

# Introduction

## A Different Approach

This book with CD represents a different approach to the parables of Jesus. The first difference, and the most obvious one, is that I use *images*, specifically *sculptural images*, to reach back to what Jesus taught through the parables. I do this because I believe that what doesn't get through to us in words may get through to us in images; some things in our lives are "too deep for words," but not necessarily for images. Thus, the text and images combined may go where words alone cannot go.

The second difference from most other works on the parables is that my approach accounts for the economic and political context of Jesus' parables. To be sure, some parable scholars include this context when interpreting the parables, however, most of those who *do* limit the number of parables they discuss to a very few or they include no images. I will consider all of the major parables and most of the obscure ones.

Having said that, many parable interpreters completely ignore the economic and political context of first-century Palestine. When we include this context, the parables, which often are maddeningly mysterious, begin to make sense. I assume the spiritual and personal meanings usually given to parables, but add the economic and political issues as background. It is a both/and, not an either/or approach.



The Samaritan

## Why Focus on the Parables?

But why should Christians focus on the parables rather than on other scripture texts? The answer is that the parables bring us as near to Jesus as we can get. Biblical scholars agree that the parables are the most authentic words available to us from the life of Jesus. While scholars interpret the parables in vastly different ways, and even the different gospels writers themselves disagree on the meaning of certain parables, recent research helps us get behind these conflicts to some of the historical realities of Jesus revealed in the parables.

Although the parables are not unique to Jesus, he made an art form of them, and some of his parables are almost universally known. The Samaritan and Prodigal Son parables, for example, are such a familiar part of world literature that they are used in endless ways to refer to the compassionate care of the stranger and to forgiveness of wayward sons. But are these the meanings Jesus intended? And what about the other 30 or so parables?



Prodigal Son

The parables are a direct route to Jesus, and we use them often not only for literary reference, but for preaching and devotions. They are listed over 30 times in the *Revised Common Lectionary*, challenging pastors over and over to interpret their mysteries. This is no easy job, because they rarely offer a single, clear meaning. Because of this mystery, the parables have enticed thousands of writers to try to find their meaning, even as some scholars deny that we can *ever* get a firm grasp of their message.

## Parable Scholarship: A Brief Overview

Seeking to understand Jesus' parables is a joyous, wise, and daunting task. It is joyous because, as Amos Wilder says, "There is wide agreement that it is in the parables that we can feel confident that we hear Jesus of Nazareth speaking" (*Jesus' Parables*, 82). For Christians, the possibility of hearing Jesus' actual stories after 2,000 years represents something of a miracle, especially for those who are aware of the extensive editing done to Jesus' words, which were written down from memory some 40 to 55 years after his crucifixion.

The search for the meaning of Jesus' parables is wise because in them we may come close to the *basileia tou theou*, usually translated as "kingdom of God." I prefer "Empire of God" (which I capitalize), to account for the economic/political contrast to the "empire of Rome" (which I do not capitalize), and to account for the virtual demise of kingdoms in the West. There is scholarly consensus that the parables point mainly to the Empire of God. Jesus encourages us to strive for this kingdom (Matthew 6:33a, Luke 12:31), and we pray the Lord's Prayer, which contains a plea for its coming. Obviously, we need to have a clue about what that kingdom or empire is.

Of course, we discover quickly that trying to understand the parables is a daunting task, in part because Jesus often turns the question of their meaning back on to us: "Which of these... was a neighbour?" he asks the lawyer, and us, after he tells the Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25–36).

To complicate matters, after we separate the parables themselves from the gospel writers' *interpretations* of them, we often find that Jesus provided no clear application or interpretation himself.

But even if we take the gospel writers' interpretations of the parable, we have to decide which interpretation in which gospel we will accept, since the gospel writers do not always agree on their interpretations, as we've already pointed out. Take, for example, the parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15–24; Matthew 22:2–10). In Luke's interpretation, the poor, crippled, blind, and lame are all welcomed, and only the excuse-makers are excluded from the food. In Matthew's interpretation, by contrast, a king sends a poorly-dressed guest to hell, destroys murderers, and burns their city. Which interpretation do we follow: Luke's gentle exclusion from food, or Matthew's less-than-gentle exclusion from life and even after-life? We cannot have it both ways.

Such conflicts among the gospel writers and puzzlements about the meanings of the parables have led scholars and preachers to pen untold numbers of books, essays, and sermons. Mastering this extensive bibliography is a major task – daunting indeed.

