



3

Parables of Reversal

NOTES TO THE LEADER

In dealing with the parables, we are addressing not only very important issues but some sensitive ones as well. Many of Jesus' parables are disturbing; the Parables of Reversal are among the most disturbing. Often they subvert our world view and cause us to question some of our most basic assumptions. Many of us assume, for example, that the wealthy and privileged are the ones who are supposed to be at an elaborate banquet. It is a shock, therefore, when Jesus tells a story in which the elite are not at the feast, but the poor, the crippled, and beggars take their place, enjoying the opulent meal.

I encourage you to bring out the shocking aspects of the parables. We sometimes tend to make Jesus' words easier than they are—to smooth out the offenses we find there or to explain away the difficult challenges Christ puts before us. When I'm leading a group through a discussion of the parables, especially these parables, I try not to allow their impact to be weakened. It seems to me if the parable would have offended the hearers in Jesus' day we should help the group see, and feel, its offense for us today.

Many people understand the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, to be a story about being nice to other people. Good Samaritan Awards are given to people who have been good neighbors. As you explore this parable in more depth, try to help the group see the difficulty in hearing Jesus' words. Encourage participants to see beyond helping a

neighbor to dealing with someone who is a despised enemy. Ask how they can relate this story to their own lives. To our world situation.

As we look more carefully at this parable we find another twist—people hearing this story would identify with the person being helped. He doesn't help his enemy, but has to receive help from the one who is his enemy. Doesn't that make the parable even more difficult to hear and respond to? In my experience with leading discussions on the parables I have found that people often try to make Jesus' parables more palatable. We try to get the parables to fit with our understanding of the world, rather than allow them to redefine our world.

If you're like most of us who study the parables, you will find it difficult at times not to allegorize them. In some cases I think it's because we heard allegorical explanations for the parables when we were younger, and automatically refer back to those familiar interpretations. As a leader it will be helpful if you check yourself to see whether you are making the one-to-one alignments of allegorization. When we interpret the parable's story as a whole, we do far better at reaching its meaning than if we try to break it down and interpret its characters and events separately. Also try to keep raising the question of allegorization to the whole group. At least help the participants be aware of when they are allegorizing a parable. Members of the group can be helpful to each other by raising questions when they feel an interpretation is allegorizing. Encourage that kind of awareness in the group throughout the session and study.

Sometimes when groups are discussing the parable of the Unmerciful Servant a difficult question arises. Note that the introduction to this story indicates it is told in response to Peter's question about how often we must forgive someone else. Jesus' answer is seventy times seven. What sometimes troubles people is that the parable which follows seems to refute Jesus' answer. In the story the king doesn't even forgive the unmerciful servant twice. The first time the servant fails, not only does the king revoke his forgiveness, but he sentences him to endless torture.

It may be that the introduction to this parable was not originally related to it. The stories that Jesus told apparently circulated for several years before they were written down. Often when the authors of the gospels included a story they tried to put it in context by providing introductory remarks. Sometimes those introductions don't fit with the message

of the story very well. The story of the Unmerciful Servant is not about how many times we should forgive, but about the relationship between having been forgiven and forgiving others. Forgiving many times is not part of the parable.

If a question about this issue comes up during your group discussion, don't feel that you need to solve it. This is a good opportunity to open discussion to the whole group and ask for their input. Perhaps a number of different interpretations will emerge. It is an excellent opportunity to raise the question, "Are there circumstances when we shouldn't forgive even a second time?"

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Define "neighbor" for themselves, using the parable of the Good Samaritan as their guide.
2. Briefly explain the difference between a parable and an allegory.
3. Describe the importance of forgiveness in the Christian life and relate it to God's forgiveness of us.
4. Cite several examples of how Jesus' teaching reverses, or upsets, our accepted ways of thinking.

Resources You May Need

Copies of the opening prayer

Sheet of newsprint with the heading, "Good Samaritan"

Sheets of newsprint labeled, "Injured Victim," "Priest," "Levite," and "Samaritan"

Newsprint with questions for the characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan

Copies of Worksheet 3A, "An Example of Allegorization"

Copies of Worksheet 3B, "Forgiveness"

Newsprint with questions concerning the parable of the Great Feast

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Open the class with prayer or call on the person who volunteered to do so at the last session.

or

Ask the group to join in praying the following unison prayer:

God, as we gather in your name we ask your Spirit to be present with us. Touch our lives, spark our minds, open us to hear your word, and give us courage to act on what we know. We pray this in the name of Christ, our Lord, who told us stories that can change our lives. Amen.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Write “Good Samaritan” on newsprint in front of the group. Ask participants to suggest what the parable is about in one sentence or less. These statements don’t need to be ones the participants themselves accept, but can be interpretations they have heard from others—perhaps in a Sunday School class, a sermon, their own reading, or popular culture. List these summary statements on the newsprint.

