

1. Opening the Parables of Luke 15

Luke 15 contains perhaps the most famous parable, that of the Prodigal Son. The parable is preceded by a note of the context (15:1-2) – how is it heard by Pharisees, Scribes, Toll Collectors, and Sinners! The parable is the third in a series:

- ⇒ The Lost Sheep (15:3-7) – a man is missing a sheep – 1 lost out of 100 – celebratory banquet
- ⇒ The Lost Coin (15:8-10) – a woman loses a coin – 1 lost out of 10 – celebratory banquet
- ⇒ The Prodigal Son (15:11-32) – a man loses a son – 1 out of 2 – celebratory banquet

The Prodigal Son conforms to the pattern (15:11-24) but there is an added section on the elder son (15:25-32). The parable is about two sons, not one!

Old Testament Brothers: Cain & Abel; Isaac & Ishmael; Jacob & Esau; Joseph & his brothers.....

Similarities before differences when comparing characters in parables:

Junior and Senior – have same father, are brothers, have inheritance, are treated well, invited to banquet but both see themselves as less than sons – hired servant (15:19) / slave (15:29)

The conclusion is open – does Senior join the banquet or not?

Movement from death to life – movement of the Gospel story especially on journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9-19). Junior was dead but is now alive, was lost but is now found (15:32). Note the language in the parable to refer to father, brother, son – Senior distances himself but the father insists that Junior is “your brother” (15:32). What might this parable say of Jesus?

There is no recorded response from the audience – this open ending allows readers to fill in what the responses might be and what challenge the parable poses for each group and for themselves!

Some Take home points to consider on parables:

Context – audience(s) of parables; **Characters** – similarities before differences; **Old Testament** echoes – characters / setting / plot; rule of threes / pairing of parables; much ambiguity, diversity, possibilities! **Christology** – what might it say of Jesus and his life and mission? (Karl Barth)

Postcolonial Critique – redefinition of constitution / rule book of Roman household

Feminist Critique – implied presence of mother, in house, in household management, reconciler, preparation of feast (parables of friend at midnight and of leaven (Luke 11:5-8; 13:20-21 cf. 10:40)

A realistic reading of first hearers. See Du Toit, C. “A realistic reading as a feminist tool: The Prodigal Son as a case study.” *HTS* (2022).

1.1 Parables: Sowing the Gospel

Parables are an *indirect* way of communicating. The story of the parable is *incomplete*, and the hearer is expected through offering an interpretation to complete the story. The hearer takes ownership of the story and its conclusion. Hearers are brought from a world familiar to them, from what is known to an unknown. Parables can be compared to laboratories, where hearers explore life questions within the safe confines of a story. A classic example is Nathan’s story to David about the rich man who took the poor man’s lamb to entertain a guest. David is enraged, until he realises that the story raises to consciousness his own recent murder of Uriah, husband of Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1-7). The prophet would never openly challenge the king, but through the parable, he enables the king to see

1.2 Parables – Images

- Parables as **prism** – a prism opens out the full spectrum of light – the parable opens out limited knowledge to many possible avenues
- Parables as **blind spot** – every visual field has a blind spot which is filled in by signals from the surrounding rods and cones at the back of the eye – the adjacent shades and colours are used to fill in the blank. Parables showcase blind spots and resist the tendency to impose coherence in stories.
- Parables as **rainbow** – a rainbow shows the full spectrum of light necessitating the right dose of sunshine and moisture. Parables require an attentive open listener who can seize the right vantage point at the right moment. The rainbow is also the sign of the first covenant with Noah – a reminder that God speaks through parables.

1.3 Parable – a story world which opens up to the imagination

Story world opens to **imagination** – not *reproductive* imagination (recalling the past), not *synthetic* imagination (combining experiences to create new realities in our mind), not fantasy but **constructive** imagination – constructing a new *world* view – how we view God, the world and ourselves.

1.4 Parable - definition

At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961) 5.

The parable is not the interpretation, but it provides interpretation. Like handles parable enable the hearer to pick up, to engage, and to examine.

A poet's function – do not be startled at this remark – is not to experience the poetic state: that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others... The person of genius is the person who infuses genius into me. (Paul Valéry)

In parables that which is not said (le *non-dit*) is important (Camille Focant)

1.5 Walter Wink “Letting Parables Live” – some nuggets

Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives. Parables participate in the reality which they communicate. In valid interpretation we feel our way into each symbol in order to sense the surplus of meaning that beckons us beyond ourselves to discover something new. Jesus' parables have only the minimum of detail necessary to attract the hearer's attention and to interpret the parable. Parables have “hooks that grab us.” They are often open-ended with multiple possible interpretations.

1.6 Reading parables in context

Traditionally parables are read in isolation from the main text. This is an influence of the lectionary which selects only short passages for public liturgical reading. Every parable has a context. It is preceded and followed by episodes or teaching which open further possibilities for interpretation. The immediate context of the parable of the lost sheep is important (see Luke 15:1-2)

- ⇒ Who hears Jesus?
- ⇒ How might the different groups in the audience hear?
- ⇒ How might readers hear?

The context can extend further to even the whole Gospel, since parables have a long view and can suggest interpretive comment on Jesus' wider ministry, that of his disciples or even of his opponents.