

## Teaching Parables

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In the religious education classroom, parables are often used for a variety of reasons: to teach about prayer, morality, Scripture and God. However, it is easy for the religious educator to become too familiar with these popular stories of the New Testament and miss their intended purpose. Often parables in the religious education classroom become like familiar fairy-tales where the punch of the story is often overlooked. To teach parables effectively, religious educators must focus on the genre of 'parable' as well as explore the social and historical context of the chosen parable and how it would have been received by the first century Palestinians listening to Jesus. When religious educators attend to these tasks scriptural education is likely to be more intellectually rigorous, religiously sensitive and biblically honest.



### The Genre of Parables

Parables are meant to affect the reader. If the reader still feels comfortable after reading a parable, the parable has not been read correctly and probably has been misunderstood. Parables are meant to shake up the listener's world view and challenge them. The reader either gets the message or doesn't – sort of like a joke. There is no universal meaning with parables, so that each time a parable is read, another meaning can be discovered – like a piece of music or poetry. When Jesus told parables to his first century Palestinian Jewish followers, they would have been confounded and challenged. Today, in our twenty-first century world, religious educators seem to have watered down the meaning of the parables to make students and themselves feel comfortable. People listening to parables in first century Palestine would have been made to feel completely uncomfortable by them and, in some cases, even threatened. When teaching parables, the religious educator must explain the social and historical context of the story, so that students can have a greater appreciation of the meaning of the story, how it shakes up one's world view, and why the parable would have been so disturbing to listen to in first century Palestine.

### About parables

Parables were a common storytelling genre in first century Palestine. Being familiar with parables, Jesus used this genre type to explain the mystery of the Kingdom (or Reign) of God to his followers. Parables are not exclusive to the New Testament. They are also found in the Jewish Scriptures: *The Parable of the Poor Man's Ewe* (2 Samuel 12:1-4) (See my article in *Echoing the Word*, Volume 9 Issue 1), the *Parable of the Woman of Tekoah* (2 Samuel 14:6-8) and the *Parable of the Unfruitful Vineyard* (Isaiah 5:1-6). Parables can also be found in the Jewish Talmud and Mishnah.

When teaching parables, religious educators must understand the genre they are working with, and help their students read the text in its proper form. At its simplest, a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from life or nature, often confounding or confusing the listener. Jesus' parables explain the Reign of God, comparing it to something familiar, drawn from common life. Often the hearers of the parable in Jesus' time would have been struck by an unexpected part of the story, leaving them puzzled and having to tease out the implications of what they have heard (Dowling, 2010, p.20). Parables are at the heart of Jesus' teaching and with each story, he is comparing and contrasting elements of daily life in first century Palestine with the Kingdom of God. Once the religious educator understands these aspects of the genre, they are well equipped to teach a specific parable.

A parable that religious educators often neglect is *the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* (Luke 18:9-14).

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

This parable offers religious educators three possibilities for engagement in the school. Two of these possibilities have application in religious education in the classroom. The third possibility has application in catechesis. First, it can be used in the classroom to unpack the Lukan feature of Jesus showing compassion for outcasts. For example, besides this parable Luke also includes stories of Jesus encountering Samaritans (10:30-37), beggars (16:19-31) and repentant criminals (23:39-43). Second, it gives the reader another glimpse of the Reign of God that Jesus is preaching – where even the lowly, sinful outcast can be redeemed and welcomed into the Kingdom of God. The tax collector is justified in this parable. At the same time, religious educators should be wary of interpreting the Pharisee as being excluded here. Definitely, this parable should not be understood in terms of bad Jew, good Christian (Levine, 2006, p. 41). Third, this parable has catechetical application: it not only offers insights into the importance of prayer and how to pray, but it directs the faithful to an appropriate disposition in prayer: humility.

To the contemporary mind, most parables are met with discomfort. They often present a challenge to accepted convention; custom and expectation are often upturned; the first becomes last, the last becomes first, so to speak (Dowling, 2010, p.20). This parable, however, is not one of those parables. It has lost its challenge. When students read this parable, there is no sense of alarm. However, when heard with first century Palestinian ears the sense of alarm is stark. The idea that a tax collector would be met with approval over a Pharisee was shocking.

### **The parable in historical context**

To appreciate this story, students must understand the role of the characters of this story in the first century Jewish world. The tax collector was certainly an outcast. Despised, the tax collector defrauded people and forced the faithful to pay taxes to the Roman occupation rather than tithes to the Temple. Their work was at odds with the temples' financial needs which were met by, among other means, the tithes that the Pharisee mentions in his prayer. The tax collector also forced his fellow Jews into impurity through failure to pay their tithes. Hence, tax collectors were social outcasts. As such they provided the Lukan author with a source for Luke's theological concern. That is, Luke was intent to show to his Gentile audience that even the outcast, the ostracised and the sinner could be righteous before God. The Gospel of Luke, more than the other Gospels, identified discipleship with a sympathy and affinity with the poor, the suffering and the neglected.

Pharisees were known for their concern with ritual purity: they insisted on no contact with those who were unclean and according to Josephus, “Ordinary Jews were much impressed by the widespread reputation that the Pharisees enjoyed for their exact knowledge of the Mosaic law.” They were not part of the wealthy elite nor the priestly aristocracy but the class of low level bureaucrats and educators. In this story the Pharisee is typically portrayed as a thoroughly believing and honourable person who dedicates himself to God.

