

Preaching & Teaching the Parables; Training the Disciples

The parable of the Good Samaritan is the last we will consider. It is one of our favorites, but it also presents a problem that is worth thinking about: How do you tell the parables, particularly this one, when they have become so familiar that they no longer have any “shock value”? When we tell or study the Good Samaritan, our first attitude is almost a yawn, “O, that again!” We already know what is going to happen in the story because every time the man gets beaten up and robbed, the Good Samaritan stops and helps him. There’s no suspense because we know how the story is going to end. And we know that the man is going to be *good*, because he is called the *Good Samaritan*! We miss the fact that this would be shocking or even outrageous to a Jew who heard this parable originally in the first century. A Samaritan was probably the last person in the world a Jew would expect to help. We do not recognize that because the only Samaritan we’ve ever heard of is a good one, the Good Samaritan. But every Samaritan they had ever heard of was bad. So we have to “unlearn” and look again if we want to see and feel what Jesus is talking about. This gets us to think about the question of communication.

In Luke 10:25 and following we see the scene. A few things are commonly missed and need to be explained. Verse 25 begins with a lawyer coming to Jesus to question Him: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer says, “I read that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.” And Jesus responds, “You’ve answered well; you’ve answered rightly; do this and you will live.” When Jesus says “you’ve answered rightly,” He’s probably saying that the lawyer has given the right answer, maybe even the pat answer, the answer everyone knows, but then says the key is actually *doing* it, and then he will live.

This leaves a bit of a problem for this particular lawyer; it is hinted at in verse 29. He wanted to justify himself and so he said, “Who is my neighbor?” There are two ways to read this phrase “he wanted to justify himself.” One is that he was embarrassed. He came asking Jesus a question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”, and he himself knew the answer. To ask a question when you know the answer seems foolish. Why would a person really be asking if he already knew the answer? Maybe he wanted to justify himself to show that he really did have a good question, and he asked further, “Who is my neighbor?” He wanted Jesus to specify what He meant.

That’s one possibility, but there’s another. The second possibility is that he knew exactly how difficult it would be to do this, so he thought, like many Jews at that time, “If I can restrict the command, maybe I can do it. If I restrict who my neighbor is, then maybe it’s possible for me to love my neighbor. If loving my neighbor is just loving a few people near to me, a few friends and neighbors, then maybe I can justify myself. Maybe I can be righteous in the sight of God by doing enough good deeds.” You see? The first possibility is not entirely wrong, the second one is more prominent and sensible given the historical background.

Jesus agrees to answer the question by telling a story. This story is so familiar to us that it creates problems; there’s no longer any shock value to it. But maybe we can see a couple of new things today. Perhaps we can learn something about what this road to Jerusalem to Jericho was like. The road starts in Jerusalem, which is actually about 2,000 feet above sea level, at the top of a range of hills. It gets a fair amount of rain, maybe 20 inches a year. Jericho is the only oasis in the Jordan rift valley, the lowest spot on earth, about 1,400 feet below sea level. Once you descend from the high plateau of Jerusalem, it is an absolutely desolate road. When I went down that road with a tour in Israel, the driver stopped the bus to point out a few sites. “There you can see the tree on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.” I noticed that

he said “the tree,” not “one of the trees.” When I looked, there was indeed *one* tree, about 10 feet tall, with about 14 leaves and 6 branches. That was all!

This is some of the most desolate, barren, forsaken territory on the earth. You want to travel through it as fast as you can, and it’s a sensible place for robbers to waylay people because there’s nothing there to stop them. There won’t be any helpers, police, towns or anything like that; it’s utterly barren. In the parable the man, the traveler, is attacked by robbers. Verse 30 says that they stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. This makes him into everyman, with nothing to identify him. He was not wearing any clothes that would tell anybody who he was. He was just a man lying there unconscious, possibly dead. Because he was unconscious he was also speechless, so no one could tell by his language or accent who he was or where he was from. He was just a man. When people saw him they would have no idea if he was a neighbor or not or if they owed him anything.

As the story continues, a priest happened to be going down the same road and passed by on the other side. Often, when this story is told, the priest is portrayed as cruel, vicious, and heartless, but in fact, it might be better to view the priest, at least in part, as a victim of his system and of the values of his class and office at that time. Priests were not permitted to touch the dead, and the priest didn’t know if this man was dead or not. There’s a clear-cut command in the Old Testament that says you cannot touch a corpse if you’re a priest. The man looked like he was dead. The man might have been alive and perhaps there could have been the chance to do the right thing, but if the man was dead, the priest certainly would have violated a law of God by touching him. Furthermore, if he did touch him, he would have had to go through a lengthy and expensive process of purification, losing some income if he was scheduled to serve in Jerusalem in the near future. At the very least he would have had to go through purification like any common person who defiles himself and it would be very embarrassing for a priest to be in with common folk taking care of uncleanness. He would have had to buy a red heifer (this was not cheap) and burn it to ash. So there were real, tangible costs, both moral and financial costs, that pushed him to do what he did.

