



Called to Be a Catechist

PONDERING THE PARABLES

Inspiration and Professional Growth



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INTRODUCTION

The parables are more than simple, short stories that entertain us. Rather, parables are bold challenges that rekindle our understanding of the kingdom of God and the meaning of discipleship.

There is a strong moral imperative streaming through the parables. Jesus told parables not to entertain but to teach and to confront people about their behaviors. He called people to conversion—to a complete transformation of the mind and heart.

While the cultural context of the gospel parables differs from our own, the meaning and importance of their implications are timeless. In this book, we are invited to capture anew the meaning, richness, and beauty of Jesus' parables. This book focuses on the importance of imagination in our lives, in the parables, and in bringing the reality of God's kingdom into our everyday world.

REDISCOVERING *the* PARABLES

FR. FRANCOIS ROSSIER, SM

The parables that Jesus told can be a source of confusion. People wonder why Jesus talked in riddles that often can be difficult to understand.

With so many people confused about some of Jesus' teaching through parables, how does a catechist go about deciphering and explaining the point that the Lord was trying to make? A good starting point for interpreting parables is the origins of the word. The English word *parable* comes from the Latin *parabola*, a word that, in turn, comes from the Greek word *parabole*. In both of these ancient languages, the word means "comparison."

Parables for "Comparison"

As the etymology suggests, a parable usually relies on an image from everyday life to make its point. The comparison to this image can be very short, contained in one verse, such as in the parable of the piece on the new garment in Luke 5:36. In other cases, it can be developed into a complex story, as in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32.

Many parables of Jesus state the comparison right at the beginning. For example, “Jesus said, ‘To what shall we *compare* the kingdom of God?’” (Mark 4:30, all emphases added), and “He proposed another parable to them. ‘The kingdom of heaven is *like*...’” (Matthew 13:31). On the other hand, some parables conclude with the comparison, such as, “*Thus* will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God” (Luke 12:21).

Teachers frequently use comparisons because an illustration is more concrete than a theory, and they help listeners grasp the teacher’s point. Jesus is a rabbi—that is, a teacher. “Tell me, *teacher*,” says Peter to Jesus (Luke 7:40). It is as a teacher that Jesus tells parables. Mark underscores this point when he says, “On another occasion he began to *teach* by the sea” (Mark 4:1), and “he *taught* them at length in parables” (Mark 4:2).

When a lawyer asks, “*Teacher*, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25), Jesus reminds him about the law, the commandment of love: “You shall love the Lord, your God...and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). When the lawyer asks, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), Jesus replies by telling the parable of the good Samaritan. At the end, Jesus asks, “Which of these three, *in your opinion*, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” (Luke 10:36). Wanting to teach the lawyer a particular lesson, Jesus tells the parable here in order to make himself understood. The lawyer gets the point and answers correctly.

Parables for Change

The point of Jesus’ parables is never this simple, however. After the lawyer gives the correct answer, Jesus says to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). In this case, the broader purpose of the parable is to prompt the listener to act, to do something he is not used to doing—in other words, to change his behavior.

In other cases, Jesus tells parables in order to change the minds and hearts of his listeners. For this reason, he tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector “to those who were *convinced of their own* righteousness and despised everyone else” (Luke 18:9). Jesus concludes by saying,

“I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

Jesus does not tell parables simply to educate or delight his listeners, but to produce an effect in them. Like any teaching of Jesus, the purpose of his parables is to transform hearts and minds, to call people to conversion. The parable of the widow and the unjust judge, for instance, begins in a way that discloses this intention explicitly: “Then he told them a parable *about the necessity* for them to pray always without becoming weary” (Luke 18:1). In other parables, Jesus makes this intention explicit by saying “*do likewise*.”

The parables also try to elicit change through warnings and rewards, such as “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). And the call to conversion can happen through a revelation about God, as in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20–27) or in the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10–14), where Jesus again asks his listeners, “What is *your opinion*?”