We who start the journey through the parables will be further challenged even to define what a parable is and, thus, which of Jesus' sayings are actually parables and which are some other literary form, such as a proverb or example story. (See Bultmann's distinctions between figures, metaphors, similitudes, example stories, allegorical explanations, and parables [*History*, 166–205]). As well, most scholars now follow Adolph Julicher, C. H. Dodd, and Joachim Jeremias in rejecting allegorical interpretations as true to Jesus' words, even though the gospel writers frequently interpret the parables allegorically. But there are exceptions. John Drury, for one, says that the gospel writers' allegorical interpretations are all we have, and that these interpretations are bound to their respective parables at birth. In other words, he claims that we cannot separate the parables from the gospel writers' allegorical interpretations of them (*Parables*, 2–3). Other scholars, such as G. V. Jones (*Art and Truth*, 24–25), take a middle position that affirms some limited allegorical application. (I provide more details on this in chapter two, where I take a position that only occasional words need to be used allegorically and symbolically, not whole parables.)

Virtually all parable scholars agree that, as opposed to being propositional, discursive, or abstract speech, parables are images or word pictures “drawn from nature and common life.” As such, they draw concrete images that “tease it [the mind] to active thought” (Dodd, 5).

Such pictures or images have immediate efficacy in communication. They instantly communicate meaning from one person to another, as

opposed to abstract, discursive, propositional language, which must reference an external, agreed-upon meaning code. We can see this difference in the following two examples. In Matthew 13:44, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field.” In this example, the hearer immediately visualizes a treasure hidden in a field. But when Jesus says, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31, Matthew 7:12), the hearer must consult the abstract codes of conduct contained in memory to imagine what behaviour may be relevant to oneself and to others. Images communicate concretely and immediately; wisdom sayings, such as the golden rule and other propositions, communicate abstractly and in a delayed fashion.

Verbal images not only communicate immediately, they stay in the mind. They last. In this book I am adding yet another challenge for the imagination in parable study. That is, I am taking the word images in the parables and making actual images of them. Through my clay images, I hope to reach deeply into the parables so that they may yield both immediate and long-lasting meaning. To *see* the meaning of a word or words is to reach a final and deeper level of understanding. We use the phrase “now I see,” when we finally understand something. This priority of seeing over hearing is an ancient phenomenon. Hence, Job says to God as his cause of repentance, “I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you...” (Job 42:05).

My hope is that although studying the parables can sometimes feel like a daunting task, you will experience it as a joyous one that may yield the wisdom of Jesus himself.

## Not *Whether* to Use Images, but *How* to Use Them

I argued in detail in my last book, *Faith Made Visible*, why using visual images in worship and education is not only sound theologically, but critically important as a vital aspect and level of communication. I did this because the Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic traditions have long been suspicious of the power images hold and have rightly opposed the misuse of images in idolatry.

However, the misuse of words is also condemned in these traditions. The Ten Commandments contain two prohibitions against the abuse of words – taking the Lord’s name in vain and bearing false witness – and only one prohibition against making images into idols (Exodus 20:4, Leviticus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:6–18, 5:8). We can see idolatry of the word in modern times in the extreme reactions of people for and against the placing of stone carvings of the words of the Ten Commandments in U. S. court houses.

It is long past time that we, in Protestantism, put away iconoclasm and embrace images, as Catholic and Orthodox Christians have done since ancient times. As a Protestant, and indeed as one from one the most iconophobic traditions of the Reformed churches, I realize that convincing scholars and church leaders to use images in seminaries, adult education, and worship is a challenge. Protestant seminaries are only beginning to experiment with the use of the arts in general and congregations move slowly when it comes to accepting new approaches. Yet I have been using images in seminary teaching and preaching for ten years, with notable acceptance and success.

The question now is not *whether* it is appropriate to use images in church, but *how* to overcome the barriers that would prevent their use and, once these are overcome, how to actually incorporate images in congregational life.

The pastor is called to the local church to preach the Word with words, not with images. Words are the central focus of all Protestant worship. The way we have constructed our theological semantics so that the same language is used for God's Word and our preached words tells us how close we have come to an idolatry of the word. We know, of course, that God is in no way contained in our words. Yet we let this ambiguity of God's Word and our own words stand. If indeed God's presence is known in words and in images and even in silence and in darkness, then we need to allow some space and time to seek that presence through sight as well as through sound.

Protestants by and large have done a good job in the disciplines of preaching and music. We have a rich tradition of hymnody and extensive structures for skilled, weekly musical contributions in worship services. God's presence is heard in sound, both preached and played. Here, I simply want to affirm that the logic that supports the use of visual art in our churches is the same as the logic that supports our use of music.

Great deference is paid in seminaries and churches to using the right words – written, spoken, played, and sung. Aramaic words, Greek words, Hebrew words, and homiletics: all of these discipline our minds and tongues to orthodox language. The tradition of sermon preparation (one hour preparation for every minute of preached sermon) is usually accepted, even expected, for pastors. Yet it is unusual if a seminary offers even a single course in art appreciation. We *do* have visual art in our church buildings, both in our sanctuaries and in our education wings, but it is often haphazardly pinned to bulletin boards. For the most part, visual art in our churches is treated casually in the extreme.



