in the Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 1, in the Rare Books and Manuscript Department of the University of Georgia Library.

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5 Lee, *Cotton Patch Evidence*, 113 f.

6 Jordan's doctoral dissertation was entitled, "The Meaning of *Nekros* and *Thanatos* (Dead and Death) in the Epistles of Paul." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 1938.

7 *Power from Parables*, No. 1, Compact Disc, Koinonia Farms, Americus, Georgia, n.d.

8 Ibid.

9 Bill Lane Doulos and Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 17.

10 See Clarence Jordan, Letter to Charles Kirtley, June 11, 1969, The Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 8. See also *Power from Parables*, No. 1, near the end of the recording.

11 Matthew 13:24-30 from *Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel: Matthew and John* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2004).

12 *Power from Parables*, No. 1.

13 *Power from Parables*, No. 3.

14 Clarence Jordan, "The Humanity of God," an original manuscript of a lecture delivered at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 2, 1968. The Clarence Jordan Collection, Box 16.

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# Interpreting the Parables' Recent Interpreters

BY SCOTT HUELIN

**The parables of Jesus are tough hermeneutical chestnuts. Many an aspiring interpreter has attempted to crack open their secrets, using some trendy academic method as a sharp tool until its blade becomes dull or its point breaks off. This should not surprise us, as many of Jesus' original hearers found themselves bemused by his parables.**

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**T**he parables of Jesus have proven, over time, to be tough hermeneutical chestnuts. Many an aspiring interpreter has attempted to crack open their secrets, using some trendy academic method as a sharp tool until its blade dulls or its point breaks off. This should not surprise us, as many of Jesus' original hearers found themselves bemused by his parables. While Jesus did not seem too concerned about outsiders' failure to understand (e.g. Mark 4:10-12), he did, on several occasions, grow irritated with his own followers' inability to comprehend his teaching (Mark 4:13).

Three recent books have attempted to discover the interpretive key to Jesus' parables through very different approaches and with varying degrees of success. The oldest of the three, Craig L. Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990, 333 pp., \$22.00), is also the most scholarly. The other two books approach the subject more pastorally: Robert Farrar Capon's *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 531 pp., \$26.00) and Barbara Green's *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables Through Metaphor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997, 164 pp., \$19.95). While Blomberg (an evangelical Protestant and professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary) writes primarily for an academic



audience and only secondarily for an ecclesial one, Capon (an Episcopalian priest) and Green (a Roman Catholic and professor of biblical studies at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union) both clearly write for the educated lay people who are interested in deepening their spirituality through imaginative engagement with the text of the Gospels. While each book has its distinctive strengths, they are best read in the company of one another, or other similar books, as each remedies a significant blindspot of the others.

### **INTERPRETING THE PARABLES' STRUCTURE**

As a work of academic exegesis, Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* is well crafted and very useful. The first half of the book surveys the previous century's scholarship on the parables, both historically (by looking at major interpreters such as Jülicher, Wrede, and Jeremias, as well as their influence) and theoretically (by discussing the strengths and limitations of three major schools of New Testament interpretation: form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary approaches).

Most illuminating in Part One is Chapter 2, where Blomberg takes on a major piece of the scholarly consensus regarding parable interpretation, namely, the conviction that Jesus would never have spoken in allegories. Allegory is a famously difficult rhetorical trope to define. It literally means 'to speak otherwise,' that is, to say one thing by way of saying something else. As an example, we can cite the apostle Paul, who said of the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, "Now this is an allegory [Greek: *allegoreumena*]: these women are two covenants" (Galatians 4:24). Thus Genesis says one thing (the history of God's saving covenants) by way of saying something else (telling the story of a patriarch's attempts to beget a son). Jesus' interpretation of the Parable of the Sower certainly seems to operate in such a way: by way of a story about a wildly profligate farmer who throws his seed everywhere, Jesus (by his own testimony) makes a point about the Kingdom of God.

