



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 The Contexts of Jesus' Parables
(*Parables*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Interpreting the Parables' Recent Interpreters
(*Parables*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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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.

Prayer

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.
Shed light on our path and lead us by your Spirit,
for without your guidance
we will surely lose our way.
Bless now the hearing of the parables.
Give us ears to hear,
and hearts to respond.
Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Reflection

We should not underestimate the originality of Jesus' parables, David Gowler points out. They have no exact parallels in ancient literature. Yet Jesus did not speak them, and the Gospel writers did not record them, in a cultural vacuum. In his stories we can see both Jewish and Greco-Roman elements.

To illustrate Gowler's point, consider the structure and content of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. (In the companion study guide, "Hazmats or Good Gifts?" we will more fully discuss Jesus' teachings on wealth and possessions in this parable.) The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

- ▶ *is like some Old Testament 'parables.'* The Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture in Jesus' day, uses *parabolê* (literally: "throwing alongside") to translate *mashal*, a more general Hebrew term for an action or saying that draws a comparison. A *mashal* might be a proverbial saying, byword, prophetic figurative oracle, song of derision or taunting, teaching poem, wise saying of the "intellectual elite" (as is Proverbs), or an allegorical fable. Nathan's *mashal* of the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-4) is the closest Old Testament parallel to Jesus' narrative parables. Just as Nathan sidesteps David's defenses to reveal the moral horror of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, so Jesus leads us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves. Luke's artful collage in chapter 16 opens the possibility that with this parable Jesus addresses not only "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (16:14), but also "his disciples" (16:1).
- ▶ *may share "a common narrative tradition" with parables in medieval rabbinic literature.* "The rabbis commonly used parables to deliver sermons in synagogues and study the Torah in the academies," notes Gowler. "In fact, they became convinced that the parable form itself was created for studying the Torah." Because we do



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not know the original contexts of rabbinic parables, it is difficult to connect them with Jesus' stories. Since the rabbinic parables were used to explain Scripture, they tend to be more formulaic and "exceed the Gospel parables in the degree of their explicit interpretation."

- ▶ *is like a Greek fable*, in that it is an invented story that (1) sheds light on aspects of human experience, (2) involves ordinary human characters, (3) illustrates a religious and ethical theme, and (4) has an ironic reversal. Unlike most fables, it does not have a "moral" attached. Elsewhere, "Matthew and Luke tend to add such moralizing features either to the beginning of a parable (Luke 18:1) or the end (Matthew 18:35)."
- ▶ *reflects the worldview of first-century peasants*. Peasants, who submitted in deference to wealthy patrons in return for their support, would assume the rich man in this parable "is evil and deserving of punishment," Gowler suggests. "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). 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."

Thus, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus "partakes in the broader arena of the cultural life of ancient Mediterranean society," Gowler concludes. "If we compare Jesus' parables *only* to other Jewish literature, we ignore the cultural contexts in which this parable was created, told, and heard."

Study Questions

1. Of the many parables told by Jesus, which one or two are most memorable for you? Why? Which of his parables is the most puzzling? Did you answer with the same parable(s)?
2. Do you remember any of Jesus' parables that are similar to a wise saying or proverb-type of *mashal*?
3. What insights into Jesus' parables, especially the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, can we glean by considering each of the four elements of Jewish and Greco-Roman culture that Gowler sketches?
4. Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11, which describes the attitude of heart that those with financial resources should have toward the poor in their land. How would a first-century Jewish listener, who is familiar with this instruction of Scripture, judge the behavior of the rich man in Jesus' parable?
5. After this brief review of the cultural contexts of Jesus' parables, do you think Jesus was more original in his teaching methods, or less, than you did before? Does it make a difference whether Jesus used an uncommon, or even unique, approach to teaching?

Departing Hymn: "Christ's Parables"

The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the study of Jesus' parables through an overview of their Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts.
2. To explore how knowledge of these cultural contexts can enrich our interpretation of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

When it comes to interpreting Jesus' parables, the problem is not that they don't mean anything, but that readers give them such different meanings. Indeed, their "poetic images [yield] not one-dimensional meaning but an expansive suggestiveness or elasticity of meaning," notes Paul Duke. "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" (quoted in *Parables*, p. 61). How can we zero in on the parables' meanings for Jesus, his first disciples, and the early church?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 16:19-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Which parables are most memorable for group members, and which are most puzzling? What Paul Duke calls their "expansive suggestiveness" – the layers of meaning that "invite us to more than one trajectory of reflection, more than one possibility of decision" – make these stories both memorable and puzzling.

The cultural contexts of Jesus' parables can help us unravel their meaning. David Gowler surveys two elements of Jewish context – (1) Jesus and his audience knew the *meshalim* in Scripture, and (2) other rabbis in his day, like those whose teachings were recorded centuries later, may have used parables to explain Scripture. Then he surveys two elements of the Greco-Roman context – (3) the Greek fable and (4) the worldview of first-century peasants – for the parables reach us through Gospels written in Greek and directed to readers in Greco-Roman culture.

