

3

Summary

Many of the parables Jesus told represent a drastic reversal of accepted values and practices. In these stories we see the good as bad and the bad as good. The ins are out and the outs are in; the accepted are rejected and the rejected are accepted. These stories of Jesus turn our world upside down.

As we explore these parables of reversal we will look at one of the most important ways Jesus' parables have been misinterpreted. It seems we have a natural inclination to allegorize these stories, to line up one-for-one the events and characters of the stories with related aspects of our world. We will discuss why allegorizing hinders our ability to find the real depth of a parable.

Basic Bible References

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 18:23-35

Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24

Word List

Samaritan

Levite

Allegory



3

Parables of Reversal

Reversals

In the film *Trading Places* the character played by Eddie Murphy is a down-and-out street person. When he attempts to enter an exclusive club and is stopped, two of the wealthy tycoons there decide to use him for an experiment. They make a bet about whether this street person can be successful if given all the opportunities they have. At the same time they arrange to have one of their young colleagues falsely arrested for being with a prostitute. They have him stripped of all his privileges and credit to see if he will fail without these benefits.

Through the course of the movie Murphy's character becomes successful as he, the falsely arrested colleague, and the prostitute outfox the businessmen who have used them. Murphy's character goes from failure to success, while the wealthy tycoons fall from great success to miserable failure.

While not the same kind of stories, many of Jesus' parables involve reversals. In them Jesus is turning our world on its head. In the parables of reversal Jesus makes us look at and question our accepted ways of acting.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN ***Luke 10:25-37***

Commentary

An example story of extravagant compassion, the parable of the Good Samaritan emerges in response to two questions a lawyer asks Jesus. The lawyer first asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Later he asks the follow-up question, “Who is my neighbor?” The introduction to the parable, which contains this dialogue, is similar to passages found in both of the other synoptic Gospels (see Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34). While the questions are somewhat different in Matthew and Mark, both Gospels contain the double commandment about loving God and neighbor.

The lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” was an open question. Those who heard it would have different understandings of who fit that category. Almost everyone would have agreed that a fellow citizen was to be treated with the kindness afforded a neighbor. Even the law in Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” implies that the neighbor is a fellow citizen.

The question was more about who could be excluded from the category of neighbor. Many of the Pharisees, who were religious leaders of the day, felt that non-Pharisees could be left out. One rabbinical rule stated that heretics, renegades, and informers should be thrown in the ditch and left there. It was generally agreed that a person could exclude personal enemies from the category of neighbor (see Matthew 5:43.) The lawyer seems to be asking about the limits of caring—whom can I exclude? In response, Jesus tells this parable. Understanding certain elements of the parable, especially the characters and setting involved, will help us interpret and feel its impact.

Priests were officials of the Temple in Jerusalem and were the highest religious leaders in Israel. They were of the upper class and held one of the most privileged positions in their society. Because of their religious function they were forbidden to defile themselves by touching a dead body (see Leviticus 21:1-3). On seeing the wounded man on the road, the priest might have assumed he was dead and therefore avoided him.

The associates of the priests in the Temple were the **Levites**. They were required to keep ritual cleanliness only in the course of their temple duties. If the Levite in this story was traveling

up to Jerusalem to work in the Temple, he was under the requirement not to touch a corpse, but if he was coming down from Jerusalem to Jericho he was not under the same requirement.

Samaritans were people of mixed ethnic and religious background who lived in the central part of Palestine. They were the descendants of marriages between the Israelites and foreign colonists. While they thought of themselves as descendants of Abraham, they were generally considered by Jews to be half breeds and religiously impure.

The **road** descends seventeen miles from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is a dangerous and lonely road with many canyons and crevices that make ideal hiding places for thieves. It winds through an area well known as treacherous.

The Samaritan poured **oil and wine** on the beaten man's wounds. This was the usual treatment. The wine acted as a disinfectant and the oil softened and soothed the wound (see Isaiah 1:6). The two might be mixed together or used separately.

