

Jesus' Parables: *A Prescription For Healthy Ministry*

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Of what significance are Jesus' parables for ministry? And, if they are significant, what is their significance for those in healthy ministry?

Hermeneutical Insights

Of all the genre of literature in the Bible, the parables may be the most elusive. Scholars, of course, disagree on the types of parables, the nature of parables, the proper approaches to use with parables, and even which parables are really parables. Scholars such as VonKoestevald claim there are seventy-nine parables in the Gospels. F.F. Bruce claimed there are only thirty-three plus eight of what he calls "parable gems." Others such as famed New Testament scholar Moulton claim there are "between 30 and 40."

If something as simple as the number of parables eludes scholars, agreement as to what a parable is does not evoke surprise either. The Hebrew "*mashal*" refers to fables, riddles or teachings used to promote spiritual wisdom. The Book of Proverbs which, in Hebrew, bears the title "*Meshalim*" evidences this Old Testament connection between parables and wisdom.

The New Testament usage of parables builds on the mashal-wisdom connection. Martin Scharlemann in his classic work, *Proclaiming the Parables*, wrote, "The word 'parable' belongs to the language of revelation. Like 'grace' and 'faith' it belongs to the lexicon of 'Good News'; it is descriptive of God's activity rather than being prescriptive or predictive. It is a kerygmatic term in the fullest sense of the word." (M. Scharlemann, *Proclaiming The Parables*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, p. 14)

The Nature of Parables

Parables *do* belong to the "language of revelation." They are "descriptive of God's activity." The question, then, is what do they reveal? What do they describe about God's activity? And, most importantly, what applications do Jesus' parables have to Christian ministry?

The word "parable" literally means "to cast something parallel." Jesus' parables are ways of describing the nature and activity of the Kingdom of God. He does it by similitudes, i.e. drawing parallels between simple, everyday events to convey deep spiritual truths of the Kingdom. His parables put the common in direct juxtaposition with the uncommon, the seen with the unseen, the ordinary with the extra-ordinary, the natural with the supernatural and the human with the divine.

It is the extraordinary parallelism between these two extraordinary opposites which helps give parables a very special, unique ability to convey spiritual wisdom. P.G. Wodehouse said, "A parable is one of those stories in the Bible which sounds like a pleasant yarn but keeps something up its sleeve which pops up and leaves you flat."

The Character Of Parables

Parables may appear simple on the surface; their enigmatic character, however, makes it clear that parables confront the hearers with the most profound instructional and revelatory teachings of the Gospel. As similitudes, they describe just what Jesus intended. They describe what happens in the Kingdom of God as the Gospel is proclaimed in this world. And they do so in a remarkable, insightful fashion.

This insight is not for everyone. The meanings often elude even the most attentive listener. Only those with the ear of faith can hear and understand their teachings. Even the disciples—with ears wide open—needed word-by-word clarification of many parables.

Parables: For Pastors

Perhaps it is the profound, enigmatic spiritual character of parables which makes it difficult to see that Jesus' parables have specific applications to ministers of the Gospel. Somehow this obvious fact has been overlooked or ignored.

If one considers that the first ones to hear the parables were Jesus' disciples, this insight suddenly makes remarkable sense. If the parables were first directed and intended for Jesus' disciples to prepare them for ministry, then the parables must also be directed and intended for those who are in the forefront of proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom—pastors and other Christian professionals.

Parabolic Lessons

True to the oriental style of teaching, Jesus' parables present hearers in the tradition of Eastern spirituality. Unfortunately, westernized Christians often overlook this vital aspect of spirituality. Westernized Christians often short-sell Jesus and His teachings (such as those contained in His parables) by making Him conform to the ideals and expectation of modern, secular culture.

Preferring to see Jesus as a CEO, they become blinded to the fact that He was also a sort of guru. Perhaps it is this kind of blindness which the parables are intended to address...and change. This is the nature of the Gospel. It is also the nature of the parables. "He who has ears, let him hear!" Or, to paraphrase Jesus' words, "He who has eyes, let him see!"

