



Introduction to the Theme

Just for Life! Experiencing the parables of Jesus

When many people think of the parables, they probably think of them in terms of the old definition, “An earthly story with a heavenly message.” Though partly accurate as a way of describing Jesus’ earthly accounts of growing seeds, mustard plants, sheep, and vineyards, such a perspective fails to recognize the unheavenly controversy that his parables have often generated.

For most of church history, the parables were treated as allegories, and the key was finding the correct equivalencies between elements of the parable and its spiritual counterparts. The New Testament itself shows how the allegorical process works (for example, the “Sower and the Seed” parable is provided with an allegorical interpretation), and it could initiate a productive theological reflection that was useful in preaching and teaching. The problem, however, is that such an approach often allowed for one’s theology to shape—or distort—the interpretation rather than let an engagement with the text shape one’s theology. The allegorist is also faced with the difficulty of making some difficult or uncomfortable identifications, such as explaining how God is the unjust judge in the parable or is a harsh king who un-forgives what he previously had forgiven.

In response to such problems, scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century began to promote a view of the parables that focused on the overall thrust or *point* of the parable. It was a helpful approach in that it allowed us to get past

troubling details of the parables and see instead the parable as a whole. Its strength, however, in providing a clear instructional point also turned out to be its biggest weakness. First, if it is crucial to identify the parable’s point, there arose the new challenge of reconciling the variety of points different scholars discerned in any given parable. If the parables were intended to be an effective teaching strategy by Jesus, they were proving to be spectacularly unsuccessful. Second, the kind of points that were being discerned were, for the most part, basically conventional wisdom or moralisms, statements like “small beginnings lead to great endings” or “everyone is our neighbor, and we should love them.” If that is all Jesus really intended, why did he not just say so? Why bother with a parable that only seemed to confuse most people? Even more problematic, as David Buttrick has observed, is that if these suitable-for-framing aphorisms were the heart of Jesus’ preaching, the only reason to have crucified him was to end the boredom of it all!¹

Within the last few decades, therefore, Jesus’ parables have been studied as stories with the potential of multiple meanings whose goal is to engage the reader/hearer in considering the world in a different way, in God’s way. As a working definition of a parable, I offer the following:

Parables function as metaphors challenging or inviting the audience into a new or deeper experience of God’s dominion, a dominion identified with those who are the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the lifeless.²

First, I emphasize the metaphorical character of the parables, by which I mean we take seriously the process of putting the mundane details of the parable alongside the more significant realities of the dominion of God. How does this story, which talks about commonplaces we



understand, relate to the mysteries of God's dominion? We are not seeking allegorical equivalencies but enlightening correspondences.

Next, I highlight the experiential nature of the parables. We are invited into the parable not simply to gain more information, but to have our assumptions challenged and perhaps even our hearts transformed. The parables intend to do something to us, to elicit reaction, and to motivate response. The parables can be, therefore, the kind of story that might make some people so disturbed and angry that they might even want to crucify the one who tells such stories.

Also note that Jesus' parables are not just quaint, proverbial stories reflecting the wisdom of the ages. They are not just clever literary devices. The parables might mean a number of things, but they do not just mean anything. They are in some way revelatory pronouncements about the dominion of God.³ For Christians, therefore, these parables exert truth claims upon us. We believe that what God was doing from creation and through all of ancient Israel's history, and what God was doing in and through Jesus, is consistent with the message that Jesus expressed in his parables. The parables are, therefore, a proclamation of the Gospel even before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ occurs, but we might also expect that they will anticipate such an unexpected and scandalous turn of events.

Finally, this unexpected and scandalous nature of Jesus' ministry begins to make some sense when we appreciate his parables' focus on the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the lifeless. I am not trying to be clever with the alliteration in this list, but I am trying to draw attention to that which usually gets overlooked. It seems to be our (flawed) human nature to be enamored with the strong, the powerful, the beautiful, and the glorious. The parables, however, force us to adopt a different perspective, one that recognizes the persuasive persistence that arises out of that which is lowly instead of the power that entraps us coming down from above. Once we start to experience such a way of viewing life, it profoundly shapes everything we say and think and do, not least of which is the way we understand and practice the justice of God in our daily lives.