The structure of the parable follows a popular storytelling technique, still used today, in which three parts or three people are involved. (Have you heard the jokes about the priest, the rabbi, and the minister, or the person given three wishes?) After hearing about the priest, then the Levite, the people listening to this story would expect to hear about a Jewish lay person next. It would follow naturally. If Jesus told the story this way it would be a harsh criticism of religious leaders and an example to be generous in caring for others—more caring than the religious professionals.

The Shock of the Story

Instead, Jesus has a Samaritan come down the road. In doing so he sets up extreme opposites. On the one hand we have a most revered servant of God and on the other a person considered a repulsive heretic. The result for the first hearers of this story is shock. The despised outcast is the hero.

Jesus helps us see, hear, and feel the Samaritan's goodness. Not only does this traveler care for his enemy, his compassion is extravagant. Jesus forces his hearers to take a terribly difficult step and say in one breath "Samaritan" and "neighbor"; worse yet, "good Samaritan."

Parables and Allegories

When we were children many of us were taught that a parable is, “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” While that statement may be true in one sense, it can lead us to think of parables as simple, moralistic stories. When we have read carefully some of Jesus’ parables, we begin to see that they are wonderfully profound and offer us much more than a straightforward, moral lesson.

Parables are indirect speech. Jesus doesn’t tell us directly what is important; we have to try to discern it by listening to the story and drawing implications from it. Jesus intentionally used this form of communication, so he apparently intended these messages to be open to interpretation rather than precise, clear, and definite.

One of the ways we limit the full power of the parables is to allegorize them. A parable is not an allegory. It is an extended metaphor which lays its image alongside some aspect of reality and asks us to relate the two. In her well-known poem Emily Dickinson wrote:

Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops at all-⁷

Here Dickinson lays hope alongside the image of a singing bird. By hearing her description of that bird, we discover new understandings about hope. In a similar way Jesus tells a story and asks us to relate it to our faith.

An allegory is different because in it there is a direct one-to-one correlation between the elements of the story and the issues it addresses. For example, in the allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress* the main character, Christian, goes off in search of the Celestial City. On his way he runs into a number of obstacles. Each main character and major circumstance stands for some aspect of Christian living. Frequently the meanings of the characters and places are obvious by their names, as with Mr. Worldly Wiseman who lives in the town of Carnal-Policy.

We come to our understanding of parables in a different way. A parable relates the story itself to our faith, whereas as allegory relates each major element of its story to specific aspects of

⁷ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960) p. 116.

faith. Thus we often find a straining of reality in allegory. An allegory is more like a series of snapshots than a picture.

Does It Mean What It Says?

Another major difference between an allegory and a parable is that the parable means what it says, while the allegory doesn't. When Jesus tells the parable of the Seed Growing Secretly, he means a real seed growing into a plant. The seed doesn't mean something else; it means a seed. The parable as a whole points to a larger meaning beyond itself, but the seed represents only a seed. In an allegory the same is not true. In an allegory, each main character or object stands for or represents something else. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, the Celestial City does not mean a real city but heaven.

In studying the parables try not to say that one element of the parable's story stands for something else. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan don't try to figure out what the Samaritan represents or what the road means. Instead, read the story as a whole, investigate its background, feel the impact of the complete story. Then ask how it speaks to your life—what meaning it has for your world.

Direct Translation?

An allegory also differs from a parable in that an allegory can be translated directly into a statement of its meaning without significant loss, while a parable expresses something that cannot be directly expressed in any other way. We can say in a direct way what *The Pilgrim's Progress* means without referring to the images Bunyan uses. The allegory's meaning can be explained without using the elements of the story. Parables, on the other hand, reveal what cannot be reduced to a simple, direct statement.

THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Matthew 18:23-35

Background Notes

The story of the Unmerciful Servant is another parable of reversal. Its reversal, however, is somewhat different from that of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here it is not "trading

places,” where the accepted are rejected and the rejected are accepted. In this parable the reversal is a reversal of fortune; the one who received a great deal lost it all because of his actions.

