

The Parables for cross-cultural ministry

Question, comments to Danny Hsu

Introduction

The parables were one of Jesus's main vehicles (alongside performing miracles and eating with people) for announcing the arrival of the new reality of His kingdom. Just as the parables invite us into a new view of reality, so we, as we share the gospel through our words and our lives, are also inviting people into a new view of reality.

But first, before we even get into how the parables help us to evangelize in a cross-cultural setting, we need to make clear what the parables are not. (And this may be a challenging idea at first for some of us.)

In short, the parables are not primarily:

- 1) Isolated stories meant to teach good morals. (Even though the parables have moral implications.)
- 2) Not some weird roundabout way of expositing systematic theology. (Even though the parables have theological implications.)

So how should we read the parables and what are the implications for how we evangelize cross-culturally?

The following Bible Project video (5 minutes) will present the outline of this Bible study.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XX-aAg4_U2Q

The following Bible study is an expansion on some of the key relevant points we can draw from the parables to incorporate into our evangelism.

1) The surprising and upside-down nature of God's kingdom

In his book *Simply Jesus* (pg. 90-91), NT Wright writes:

“Jesus, telling stories about a sower sowing seeds, about weeds among the wheat (Matt 23:24-30), about a seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), and about a vineyard where the tenants refuse to give the owner the fruit (Mark 12:1-12), is allowing these ancient echoes [found in the OT] to take root in the fertile and scripture-soaked minds of his hearers, to try to get through to them the message that what they have longed for is happening at last, but it doesn't look as they thought it would! God is at last doing the great new thing he's always promised for Israel—but the wrong people seem to be getting the message, and many of the right people are missing it entirely!

The parables, in fact, are told as kingdom explanations for Jesus's kingdom actions. They are saying: ‘Don't be surprised, but this is what it looks like when God's in charge.’ They are not ‘abstract teaching,’ [meaning, systematic theological doctrine] and indeed if we approach them

like that, we won't understand them at all. Specialists who have studied the way in which Jesus's language works describe a 'speech-act' effect, whereby telling a story creates a new situation, a new whole world...It was the new world in which God was in charge at last, on earth as in heaven. God was fixing things, mending things, mending people, making new life happen."

Study:

Read the parable of the banquet in **Luke 14: 12-24**

Clues:

- a) Banquets were important functions of social status and honor in society at the time.
- b) But the "honorable" people and those with wealth in this story rejected the host's invitation.
- c) In the end, it is the outcast and the poor who show up at the banquet.

Questions:

- a) How is Jesus upsetting and surprising people's view of what banquets are for and who is "worthy" of showing up at a banquet?
- b) Just as few "worthy" people in society at the time would have deemed outcasts and the poor as undeserving recipients of a banquet, how might this translate into what people's conceptions were about God's kingdom and those who were "worthy" of God's kingdom?
- b) How might Jesus be painting a surprising picture of the kingdom of God?
- c) How might these surprising values of God's kingdom be attractive to non-believers?

Study:

Read the parable of the lost son(s) (Luke 15: 11-32)

Clues:

- a) Though the temptation might be to focus all our energy on highlighting the mercy and love of the father, let us remember the immediate context of this parable. Jesus gave this parable as an answer to the grumblings of the Pharisees and teachers of the law: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Read in this light, the Pharisees represented the older son.
- b) Notice that in Jesus's parables, the world basically consists of two groups of people: sinners who are aware of their condition; sinners who are unaware. And here, Jesus points out two paths of salvation (regardless of whether one identifies as religious): the path of self-discovery and exploration; the path of moral rectitude.
- c) Anticipate the reaction that many reading this parable will identify strongly with the righteous (read self-righteous) indignation of the older son. Dwell on this with the people you are reading with.

Questions:

- a) How is Jesus's description of the kingdom of God different than from what many people imagine "heaven" to be?
- b) How might people today be just like the younger son in the parable? What kinds of stories might we be able to share about our own self-discovery efforts and if that ultimately led us closer to really understanding God and truth?

c) Have we ever felt cheated by life? Like we didn't get what we rightfully deserved? How do you think Jesus would respond to this sense of injustice that many have?

2) The necessity of indirect communication

Parables are stories that are told using indirect communication.

