

God is Still Speaking: Parables for Today

The following parables reflect my theology that God is still speaking even today. The Bible reveals that God's laws change over time as his children grow, as evidenced by Biblical stories written over millennia, in particular a major shift between the covenants of the old and new testaments. Major changes are seen even in the New Testament from Jesus declaring that "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." Matthew 5:18 (NASB) to both Peter and Paul's teaching that some laws like circumcision are not required for the gentiles. I believe that many of the mosaic laws were good and proper for the time and culture when they were written. Many were necessary for the very survival of the people. The commandment to procreate is an example which was necessary at the time. Large families were critical to survival in harsh rural cultures, especially since many children died before reaching adulthood. However, in today's overpopulated world, such a philosophy is not healthy. God does not expect us, or command us, to continually multiply unabated. He expects us to be responsible for ourselves and our future. The Bible is our religious roots, our guide, our teacher, but must be understood in the context in which it was written. It was written by people with divine inspiration, but those divine revelations were to children. We are still children, but have grown a little bit. Listen to God speaking now in your lives.

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The Parable of the Roots

Three young farmers received grape vines from their fathers. They were all eager to raise vines with prize grapes. They carefully tended their vines, providing water and weeding as necessary. The first farmer knew the importance of the vine's root. He was careful not to damage them and to provide them with mulch and fertilizer. His vines grew vigorously and produced much fruit. But the second farmer considered only the branches and stems of the vine. He did not think about its roots which were hurt as he dug around the vine and pulled the weeds. Despite his unwitting carelessness the second farmer's vine also grew and bore fruit. Unfortunately, the third farmer received a vine with no roots. Undaunted she said to herself "I will pray for God's help and trust in him." And so she planted the vine and cared for it as best she could. Because of her faith in God, the third farmer's vine also put down strong new roots and produced wonderful fruit. After a time, there was a great storm. The winds blew hard and uprooted many vines. Though the second farmer tried to protect his vine, it was lost. The strong roots of the other farmer's vines anchored them against the storm and they lived and continued to bear fruit.

Lesson: The farmers are like three Christians seeking to grow in faith and spirit. The vines are their faith and the roots are the Church and the Bible. If we nurture our religious roots throughout life, we are better able to weather storms of hardship, trial and doubt. The third farmer was able to overcome the lack of these roots because, unlike the second farmer, she recognized the importance of strong roots and sought out help and guidance from God, who provided her with new roots for her faith. Even those without a Bible, without a Church, without knowledge of Christian history, or theology, can be secure in faith if they seek out God's voice in their hearts. So, although it is possible to grow in faith and spirit without roots (with God as your anchor), for most of us it's better to start with good roots! In your faith journey, don't forget to nurture and care for your roots. Participate in a Church of your choice and regularly study the Bible.

The Parable of the Parable

A teacher sought to help her children learn that it is wrong to lie. She could have simply told them that lying is wrong and that they would be punished if they were caught. Instead she told them this story:

Two kittens were each given a sardine as a special treat by their mother. When the mother left, one kitten ate his sardine while another went to get a drink. While his sister was away, the first kitten finished his sardine and, still being hungry, ate his sister's sardine too. When his sister returned, she asked her brother where her sardine was. The brother was ashamed that he ate her sardine and was afraid he would be punished, so he lied. "A big dog came and stole it" he exclaimed! His sister cried and ran to tell her mother. The terrified mother came running back with the father. "Are you all right? Where is the dog" they exclaimed! Well the little kitten did not know what to say. Now he was really frightened. "He, he ran over to the neighbor's yard" he finally stammered. "Stay here," the father said. "I'll go warn the neighbors." Soon the little kitten was surrounded by worried adults with lots of questions. "What did the dog look like? Have you seen him before?" It was all too much for the little kitten and he finally admitted the truth. "There was no dog" he cried in anguish. "I made it up because I ate my sister's sardine". Of course the parents were upset with their kitten. They explained to him that he had done a bad thing and had him say he was sorry to his sister, to them, and to all the neighbors. But of course, they told him they still loved him and said it was brave of him to admit the truth.

After the teacher finished telling the story, she asked the children what they thought, and they discussed why the kitten lied and what the consequences were. In this way, each child learned for themselves why lying is wrong. And they remembered it.

Lesson: One of the most effective ways to teach is to use a story to help people come to a conclusion on their own. This is especially effective because the idea is not forced upon them, but comes out of their own thought processes. It's also important because people don't just accept an idea because of the person telling them about it. They accept it because it makes sense to them.