The parable proper is introduced when Peter asks Jesus, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Then Jesus begins a story, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king....” He doesn’t mean that the kingdom of heaven is literally like this king, but that we can learn about God’s reign from the narrative which follows. The comparison is not made with the king but with the entire story. Matthew apparently has a preference for this introduction, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...”. While Mark and Luke both have two teachings that begin with this phrase, Matthew has eleven.

Commentary

A servant who owes an enormous debt—10,000 talents—is brought to a king. Jesus specifies a measureless amount of money in this parable. Obviously the servant can’t pay this debt—the figure is astronomical. Ten thousand was the largest number people used in Jesus’ day, and the talent was the highest denomination of money. Thus ten thousand talents represents the largest amount of money imaginable.

Because the servant owes this huge amount, the king orders that he and his family be sold. In spite of his enormous debt, the servant pleads for more time, claiming that he will pay back the full amount. When he gets down on his knees, it is a sign of urgency and desperation. Finally the king not only lifts the order that the family be sold but forgives the servant’s huge debt.

The servant leaves and soon runs into a person who owes him one hundred denarii. This is one millionth of the amount he has just been forgiven. Rather than reflecting the mercy he has received, the servant grabs his fellow servant by the throat and demands to be paid.

The next scene is intentionally similar to the one above. The second servant falls on his knees and pleads with his creditor, using almost the identical words of the first servant. The difference in wording offers a subtle irony. The first servant, for whom it would have been impossible to repay the debt, promised to pay back everything. The second only asks for more time. This second servant’s request is denied, and the man is thrown in jail until his family is able to come up with the money to pay for his release.

When the other servants see what has happened, they go and tell the king. The angry king summons the first servant. He lectures him about showing mercy as a result of the mercy he received, then has him tortured until he pays back the full debt. Some scholars have speculated that the parable's ending reflects more of Matthew's message than of Jesus', since torture appears to be unrepresentative of Jesus' teaching elsewhere. Do you think the parable may have originally ended with a question, such as, "What do you think will happen to this servant?"

The relationship between forgiveness and forgiving is a familiar theme in Matthew. Read Matthew 6:9-15. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer we find, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Then two verses later we read that if we forgive others, God will forgive us. But if we don't forgive others, neither will God forgive us. Is our own forgiveness in question when we fail to pass on the forgiveness we have received? ⁸

Extended Session

THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT FEAST

Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24

Commentary

This parable is found in Matthew and Luke. Because Matthew's version seems to combine elements of another story, we focus our attention on Luke. The parable opens with invitations extended to a great dinner. All the guests, however, decline the invitation. In the place of those who refuse, others are invited whom we would not expect to see at the dinner. At first glance the guests' reasons for declining seem reasonable. To help us better understand the background of this parable we will enlist the help of Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey. He is an excellent New Testament scholar who has the added advantage of having lived in the Middle East for most of his career. He has a firsthand acquaintance with the customs, culture, and people of this area. Much of the material which follows is drawn from Dr. Bailey's work. ⁹

⁸ These additional sentences are not found in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (compare Luke 11:2-4), nor in the similar passage in Mark (see Mark 11:25-26).

⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979) pp. 88-113.

Invitations

In the parable, a great man invited his friends to dinner. Actually he invited them twice. This was customary in Jerusalem in ancient times. The first invitation announced the time of the banquet and determined the number of guests who would be attending. The second invitation came when everything was prepared and the host was ready for the party to begin. The first invitation was important for deciding about the preparation of food. Since meat was expensive, knowing the precise number of guests was critical.

When persons accepted the first invitation they were making a firm commitment to attend. The host prepared the feast based on the guests' commitment to be there. To refuse to come after accepting the invitation was an insult to the host. It would be as if you invited friends to your home for dinner and they agreed to come. When they arrived, you finished the final preparations as all of you indulged in small talk. Finally the meal was ready and you invited your guests to come to the table. At that point they said, "Oh no, we can't stay for dinner. We're going out to buy a new car tonight, and we have to get to the dealer before he closes. Please accept our regrets."