Here, through these last two parables, Jesus continues to engage his listeners, but he lets them draw the right conclusion for themselves after meditating and reflecting upon these revelations about God. Jesus helps them to conclude that, if God exists in a certain way, then they should respond in a corresponding manner. In all these cases, Jesus the teacher does not want his listeners to remain indifferent to his teaching. To help them to reach the appropriate conclusion, he illustrates his teaching with parables that nudge them in the right direction.

The use of parables by Jesus...is situated in continuity with the Old Testament. Jesus' parables cannot be understood in isolation.

Parables for Revelation

On other occasions, however, the point of the parable is more complex. In these cases, we might look to the parable of the sower in the Gospel of Matthew (13:3–23). It is at the beginning of this parable where we encounter the word parable for the first time in the New Testament (Matthew 13:3). The parable of the sower thus serves as an introduction to parables in the gospels.

After this parable and the three that immediately follow, Matthew explains that parables show how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies, a theme in this evangelist's gospel. Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables because "Isaiah's prophecy is *fulfilled* in them" (Matthew 13:14). Later, Matthew explains further that Jesus' use of prophecy was "to *fulfill* what had been said through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables'" (Matthew 13:35). The use of parables by Jesus, therefore, is situated in continuity with the Old Testament. Jesus' parables cannot be understood in isolation.

The fact that Jesus' parables are presented as fulfilling Old Testament prophecies shows that they have a revelatory function. Quoting Psalm 78:2, Matthew states that, through parables, Jesus "will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation [of the world]" (13:35). Jesus' parables are meant to unveil, not simply illustrate or explain. They are keys that unlock the meaning of God's revelation.

Yet Jesus' listeners must know how to use these keys properly. Otherwise, a parable can become an unsolvable riddle or even a source of confusion that prevents listeners from grasping the meaning of God's revelation. The prophecy of Isaiah 6:9 quoted in Matthew 13:14–15—"You shall indeed hear but not understand"—is thus fulfilled when Jesus speaks in parables, as he himself declares: "This is *why* I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand'" (Matthew 13:13).

More Than Telling

After Mark concludes the parable of the sower (4:3–8) with "Whoever

has ears to hear ought to hear” (Mark 4:9) and recounts a few other parables told by Jesus, he adds, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to *his own disciples he explained everything in private*” (Mark 4:33–34). Although Jesus tells parables to illustrate some teaching or unveil some revelation, the parables must be explained because an example or a comparison that illustrates a theory is pointless without an explanation. Consequently, parables must be taught not just told.

Why would Jesus tell the crowds parables that were unclear or seemed misleading? After all, parables should unveil the meaning of his teaching, not veil it.

For this reason, those entrusted with spreading the Good News—such as catechists—cannot be content with simply telling Jesus’ parables. They have to explain the parables, to unveil the meaning of the parables, to show how the parables relate to Jesus’ teaching. Catechists are teachers, not mere storytellers.

Now, we may ask, why would Jesus tell the crowds parables that were unclear or seemed misleading? After all, parables should unveil the meaning of his teaching, not veil it. They should offer solutions, not become riddles without obvious meaning.

The first reason could be the one just mentioned: Jesus’ parables are not to be considered in isolation. They make sense only in the context of his whole teaching, as well as within the tradition of the church.

The second reason is the oral culture of the time. In those days, very few people could read and write. Parables, like short stories, were easier to memorize than the long speeches of Jesus in the Gospel of John, for instance—the only gospel without parables.

The oral transmission of parables, of course, has ramifications for their interpretation. Because of this mode of transmission, a direct interpersonal relationship exists between the teller and the listener. Both par-

ticipate actively in the transmission of a parable. The teller must be able to entertain the audience and capture the listeners' imaginations. The teller or teacher, therefore, often feels free to modify the parable a little to fit the circumstances. This is part of the game.