(Editorial comment: this parable is a little tongue-n-cheek, but a lot of people ask why Jesus taught using parables. I think this illustrates one of the main reasons he did)

The Parable of Things in Common

A Minister brought several things to the altar during service: an apple, an orange, a ball, a coin, and a hula hoop. Then she asked the congregation “How are these things all the same?” “They are all round” said one. “That’s true” said the Minister. “Now how are they all the same and yet also a symbol of God?” Well, that had them stumped for a few minutes, then one perceptive person said “I know, they are all circles and the circle, being without end, represents God.” “Very good” said the Minister as the crowd murmured to themselves. “I have given you a puzzle to teach you a small lesson, but God has given you a puzzle to teach you a great lesson” the Minister said. Then the Minister went out among the congregation and asked each person she touched to go stand before the altar. First an elderly lady went to the altar, then a young boy. A black man, a short woman, a tall man, a big boy, and a young woman in a wheelchair soon followed. The Minister went back to her podium and looked over the persons assembled before the altar for a long moment. Then she turned to the congregation and asked “How are these all the same and in the image of God?” There was much murmuring and talking among the people. “They are all children of God” said one uncertainly. “Of course that is true” said the Minister, “but that’s not quite it.” Finally, one offered “they all have a soul?” “Yes!” said the Minister. “To paraphrase a popular movie character” she said. “Luminous beings are we. Not this crude matter!” And then she explained “It is our souls, not our bodies that are made in God’s image. Hence we are all equal in his eyes.”

Lesson: “Luminous beings are we” indeed. Our spirits, not our bodies, are made in the image of God. This simple concept has profound implications for how we treat one another based on gender, age, race, ability, etc. If we were to truly embrace this fact, there would be much less hate in the world today.

The Parable of the Good Devil

The Devil stood by a lake watching a child drown. A Christian happened along and the Devil said “Look a child is drowning, jump in and save him.” But the Christian was filled with fear and said to himself “If the Devil is telling me this, it must be a trap. If I jump in to save the child I will be eaten by a monster” and he ran off. Next another Christian came by and the Devil said to her “Look. A child is drowning. Jump in and save him.” But she too, reasoned that the Devil sought to trick her. “He wants me to save an evil demon and I will not” she said as she ran off. Next another Christian came along and the Devil repeated his request. This time the Christian said to himself “I know this is the Devil, but a child may be drowning.” And so he jumped in to save the child. Yet again, the Devil stood by a lake watching a drowning child. This time, an atheist came by and the Devil said to her “Look. A child is drowning. Jump in and save him.” Not knowing it was the Devil who spoke, she jumped in to save the child. Which of these have done the work of the Lord?

Lesson: Do the right thing dummy! It’s pretty simple; listen to your heart, your soul, and God. Endeavor to do the right thing to the best of your ability. Occasionally, you may get fooled, but it matters that you did the right thing for the right reasons. There may be consequences, you may be frightened. Sometimes it may be hard to tell what’s right, but always listen to your heart and to the voice of God. Asking “What Would Jesus Do?” is a powerful guide in times of doubt.

The Parable of the Many Signs

A good woman was lost on the road to home. She wandered down many streets and kept looking for signs directing her to the way home. But there were signs everywhere, pointing in all different directions. Some pointed many ways, many contradicted each other. The woman became confused and was soon frantic, despairing of ever getting home. But then she came upon a stranger walking in the road. With concern in his voice, the stranger asked her why she was troubled. The woman recognized the voice and said: "Lord, I'm lost and can't find my way home. There are so many signs and I don't know which to follow." Then the Lord said, "Follow me. I know the way" and together they made the journey home without trouble.

Lesson: Too often we look for signs to show us the way to travel in our Christian life. Not sure about how to handle a personal crisis? Look to Christ for inspiration. Keeping in mind his great commandment, ask yourself "what would he have you do?" Worried about the world and when the end will come? Don't. Sometimes we look to pundits and theologians who claim to understand the Book of Revelations and to interpret it in the events of the day. Practically since Revelations was first written nearly two thousand years ago these people have claimed to be guided by signs in current events that portend the immanent coming of the end times. Every new crisis becomes a sign, from the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, the Mongol hoards, the crusades, the plague, World War I, the great depression, World War II, the red menace, war in Iraq, and now the threat of ISIS, just to name a few. Those that preach these interpretations do so out of arrogance and pride in order to advance their own agenda. Too often it leads to hate and conflict, bringing us down a maze of wrong roads and taking us farther and farther from the Lord. Even if some learned person were to figure it out, it has little bearing on a good Christian's life. We are called to follow Christ, and that's all we really need to know. The Bible admonishes us not to worry about when the end will come because it will come as a "thief in the night". If you follow the Lord, you will always be ready when the end comes, whether it is your own death or the end of the world. Just follow the Lord and he will lead you to your home in heaven. Teach, not force or coerce, others to follow the Lord and they too will find heaven.

