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Reading the Parables through the Lens of Social Justice

> "He sighed and whistled, bending his old head. He said, 'You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the … appalling … strangeness of the mercy of God.'"[1]

1. Introduction

The longer I study and teach about the parables, the more uneasy I become. Scared may even be a better word for it, if I am being honest. I know this may seem an odd way to begin but bear with me. Two things unsettle me.

First, recognizing that parables are notoriously difficult to interpret and that they are "stories with intent" as one writer calls them, I am afraid that I may be missing the point. As a person of faith who has spent many years studying the Bible, teaching it as a professor, and working at an educational institution with deep roots in the Christian tradition, it is troubling to think that I might actually miss the point of the parables. Looking at their complex history of interpretation it is clear that others have done so. And it is a real possibility that I might too.

[1] Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Penguin Classics; New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 268.

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Matthew E. Gordley.

Second, and still more unsettling, recognizing that in the parables Jesus calls his listeners to live a radical new kind of life marked by mercy, justice, valuing of community, and forgiveness (the values associated with what Jesus called the "kingdom of God"), I am afraid that I may *not* be missing the point. The kind of human existence to which Jesus calls his followers is one that sounds appealing—who wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of divine mercy?—but also carries with it significant obligations to others. If we take seriously the message of Jesus in the parables, then we are called to recognize that there are harmful prejudices within us that need to be challenged and there are demanding, new actions that we need to take. These attitudes and actions relate not only to ourselves but to the world around us. Moving toward a life marked by mercy, justice, community, and forgiveness means embracing a commitment to the flourishing of all people. And in a world where only some are flourishing and many are suffering, and where complex societal forces dehumanize and degrade, and where ideologies and beliefs divide, the parables challenge us to think differently and live differently. Mercy, justice, community, and forgiveness—the themes of many of the parables—call us to care for our neighbors, whoever they may be. Their call is a call to restoring those who are broken and making whole those whose dignity has been lost. If I am not missing the point, then the call of Jesus in the parables is an appeal to recognize that it is only in living a life of concern for others' wellbeing that one is able to live fully into one's own humanity, and thus live in the way of "the kingdom." Scary.

Of course, not everyone who reads the parables takes away such a message of other-concern and solidarity with our fellow humans in the here and now. As metaphorical stories there is an almost limitless plurality of interpretations that are possible for the parables and what they convey about the kingdom of God. But the "religious" element of the parables (I mean, they are found in the Bible and on the lips of Jesus who is a religious teacher, right?) has led many readers to find in them a spiritual message rather than an ethical one. In this line of thinking the parables teach primarily about spiritual realities like salvation, getting into heaven, and gaining eternal life. One quick example is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard who receive their

wages at the end of the day in Matthew 20:1–16.[2] A common "spiritual" interpretation understands this parable as really being a message about salvation, becoming a Christian, and receiving eternal life. Overlooked entirely are the this-worldly dynamics of the complex relationship of the landowner, the laborers, and the societal obligations the characters had toward one another within the harsh realities of the agrarian economy of Jesus's day. By ignoring the concrete details of the parable and spiritualizing the message, many interpreters throughout history have unintentionally "domesticated" the parables—ignoring their ethical implications and making them easier to live with.[3] Yet if one takes seriously the explicit teachings of Jesus about social concerns together with his actions on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, one can see that the parables themselves also deal with these same concerns about the human experience in this world. As Michael Cook explains, "Parables … raise in an acute and striking way the question of how concrete and specific was Jesus' own concern for justice."[4] In this way, and importantly for anyone who wishes to understand the historical Jesus and his concerns in their context, "Parables bring us to the very heart of Jesus' ministry."[5]

While spiritual interpretations of the parables abound, throughout history there have also been those who have taken seriously the ethical challenge of the parables and come to this point of recognition of their social implications. Whether theologians, philosophers, writers, ministers, or activists, they have read the parables, heard the call to live fully into their own humanity, and were moved to devote their energies and activities for others. At my university—a school founded by the Sisters of Mercy and that continues to be animated by their spirit—I have encountered some of these heroic people, some in person, and some through their legacies of writing and action. Teaching the parables in such a context I have made an important discovery: it is not just whether

[2] See the discussion of this parable in Chapter 8.