Many contemporary scholars, influenced by an overly sharp distinction between Hebraic and Hellenic modes of thought which has crippled academic theology for over a century, regard allegorical interpretation as a hand-me-down from Hellenistic Greek culture forced upon an essentially Hebraic (and therefore un-allegorical) Christianity. As a result they regard New Testament references to allegorical interpretation as later impositions by a Hellenized church upon the original teaching of the historical Jesus. However, such a claim would be hard pressed to ignore the Jewishness of the example cited above, in which Paul provides, in the manner of first-century rabbinic interpretation, an allegorical *midrash* upon Genesis 16-21. Blomberg very helpfully demonstrates the limitations of the "parables are never allegories" consensus without ever making the error of going to the other extreme, namely, that parables must always have one and only one meaning. His position is, thankfully, more nuanced and attentive to the

variations among the parabolic statements we have in the Gospels.

When Blomberg actually gets down to the business of interpreting the parables, though, I suspect his ecclesial readers will be disappointed with him. His method is essentially structural or form-critical, dividing the parables according to the number of significant actors, or points of comparison, in each. Three-point parables, such as the Prodigal Son (elder son – father –

younger son) or the Vineyard (day-long laborers – master – last-minute laborers) are treated separately from two- and one-point parables (such as the Wise and Foolish Builders or the Pearl of Great Price, respectively).

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The virtue of his readings of particular parables is his ability to demonstrate how the structure of the vast majority of parables

points to their communicative intent, the point they are trying to get across. However, the method seems exceedingly dry: diagramming the structural elements of the parables does little to bring anyone closer to the Kingdom of God. Blomberg, to his credit, is aware of this limitation to his method, and so he reserves a final chapter for exploring the theological implications of the preceding three exegetical chapters. However, the very fact that the spiritual significance of his interpretation has to be discerned as a secondary operation performed only *after* the exegetical work is done points out the essential sterility of form-critical exegesis. While Blomberg effectively demonstrates that evangelicals can practice various forms of critical interpretation without losing their faith, he also unwittingly testifies to the limits of modern biblical hermeneutics.

### **REINTERPRETING THE PARABLES' MEANING**

Capon's book (which is a compilation of three previously released books: *Parables of the Kingdom*, *Parables of Grace*, and *Parables of Judgment*) exhibits a similarly ambiguous relation to historical-critical method. While he draws upon its results and, in a few notable instances, shares its presuppositions (such as his prejudice against parable as allegory), he only occasionally wields it as an interpretive tool. Rather the methodological center of Capon's exegesis is listening, and specifically listening for what new things God might be saying to the Church today. In this, Capon seems to have achieved a far more satisfying synthesis of dry scholarship and living faith than Blomberg manages, for his kind of listening involves attending

to both the text as ancient artifact and the voice of the God who speaks through this text to its contemporary readers.

In several cases Capon's distinctive approach frees the New Testament text from certain interpretive straitjackets and yields fresh insights. When Capon, for example, points out the ironic humor involved in the enacted parable of the coin in the fish's mouth, he implicitly (and helpfully) challenges the common interpretive assumption that Jesus must always speak with the gravity of a Victorian moralist (pp. 173 ff.). Moreover, Capon's determination to trace Jesus' growing consciousness of his Messiahship and the sacrifice it will require, while open to any number of theological and exegetical objections, takes more seriously than most the implications of Chalcedonian Christology, namely, that Jesus was (and is) fully *human* as well as fully divine. In other words, Capon takes seriously the character of Jesus, his human particularity, as presented in the Gospels, and so he generally tells more compelling stories about Jesus than the average academic interpreter.