1) Why indirect communication? "Direct communication is important for conveying information, but learning is more than information, especially when people think they already understand. People set their defenses against direct communication and learn to conform its message to the channels of their understanding of reality. Indirect communication finds a way in a back window and confronts what one thinks is reality" (Klyne Snodgrass).
(See Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* for fascinating evidence that demonstrates this point.)

2. How is indirect communication used? These stories employ narratives about seeds, treasure, masters, and servants. But the point is to sneak in the back window through these narratives to help us see God, the kingdom, and God's people.

To borrow from poet Marianne Moore's description of poetry, we can see parables as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

3) What's the purpose of using indirect communication? Much related to point 1, because people's set their defense against overt messages that do not already conform to the hearer's existing worldview, indirect communication's goal is to sneak in the back window. But once it has snuck in and the message has taken hold, the goal is to get people to stop, to reconsider their ways, and to change their beliefs and actions.

Study:

Read the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7: 36-47)

Clues:

- a) Note that in a lot of Jesus's teachings and parables, there are basically two types of people in the world: those who know they are sinners; and sinners who are unaware of their sinfulness.
- b) A woman letting down her hair like this was truly a provocative act in this society. Were it not for her genuine tears, one might reasonably find this to be quite scandalous. To Simon, Jesus could not possibly be a prophet since he did not know what kind of woman touched him.
- c) Jesus, in telling the parable, turns the table on Simon and reveals Simon's heart to him.

Questions:

- a) Today, people often posit love and punishment (of sin) as opposites: "I don't believe in a God of punishment, I believe in a God of love." How does this parable turn this false dichotomy on its head?
- b) Sin is often described as "missing the mark" with God's standard. However, this type of explanation, more often than not, is in danger of "missing the mark" in terms of

comprehensibility with the younger generation. How does this parable present to us an indirect and surprising understanding of sin?

c) How can we explain Jesus's logic here that the degree to which we are able to love is a barometer of our own awareness of our sin and the need for forgiveness?

Read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

Clues:

a) Jewish people looked down on the Samaritans

b) The expert of the law here wanted to "justify" himself before Jesus. That gives us some indication of his heart attitude.

c) Notice how in the strictest sense, Jesus doesn't directly answer the question of "who is my neighbor?"

Questions:

a) What do you think might have happened if Jesus answered the expert of the law with a direct rebuke of how he ought to be loving the Samaritan?

b) Instead of directly answering the person's question, Jesus's response seems to peel back and critique a more deeply held assumption about people and life. What do you think that assumption was that was held by this expert of the law?

3) Application: God's kingdom requires a decision

The following is from Klyne Snodgrass's magisterial but heavy tome on the parables, *Stories with Intent*.

"A parable's ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, and move to action... They are used by those who are trying to get God's people to stop, reconsider their ways, and change their behavior. Biblical parables reveal the kind of God that God is and how God acts, and they show what humanity is and what humanity should and may become... They seek to goad people into the action the gospel deserves and the kingdom demands. One of the major problems of Christian churches, of Western Christianity in particular, is our stultifying passivity. The parables compel us—for Christ's sake literally—to do something! Parables do not seek the 'mild morality' about which Kierkegaard lamented but radical cross-bearing, God-imitating response worthy of the name 'conversion.'"

What that means for us is that if we use parables as part of our evangelism, our goal is not to use these stories as some kind of proof text for the superiority of Christian morals (even though that may be one of the real implications).

We do not try to stuff parables to fit our pet theological doctrines (though good theology is absolutely important).

Rather, our goal in using the parables as an evangelistic tool is much like Jesus, to paint for our audience a vision of a new reality that is being ushered in (through the body of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit) even as we speak.

Examples from ministry in China

1) When we lived in China, we were involved with the autism community in our city and also exposed our friends to this community. However, rather than promoting involvement with the autistic community as a form of charity and “helping the needy” (i.e., focus on being a good moral person), I liked to talk to students about the valuable contributions of this community to “mainstream” society. I was also often invited to speak at the autism community’s public events to raise awareness. I liked to talk about how involvement with autistic children could help us be more truthful with our own limitations, weaknesses, and the need for community. Many were surprised by my talks (these public events included many social notables) and I found this to be a wonderful way to engage in deeper conversations of the soul with students.