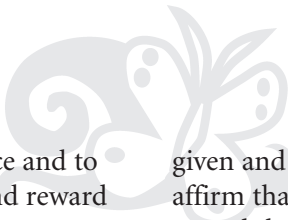
The parables of Jesus and the justice of God

How can the parables of Jesus help us to understand the justice of God? We need to consider what we mean when we talk about justice.⁴ I suspect that most people think about justice in terms of fairness and deserved rewards or punishments. If so, the clearest instance of such an understanding of justice in the New Testament is in Acts 28:4 when the people of Malta speculate about Paul after he has survived a shipwreck on their shores only to be bitten by a deadly viper. "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live."

Such a view only captures the retributive character of justice. Retributive justice is focused on compensating for unjust, wrongful actions and how good and bad can be balanced out. We can often tell we are working with it when we can substitute the word "judgment" for it. So, for example, we see this retributive justice at work when we hear the widow cry to the judge, "Grant me justice!" (Luke 18:3) by which we understand her to mean, "Grant a judgment in my favor." The Bible, including the parables, regularly talks about "judgment," but that is not going to be the focus of this study. People seem to "get" this sense of justice/judgment naturally without having to study it at all. From childhood we have a strong sense of fairness and the need to reward good performance and punish bad behavior.

In contrast to retributive justice, this study focuses more on the practice of distributive justice. Abstractly, this kind of justice involves acting impartially and fairly and doing not only what is legal but what is good. If retributive justice is usually backward-looking, trying to right past wrongs, distributive justice tends to be more forward looking, trying to discern what is the right thing to do. What might such justice look like? The nineteenth-century British statesman Benjamin Disraeli once said that "justice is truth in action,"⁵ and that certainly can be correct, but from a biblical perspective, it might be better to say that justice is love and mercy in action.

Yet here is where we run into situations when the demands of justice seem to conflict with the desire to show compassion. The easiest way out



is to fall back on laws that define justice and to operate out of that sense of fairness and reward and punishment with which we are so accustomed. In the world envisioned by Jesus' parables, however, we are to experience how God's justice is expressed as love, a love that is willing even to assume roles that are usually regarded as weak or even shameful. In the parables, we see how the justice of God is at work in justifying the last, lost, least, little, and lifeless.

So it is that one Greek word can be translated as "justice," "judgment," or "justification" depending on the context.⁶ In all instances, it may be argued that we are still interested in making sure that people get what they deserve. The real issue then becomes the basis on which people are regarded to be deserving. Is it based on merit (which itself can be defined in a variety of ways)? Apparently three-quarters of all adult Americans think along such lines, since they believe that the Bible says that God helps those who help themselves.⁷ Is it based on need? The parables reject a merit-based justice and insist on a needs-based one. From a perspective of material goods, this is good news to the poor because it means it is a matter of justice to make sure they get the daily bread they need. From God's perspective, the parables help us see that everyone needs the justice of God that graciously and compassionately justifies sinners. Of course, this message is only good news to those who count themselves among the last, lost, least, little, and dead. It is good news to those who realize they cannot do anything for themselves.

So is justice only something done to us, or is it also something we do? My seminary professor, Gerhard Forde, used to emphasize, "There is nothing you can do." Then he would pause to let that recognition fully sink in and to stress the importance of the sequence of that statement followed by what he was about to say. "Now, what are you going to do?"⁸ The parables we are going to study bring us to the point of that pause, but they also do a good job of driving us to the follow-up question, "Now, what are we going to do?" It is not bad to close with that question and let it linger, but for clarity's sake here, we can acknowledge that the answer is twofold. First, we confess that indeed we can do nothing. God in Christ has done everything necessary for our justification. Second, we, as for-

given and transformed children of God, can affirm that we want to do everything possible to spread that justice of God throughout the world.

Daily themes

Day 1: Grant Me Justice!

The unjust judge and the widow

This week, focusing on justice begins improbably with a parable that highlights an unjust judge. It is a good choice, however, because it allows us to see that the parables do not work well as simple allegory (God as an unjust judge?), nor just as providing a single point ("Pray without ceasing!"), but instead it offers a startling experience of the realization of God's persistence in bringing about justice. The parable drives us to the confession that we are the unjust ones even as it assures us that God's justice will prevail in leading us into acting justly. That may not be good news to everyone, and it also raises the issue of how just we really want God to be, but it also sets the stage in getting us to see the world from God's perspective.

Day 2: It's Not Fair!

The laborers in the vineyard

Most people probably function with a strong sense of *fairness*, that people should be rewarded for their efforts and have some kind of consequences for their errors. This parable not only challenges such an assumption, but it asserts that such blatant unfairness is in fact the justice of God at work in the world. It is, however, not a matter of simply being unfair but a matter of being just for life's sake. At the end of the day, the parable highlights the graciousness of God as the one who creates true justice and provides us with a glimpse of a truly just reality where equality and "daily bread" for everyone are the norm.