You have a table full of food, and guests who, having given you a weak excuse, backed out of the invitation they had previously accepted. How would you feel?

The Landowner

The man who says he has purchased land offers perhaps the weakest excuse. As Dr. Bailey says, "No one buys a field in the Middle East without knowing every square foot of it like the palm of his hand. The springs, wells, stone walls, trees, paths, and anticipated rainfall are all well-known long before a discussion of the purchase is even begun."¹⁰

With this excuse the guest is asking the host to believe that he bought land, sight unseen, and now has to inspect his property. Dr. Bailey says that the Western equivalent of this excuse would be the suburbanite who reneges on a dinner invitation, claiming that without ever seeing it, he bought a new home over the phone and now has to go out to have a look at it—to see what kind of neighborhood it is in and how structurally sound it is. No one would believe this excuse, let alone accept it as a reason to cancel a dinner invitation. When the guest says, "Please accept my regrets," it seems insincere.

¹⁰ Ibid

A Yoke of Oxen

The second guest says he bought five yoke of oxen and now he is on his way to try them out. In the Middle East a person would not even offer a bid on a pair of oxen if he hadn't already tried plowing with them. What if they were old and weak or couldn't pull as a team? The marketplaces where oxen were sold often were placed near a small field where an interested buyer could try plowing with them.

Bailey says this would be as if a husband called home to say he could not make it for dinner because he just bought five used cars over the phone, and he has to rush down to the used car lot to find how old they are, what models, and if they will start. If the man has paid for these oxen, why the urgent need to go try them out? This excuse is also weak, and would insult the host, despite his expression of regret.

The Groom

The third guest has recently been married but not on this day. Two major parties wouldn't be scheduled on the same day. The groom's answer also violates social customs, since in the Middle East a man doesn't talk about women in a formal setting. In fact, a man will go to extreme measures not to speak in public of the women in his family. This guest's response would be considered a crude break with accepted behavior.

The banquet would normally take place in the late afternoon, so the groom would only be away from his bride for a few hours and then back at her side again by late that night. Presumably the husband knew he was going to get married when he accepted the invitation. What has changed now that he must decline it? To make matters worse, the groom doesn't even offer his regrets to the host. All this would be taken by the host as a crude offense.

The Shock of the Story

Earlier we imagined ourselves as hosts for a dinner where our guests walked out on us at the last minute. One response to that situation might be to say, "Let's take this food to a soup kitchen and offer a banquet to the people there." In a sense this is what the host does, except that he welcomes the poor, lame, and blind into his home for the feast.

In Jesus' day all of the people with these challenges would have been forced to be beggars because of their situations. The shock of the parable comes when we see the people who end up at the banquet. The poor, ostracized, rejected, and hurt are there rather than the privileged elite.

Review the setting for this parable and the people involved (Luke 14:1-15). Just before Jesus tells this story, one of the people sitting at the table with him piously remarks, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" When Jesus is done telling the parable, we wonder if he would feel quite so blessed in the presence of those whom Jesus indicates will be at the banquet.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Memorize the commandment about loving God and neighbor in Luke 10:27.

Research

1. Look up Samaritan in a Bible dictionary. How does the description deepen your understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan?
2. Find the definition of a metaphor in a dictionary or English textbook. How is it different from a simile?
3. Make a list of the key factors that distinguish a parable from an allegory, as discussed in this session.
4. Explore the meaning of other parables of reversal. (The Rich man and Lazarus—Luke 16:19-31; The Pharisee and the Tax Collector—Luke 18:9-14).

Reflection

1. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, substitute two contemporary enemies for the wounded man and the Samaritan. For example, imagine a member of the Ku Klux Klan being helped by an African American, or a militant Protestant being helped by a Catholic in Northern Ireland.
2. In the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, does the torture at the end of the story blur its focus for you? After feeling anger at him for being so unforgiving, do you begin to feel some sympathy for him, now that he faces endless torture? How does this affect your understanding of the parable?