

The Parables of Jesus INVITATIONS TO GRACE



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INTRODUCTION

The Art of Storytelling

From the dawn of civilization, the art of storytelling has been one of the most effective means of communicating values and wisdom from one generation to the next. Our ancient ancestors who lived over 40,000 years ago in caves in Indonesia, Spain, and France began carving on stone the stories they told each other. They wished to leave these stories to those who came after them.

A well-thought-out story does more than simply narrate events. It goes beyond the mere imparting of dry knowledge. It draws the listener or reader into another world. Every story has a truth, a moral, or a new insight wrapped up in its cast of characteristics, setting, and dramatic plot. A good story opens up new ways of understanding. It challenges the listener or reader to think and make judgments.

People of every age have delighted in the tales told to them. In the 6th century B.C., the Greek storyteller Aesop not only entertained but also instructed his audiences with his fables. For three hundred years these stories were repeated by word of mouth before being written down. Yet they never remained imprisoned in a book. Aesop's tale of *The Fox and the Lion* still teaches that "familiarity breeds contempt." His story of *The Hare and the Tortoise* still imparts the wise caution that "slow and steady wins the race." Once stories fall from the lips of the storyteller, they have a life of their own.

In ancient Rome the wealthy would hire professional storytellers to entertain them. They enjoyed having a storyteller accompany them on their long, tedious journeys.

They also employed them for dinners and at other celebrations. In one of his letters, Pliny the Younger, a second century magistrate of Rome, gives an insight into the popularity of storytellers in his day. He tells us that, at local fairs and festivals, storytellers would beckon bystanders to come and listen to them, crying out, "Pay a penny and hear a golden tale." The Roman emperor Augustus even used storytellers to lull him to sleep on restless nights.

For almost two hundred years audiences in Europe enjoyed listening to the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. King Arthur embodied for them the never-ending struggle between good and evil. These tales enthralled and inspired listeners. Then, when Sir Thomas Malory was locked in a London jail in 1460 until his release, he gathered the stories about King Arthur in a book for the first time, thus preserving them for posterity.

No age is without its famous storytellers. The 14th century had the famous English poet Chaucer. In *Canterbury Tales*, he tells the stories of pilgrims on their way from London to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The 18th century had Samuel Johnson, the author of one of the most influential dictionaries in the English language. Johnson would meet regularly with other academics for the sheer pleasure of telling stories. As they competed with each other to tell the best story onlookers would listen with delight.

The 19th century had Hans Christian Andersen. Traveling through the Danish countryside, he captured the attention of children with such stories as *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Ugly Duckling*. And, the 20th century had Walt Disney. He captivated audiences of all ages. He understood what storytellers do. He once

said, “We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.”

But, of all the storytellers the world has ever known, Jesus is second to none. Jesus is the master storyteller. He steals no one’s brush when He paints the vivid images that populate His parables. Both the scholar and the student, the expert and the layperson, can draw inspiration from His parables.

Jesus belonged to a religious and cultural environment that was accustomed to use figurative language to speak of God and His providence. He stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who used images rather than abstract, logical statements to teach and to call others to conversion. The prophet Nathan at the court of King David is a classic example.

It was not unusual for the king to be asked to pass judgment on difficult cases. One day when David was seated on his throne of judgment, Nathan appears before David, feigning to present a case. Unsuspecting, David listens attentively. Nathan tells the parable of “The Poor Man and His Lamb” to uncover David’s sins.

The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David, and when Nathan arrived, he said to him: “There were two men in a certain town. One was rich and the other was poor. The rich man had flocks and herds in great abundance, but the poor man had nothing at all except for one little ewe lamb which he had bought. He cared for it, and the lamb grew up with him and with his children. It would share the little food he had and drink from his cup and sleep in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“On one occasion the rich man welcomed a traveler into his house, but he had no wish to take one

Matthew himself, or someone else before him, may have added the allegorical details and their interpretation to the original parable as told by Jesus. In no way does this lessen the inspiration of the text. The whole process of passing on the words of Jesus from His lips to the written text of the gospels was under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The gospels may not always record the *ipssima verba Christi*, but they always give us the *ipssima vox Christi*.