Additionally, since the priest was unsure who this man was, it was not clear that he owed him anything. In the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiasticus, an apocraphal book read commonly in Jesus’ time, it says, “If you do a good turn, know for whom you are doing it. Do good to a devout man and you will receive a reward from him or from God. Give to the devout man, do not go to help a sinner; give nothing to a godless man.” Why? Because if you help a godless person become restored to health, you may simply help him or her sin more. In fact, at one point several rabbis had a debate, several rabbis had a debate about what exactly you owed to a Gentile. What if a Gentile falls out of a boat into a river or lake and is drowning; do you have to help him or not? They answered, “You may, but you don’t have to.” You don’t owe him anything so you decide; it’s up to you. Therefore the priest is not necessarily a cold or evil man; rather he is doing what is almost predictable for his day and time.

It would be much the same with the second man who passed by, the Levite. It’s a little bit more complicated with a Levite. While the Levites didn’t actually have all the prohibitions that the priests did according to the law of God, the Levites laid the laws of priests on themselves.

The third person who came was, of course, the Samaritan. Not only is it unexpected that the Samaritan would help, but rabbis of the day urged that a Jew not receive help from a Samaritan because if the Samaritan fed him, clothed him, or put oil on his wounds, he would be using what was not tithed, and would therefore be sinning. One of the rabbis instructed Jews in this predicament to say, “Samaritan, I will have none of your oil and wine.” To take oil or wine from a Samaritan was seen as a sure sign that you didn’t have any self-control because you shouldn’t be receiving anything not tithed to God. The

Samaritan, despite all this, helped the man, gave as much as was needed to take care of him, and took him in.

These may be things you hadn't heard before, but do you think even this would restore the story's shock value? Is it easy to bring it to life for people today, to get them to see the point? Here's a modern parable that might add some shock value. A man was traveling from one midwest American city to another, on a winter morning, when his car hit a patch of ice and slid off the road, into a ditch. The man was knocked unconscious and thrown from the car. Soon a pastor who happened to be driving by saw him in the ditch, but he drove by. He was on his way to an important church meeting. Next a missionary saw him, but he too turned into the outside lane and passed him by; he was on his way to a mission conference. Then a homosexual on his way to New York City came by, saw the man lying on the roadside, felt compassion for him and stopped. After checking for injuries, he covered the man with his coat, called an ambulance and accompanied him to the hospital. He left his credit card to pay for any expenses not covered by the man's insurance and called the auto club to get the man's car. Meanwhile, the pastor was now two or three miles down the road and remembered Jesus' words, "Whatever you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done unto me." Deeply troubled he turned around and returned to the scene. By the time he had arrived, however, the man and his helper had already gone. Angry at himself he sat in his car and prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me."

This correlates to the Good Samaritan because today's church sees a homosexual as an outcast who has a stigma because of his sin. Also, the man lying by the road is undistinguished. He's just a human being in need and then an unexpected person stops to help the person in need and does what is necessary in an act of love for neighbor, somebody whom you wouldn't think of as neighbor, just a man lying there. That's the way it is in the Good Samaritan.

But this "re-telling" doesn't quite fit because homosexuals have a higher standing in our society than Samaritans did back then. You're never going to have a perfect match because cultures are multi-faceted. No matter which group you choose for the "re-telling" or which facet of their identity matches the point of the parable, there will always be room for critique. Somebody will point out other aspects of the analogy that do not match.

I made the correlation for two reasons. First, I did it just to add a wrinkle, to trouble you a little bit, because that's what parables are supposed to do. They're supposed to get you thinking and maybe also make you identify with the characters. We have all done this; we have all passed by somebody in need and then felt bad about it. In most of His parables, Jesus is trying to pull His listeners into the story so they can evaluate how they would act in the same situation.

Second, we can't be passive about the parables. The parables were like jokes. They startled people; they amazed people. If the parables are only explained by dissecting them and pointing out all the cultural nuances, the life is sapped right out of them. They need to be lively, and told so that people feel engaged.