The Parable of the Rule

A parent taught two children to be careful crossing the street with the following rules: always look both ways to see that it is safe, only cross when the light is red, only cross in the crosswalk. The children were obedient and always followed the rules. They even wrote them down in a book so as not to forget them. As time went on, they received many other rules, which they also wrote down. Much time passed and the children grew in strength, stature and wisdom. One day, the parent said to the children. "You have done well and have learned much. From now on, I trust that you will always look both ways and be careful when you cross the street. You do not have to cross in the crosswalk only, but wherever it is safe." One child heard the parent and did accordingly, but the other refused to change the rules in the book and kept fast to them always. The children argued and each chastised the other for disobeying. Who then is obedient to the parent?

Lesson: A good parent guides their children as they grow, giving them rules according to their ability. When a parent modifies a rule or even changes a rule for older children, it is not a demonstration of inconstancy, fallacy or weakness, but of the recognition of their growth and need to adjust to changes in the world around them. In some cases, a parent may even provide different rules for different children according to their needs and ability. Why then do so many people expect less of God and insist that his laws are never changing? I suspect one reason is to exert power over others, by insisting that they follow rules that may not always be applicable or even reasonable in today's world. This "hardness of heart" does not come from God. Listen to God speaking.

The Parable of the Teacher

Some young children were taught about the atom by a good teacher. “An atom is made up of a nucleus and an electron. The nucleus is like a planet, while the electron is like a moon spinning around it” said the teacher. The students wrote down what the teacher said so that they would remember it. As time went on the children grew and learned many things. One day the teacher said to the children “Remember when I told you about atoms? Well now that you are older, I can explain that the nucleus is not exactly like a planet. Instead it’s composed of one or more neutrons and protons. The protons have a positive charge and attract the electrons which have a negative charge, kind of like the earth attracts the moon by gravity. Some students listened to the teacher and learned, while others did not. Instead when asked what an atom was they repeated the first description they had learned and when others argued with them, they pointed to the book and said that’s what the teacher taught them. When the children protested that the teacher had taught them a new definition, the stubborn children refused to believe them. As time went on, the teacher taught the students more and more complicated things about atoms until they were learning of things way beyond quantum mechanics, yet some still refused to listen and believed only what they were first taught. “You are all wrong” they said to the more learned children. “The teacher taught us this” they would say, “and teacher is always right, never changes and would never lie. We wrote it all down, so only what we wrote is right.”

Lesson: The lesson here is similar to that of the Parable of the Rule. A teacher or parent can’t expect young children to have an adult understanding of a topic or phenomenon. But for the child to learn, the teacher must explain the topic in terms that the child can grasp. Is the teacher lying to the child by not explaining things exactly as they are? Of course not; certainly not in the sense of attempting to deceive the child. It is often through imagery, metaphor, and allegory that a child can relate to and begin to understand complex topics. But it is vital that the child let go of the simplistic explanations and move forward in understanding as more and more things are learned. How do we know when to abandon an old cherished concept for a new one? When the new concept makes more sense. In the case of theology, it is when we listen to God our teacher as he speaks to us today.

The Parable of the Good Cake

Many people sat around a large table in a big kitchen. A delicious looking cake sat at the center of the table. In front of each person was a small plate. Some plates held half-eaten slices of cake, but many held untouched slices. Still others had not yet taken a slice and their plates were still clean. The Chef stood off to the side quietly watching. The room was noisy because most of the people were arguing. Some argued that the cake was magic and the Chef created it out of thin air. Others argued that the cake was baked in the oven that sat still warm in one corner of the kitchen. Some said the Chef used a box mix, while others said the cake was made from scratch. One vigorously exclaimed that the Chef had nothing to do with the cake and tried to explain the intricate chemical processes by which the cake was formed. Another learned person interjected that of course the cake formed by those well-known processes, but that the Chef had placed the cake in the oven and turned it on. The debate raged on. But amidst the din, one person sat quietly eating the cake. When finished the person leaned back and smiled, then thanked the Chef for such a delicious cake before leaving. The Chef smiled and was pleased.

Lesson: Instead of arguing about how God created us, isn't it enough that he did? And for those that deny the scientific theory of evolution on earth and condemn others for it, why do you want to limit God's ability? We are talking about a God that created an entire universe and everything in it. The book of Genesis was written more than two thousand years ago and is based on a much older oral tradition. It is divine revelation, and is a very reasonable explanation of creation for the people of the time. In fact the first creation story in the book of Genesis parallels the sequence of evolutionary events to a large degree, and is a perfectly reasonable explanation of creation for people of the time. To be sure, whether you accept the theory of evolution, or hold to the biblical account of creation you are still a good Christian as long as you recognize God as the ultimate creator. It's only when you attack and condemn others for their conviction that you begin to stray.