Discuss what these statements have in common and how they differ. Invite participants to review the parable in Luke 10:25-37. Do any of these understandings not fit with the actual story Jesus told?

and/or

Divide the group into four smaller groups of relatively equal size. (If it is a large group make eight groups, but in any case there should not be more than six people in each group.) Assign one of the characters in this parable to each group—Injured Victim, Priest, Levite, Samaritan. (For large groups, two sub-groups can take each character).

Give each group a sheet of newsprint with the name of its character. Ask them to place themselves in the shoes of their character and have a narrator in the group read the story aloud. How do they feel? What do they say to themselves? What emotions are they experiencing? Why do they respond as they do? (Write these questions on newsprint and post them at the front of the room so that everyone will have the opportunity to see them.)

As part of their discussion the groups may want to review the material in the *Resource Book* related to their characters. Ask one member of each group to take notes on their responses to the questions. After about ten minutes have these recorders summarize for the whole group what they noted.

and/or

In small groups, either the ones from the previous activity or newly selected ones, discuss the three paragraphs below. Either read them aloud for the small groups or provide copies for each group.

- If the parable of the Good Samaritan were a simple moral tale about being generous and helping other people, a Jewish lay person could have been the third person to come down the road. He could have offered his help, when the religious leaders had passed by on the other side. How is the meaning of this parable changed by having the third person be a Samaritan?
- If this parable were only about loving our enemies, it could have been about a Jew who stops and generously responds to the suffering of a beaten Samaritan, but it is a Samaritan who lavishly helps a Jew. How would you respond to receiving such extravagant help from your enemy? Is it sometimes easier to offer help to someone—even an enemy—than to accept it? Why?
- The parable of the Good Samaritan is told in response to a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" Attempt to arrive at a group consensus on a definition of "neighbor" in light of this parable. How does this affect our lives as Christians? What does it say about the reign of God?

Bring the groups together and invite participants to share their responses to the questions in each paragraph.

2. Hand out Worksheet 3A, "An Example of Allegorization." Ask the participants to read through St. Augustine's interpretation. Then ask the group to discuss how this allegorization of the parable limits its interpretation. How does this one-to-one correlation narrow our understanding of what Jesus is trying to say to us?

Now invite group members to read through the parable of the Good Samaritan, trying not to think that any of the characters or events stand for or represent anything other than who they are in the story. Then ask the group: Can we still draw meaning from the story? Which method of interpretation do you find more helpful in discovering the importance of this parable? Which has more impact on your faith? Why?

and/or

For an example of an allegory in the Old Testament, ask the group to turn to Ezekiel 17:1-10. Read through this allegory, asking the group to listen carefully to the style of the writing. As the allegory is read encourage the participants to ask themselves: (a) Is this a story? That is, does it have a story line? Characters? Action? Development? (b) Could this actually have happened? (c) How is the style of Ezekiel's story different from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? (Which seems more natural, or less strained?) In what ways does this demonstrate the difference between an allegory and a parable?

and

Introduce the person you recruited at the last session to make a presentation on Ezekiel, or make the report yourself. On newsprint note the meanings of each of the figures of this allegory (e.g. the eagle = Nebuchadnezzar; the top of the cedar = the house of David, etc.) Point out the one-to-one parallels between items in the allegory and what they relate to in the hearers' world.

Now ask the group to summarize the message of Ezekiel 17:1-10 without any reference to the images contained in this allegory. Can the message of this story be communicated with the same impact without using the imagery? Could the message of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan be communicated with the same impact without the story and its images?

3. Distribute copies of Worksheet 3B, "Forgiveness," to the group. This activity is based on the story of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18:23-35. Invite members of the group to review the commentary on this parable on pages 33-35 of the *Resource Book*.