[3] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 3–4.

[4] Michael L. Cook, "Jesus' Parables and the Faith that Does Justice," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 24, no. 5 (1992): 4.

[5] Cook, "Jesus' Parables," 3.

we read the parables or even how we read the parables that impact our understanding of their message. It is also *who we read them with* that matters. And reading the parables with the reflective and action-oriented Sisters of Mercy led me to some startling moments of fresh insight about the mercy of God as both a spiritual reality and a practical one.

Engaging with the parables in my current setting also challenged me to wrestle with the kind of mercy that the parables invite us to show to ourselves and to others. In this way I have come to see that the message of the parables is both personal and communal, with implications for my own personal faith but also for matters of societal importance and social justice. So this book has grown out of my own context and experiences. I have written it as an invitation to you not only to read the parables, but to read the parables in conversation with some of these individuals who have grappled with the message of Jesus and brought it to life in their generation in their own way. By doing so we will consider together the claims of mercy on us and on our world; claims that seem more urgent with each day that passes.

The context in which this book is being written in the United States in the 2020s calls attention to ways that mercy is needed more now than ever. An important aspect of mercy, as we will see, involves the simple act of seeing the need of human beings around us. In a global pandemic and its aftermath, inequities in our society have been brought into sharp focus. Before vaccines were available all of us could see human dignity being compromised in essential workers, often people of color, who contracted the coronavirus and died from it at rates disproportional to the rest of society. Police brutality, use of excessive force, and killing of black people are continuing to occur at alarming rates. The murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in 2020 seems to have been a tipping point for many white Americans who were forced to come to grips with the reality that racism impacts the lives of black and brown Americans on a daily basis throughout their lives. Americans of all backgrounds have had no choice but to see these realities. Yet each person's response, and our collective response, are still being enacted and written.

Beyond what is happening in the United States, the world itself is facing unprecedented challenges which call for responses of mercy. The growing gap between the poor and the wealthy, the disproportional impact of climate change on the poorest, violence against women and

children, and ongoing military conflicts are impacting literally billions of our fellow humans. These global crises call for our attention and call for us to respond. Can we respond with mercy? How? And what would it look like if mercy were animating our responses to what we see around us and experience ourselves? With these questions we can see that we are facing not only religious questions, but ethical ones. What is the right thing to do in our time?

Author and activist Jim Wallis refers to the present moment in US history with its multiple crises of racism, gun violence, white nationalism, intolerance, and political and social discord as a "Bonhoeffer moment"—referring to the German theologian and pastor who served, preached, and wrote during the rise of Hitler in Nazi Germany.[6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer explored what faith in Jesus meant in response to the rising authoritarianism and evils perpetrated by the Nazis. In an era in which large sectors of Christian churches failed to offer any meaningful critique or resistance to the Nazi agenda, Bonhoeffer was ultimately imprisoned for his resistance efforts and killed in a German prison just weeks before the end of World War II. Wallis suggests that individuals who consider themselves followers of Jesus should ask Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" This question requires those who identify as Christian to ask what the teaching and message of Jesus means in the current context and current historical situation. In particular it invites consideration of whether following God may require Christians to resist in some way the direction our society is moving or even to actively disobey unjust laws. Wallis writes, "We need to understand Jesus and his teachings to shape how we respond to this historical and moral crisis if those of us who call ourselves 'followers of Jesus' want to keep calling ourselves that with any credibility."[7]

In the parables we come face to face with the central message of Jesus. Through them we will see that Jesus invites his followers to act in ways that promote the dignity of every human. The short stories of Jesus invite all readers to see the needs around us, and to respond with compassion. They invite us to question our assumptions and our sense of

[6] Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis? Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019), 184–186.

