

## **The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A Seven-Part Small Group Study**

The study that follows is designed to start and to guide seven conversations on the parables of Jesus. Each part focuses on a different parable, some of them very familiar and others less so; and all of the parables are from the Gospel of Luke (the Gospel featuring the largest number of parables). Each parable selected is unique to Luke; they are (with the New Revised Standard Version's inserted titles):

- Luke 10:25-37 ("The Parable of the Good Samaritan")
- Luke 11:5-13 (untitled; NRSV subheading: "Perseverance in Prayer")
- Luke 15:11-32 ("The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother")
- Luke 16:1-13 ("The Parable of the Dishonest Manager")
- Luke 16:19-31 ("The Rich Man and Lazarus")
- Luke 18:1-8 ("The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge")
- Luke 18:9-14 ("The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector")

### The Gospels on Parables

The word "parable" is a transliteration of a Greek word that means "a comparing." A parable is a short story that likens one thing to another thing—God to a forgiving father, for example. Jesus uses parables frequently in his teaching: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:33).

Jesus offers a strange explanation for his use of parables: "To you [his followers] it has been given to know the secrets [or mysteries] of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10). Whatever else is made of this statement, it is clear the parables are not easy to interpret. Like the kingdom some of them illustrate, they are mysterious.

### The History of Interpretation

Given this mysteriousness, it should not be surprising to learn that biblical scholars and theologians have not always agreed on how best to interpret any given parable. Approaches have included looking for "a moral generalization (Julicher), a single theological theme (Dodd), a variety of theological themes (Jeremias), existential themes (Via), or a philosophy of

language and perception (Crossan, Funk).”<sup>1</sup> More recently, William Herzog has advocated greater attention to the social setting of the parables in order to see how these teachings challenged “the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine in the time of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Given this diversity, epistemic humility is in order. This study’s approach seeks to foster such humility by exposing readers to a range of interpretations. Specifically, two interpretations (each from a different scholar) will be offered for each parable. It’s an approach not likely to lead to certainty!

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<sup>1</sup> William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## **“The Parable of the Good Samaritan”** **Luke 10:25-37**

This story is found only in Luke’s Gospel. Luke places it between a scene in which a joyful Jesus offers prayer (Luke 10:21-24) and a story in which Jesus visits the village home of Martha and her sister Mary (Luke 10:38-42). It is a parable (a comparison) in that Jesus uses it to call his listeners to live comparably: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

1. Read Luke 10:25-37 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer hears in this parable a focus on mercy, which he names as an emphasis of the Gospel of Luke. The story “supplies a practical model for Christian conduct with radical demands” rather than an “analogy to a spiritual truth”; it should not be allegorized (as in, “Christ is the good Samaritan” or “the inn is the church”). The Samaritan is the story’s hero and should be imitated. Jesus’ decision to make the moral example a Samaritan (Jews and Samaritans despised one another) challenges ethnocentrism—neighbor-love is to be practiced “beyond the bounds of one’s own ethnic or religious group.” In Luke, neighborliness “is an essential part of...‘eternal life.’”<sup>3</sup>
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
Theologian Robert Farrar Capon sees this story as one of Jesus’ “parables of grace.” He interprets the beaten and dying man as a “Christ-figure”; this character is the story’s “defining character.” The story’s call is not to imitate the neighborly Samaritan, as such a story would encourage people to believe (wrongly) that they can save themselves by doing good works. Capon writes, “We don’t need even another minute’s worth of sermons about good works.” What the Samaritan does right is to participate in Christ’s “passion”—his suffering and death—by letting prior plans die and by inconveniencing himself to help a dying man.<sup>4</sup>
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1985), pp. 882-890.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 209-218.

## **“Perseverance in Prayer”**

### **Luke 11:5-13**

The short story found in Luke 11:5-13 is unique to the third Gospel. Prayer is one of Luke’s favorite subjects; here, a parable that has at least something to do with prayer follows Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). The parable itself ends with verse 8; in verses 9-13, Jesus offers additional words of explanation.