In the parable in Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks of weeds (ζιζάνια). The word is sometimes translated as "darnel" or "tares." This weed grows to almost two feet tall. Because it looks like the wheat, it is also called "false wheat." It is a poisonous weed. If eaten, it causes dizziness and nausea. It looks just like wheat until the harvest. Like thorns and thistles, darnel was a nuisance to the farmer of ancient times.

In the parable, when the servants see so many weeds growing among the wheat, they are surprised. They questioned the owner. Did he not plant good seed? Seeing the vast quantity of weeds, the owner himself immediately realizes that this is not the hand of Mother Nature. He tells the servants, "An enemy has done this." Someone is deliberately trying to destroy his work. It is an act of subversion meant to ruin his farm.

At this point in the story, the listeners would be expecting the owner in the parable to tell his servants to clear his field so that the weeds no longer have a chance to drain the soil of its nutrients, thus allowing the wheat to grow strong. But Jesus catches His listeners off guard. He tells them, "Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, 'First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

CHAPTER 6

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats

In the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem lies the largest and most important Jewish cemetery in the world. The Kidron Valley runs north to south dividing the eastern side of the Old City from the Mount of Olives. It is actually a dry river bed just below the eastern wall of the Temple Mount. It is crowded with tombs. Some date from the time of Jesus Himself.

According to Jewish belief, the Messiah is to appear in the Kidron Valley at the end of time. This is why many pious Jews have chosen to be buried there. They desire to be first in line for the resurrection on the last day.

Sacred Scripture indicates that the Last Judgment will take place in the Kidron Valley. The post-exilic prophet Joel had said that the final reckoning of humankind would take place in the Valley of Jehoshaphat:

I will gather all the nations together
and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.
There I shall bring them to judgment on behalf of
my people
and my inheritance Israel. *Joel 4:2*

In popular tradition, the Kidron Valley is identified with the Valley of Jehoshaphat. The name “Jehoshaphat” means “the Lord judges.” In the vision of the prophet Joel, the Lord is seated above this valley as He enters into judgment with the nations.

Many times in His public ministry, Jesus crossed over the Kidron Valley. Whether He was on His way to Jerusalem from Bethany, the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, or leaving the city to return to their home,

He would pass the tombs on either side of His path. Whenever Jesus stopped on the Mount of Olives either to pray or teach, His eyes would naturally come to rest on these tombs of those waiting for the Last Judgment. No surprise, then, that Jesus chose this place to give His most extensive teaching on the end times.

Jesus spent the final week of His life teaching in the Temple. Three days before His own death, when He is leaving the Temple, Jesus' disciples proudly point to the magnificent Temple built by Herod. It is glistening in the golden light of the setting sun and they are taken by its beauty. Jesus responds to their admiration of the Temple with His prophecy of its impending destruction: "Do you see all these things? Amen, I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another; every one will be thrown down" (Mt 24:2).

After crossing the Kidron Valley, Jesus comes to the Mount of Olives. His disciples are curious about what Jesus had said about the final days. And so "the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (Mt 24:3). Jesus sits down and responds to their two questions.

First, He speaks of the end of time (Mt 24:4-35). Then He talks about His second coming (Mt 24:36-25:30). Jesus' response, given privately to the disciples, is the longest answer Jesus gives to any question ever asked of Him. Matthew records Jesus' extensive teaching given on this occasion in Jesus' fifth discourse in his gospel (Mt 24:1—25:46).

In this last discourse of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. He also speaks of the Parousia when He will return at the end of

According to one estimate, Jesus asked as many as 307 questions. That is almost three times more than the 113 questions which He answered. The world's greatest teacher knew how important the right question is. Moreover, in preaching the kingdom of God, Jesus preferred not to get entangled in abstract theological discussions. Rather, He spoke to concrete situations, challenging individuals to enter the kingdom.

Once, as Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, He "passed through towns and villages, teaching as he made his way... Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?'" (Lk 13:22-23) This was a hotly debated question in that day. Will all of Israel be saved? What about the Gentiles? There was much discussion and speculation. Not all the answers were optimistic.

The Second Book of Esdras, an apocalyptic book written around the time of Jesus, reflects the attitude of those Jews who leaned too heavily on their bloodline from Abraham. Their pride in being part of the Chosen People led them to espouse a harsh exclusiveness. "The Most High has made this world for many, but the world to come for few" (2 Esd 8:1). "There are many more of them which perish than of them which shall be saved... as a wave is greater than a drop" (2 Esd 9:15-16). "Let the multitude perish then" (2 Esd 9:22).