[7] Wallis, *Christ in Crisis*, 186.

who is deserving of God's favor and who is undeserving, who is right and who is wrong, and see the world and its people in new ways. The parables challenge readers to see and feel the suffering of others, and to act to alleviate it. They invite us to envision a world in which people act in ways that promote human connection and foster communities where everyone thrives.

In short, the parables invite us to live in mercy—to live with compassion and love in light of the reality of what Jesus called the "kingdom of God." The parables remind us that in every moment of life we either need to show mercy to others or we need mercy shown to us. Oftentimes both. And at different times one more than the other. And it is through living out mercy and living in mercy that we can live into our full humanity. If we close ourselves off from this kind of genuine concern—whether showing it or receiving it—we close ourselves off to a part of what it means to be human. So in a very real way, the parables of Jesus offer a challenging invitation to embrace our full humanity. And in so doing, to change the world for the better through what might be called an ethic of love.

So this book is an invitation and you are the one who is invited. You are invited to enter into a conversation—one that literally goes back two thousand years. This conversation is a two-way dialogue between Jesus and his listeners. Jesus taught in parables and through them offered the world a challenging message about what it means to be human—human in the fullest sense of the word. For Jesus, this was a message about a radical kind of life: a life marked by mercy as a defining characteristic. His listeners responded in different ways, of course. Some dismissed his teaching, missing the point or being unwilling to struggle with its meaning. Some sought to understand his teaching and to wrestle with its implications for their lives. They asked questions and engaged in dialogue and discussion about what it all meant. That dialogue has continued through the centuries as readers in each generation have encountered the parables in new contexts and in new circumstances. You are now part of this ongoing dialogue. Each chapter of this book is an invitation to explore a parable and consider its significance at the time of its original telling and also its significance today in our time. Through engaging with these stories we all are invited to consider how mercy might be a part of our world, our communities, our relationships, and our individual lives today. We all are invited to consider what it means to be more humane and more fully human.

In this introductory chapter we will lay a foundation for entering into the conversation. First, we will need to understand a little bit about what parables are and why Jesus used them as a primary vehicle for his message. Second, we will need to consider why it is important to think about the original meaning of the parables as they were understood by the first-century listeners. We will see that if we want to understand what they may mean for us in the "here and now," it will be helpful first to grapple with what they meant "then and there." Third, we will introduce a major theme that runs through the parables—mercy—and meet Jon Sobrino, a figure who has understood this message in a striking way as a matter of life and death. His insight into the social implications of the teaching of Jesus in the parables will prepare us for our fourth task: exploring the idea of reading the parables through the lens of social justice. With all of the above perspectives in mind, we will wrap up this introduction by outlining a process of reading the parables that will enable us to appreciate the original message of the parables and to consider their ethical implications for our contemporary contexts. We will use this process in the remainder of the book to look together at eight parables of Jesus in conversation with influential thinkers in social justice.

When it comes to interpreting the parables, author Barbara Green uses two images of a butterfly that I find very apt as we begin this study.[8] The first image is that of a butterfly preserved in a display case complete with arrows and pins pointing to various aspects of the butterfly's physical characteristics. Quite analytical. The second is an image of a live butterfly gracefully fluttering through the air: awe inspiring and uplifting to behold. Both types of beholding a butterfly have their place, though we probably have our preference for one or the other. For the truly curious, the analytical view can enhance our appreciation of the butterfly in motion, and vice versa. In the same way, we can look at parables in two very different ways. In this book, my goal is for us to be able to look at them in both ways in order to gain the benefit that each way of perceiving offers. In each chapter I will provide some analytical pointers to the features of each parable that we will examine: the parable in a display case. But each chapter will also engage with key thinkers, writers, and

[8] Barbara Green, *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables through Metaphor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 10.

activists who have sought to put the message of the parables into action in their own way. Whether in their writings or in their communities, these are individuals who draw our attention to issues of social justice and the ethical implications inherent in the parables. As we engage the parables and these individuals, we will be challenged ourselves to consider enacting the kind of mercy the parables call us to. Through this process in each chapter I hope that we will not only understand the parables better, but capture a glimpse of the beauty of each parable in flight.