1. Read Luke 11:5-13 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
  
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
Theologian Robert Farrar Capon reads the sleepy friend as a “surrogate for God”: “[Jesus] has [his disciples] posit, as the figure of God the Father in this parable, a person who is deep in the experience of the nearest ordinary sacrament of death available to living people, namely, the daily expiration of falling asleep.” The story is an allegory: God dies (the friend sleeps) and rises (the friend rises from slumber); the neighbor who requests his help has died to pride (he’s “a total loss as a host”) and needs his rising friend to raise him from this death. It is dying (in this case, to pride) that leads to resurrection. Just as it is not “the *content* of the importunate friend’s request” that leads to help, neither is it the content of our prayers that moves God; rather, it is our dying that leads God to raise us.<sup>5</sup>
  
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Fred Craddock reads this parable as one part of a larger emphasis on prayer. Luke shows Jesus at prayer repeatedly, which prompts people to question him about this practice. Luke “treats prayer as a learned experience, not simply as a release of feelings. Discipline is clearly implied.” In first-century villages, hospitality was a societal expectation; therefore, Jesus’ hearers would not have thought the midnight request unreasonable. The sleepy man does not represent God. Instead, the parable is an example of “from lesser to greater” reasoning: If a tired man responds to persistence, then how much more will God? Verses 9-13 continue and reinforce this logic.<sup>6</sup>
  
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>5</sup> Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, pp. 219-226.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 153-154.

## **“The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother”**

### **Luke 15:11-32**

Often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” Luke 15:11-32 is likely the most familiar parable of Jesus—despite the fact that it appears only in Luke. Many interpreters point out that this parable’s traditional title is a misnomer. The story features two sons, not one—hence the NRSV’s “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother.” Moreover, the story’s most important character is the father.

1. Read Luke 15:11-32 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer observes that “the central figure in the story is really the father”; he suggests that it should be called “the parable of the Father’s Love.” As in other parables of Jesus, two characters are contrasted—in this case, the younger son and the older son (who represents “the grumbling Pharisees and Scribes”). The father is a God figure. This father’s forgiveness is extended to a “repentant” sinner, with the prodigal’s attitude in verses 18-19 counting as repentance.<sup>7</sup>
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
Theologian Robert Farrar Capon identifies a series of deaths in the parable—the father dies by granting the younger son his inheritance (a son who has in effect told his father to “drop legally dead”), the prodigal wastes away his life far from home, the son dies again when he confesses his sin, and the fatted calf also dies. Farrar sees the fatted calf as a “Christ-figure.” The problem with the older son is that he refuses to die to self. The younger son knows he has died; he is raised back to life by his father’s gracious embrace. That the father has forgiven his son prior to the latter’s repentance is seen in the fact that this embrace precedes the confession. Repentance “is *subsequent to forgiveness*.... Confession is not a transaction, not a negotiation in order to secure forgiveness.”<sup>8</sup>
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>7</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, pp. 1082-1094.

<sup>8</sup> Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, pp. 293-301.

## **“The Parable of the Dishonest Manager”**

### **Luke 16:1-13**

“The parable of the unjust steward has always been disturbing,” writes Kenneth Bailey. “Preachers, writers, interpreters and teachers of the Bible often avoid it like the plague.”<sup>9</sup> This story is found in Luke 16:1-9, with some loosely related sayings following (16:10-13).

1. Read Luke 16:1-13 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
  
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Joel Green hears this parable as one of many examples in Luke of “the extension of hospitality to the poor.” In this case, the poor are tenants who have part of their debt forgiven by a “shrewd” estate manager. But the manager acts out of self-interest; and the master commends the manager for his dishonesty, not his mercy. The parable illustrates well, then, “the problem of trying to read the parables in Luke in an allegorical way—that is, by trying to identify God or Jesus or someone else as characters within the parable.” God should not be identified with the rich landowner who commends “the dishonest manager.” Instead, “the point is simply that Jesus’ audience should learn lessons from ‘the real world’ about how the new age works.”<sup>10</sup>
  
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey sees the “rich man” as “a noble master who demonstrates extraordinary grace to a wayward underling.” Had the master not been noble and loved, then no one would have reported his servant’s misdeeds to him—they would not have cared enough to have done so. Moreover, the master could have jailed the man or sold him as a slave instead of merely dismissing him. The master is a God figure: “God is a God of justice, mercy and great personal integrity.... His sense of justice leads him to dismiss the rascal. His mercy is demonstrated in the decision to dismiss the servant rather than sell or imprison him.”<sup>11</sup>
  
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 332-333.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Green, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 1884-1885.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, pp. 332-342.

## **“The Rich Man and Lazarus”** **Luke 16:19-31**

“The Rich Man and Lazarus” is yet another story found only in Luke. It follows after a section (16:14-18) in which the Pharisees are criticized as “lovers of money” (among other things). It is followed by a number of sayings (17:1-10) and a story in which a Samaritan’s virtuousness is again highlighted.