Nature of Parabolic Lessons

Many of the parables share common elements. Not only do they proclaim Gospel; they *are* Gospel and bear the marks of the Gospel. In the narrow sense, parables echo the classic teachings of grace, forgiveness, powerlessness and the exclusive initiative of God. They also describe the response to the Gospel—whether it be belief, disbelief, or unbelief—and the respective emotive response of profound joy or profound grief.

In the wider sense, the Gospel-nature of the parables is such that reflects themes often found in recovery literature. Themes of humility, of letting go, of acknowledging that things are not in our control, and of the joyful, surprising and miraculous spontaneity of the unexpected are but some of the themes of parables. It is in these Gospel elements—both narrow and wide sense—that parables become a sort of "chicken soup" for the Christian minister's soul.

Some Parables For Your Ministry

* Parable Of The Hidden Treasure--*Matthew 13:44*

One of the most important parables for healthy ministry is also one of the shortest. Jesus compared the activity of the Gospel in the Kingdom to a man who just happened upon a treasure in a field. Remarkable, it wasn't even his field. Finding it was just an act of random chance. This find, however, was so remarkable that it changed his entire life, inside and out. Selling all he had, he bought the field and possessed the treasure which was now the center of his life.

The nature of Kingdom work is that one can never quite be sure where the next action of God will happen. In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren urges a necessary openness to the working of God. Instead of planning every jot and tittle of ministry, Warren urges Christian leaders to watch for the "waves" of ministry opportunity...and to "surf" them.

This parable demonstrates that sometimes churches and church leaders spend so much energy sweating to ways promote the Kingdom that they can't see the opportunity in the field. In the Kingdom, sometimes answers don't come by our intense searching. Instead, this parable shows that God gives us the answer when we submit ourselves and our agendas to the plan of God.

God makes this evident in the most simple places while carrying out everyday, ordinary Kingdom activities. When you "trip" over it, the faithful ones unite with joyful passion to do everything necessary to realize the joyful calling of God. Indeed, the answer is not in our searching. The answer is in the grace of God which He reveals to us...in *His* time.

*** Parable Of The Net--*Matthew 13:47 ff.***

This parable demonstrates that the nature of the ministry is like a fisherman's net. Casting the net is always an uncertain venture. Not only does one not know what fish will be caught; one also has no idea if any fish will be caught at all. At times all the effort involved in casting may appear in vain.

Casting the net of God's Word result in catching a very wide diversity of "all kinds" of people. The nets may include desirable trophy species as well as the less desirable scavenging bottom dwellers. Jesus, in this parable, refers to these two extremes of fish. The "good" fish are described by the Greek word is *kala*. This word means "to be useful, healthy, and fine." Jesus used the Greek word *sapra* to describe the "bad" fish. This word means "to be useless, unusable, of no value, and unfit." Most interesting is that it also means "to be decayed, rotting, or already rotten."

Whatever is caught, God's calling is not for us to pick and choose among the "good" and "bad" according to our preferences. If that were our calling, God would have given us fishing rods with very specific kinds of bait and lures. But He didn't. In the Kingdom we use nets --not hooks.

Casting God's Word in this manner certainly presents some implicit joys--and challenges--for Kingdom ministry. When we broadcast the Word we give up our own self-guided preferences for what we would like to catch. We have to live with the consequences of ministry to both the "good" and "bad" fish. It is not ours to judgmentally accept and reject, pick and choose, incorporate and eliminate.

Instead, we must patiently bear with the entire catch until Christ's angels sort through the catch. They will pick out what is good and scatter what is not good. Until then we can only watch, wait and keep on casting the net of the Kingdom of God. As this and other parables teach, this is the nature of ministry in Kingdom; this is the nature of the Kingdom of God.

*** Parable Of The Mustard Seed--*Matthew 13:31 ff.***

In this parable Jesus' point of comparison is between the small, minuscule, barely visible mustard seed and the activity of the Kingdom of God.