Accounting for Variations

This aspect of oral transmission may account for the differences that we find in the way the gospels recount Jesus' parables. An example is the difference between the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) and the parable of the ten gold coins (Luke 19:11–27). In Matthew, the worthy servants receive the same reward, regardless of the amount entrusted to them. But in Luke, the reward is proportionate.

The differences are not simple variations introduced by the authors of the gospels. Jesus himself seems to repeat parables in the same gospel with some variations, as we see in the parables of the buried treasure and of the pearl of great price, in Matthew 13:44–46. It is not mere repetition. The differences or variations convey meaning that we can discern by comparing and contrasting the parables.

You—Teller and Teacher

It is interesting to note that *parable* is not the only word that comes from the Latin noun *parabola*, a word that means “comparison.” So does the word *parol*, which refers to a law given *orally*. Although a parable was originally handed on orally, Jesus' parables come to us today in written form in the Scriptures—“frozen,” so to speak. They may no longer be modified by their tellers and teachers. The Gospel of John—written well after the other gospels, when Jesus' teaching was also being transmitted through texts—contains no parables.

According to biblical tradition, not one word or the slightest variation in Scripture is irrelevant. The differences or variations that we find between similar parables are now part of a sacred text that must be commented upon and accounted for by teachers. In the Jewish tradition, these teachers are called *rabbis*. In our tradition, some are called catechists.

Your Thoughts

1 What is my current understanding of the meaning and role of parables in the New Testament?

2 Is there a particular parable that is meaningful to me? How does the parable help me understand Jesus' message—in the context in which he spoke the parable and in my life today?

Try This

Select one of the parables from the Scriptures referenced in this chapter and use the *lectio divina* form of prayer to contemplate the meaning and impact of this parable for your life.

RESPONDING CREATIVELY *to the* PARABLES

FR. JOSEPH KOZAR, SM

Jesus tells parables because he, himself, is a parable—for Christians, he is the parable of God.

The world of the gospel parable includes two dimensions: our everyday world and the world of God's love. Alongside our everyday, familiar world, parables present the unfamiliar world of the kingdom of God. In fact, the truth of God's kingdom serves as the interpretive context for understanding the gospel parable.

Jesus tells parables because he, himself, is a parable—for Christians, he is *the* parable of God. He does not tell parables merely to entertain or pass on folk wisdom. Rather, he tells parables to confront his hearers.

This confrontation takes place because the person of Jesus tells the parables and because of the content of the parables—which is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Confrontation also occurs because of the role that the reader or listener must take in appropriating and internalizing the message that the parables offer.

Stretching Reality

Parables are “narrative icebergs” whose content lies more beneath the surface than above. In the places where we observe what easily rises to the story level of a parable, we notice cracks in the narrative that open up and stretch reality. These fissures enable us to see in the context of daily life that which is new and unfamiliar. They bring us into contact with the freely given love of God. The indirect nature of the parable structure forces us to puzzle out the new context and new reality of the kingdom as it breaks forth in the narrative.

Parables contain an intermixing of practice and belief. True Christian belief is a process of coming to belief through engaging ordinary life and the hidden presence of God’s kingdom. Christian life attempts to put belief into practice in everyday life. This dynamic is the same dynamic found in the gospel parables. People most able to read parables creatively are those who are already skilled at reading the “parable” of their own lives.

Parables lead us to travel in a certain direction, and we are always in process. We are invited to take a leap of faith not merely with our intellect but with our total being. Our stories, experiences, and commitments resonate with the metaphors and invitations by which parables open up the cracks found on the solid floor of the real world.

One feature of parables is their “normalcy.” Parables work with the realities of everyday life and actions. The problem of interpretation of parables revolves around the way in which real life peers out from them while, metaphorically, it is connected to the kingdom of God. This explicit connection forced recipients of Jesus’ parables to both transmit and interpret them at the same time.

The extravagance and quirkiness of the parables point to the kingdom of God and bring it into focus.