

Bite Size Bible Study

Parables #236

By Lee Logue

I have noticed a section in Kenneth Bailey's book "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes" on Parables. He presents a good explanation of what parables are, and how we should handle them. The following is an edited version of his work along with some of my comments.

In the early centuries parables became a source for *Christian life* (ethics) but not *Christian faith* (theology). It is instructive to note that in the second century Galen, (a 2nd-century Greek physician and philosopher) saw Christians building their *faith* on parables. How did parables lose their status as a source of the *Christian faith*?

Today, Christians see Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world. The New Testament also presents him as the perfect example of love and an effective storyteller for simple folk. But have we thought of him as a serious *theologian*?

Jesus was a *metaphorical* theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like a philosopher.

Theology: Conceptual and Metaphorical

In the Western tradition serious theology has almost always been constructed from ideas held together by logic. In such a world the more intelligent the theologian, the more abstract he or she usually becomes, and the more difficult it is for the average person to understand what is being said. Paul works with ideas *and* metaphors. In the West we have tended to emphasize his concepts and sideline his metaphors. By so doing we have made him fit into our world of conceptual theologians.

In contrast, the popular perception of Jesus is that of a village rustic creating folktales for fishermen and farmers. But when examined with care, his parables are serious theology, and Jesus emerges as an astute theologian. He is, as noted, primarily a *metaphorical* rather than a *conceptual* theologian.

What precisely is a metaphorical theologian? Consider the following. We know that God is Spirit and is neither male nor female. Yet in the Scriptures we are told that the believer is "born of God" (1 Jn 3:9). Here John uses female language to describe the relationship between God and believers. Similarly, when Jesus addressed God as "Father," he used a male metaphor/title to help us understand the nature of God. Scripture uses male and female images to enrich our understanding of God, who is Spirit and thereby beyond male and female.

A metaphor communicates in ways that rational arguments cannot. Pictures easily trump but do not replace abstract reasoning. A powerful television image communicates meaning that a thousand words cannot express. When used in theology to create meaning, the parable challenges the listener in ways that abstract statements of truth cannot approach. Yet the two are often linked, and both are critical to our theology.

Theologians often use "illustrations" to infuse energy and clarification into their abstract reflections. Illustrations are frequently "the sugar-coating on the theological pill," as T. W. Manson so aptly stated. A metaphor, however, is *not* an illustration of an idea; it is a mode of theological discourse. The metaphor does more than explain meaning, **it creates meaning**. A *parable is an extended metaphor* and as such it is *not a delivery system for an idea* but a house in which the reader/ listener is invited to take up residence.

The listener/reader of the parable is encouraged to examine the human predicament through the worldview created by the parable. The casing is all that remains after a bullet is fired. Its only purpose is to drive the bullet in the direction of the target. It is easy to think of a parable in the same way and understand it as a good way to "launch" an idea. Once the idea is "on its way" the parable can be discarded. But this is not so.

If the parable is a house in which the listener/reader is invited to live, then that person is urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of that house. Such is the reality of the parables created by Jesus of Nazareth, a reality that causes a special problem.

If theology is built on logic and reasoning, then all one needs to understand that theology is a clear mind and a will to work hard. But if, for Jesus, stories and dramatic actions are the language of theology, then the culture of the storyteller is crucial.

Our task includes the responsibility of trying to understand the metaphors and stories from and about Jesus in the light of the culture of which he was a part.

Unlocking Metaphors

To unlock the secrets of these metaphors, there are a few simple yet far-reaching challenges.

The first is to realize the importance of the task. It is easy to ignore historical questions. Granted, anyone can read the Bible and be blessed by that reading, just as anyone can listen to a Bach cantata and be moved. But at the same time, the trained ear will hear more and be moved on a deeper level by the same music.

One ploy often used to escape the hard work of attempting to discover what Jesus was saying to his

audience is to affirm the "universal appeal" of his parables. Every culture has loving fathers, rebellious sons and self-righteous older brothers, and many, directly or indirectly; assume that the parable of the prodigal son needs no special cultural glasses. It is universal in its appeal.

Up to a point this is true. But in the Middle East when a young man asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive his request means, "Dad, why don't you drop dead." The father is expected to get angry, slap the boy across the face and drive him out of the house. (Think of the commandment to honor your father and mother) None of these things happens in the parable. By the time we process the significance of these three bits of cultural insight, the parable exhibits new meanings that otherwise would be missed.

The second challenge is to realize the historical nature of the Word of God. The Bible for Christians is not *just* the Word of God. Rather, it is the Word of God spoken through people in history. Those people and that history cannot be ignored without missing the speaker or writer's intentions and creating our own substitutes for them. Historical interpretation is the key to unlocking the vault that contains the gold of theological meaning. Without that key the gold turns to brass.

The third challenge is to distinguish what meaning or meanings can be attributed legitimately to the parables. For many centuries allegory reigned supreme as a method of interpretation, and the fatted calf in the parable of the prodigal son became a symbol for Christ because the calf was killed. Through allegory, interpreters were able to locate their favorite ideas almost anywhere, and confusion and finally meaninglessness conquered. This is probably why parables ceased to be sources for Christian faith and were limited to ethics.

In reaction to the fanciful exaggerations that the allegorical method produced in past centuries, across the twentieth century there was a stream of scholarship that argued for "one point per parable." Others allowed for several themes in a parable. The purpose was to protect interpretation from adding meanings to the text that could not have occurred to Jesus or his audience.

But if a parable is part of a larger worldview, and if it is "a house in which we are invited to take up residence," then the dweller in that house can look out on the world

from different windows. The house has a variety of rooms. If the great parable of the prodigal son has "only one point," which shall we choose? Should the interpreter choose "the nature of the fatherhood of God," "an understanding of sin," "self-righteousness that rejects others," "the nature of true repentance," "joy in community" or "finding the lost"?

All of these theological themes are undeniably present in the story and together form a whole called "the theological cluster." Each part of that cluster is in creative relationship to the other parts. The meaning of each can only be understood fully within the cluster formed by the entire parable. The content of the cluster must be controlled and limited by what Jesus' original audience could have understood.

When the Pharisees sat together and reflected on what Jesus was talking about in a particular parable, what ideas were available to them? There may be one or more. The themes that comprise the theological cluster of a parable must grow out of the world in which the parable was told and first heard. But should such a principle be strictly applied?

A great work of art has a life of its own. The viewer of that art brings his or her own life and experience to the moment of encounter with the work. Michelangelo's statue of Moses leaps beyond the world of sixteenth-century Italy and becomes "the angry man of God." Yet there needs to be limits to what can legitimately be found in a story..

Whatever the interpreter finds in a parable needs to be evaluated in the light of the life and witness of Jesus. Such a discipline keeps one within the "critical realism" that is the starting point for New Testament interpretation.

None of us have all the historical, intellectual and spiritual resources as we approach these parables.

All we can do is to pull together the resources we have at our disposal and do the best we can with what we have and be willing to expand our understanding whenever new information becomes available.

**The theological and ethical House
of the Parables of Jesus awaits.
May we all enter with great expectations!**

GC Lemon Grove (formerly Cornerstone Community Church)
PO Box 654 Lemon Grove, CA 91945-0654 – <https://www.gclmongrove.org>