Contrary to what one might expect, this tiny mustard seed's surprising, spectacular, and unexpected growth parallels the pattern by which the Gospel works as it is proclaimed. As it works in the hearts of believers, its marvelous, unexpected growth is likened to that miraculous transformation of the minuscule mustard seed into the largest of all garden trees.

For those whose work is the proclamation of the Word, this parable has numerous applications. Most evident, perhaps, is that even the smallest sharing of God's

Word, even the most insignificant and unnoticed ministry, can --and does--result in remarkable growth. This growth often exceeds even the most illustrious expectations of the one planting the seed.

Christians often look to visible signs of "success" for their ministry. Too often this becomes an unhealthy focus on one's own narcissistic, ego-driven efforts. Jesus' parable takes the focus off our "success" and toward trusting Him to cause the Word of God to grow in His way and time. When we can learn to stand back and let God's Word work--instead of having to control and plan every minute aspect of its growth and fruitfulness--we can experience an euphoric wonder comparable only to that of the mustard seed planter.

The planter plants, waters and watches in amazing joy asking, "Now how did God do that?" The more the mustard seed planter sees God's faithful and marvelous working repeatedly in other mustard seeds, the planter realizes the most important thing in the Kingdom is not how much the planter has done or how much recognition is earned. That's not where the joy is. Instead, the joy is sharing the child-like rapture of watching the Gospel work in others in ways beyond *any* human imagination.

*** Parable Of The Laborers In The Vineyard--*Matthew 20:1 ff.***

In this parable the Kingdom laborer's reward is compared to the manner in which the master of the vineyard compensates workers. Each worker has worked in different parts of the field, doing different duties, under varying conditions, for varying duration. Though they have expectations of "more work, more pay," the Master considers none of them greater or lesser than the other. All receive the same compensation: the joy of working for the master in the vineyard.

Given the multitudinous variegated expressions of the Body of Christ in the world, the tasks ministers face range from simple to overwhelming; non-threatening to life-threatening; difficult and unfruitful to fruitful beyond all expectations.

For Kingdom workers who believe their work for God is greater than another's and, thereby, worthy of greater honor and recognition, this parable brings them to a more sober reality. Kingdom workers who believe that their exhaustion and frustrations bring them greater or lesser honor and recognition are likewise brought to the sober reality that God extends His greatest blessing to them, too.

This parable demonstrates that in the Kingdom of God it's not how long, hard, or fruitful your work nor it is how much sweat, pain or frustration you've experienced that qualifies you for the compensation of joy. It's only --and exclusively--God's impartation of equal grace and joy for everyone who works in the vineyard. In God's sight every Kingdom work, whether done by the least or

the most exalted in the Kingdom, is accorded the same value, the same grace, the same joy.

*** Parable Of The Lost Son--*Luke 15:11 ff.***

The comparison between the loving, heartbroken father and the rebellious son strikes to the core experience of Christian ministry. No matter how generous, loving, industrious, helpful and ambitious the father is, his son's defiance defies the father's greatest and most sacrificial efforts. The son plunders and deserts his father and lives out a life of unhindered self-sabotage, finally nearly totally destroying himself.

The father, experiencing perhaps the most painful rejective experience of his life, cannot control his son's behavior. He has no "remote control" on his behavior. Having only the power of loving words of grace, the father realizes he cannot stop his son's senseless insanity. Though heart-broken, he directs his life to a prayerful hope-against-hope that someday, somehow, his son will return. When the son does return, the father takes the initiative of love, restoration and joy even amid criticism by his most loyal and closest son.

The experience of Kingdom ministry is that people will betray, ridicule, and defy the Kingdom and its workers regardless of the peril or harm caused. Their senseless acts of self-sabotage, however, ought not change the character of those who minister anymore than it changed the character of the lost son.

The Kingdom is marked by rebellion; it is also marked by repentance. Faithful Kingdom workers ought expect both while holding high their own character and churchmanship in--and for the sake of--both Law and Gospel. As long as those who minister maintain the Gospel-character of their proclamation, there is always hope that the Gospel will transform lives, even the lives of the most renegade, reprobate individuals. When this hope is realized and the renegade repents, there is unsurpassed joy throughout the Kingdom.