2) On average, it took about 2 years of lunches, book discussions, and meetings with students before they came to Christ. Of course, some were faster, and some never chose to follow Jesus. Often, my goal with the lunches was not to share a Bible verse or even challenge them. I saw myself as a guide to help them to see the implications of the ideas and values they professed to believe.

One of my students, Dwayne, loved basketball. He chose his English name because of his love for Dwayne Wade (ex-Miami Heat basketball player). One day at lunch, we started talking about role models and I asked him who he would choose to follow in this life. He said Dwayne Wade. I wanted to shoot him down right away but instead engaged him in a long conversation about why he liked Dwayne Wade so much. At the end of the conversation, I pointed out that it seemed that he was willing to invest so much energy in a guy who was really just a good ball player, impressive as that is. I asked Dwayne if he even knew much about Wade’s life outside of basketball. He said no. I asked him something to the effect of how would a ball player with mad skills help him later in life with tougher issues? Wouldn’t he be better off at least considering someone with a more known track record on life?

A couple of weeks later, Dwayne returned to this topic and told me he had now chosen a singer who he really liked. So we engaged in why he liked this singer so much and what his lyrics talked about. I questioned the viability of some of those song lyrics and left it at that.

Long story short, Dwayne is a believer now. He helped his girlfriend (now wife) come to faith and he is one of our group’s best evangelists.

3) It is very popular these days to talk about non-Western cultures as honor and shame-based, and therefore, explanations of the gospel using sin won’t work. Nothing can be further from the truth. While honor and shame can be useful in our discussions of the gospel, this does not mean non-Western peoples are incapable of understanding sin. If that were the case, then the parallel should also be true: Westerners, being sin/guilt cultures, should not be able to understand honor and shame. Otherwise, we encounter the logical problem of why is it that Western cultures can

comprehend the entire human cultural spectrum while non-Westerners can only comprehend a sliver of the spectrum?

More often than not, the problem is not the cultural inability to comprehend the Biblical concept of sin, but our inability to communicate the essence of this important idea in a relevant way. We have to learn to present the idea of sin in metaphors and examples people can relate to rather than to approach as if we are trying to do Biblical exegesis for seminary students.

Many young Chinese grew up neglected and having very little quality interaction with their parents. Busy parents used money and “educational opportunity” as substitutes for loving their children. Many Asians will not disclose such painful information immediately, but once they trust you and open up, chances are, you will find that a majority of them will have also grown up in highly toxic family environments (infidelity, abuse, etc.). A lot of the young people we worked with were interested in understanding more about the idea of love and what it takes to genuinely love others and build relationships with others. This parable has always been very effective at capturing their imaginations, but also, in our discussion of love, for them to begin to turn the searchlight inwards towards their own sinful condition. We discussed numerous examples of why it is that we are able to empathize with the struggles of others when we ourselves have undergone the same struggles. From this common base of human experience, we can then begin to move closer to the relationship between forgiveness of sin and love that Jesus is pointing to with this parable.

Notes:

- There is a huge difference between highlighting important moral implications at the appropriate time (the correct handling of parables) versus presenting the parables mainly as isolated moralistic tales. The question we need to ask is, what is the essence of our faith? Is it to produce good moral people or to call people to follow Jesus radically (which, of course, has moral implications)? Good morals, if that’s really what’s it’s all about, are, after all, found in every single cultural tradition.
- I believe many are tired of the ways of this world. What are we offering as an alternative? Does our picture of the kingdom of God mirror that of the society they already see? Or is it radically different and life giving?
- Christians are often always looking for the “silver bullet” that will magically help non-believers see the light. We look for this “silver bullet” in the form of nifty illustrations or pre-packaged curriculum. Thus, if we approach the parables as a means to rush to the end-goal of getting people to “pray the sinner’s prayer,” we’ll probably be sorely disappointed. Even Jesus told many parables in many ways, and still, most people didn’t get it. So, the parables do not give us a quick fix to converting people.
- The goal of doing a parables Bible study is not to demonstrate to non-believers how well we can model sound Biblical exegesis. For the most part, that kind of approach often reinforces to people that the Bible is just a musty old book with some nice, but quaint ideas that requires experts to explicate. Rather, the hope is that we help people see how Jesus uses these stories to reveal the layers of the human heart (in all its darkness and light) and then to use the parables as a launching point for helping people to evaluate their own lives. It’s a long journey.