1. Read Luke 16:19-31 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
Theologian Robert Farrar Capon reads this story as teaching that everyone—both life’s losers and life’s winners—ends up dead. On the other side of death, the rich man remains clueless and unrepentant—even asking that Lazarus be sent to serve him! In contrast, Lazarus “plays out his allotted hand,” accepting death and experiencing resurrection. The rich man “never accepts death”—in this life or the next. As a result, he never gets beyond death. The parable does not teach people “to run out and actively seek a miserable life”; but it does teach people to accept death—which both Lazarus and Jesus do, making the former a “Christ-figure.”<sup>12</sup>
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar William Herzog interprets this parable as a prophetic critique of “conspicuous consumption”—the lifestyle of the rich man. The rich man is clothed in luxury; the scraps that fall from his table are the loaves of bread that the wealthy used for napkins. He may be a Sadducee, as Sadducees believed that their wealth was “God’s overflowing blessing” and that “God parceled out wealth and poverty.” The story challenges the notion that abundance in this life is a sign of God’s favor, on the one hand, and that suffering in this life is a sign of God’s curse, on the other hand. Ironically, the rich man’s pleas in Hades indicate that he still sees Lazarus as the other rather than as kin—he is concerned about his brothers, who are “members of his class,” but he still does not see Lazarus as a brother.<sup>13</sup>
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>12</sup> Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, pp. 312-317.

<sup>13</sup> Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, pp. 114-130.

## **“The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge”**

### **Luke 18:1-8**

“The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge” (Luke 18:1-8) is preceded by a passage in which Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. After establishing that this reign has already begun (“the kingdom of God is among you” [17:21]), Jesus speaks of hard times to come. He then shares “a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1).

1. Read Luke 18:1-8 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
Theologian Robert Farrar Capon interprets the unjust judge as an “anti-hero”—a “stand-in for God.” The widow is not a hero—she is marginalized and vulnerable, yes, but she should be willing to accept her situation (“her death”) instead of trying “to make a buck out of her loss.” The judge “arrives at his judgment...not on the merits of the [widow’s] case but simply on the basis of his own convenience.” The story shows that “God is willing to be perceived as a bad God”—even judging *for* people who have weak cases (which is everyone). God shows mercy to people regardless of whether their causes are just.<sup>14</sup>
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey interprets the judge as “a very human judge who did not fear God or respect people.” Because the judge cares not about either God or people, “the widow’s situation appears hopeless.” The widow is especially vulnerable—the fact that she appears in court, highly unusual for a woman in her day, indicates that she has no living male relatives. In persistently seeking justice (the Torah promised widows certain rights), the widow shows “courage and persistence”; her portrayal is consistent with the positive portrayal of women throughout the Gospels. The parable uses lesser-to-greater reasoning—if an unjust judge rewards persistence, then how much more will a just God reward it?<sup>15</sup>
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>14</sup> Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, pp. 329-336.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, pp. 261-268.

## **“The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector”**

### **Luke 18:9-14**

“The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector” follows immediately after “The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge.” Both of these stories are unique to Luke. The negative presentation of a Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 is consistent with the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees that the Gospel has depicted up to this point.

1. Read Luke 18:9-14 in at least two versions; note any significant differences you hear.
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer hears this parable as another “example” story (like the earlier “Parable of the Good Samaritan”). Also like earlier parables in Luke, it emphasizes the mercy of God (see, for example, “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother”); and it re-employs the approach of contrasting two characters (two brothers, an unjust judge and a widow seeking justice, etc.). Jesus prefers humble prayer to boastful piety. The story also underscores his frustration with the powerful and his love for the outcast—toll-collectors (a better translation than “tax-collectors”) were considered especially sinful for their work on behalf of the Romans.<sup>16</sup>
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following interpretation:  
New Testament scholar William Herzog sees this story as unveiling the injustice of the Pharisees by showing that they are not as different from toll-collectors as they make themselves out to be. Toll-collectors experienced “popular resentment” due to their work for the Romans; but Temple taxation—with “twelve different taxes prescribed in the Torah”—“was equally oppressive.” Who were the Temple’s collectors? The Pharisees. “Like the toll collector who is a functionary in the Roman system, the Pharisee is a retainer in the Temple system. Through the network of synagogues, the Pharisee and his faction participated in efforts to enforce the collection of tithes.” Both characters are toll-collectors; the difference between them is that one wants “to reinforce the status quo,” and the other is “seeking mercy.”<sup>17</sup>
4. How are these interpretations similar/different? Which one do you find more compelling? Why?

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, pp. 1182-1190.

<sup>17</sup> Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, pp. 173-193.