It is the passionate longing to repeat that celebration of joy which must rest in the deepest parts of the soul of all who proclaim the Law and Gospel. Without it, those who proclaim the gracious plan of God will succumb to the loveless legalism of the other son who, though obedient to his father, had no longing for joy. His protests clearly demonstrate that it is really he who is far from the Kingdom, not the repentant brother.

Parables: Common Elements For A Healthy Ministry

These and other parables teach healthy attitudes for a healthy ministry. Some of the attitudes and messages found in the parables include the following:

- 1) In the Kingdom of God, it's not your work that's important. It's the working of God through your proclamation.
- 2) You can't control the working of God. If you do, you'll kill it. Get out of the way, let go and let God.
- 3) Kingdom work is difficult work. It is a ministry among weeds and the rebellious. It's having to be in the same boat with good fish and the rotting fish. But that is the ministry. It's what Kingdom work is all about.
- 4) The proclamation of the Kingdom is a message intended to bring eternal joy. If that is the intended result, the one who proclaims it must possess joy in their proclamation.
- 5) In order for individuals to enter the joy of the Kingdom, the preaching of the Law and Gospel must change them. Thus, proclaimers of the Kingdom are essentially called to a ministry of being God's agents of change.
- 6) The only power in the Kingdom is not men but God. As that power is conveyed exclusively through the proclamation of the Word, the only effective power one can wield in the Kingdom is the Spirit-empowered Word of God. Nothing -- *nothing*--else will do.
- 7) The Kingdom always comes at God's initiative, not man's. That is why it is the Kingdom of Grace. That is why it is the Kingdom of God. It's His Kingdom and His initiative.
- 8) The joyful response to the Kingdom of God results in the totality of joyful service to the Kingdom. It is this Gospel-borne joy which is the hallmark of the Kingdom.
- 9) Whatever occurs, God is always faithful. The Kingdom will always remain. Its joy will never be silenced, quenched or destroyed.
- 10) God's working in the Kingdom is paradoxical. Though always beyond expectation and imagination, the Kingdom's greatest manifestation is not in the spectacular and grandiose. Instead it's in the simple everyday experience of life. God best demonstrates the spontaneous, sudden and remarkable power of the Gospel in the simple and mundane.

11) Kingdom work is marked by a profound eschatological understanding. It...

- * *Recognizes* that the present proclamation of the Kingdom may be painful, arduous and excruciatingly difficult;
- * *Cultivates the patient anticipation* of the consummation of the Kingdom of God which is the reason for hope and the cause for daily joy;
- * *Lives in the confidence* that those who remain faithful until death receive the crown of life; and, among other convictions, it
- * *Gains strength* from knowing that until Christ appears in glory, His grace is sufficient for us, His strength is made perfect in our weakness, and that the Spirit truly does help us to endure whatever is necessary to enliven our eschatological hope.

Your Parabolic Ministry

The Kingdom of God is that it only exists where Christ is present and His Word proclaimed.

In spite of all the joy and sorrow that comes to those ministering in the Kingdom, Jesus' teaching in the parables tells us that the Gospel is powerful and effective. The Gospel of the Kingdom changes the hearts of the rebellious. It also gives strength to endure among them when their hearts aren't changed. Most important, Jesus' parables provide pastors with tools for a healthier "parabolic perspective" in Kingdom ministry.

Jesus said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of God has been given to you" (Luke 8:10, NIV). These "secrets" are really no secret at all. They are for everyone to hear and for Kingdom workers like you to proclaim.

What will you do with these "secrets"? In the Parable of the Fig Tree, Jesus urged His front-line Kingdom workers to "learn this lesson from the fig tree" (Matthew 24:32). His parables have many lessons for faith and for a healthier ministry.

Take time to learn the many lessons from the parables. Let Jesus' parabolic prescription ministry bolster you in the joyful patience and hope which characterize a healthy parabolic ministry. Then you can enjoy a more profound understanding of Jesus' promise for your ministry, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

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