It is also vital that we see the presence of Christ in the parables. Most of the parables we have looked at are about discipleship or about the kingdom. There is a danger that you will find yourself focusing on the moral point of the parable too much. As we saw with Jesus' teaching in Sermon on the Mount, it is very enticing to say, "These are the things Jesus says; go do them. Go be a good disciple; go be a good Christian; go do these things." It is possible to read the parables too moralistically, as if Jesus is just saying, "Go be a good neighbor; go welcome sinners." A man named Adolph Jülicher said that all parables have one point, a moral point. He was a liberal in the sense of an old liberal, who believed in

the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the infinite value of a human soul and the worth of the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. That's what it means to be a Christian. He said that each parable has a moral point. This is a common, yet deeply flawed way to read the parables.

We must see that Jesus Himself is visible in most of the parables. First, Jesus says you can find teachings about Him all through Scriptures. Luke 24:44-47 records that Jesus told His disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms.' And He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and said, 'This is what is written. The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem. You are my witnesses of these things.'" The phrase, "This is what is written," means "This is what is written in the Scriptures of the Old Testament," and it will usually be followed by a quotation from an Old Testament passage. But Luke 24:47 is one of just a handful of times where the phrase "It is written" is not followed by a quotation. This means Jesus is saying that the whole Old Testament is written about Him—the law of Moses, the prophets, the psalms. He is not thinking about one Bible verse. In some way, every book, every part of the whole Bible points to Him. When He said, "It is written," He is thinking of the Old Testament, but it is also true of the New Testament as well. The whole thing is about Jesus.

(Some reference Bibles link Luke 24:47 to Hosea 6:2, "After two days, He will revive us, on the third day He will restore us so that we may live in His presence." This verse is actually not about the Christ, but about the restoration of Israel. It uses the poetic device, "2 and 3, 3 and 4," a device used by some of the prophets.)

If Jesus Himself says the whole Bible is about Him, then the parables are not just about morals but about Him. Jesus explicitly placed Himself in several of His parables. The first parable we studied was about the sower. Jesus identified the sower as the Son of Man, Himself, who sows the Word. Similarly, when He told the parable of the wheat and the tares, He identified Himself as the one who sows the good seed, and explained that there would be opposition to His work (Matthew 13).

Other parables have a Christ-figure. In the parable of the lost sons the Christ-figure was the father, because just as the father seeks lost sons so Jesus seeks lost people. We saw that in the parable of the great banquet, Jesus is like the host of the banquet, inviting all kinds of people to Himself. In the parable of the wicked tenant farmers in Matthew 21, the owner sends his messengers to collect the rent but the tenants beat them and throw them out. Then he sends his son, thinking they will respect him, but instead they kill him, saying they will take the inheritance. That is exactly what Jesus did, and He is the like the son in the parable.

Matthew 24 and 25 contain parables about the day of judgment. Jesus says very plainly that no one knows about that day or that hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father; He is the only one who knows. That's pretty clear. He goes on to say, as it was in the days of Noah so it will be with the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man is Jesus. He is saying His coming will be like the coming of the flood. For 120 years Noah kept saying it would rain and all the people kept living their lives. Then one day it finally rained. And then everybody wanted to get into the ark and be delivered. Next, Jesus tells a series of parables about this very event. He tells about one who comes like a thief in the night. Who is this? Jesus. Then He tells about 10 virgins who weren't ready for the bridegroom when he came. Who is the bridegroom? Jesus. He talks about someone who went away on a long journey and gave talents to his subordinates and then returned unexpectedly, to see how they did with the money and to call them to account. Who would that be? Jesus.



So we have seen that in these parables and in others, Jesus appears in the very stories He is telling. In some way or another He is the main figure, revealed either explicitly, or implicitly, by His actions, His grace, His judgment and His plan. Some other parables are told under the shadow of the cross, pointing to His future death and resurrection. We have also seen that when we teach or preach the parables, we must be careful not to over-explain them, looking at every detail, and not to turn them into moralistic stories with a legalistic thrust.

Now we need to return to the Gospel of Matthew, our main book for this course, and look specifically at the training of the disciples. All four Gospels make it clear we have now come to an awkward, difficult phase of Jesus' ministry. We saw it when we were studying Matthew 11-12 in a previous lesson. Jesus performed that wonderful miracle of curing the demon possessed man, and what did the people say? "He does it by the power of Satan." That was a startling response, and Jesus then began telling the parables to show how His ministry would be rejected (Matthew 13). He was veiling His words somewhat so perhaps they couldn't be seized and misused. Matthew 14-17 illustrates various responses to Jesus in real life, in a cyclical pattern. First He experiences opposition from the Jews, then from the crowds, who cannot comprehend, then comes an episode of a little bit of understanding by the disciples. But next we see opposition again, complete misunderstanding, and then a little bit of understanding by the disciples.