### **Opening up the parable**

The story begins with Jesus telling this parable to those ‘who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt’ (Luke 18:9). Already, arresting the listener, Jesus has focused this story on

the Pharisees, and he goes on to compare two different types of prayer. Jesus' original hearers of this story would have been familiar with the Pharisee's prayer. The pharisaic concern of correct behaviour towards the Mosaic law would have been familiar; the Pharisee continues his thanksgiving by enumerating the religious acts that he is able to do: fast, pay tithes, and he goes beyond what is required of him. For many contemporary religious educators, the Pharisee's prayer reads as one who is pretentious and vain. However, the prayer corresponds to the practice of prayer of the time. Prayers were handed down in the Talmud and the listeners of this story in the first century Jewish world, would not have found offence as it is a typical Jewish prayer, which begins with thanksgiving and shows no arrogance. Levine (2006, p. 40) offers us further explanation of the Jewishness and appropriateness of this prayer.

The tax collector's prayer, in contrast is simple, a short plea with reference to Psalm 51, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18: 13b). Obviously the tax collector has recognised his sins, humbly begs for forgiveness and forces the hearer to see something positive about the tax collector. In this story the tax collector is portrayed as a person who is aware of his mistakes and is seeking grace. His outward posture demonstrates remorse and indicates the hopelessness of his situation. Standing at a distance, he understands himself to be a sinner as he beats his own chest.

Listening to the story through first century Palestinian ears, this story would have shocked. Levine (2006, p. 38) claims that the idea that the tax collector would receive approval over a Pharisee would have been absurd. Levine goes on to suggest that in today's world you could see the Pharisee as an equivalent to Mother Teresa, and the idea that she would not be in right relationship with God is preposterous. This story shows two different kinds of prayer and piety. It is the final line that provokes and challenges, and delivers the sting found so often in Jesus' parables: "I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other". Jesus' story is one that was shocking, radical and a double reversal of the metonymic poles of his world. The author has placed this parable to show the readers clearly that in prayer the reader is to have the attitude of the tax collector, a sinner, an outcast and to avoid the Pharisees' attitude (Friedrichsen, 2005, p.89). For Luke, the Pharisee went up to the temple trusting in his own righteousness, but went down again unrighteous, that is - not in right relationship with God to whom he showed no gratitude. The Lukan theme of reversal is apparent as the final line reverses the Pharisee-Tax Collector order, and also reverses the characters relative uprightness (Friedrichsen, 2005, p.103).

### **The meaning of the parable**

The author of the Gospel of Luke has placed two parables side by side: The unjust Judge (Lk 18: 1- 8) and The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-17) to teach about the spiritual reality of which prayer should be placed and the importance of maintaining a personal relationship with God.

The story also highlights as with all of Jesus' parables, the type of Kingdom Jesus was proclaiming. God's reign in contrast to that of the Roman rulers of the time is a Reign of justice and graciousness. The parable invites and challenges hearers to expand their understanding of God and how God operates (Dowling, 2010, p. 20). This parable promotes a Kingdom of God that forces the hearer to hear something positive about the enemy, the outcast – in this case the tax collector. It insists that even those who work for the enemy may still be part of the Kingdom of God; that those who exploit others in their own community deserve consideration and compassion. The parable forces the hearer to walk in the shoes of the ostracised (Levine, 2006, p.40).

### **Teaching this parable**

This parable can be used in a number of contexts within the Catholic school. As a tool for catechesis, teachers could use this parable to focus on prayer: how one might pray to God in humility and thanksgiving. Primary school students may like to write their own prayers of thanks and repentance. Secondary school students may like to deepen their spirituality by exploring the relationship between Christian and Jewish prayers and using the Psalms as prayer.

In the classroom, religious educators can also spend a great deal of time teaching their students about the social and historical context of the parable, so students can gain a greater understanding of the parable and how the genre of parables is intended to shock the audience. To fully understand parables, students must understand the social, historical, political and religious contexts of first century Palestine, as well as the genre of parables. Younger students can act out this parable while older students can spend time studying the historical context of first century Palestine, thus bringing to life the world of Jesus, and gaining a greater and deeper understanding of parables.

Parables seek to arrest the listener, to show another perspective on the world, to call into question the status quo. They often convey news that the audiences do not want to hear and yet they do so in ways that could even bring a smile, through wild exaggeration, ridiculous scenarios, and startling juxtapositions (Levine, 2006, p. 34). The faithful reader should feel uncomfortable when reading parables, but at the same time they should be moved to a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of God. This is the intent of parables and this very point should be emphasised in classroom teaching. Students, regardless of their religious adherence, should understand that parables seek to engage the reader in interior conversion.

As in my article "*The Parable of the Poor Man's Ewe*" (*Echoing the Word*, Volume 9 Issue 1), I offer here five tips for teaching the genre of parables:

- ▶ Remember these are stories for adults, so be careful not to 'dumb them down' – we don't want to have to 'unteach' knowledge to students as they get older.
- ▶ Parables are stories that have been used throughout time – especially in the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament. Parables are meant to affect the reader – you should feel uncomfortable reading the parable. The parable shakes up the status quo, the worldview. Parables have been used as teaching tools throughout time.
- ▶ There are no universal meanings with parables – the question should be "What does the parable mean to you, this time you read it?"
- ▶ A parable should affect you like a piece of music/good story/piece of poetry. How does the parable affect you?
- ▶ Usually the characters are not the typical characters that story tellers use. Don't forget – parables from the Bible were not written for twentieth century ears. The *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* was a story told to first century Palestinians, but written by Luke for a Greek speaking gentile world.

## References

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