Day 3: Good for Business!

The rich man and his manager

Here is another parable that features a scoundrel who seems to be acting unjustly, and yet he ends up being commended. Where is the justice in the parable? This parable revolves around our preconceptions of what we understand the busi-



ness of the rich man to be. Is he all about accumulating as much money as possible? If so, we all are in trouble. If, however, the rich man is in the “business of forgiveness,” then we are presented with the realization that God’s justice indeed has more to do with forgiveness than with judgment, and we as managers of God’s goodness are likewise called to be faithful in forgiving.

Day 4: For the Birds!

The mustard seed

By this point in the study of the parables, we are starting to expect the unexpected ways that God’s dominion is experienced among us. This parable of the mustard seed provides one of the most dramatic contrasts between the way that the dominions of the world impose their will and the way that the dominion of God grows into being among us. We look for symbols of power, and what the parable portrays instead is the mighty (?) mustard seed. What tree is more ignoble than a mustard tree? It is Jesus’ cross, and when we too are marked with the cross of Christ, it is a confession that the dominion and justice of God will mark our lives as well.

Day 5: What a Loser!

The Pharisee and the tax collector

The scene is somewhat absurd: an honorable, law-observing Pharisee and a despised, money-grubbing tax collector praying within view of each other in the temple. How will the justice of God be experienced between these two? By now, on the last day of this study, we hopefully are ready and even grateful to see God acting in surprising ways. It turns out that the good news is not about being less self-righteous than Pharisees. The good news is not about being more humble than tax collectors. The good news is that the justice of God is what justifies sinners. Whether we stand with the Pharisee and despise sinners or stand as an onlooker critical of the Pharisee’s self-righteousness, in either case, we can give thanks for the justice of God!

Additional resources

Capon, Robert Farrar. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002. You may not always agree with Capon, but you will always be encouraged to think about the parables anew.

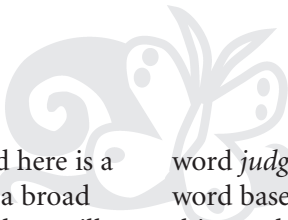
Gowler, David B. *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* New York: Paulist Press, 2000. An excellent introduction to the study of the parables, including a historical overview as well as more recent approaches.

Hultgren, Arland J. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000. This provides an encyclopedic approach to every parable. This is the place to start to get background information about any particular parable.

www.gettysburgseminary.org/mhoffman/parables/resources.htm. A useful Web site for collecting links to resources on the Internet pertaining to the parables.

Endnotes

1. David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 16.
2. My concluding alliterative series is partially in debt to Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 205.
3. In the Greek, Jesus regularly likens his parables to the *basileia tou theou*, which usually, including in the NRSV, gets translated as the “kingdom of God.” I prefer to translate this phrase as the “dominion of God,” not only because it is a more inclusive term, but also because I suspect most people today upon hearing “kingdom” either associate it with something like the British monarchy or Disney’s Magic Kingdom®. When Jesus talks about *basileia*, he is talking about the realm and reign of the powers that rule one’s life, and in Jesus’ time, the inescapable dominion was exerted by the Roman Empire. The controversial nature of Jesus’ parables, then, is readily experienced if one keeps in mind the contrast between the apparent dominion of Rome and the proclaimed dominion of God.



4. The discussion of justice provided here is a greatly simplified summary of what is a broad and complex topic. For a more detailed yet still concise description, see Michelle Maiese, “Types of Justice” in *Beyond Intractability*, Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, eds. (Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder). [Posted: July 2003.] Online at www.beyondintractability.org/essay/types_of_justice. Follow the links from there to additional resources.

5. Cited March 3, 2007. Online at www.bartleby.com/100/424.7.html.

6. The Greek word root is *dik-*, and it is also regularly translated with words related to “righteous.” From a biblical perspective, true righteousness is true justice. (Note how either “justice” or “righteousness” might be used in a passage like Romans 3:5.) When the NRSV uses the

word *judgment*, it is most often translating a word based on the Greek verbal root *krin*, but this word is often associated with *dik-* words to talk about righteous or just judgments.

7. This statistic is from the Barna Research Group and cited in George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21st Century* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 189.

8. From my class notes at Luther (Northwestern) Theological Seminary, April 1979.