Ask participants to write in the first column of the worksheet things for which they need to be forgiven by God. In the second column they are to list grievances for which they need to forgive someone else. In the third column ask them to record items for which they need to be forgiven by someone else.

Tell the members of the group to reflect silently on the information they have listed in each column. How do the items in column one compare with those in column two? Now compare columns two and three. Then ask: What relationship

is there between God's forgiveness of us and our need to forgive others? Do you accept the statement that we will not be forgiven if we do not forgive others?

Note: This is a personal experience, so determine beforehand if you feel the group is prepared to do this kind of intimate reflection. The participants should clearly understand that they will not be asked to share any of the information on these sheets unless they want to.

and/or

If you feel the biblical knowledge of the participants is adequate, ask the members of the group to recall times in Jesus' ministry when, through his words or actions, he demonstrated a reversal of accepted standards. These are, in a sense, "lived parables." In addition to telling Parables of Reversal, Jesus acted in ways that called into question the traditional values of his culture. An example of this would be the poor widow's offering found in Mark 12: 41-44 and Luke 21:1-4. What was considered insignificant was raised up by Jesus as extremely valuable—more valuable than the significant offerings given by those who could easily afford it. List these "lived parables" on newsprint or a blackboard, and invite the participants to comment on them. In what ways are they similar to the parables Jesus told? Which of these events could be told in story form as a parable? In what ways do they differ from Jesus' spoken parables?

EXTENDED SESSION

4. Discuss the following with the group as a whole: Some scholars disagree with Dr. Bailey's interpretation of the parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:16-24), indicating that the excuses the people give for not being able to come to the banquet can be understood as legitimate. Invite participants to turn to pages 35-38 in the *Resource Book*. What would the meaning of the parable be if we assume the reasons for the guests inability to come are reasonable and important? How does this change our understanding of the parable? What does it say about our values if God's reign is even more important than our most crucial commitments?

or

Separate the group into two sub-groups of approximately the same size. Ask the first group to reread the parable of the Great Feast, hearing it from the perspective

of those who were originally invited to the banquet (the landowners, wealthy, and prestigious people of Jesus' day). Ask the second group to reread the parable, hearing it from the perspective of those who end up at the banquet (the poor, lame, blind, and rejected). Have each group discuss how they feel about the story using the following questions (write these questions on a sheet of newsprint and post it at the front of the room).

- Is this story good news or bad news for you? Why?
- How do you feel as the story unfolds? What particular parts of the parable affect you the most?
- Provide one word for how this parable makes you feel (for example, angry.)

Call the groups together and invite persons from both groups to share their responses to the three questions. Continue the discussion with the following questions.

- Those who are invited do not come to the banquet and are replaced by others—an unexpected group—who do come. How much does it matter whether the reasons the first group gave for not coming were reasonable or not?
- What groups in Jesus' day might have identified with the first group who were invited but did not go to the feast? What groups might have identified with the second group who went in their places? What groups today might identify with each of those two groups?

CLOSING

1. Ask the group for any prayer concerns they have—either for themselves or for friends and relatives—which they would like to include in the closing prayer. Note the names of those mentioned and include them by name in the closing prayer.

or

Lead the group in a bidding prayer, suggesting they pray silently expressing thanks to God for the forgiveness God has granted us, asking for forgiveness in specific areas of life, praying for the ability to forgive those who are difficult to forgive, praying for specific persons whom we need to treat as neighbors, and celebrating God's love and acceptance of us.

Looking ahead

1. Ask one member of the group to prepare a brief definition of “connotations,” using the material in Session Four of the *Resource Book* and a dictionary. This report will be part of Setting the Stage.
2. Ask for a volunteer to lead the opening prayer at the next session.

Worksheet 3A

An Example of Allegorization

An example of how allegorizing limits the understanding of a parable is seen in St. Augustine's allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Turn again to Luke 10:29-37. Here is Augustine's interpretation of the story, making it into an allegory rather than a parable:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels, who stripped him, namely, of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by his name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers returning to the heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul)...¹

Augustine continues his detailed explanation, but this excerpt gives a sense of how he has allegorized the parable.

¹ C.H.Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961) pp. 1-2.

Worksheet 3B

F O R G I V E N E S S		
THE NEED TO BE FORGIVEN BY GOD	THE NEED TO FORGIVE SOMEONE ELSE	THE NEED TO BE FORGIVEN BY SOMEONE ELSE