Study Questions

1. Kline Snodgrass[†] has compiled the following list of Jesus' parables:
In the Gospel of Mark: *Bridegroom's Guests* (Mk. 2:19-20/Mt. 9:15/Lk. 5:33-39), *Unshrunk Cloth* (Mk. 2:21/Mt. 9:16/Lk. 5:36), *New Wine* (Mk. 2:22/Mt. 9:17/Lk. 5:37-39), *Strong Man Bound* (Mk. 3:22-27/Mt. 12:29-30/Lk. 11:21-23), *Sower* (Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20/Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23/Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15), *Lamp and Measure*

(Mk. 4:26-29/Lk. 8:16-18), *Seed Growing Secretly* (Mk. 4:26-29), *Mustard Seed* (Mk. 4:30-32/Mt. 13:31-32/Lk. 13:18-19), *Wicked Tenants* (Mk. 12:1-12/Mt. 21:33-46/Lk. 20:9-19), *Budding Fig Tree* (Mk. 13:28-32/Mt. 24:32-36/Lk. 21:29-33), and *Watchman* (Mk. 13:34-36/Lk. 12:35-38).

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: *Wise and Foolish Builders* (Mt. 7:24-27/Lk. 6:47-49), *Father and Children's Requests* (Mt. 7:9-11/Lk. 11:11-13), *Two Ways/Doors* (Mt. 7:13-14/Lk. 13:23-27), *Leaven* (Mt. 13:33/Lk. 13:20-21), *Lost Sheep* (Mt. 18:12-14/Lk. 15:1-7), *Wedding Banquet* (Mt. 22:1-14/Lk. 14:15-24), *Thief in the Night* (Mt. 24:42-44/Lk. 12:39-40), *Faithful and Unfaithful Steward* (Mt. 24:45-51/Lk. 12:42-46), and *Talents and Pounds* (Mt. 25:14-30/Lk. 19:11-27).

In Matthew only: *Good and Bad Trees* (7:16-20), *Fishnet* (13:47-50), *Wheat and Tares* (13:24-20, 36-43), *Treasure* (13:44), *Pearl* (13:45-46), *Unmerciful Servant* (18:23-35), *Laborers in the Vineyard* (20:1-16), *Two Sons* (21:28-32), *Wise and Foolish Maidens* (25:1-13), and *Sheep and Goats* (25:31-46).

In Luke only: *Two Debtors* (7:41-50), *Good Samaritan* (10:25-37), *Friend at Midnight* (11:5-8), *Rich Fool* (12:13-21), *Barren Fig Tree* (13:6-9), *Tower Builder* (14:28-30), *Warring King* (14:31-33), *Lost Sheep* (15:1-7), *Lost Coin* (15:8-10), *Prodigal Son* (15:11-32), *Unjust Steward* (16:1-8), *Rich Man and Lazarus* (16:19-31), *Humble Servant* (17:7-10), *Unjust Judge* (18:1-8), and *Pharisee and Tax Collector* (18:9-14).

In John only: *Good Shepherd* (10:1-18; cf. Mt. 18:12-14; Lk. 15:1-7), and *True Vine* (15:1-8).

- Members might mention short parables like *Bridegroom's Guests* (Mt. 9:15), *Unshrunk Cloth* (Mk. 2:21/Mt. 9:16/Lk. 5:36), *New Wine* (Mk. 2:22/Mt. 9:17/Lk. 5:37-39), *Leaven* (Mt. 13:33/Lk. 13:20-21), *Treasure* (Mt. 13:44), or *Pearl* (Mt. 13:45-46). Most of Jesus' parables are longer stories.
- Of the Old Testament *meshalim*, Nathan's story the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-4) is most similar to Jesus' narrative parable; like Nathan, Jesus uses his story to sidestep the defenses of his auditors ("the Pharisees, who were lovers of money," but possibly "his disciples") in order to reveal the darkness in their lives.

Like the later rabbinic parables, Jesus' story "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."

Jesus' parable does not have a moral attached, but it shares other features with Greek fables: (1) it sheds light on aspects of human experience, (2) it involves ordinary human characters, (3) it illustrates a religious and ethical theme, and (4) it features an ironic reversal.

Gowler suggests first-century peasants would readily understand the rich man's condemnation, for he fails to be a responsible patron. Other ancient stories describe the reversal of rewards for rich and poor in the afterlife.

- Deuteronomy 15:7-11 commands that men and women who have adequate resources should "give liberally and be ungrudging" in lending to "anyone in need," even if this is costly because a sabbatical year is approaching when the needy person's debts will be completely forgiven (15:1). Because the rich man ignores Lazarus' suffering at his front door, a first-century Jewish listener might conclude that he is willfully violating God's law.
- The divine inspiration and power in Jesus' instruction does not depend on the uniqueness of his teaching method. Yet the originality of his approach might cause us to wonder, along with his hometown friends, "Where did this man get this wisdom?" (Matthew 13:54).

Departing Hymn

"Christ's Parables" is on pp. 51-53 of Parables. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

† Kline Snodgrass, "Parable," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 595.