The unnamed man who questions Jesus about the number of the saved grew up in an atmosphere where there was a strong emphasis on the doctrine of election. The Jews were chosen. The Gentiles were not! What was the opinion of the young rabbi from Nazareth on this topic important to so many?

The man questioning Jesus may well have been one of His own followers. He addresses Jesus as "Lord." Seeing

the small following Jesus has, is it not possible that He is honestly asking whether only the few who accept Jesus as Messiah would enter the kingdom? Or, perhaps, is he worried because Jesus is welcoming the sinners and outcasts? Will these too be saved? Is he, in a more general way, raising the thorny question of predestination? The gospel text gives us no reason for his question.

The question itself places Jesus on the spot. If Jesus responds by saying that there are indeed few in number to be saved, He would be giving His blessing to the harsh, jealous, exclusive attitude of some of His contemporaries. If Jesus says that there will be many who will be saved, He would be quenching the fierce nationalism of others and would be judged disloyal to His own people.

Masterfully, Jesus moves the discussion away from the general to the specific. He sidesteps the speculative question whether few will be saved. No longer is it a matter of how many will be saved. Rather, He turns the spotlight on the man questioning. Will he be one of the saved or not? He answered, "Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter but will not succeed in doing so" (Lk 13:24).

On such an important matter as one's salvation, discussing the issue theoretically pales before the imperative of doing all one can do to be saved. And so Jesus issues a command that applies to this man and to all of us: "Strive to enter by the narrow door."

Jesus' one line answer is actually a short parable. He is using an image familiar to His audience in an attempt to lead them to the truth about the kingdom of God. Jesus speaks of "the narrow door." The Greek word θύρα (thura) can be translated either as "door" or "gate." It is not improbable that Jesus was near some small town on

is “the true light which enlightens everyone coming into the world” (Jn 1:9). His teachings do not gather dust. They do not remain on the printed text of some scholarly tome. They take on flesh in the life of His followers. His teachings are the bread of life for those hungering for the truth.

Civilizations have come and gone. Yet, every age continues to find new meaning and fresh strength in the parables Jesus told. He related these stories along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in the houses of His disciples, at dinner parties with the elite and the marginalized, and in the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple. But these narratives are not tied to one place and one time.

As narratives, the parables are art and thus have the potential to receive new and deeper interpretations. As stories coming from the lips of the Word made flesh, these parables challenge the listener in every generation. We may interpret the parables, but, as the inspired word of God, they ultimately interpret us.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it pierces to the point where it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. Nothing in creation is hidden from his sight. Everything is uncovered and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we must all render an account.

Heb 4:12-13

The parables open us up to the heart of Jesus. On the Cross, His pierced heart revealed the depth of God’s love. The parables expose in literary form that same love beckoning all to enter the kingdom of heaven. To return again and again to the parables is to come closer and closer to the very heart of God. These are not stories to be read

and then tossed aside, but invitations to enter into a deeper union with God who is love.

Much of today's preaching is moralistic. It aims at putting us on the narrow path that leads to heaven. But the parables, with the use of metaphor, function in a different manner. They are images to open wide the door of God's grace in the very moment we listen to them.

The parables bring us face to face with the mystery of God who "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the righteous and the wicked" (Mt 5:45). They overturn our standards of human conduct. They make us feel beneath our feet the tremors of a new world in its birthing. When we meditate on the words of Jesus, we find delight and become "like a tree planted near streams of water, which bears its fruit in season and whose leaves never wither" (Ps 1:2-3).

The memorable images of Jesus' parables remain embedded in our minds. The Good Samaritan. The father of the prodigal son. The tax collector beating his breast. The farmer looking for figs. The seed planted in the ground. The tower collapsing. The rich man clothed in purple and feasting with Lazarus in rags begging at his doorstep. The parables shine the divine light on the experiences of this world and, through them, lead us to God.

The parables make us realize that God does not only occasionally intervene in our lives, but rather is always present. These narratives crack the shell of mundane reality to expose the divine in the human, the supernatural in the worldly. They strike the rock of everyday life to let flow "rivers of living water" (Jn 7:38).

The parables challenge. They excite. They inspire. They confront our freedom and offer us the choice of accepting God's transforming grace in the present