The cycle continues and nobody is grasping anything clearly. The disciples are barely understanding a few things. That's the best you can say. Mark and Luke describe it a little bit differently. Mark stresses even more strongly how the disciples struggled mightily to come to an understanding of Jesus. He doesn't focus so much on the others but just on the tremendous difficulty the disciples had. Luke emphasizes the idea that Jesus and the disciples are beginning a great journey to Jerusalem. John, in his own way, shows how tumultuous and dangerous this period was. His telling of the feeding of the 5,000 stresses the misunderstanding of many of the common Jews, who tried to make Jesus king on the spot, because of His ability to make bread. So the four Gospels give different stories and different accounts of the events, but they all show the same picture of opposition and misunderstanding.

Matthew's account of the death of John the Baptist, in Matthew 14:1-12, shows the opposition of the Jewish leaders. How does the death of John signify trouble for Jesus? Because John preaches and points to Christ. If the forerunner of Christ is slain, what are they going to say about the one to whom he points? What will their intentions be? Furthermore, John's and Jesus' ministries were similar in certain ways. Both came preaching the kingdom; both came calling people to repentance; both attracted crowds; both suffered opposition. When John, whose career started a little earlier than Jesus', is killed, it gives us a hint about what their intentions may be for Jesus. During this time the crowds are following Jesus, to be sure, but it's questionable how much they really received.

Matthew then records the feeding of the 5,000. Matthew 14:13 reads, "When Jesus heard what had happened [to John] He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." This tells you that Jesus practiced what He preached. Remember, He had said that when there is opposition, go to another town. Do not change your theology but change your geography. When Jesus hears about John's death it is as if He says, "Okay, they're killing over here; I'm leaving. It's not time yet." So He moved on and the crowds followed Him. In fact, they followed Him on foot, without planning things very much. Verse 15 notes that His disciples said, "This is a lonely place; it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." Did you hear that, "buy themselves some food"? The disciples were thinking that the crowds had been with them for a long time, getting lots of teaching, and now it was time they took care of themselves. But Jesus didn't send them away. He said, "You know that's not right; they don't need to go away, you give them something to eat." In Greek that's emphatic.

“You, you give them something to eat.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all record Jesus’ insistence that the disciples give them something to eat. They also record the disciples’ reply: “We only have five loaves and two fish.” John adds to the response, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish” (John 6:9).

If we put the synoptic accounts with John’s account, I believe that the boy was a member of their entourage, and he was carrying their food. Traditionally, he is thought of as a young child, but he was probably more like a teenager. The word “boy” that is used could include somebody almost up to manhood, so it’s not a little boy walking up and offering his lunch. Everybody is ashamed that they refused to share. The picture is that Jesus and the disciples are supplying the food, and Jesus is checking on how much they have available. Incidentally, it is from John that it says it is five barley loaves. Barley loaf is horse food. That indicates the poverty of Jesus and the disciples. When food had to be created, Jesus would do it, but he did not create fine flour for them on a daily basis. The Greek word here for fish is *opsaria* which is like our word “sardines.” This is not good quality fish like albacore tuna or swordfish.

But Jesus takes the elements in His hands. Mark makes it clear that the miracle takes place in Jesus’ hands. Mark also says that He kept on breaking—He took those five loaves and kept breaking and breaking and breaking, giving and giving and giving, and somehow those loaves never gave out. In fact, there was so much food that 5,000 men ate, plus women and children. This means that perhaps 12,000 – 15,000 people ate, with 12 basketfuls were left over. The word used for “basket” here indicates a big basket, like one you use to take out your trash.

Then when it’s over, an interesting thing happens. Immediately Jesus told the disciples to get in the boat and go on the other side. This is odd and different because the crowd’s response is not recorded. We are used to a response after the miracles, such as people praising God or saying “Who is this?” or “We’ve seen marvelous things today.” Even if it’s not a strong or excellent response, there is usually some response. This reminds me of teenage boys who sit down to a meal and say they’re “starving to death.” They eat and eat and eat, seemingly without limit, and then when everything is gone they just leave. They don’t even say “thank you.” It doesn’t occur to them. “Of course Mom feeds us; that’s what she is supposed to do!” They eat, move on, and give it no more thought. This is how it was when Jesus fed the crowd. The disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was accomplishing, and the crowds didn’t either. Jesus has opposition on one side, and total lack of understanding on the other. Perhaps in the next scene the disciples will start to show some signs of life and comprehension.