## Paying Attention

Paying attention to God's creation is an imperative for religious people, but we rarely give it *visual* attention because most of our focus in churches is on reading, speaking, and hearing. As a start to integrating visual art into churches, art appreciation helps us make some critical distinctions between works by trained and amateur artists. Also a trained artist can be asked to teach art in a church just as a trained musician teaches music. This distinction is not elitism; we make this distinction in our choice of music and music leaders as a matter of course. To be sure, we encourage children to draw in church schools. But why do we stop doing so when they reach puberty? When I teach art classes to adults, many of them are terrified at the thought of trying to draw, as if shame and abuse will follow anything less than a perfect sketch.

Personally, I believe that I cannot really see things in this world *unless* I spend time sketching and drawing them. Sketching is how I begin to pay attention to the world around me. It amazes me what details appear in objects when I take the time to really see them well enough to sketch, draw, or sculpt them. For many spiritually-inclined people, paying attention in this way is a form of prayer.

As we begin to pay attention, it's also important to note the difference between *seeing* and *glancing*. With the advent of film, video, and computer graphics, we have become trained to *glance* at images, rather than to *see* them. As a result, we need to help students and parishioners who are accustomed to *glancing* at art to actually *see* art, in the sense of paying due attention so that they can discern the depths of meaning a piece of art may hold. Art contains far more than we can see or appreciate at first glance. We have to help people get around noetic, left-brain abstractions – as when children draw from memory a person's head that is larger than

its natural size – that come from glancing at art and not seeing it at all. I hope the printed images and CD included with this book can help such *real seeing* happen.

## Biblical Illiteracy

It is well-known that most people have no knowledge of the parables beyond The Samaritan and The Prodigal. One friend, a seminary professor, refused to believe the Warring King parable was in the Bible until I showed him. I have written this book with this unfamiliarity in mind. I have also tried to avoid technical language. My goal has been to make this book as readable as possible, while putting the best of recent scholarship in lay language.

## Using this Book and CD

Each parable study in this book starts with a question to which the parable speaks. The question is meant to engage the reader and the viewer in the dialogue about the meanings of the parable. Jesus himself often started a parable with a question, such as “What do you think?” (Matthew 18:12), or “Which one of you...?” (Luke 15:3). These questions are tools that can be used to engage a congregation or class struggling with the issues raised in the parables – which always have implications for people living today, even though they were asked 2,000 years ago.

The text of this book includes small prints of the parable sculptures so that individuals can study the images with the text. The CD gives an overview of the parables in each of the synoptic gospels. In group study and in worship, the projected CD images are needed so that all participants can view the images together. For this, a data or multimedia

projector is required with a computer and a PowerPoint program. If one does not own such, they are usually available for rent or loan from a college or conference office.

The images of the parables can be projected during worship to accompany a sermon on a parable. In this way, hearers will have images that stick in the mind, helping them to remember the sermon. In educational settings, the same projection equipment is required and the same learning dynamic applies. Careful study of the visual images is needed to *see* the parables.

The text of the parable research is background to the images and needs to be studied by the preacher or teacher even if the congregation or class does not. Each parable study in this book begins with a visual overview (A New Image) followed by a critical study of the most recent scholarship (Parable Research). Realistically, not everyone will read this research or the more in-depth study in Chapter 1 on the definition of a parable. But it is essential for leaders to study the background to the images and the overviews in the text and on the CD.

Usually only one parable can be covered adequately during a worship service. Two, or a maximum of three, can be studied in a one-hour class. This includes an introduction and a discussion of the images as they are projected on a large screen.

The CD provides a visual overview of the parables in Luke, Mark, and Matthew, in the same order as the text, with the two exceptions of the Doorkeepers and Overseer parable and the Children in the Market parable. It is wise to plan one educational session on each of the gospel overviews. Then plan follow-up sessions on the individual parables. For example, a leader can plan a six-to-eight-week course consisting of one

hour a week on the parables of Luke. The first session might look like this:

1. Introduce the parables. (15 minutes)
  - a. Explain the importance of the parables to Jesus' message.
  - b. Present the definition of a parable as a metaphor or simile with a story.
  - c. Explain how the gospel writers, Luke in this case, framed and sometimes allegorized the parables.
  - d. Describe the economic and political context of Jesus' time in occupied Palestine, and that of Luke's time, about 85 CE after Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
2. Show the Luke parables CD. (22 minutes)
3. Discuss Luke's attitude toward Gentiles and toward Rome. (10 minutes)
4. Discuss the reasons Jesus used parables. (10 minutes)

This introduction in session one can be followed by future sessions that might follow an outline similar to the one below:

1. Introduce one parable. (10 minutes)
2. Have someone read aloud the parable at least once, while projecting the images of that parable on the CD. (10 minutes)
3. Discuss the parable using the questions in the text. (15 minutes)
4. Project and read the second parable. (10 minutes)
5. Discuss the second parable. (10 minutes)
6. Summarize and/or make assignments. (5 minutes)