However, Capon's hermeneutics of listening does not always live up to its promise. Despite Capon's insistence that he only wants to serve the text and, through it, the One who speaks its meaning, his distinctive interpretive hobbyhorses often leave readers with a sense of having suffered from a bait-and-switch maneuver. In his attempt to listen afresh, Capon frequently introduces foreign or anachronistic elements into his exegesis. In what might be the most notorious example, he associates the field bought by the man who found the precious pearl (Matthew 13:44-46) with the slightly archaic colloquialism 'buying the farm' as a euphemism for death. On this reading, God hides the mystery of the kingdom in the world at its creation (here he is thinking of Colossians 3:3), and that mystery is only fully revealed to us — to *all* of us, believer and unbeliever alike — at our deaths (p. 117)!

Here Capon's interpretation strains the limits of credulity not only because of its manifestly ahistorical contextualization but also because it demonstrates Capon's overarching goal in interpreting the parables: to exclude *a priori* any interpretation of any particular parable that would assume or produce a division between insiders and outsiders. Capon's vision is of a God whose grace is so abundant that no one need fear missing it, and that conviction creates the problem that the whole three-book structure seeks to solve: how to read the parables of judgment *as* parables of grace, and so to come closer to understanding and experiencing the kingdom now. But in order to read the parables of judgment as parables of grace, Capon must take them as an ironic sop tossed to disciples and persecutors alike in order to reveal to them their bloodthirstiness and fondness for exclusion.

While Capon is to be commended for his fresh examination of the parables and his clear desire to restore them to their usefulness for cultivating Christian spirituality, his faithfulness to the content of the Gospels remains highly questionable. His struggle is the inverse of Blomberg's, who pre-

ferred (at least in fact, if not in theory) the details of the parables to their significance.

### **REINTERPRETING OURSELVES THROUGH THE PARABLES**

Barbara Green's book provides hope for a rapprochement between the two. Her book, unlike Capon's, is replete with footnotes referring to important academic interpretations of the relevant texts. She takes quite seriously

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the notion that Scripture has a content that ought not to be ignored. And yet her method is, in one sense, rather ahistorical: she contextualizes the parables by placing them alongside the Psalms. The purpose of this move is not to claim some sort of literary dependence (though one certainly could), but rather to point to the fact that the Psalms, as the poetry and hymnody of both Israel and the

Church, provide a resonant manifold for Jesus' perplexing pronouncements. In other words, the Psalms provide a shared context of interpretation for both Jesus' first-century hearers and his contemporary followers.

This phenomenon, moreover, suggests that the parables, like the Psalms, aim at guiding us in self-understanding as much (or more than) the understanding of the text itself. Consequently the chapters, which pair metaphors common to both the Psalms and the Gospels, are less exegetical than they are exploratory and prayerful. None of the chapters provides a definitive interpretation of any one metaphor or parable; she is even willing to question whether we ought to consider the prodigal's father's behavior commendable, much less whether he represents God the Father (p. 50). But her point is not to undermine the notion that Scripture has a meaning; it is rather to ensure that we take advantage of Scripture's power, under the influence of the Spirit and aided by practices of spiritual reading, to reframe our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Green's commentary stands in a long tradition of contemplative prayer and of exegesis as a means of prayer (the predominant practice of the ancient and medieval church), but it stands in stark contrast to the kind of sterile, methodical works produced by Blomberg and countless other academic interpreters in the wake of modernity. At the same time, Green's emphasis on reinterpreting oneself in light of Scripture and God's gracious activity through it avoids Capon's eisegetical tendencies (i.e., to read his

own ideas into the text), because the goal now becomes reading the self in light of the text rather than reading the text in light of the self and its concerns. Whereas Capon sought to reread his universalism into Scripture, Green seeks to reread herself (and to aid us in rereading ourselves) in light of the Gospels and the Psalms.

Green's wonderful little book is a great reminder to the Church that Scripture is not only a means of truth but is also a means of grace. Perhaps, then, the chestnut that is most difficult to crack is not Jesus' perplexing sayings but rather the soul of the interpreter who struggles to make them reveal their mysteries. If so, then the best method would seem to be the opening of oneself to Jesus' words, rather than the other way around.

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