2. What Are Parables?

According to the Gospels—the books of the New Testament that tell us about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus—parables are a type of teaching method that Jesus used extensively. Here we will take a look at what a parable is and how parables convey their teaching in some very unique ways.

As a starting point we can begin with New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine's clever reference to the parables as "short stories by Jesus."[9] This is a fitting description in many ways. Most of the parables are given in story form. They have memorable characters (a good Samaritan, a prodigal son, a farmer sowing seed, a king hosting a wedding banquet). They have plots that develop, some in quite dramatic ways. And like good stories, they are interesting to listen to. However, if we approach the parables expecting to encounter a short story such as we might read today, we will be surprised by a couple of things. First, some of these "short stories" are very, *very* short—as short as one or two sentences. Second, though these "short stories" have memorable characters, in all but one parable the characters are not named. This creates an interesting dynamic as well, reading about anonymous characters who are often more like general types rather than specific individuals. On these bases alone, our concept of "story" does not quite capture what we are reading when we read a parable. Further complicating matters, some of the teachings that are called parables by the gospel writers are not stories at all but really just clever comparisons.

[9] Levine, *Short Stories*.

The original Greek term from which we get the English word parable carries with it the connotation of a comparison: putting two different things alongside of each other. This is useful to know as we read the parables. They are not simply stories with a point. Instead, they are comparisons of two unlike things to bring out some truth about one or the other. Understanding what that truth is is the hard part. Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan puts it this way: "The parables describe what is unknown in terms of what is known. Parables use the language of analogy and comparison."[10] Through a simple story about what is known and familiar, the point of parables is to tell us about something external to the story; something that is unknown, perhaps unfamiliar, but is the important point of the parable—more important than the story itself. As literature professor Leland Ryken writes, "The parable is a story that means what it says and something besides."[11]

When Jesus introduces his teaching with a phrase like "Listen to another parable…" (Matthew 21:33) he is, in effect, saying, "Listen to this comparison, and see what you make of it." In another place, Jesus starts out even more explicitly about the comparative nature of what he is saying: "The kingdom of God may be compared to…" (Matt. 22:2). What follows next is a parable. And just as parables invite the reader to do the work of comparison in different ways, so too do they end in a range of ways. Sometimes parables end with a question. At other times they end abruptly, inviting the listener to imagine where the story goes from there (e.g., Matt. 21:40).

In this vein we can see that for a formal definition of parables, Arland Hultgren's is a good one: "A parable is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God's kingdom, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined."[12] In this book we will focus mostly on parables that are of the narrative or story type. Another type of parable is called a similitude, in which a simple comparison is made without all the features of narrative. Using this definition of parable there are about thirty-eight parables of Jesus recorded in the New Testament.

[10] Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 3.

[11] Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 145.

[12] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (The Bible in its World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3.

As a kind of folk discourse common in the ancient world, parables are a creative medium that is uniquely suited to convey a provocative message in a simple and even disarming way. One intriguing point about parables is that they require the reader or hearer to really think about what might appear at first glance to be a relatively simple interaction. Of course, if the reader or hearer is not interested in really understanding, he or she can leave it at face value. But the point of a parable is to use a comparison to help the listener gain some insight, and then to do the hard work of considering how that insight may be true in the listener's own life. Through this act of comparison parables "metaphorically redescribe our world" and invite us to a fresh awareness of how things are or how they might be.[13] And then, in view of that insight, the listener is invited to consider what action, attitude, or thought might need to change in order to live in line with the mercy of God and the reality of God's love for all of humanity.

In these acts of narrative comparison it is important to recognize that there is a range of ways in which the comparison works. Some parables can be understood as allegories where each element of the story has a specific corresponding meaning in another sphere. The parable of the sower is most often understood in this way since an allegorical interpretation is provided by Jesus himself in Matthew's Gospel (see Matt. 13:1–9 and 18–23). Most parables, however, are not allegories (though as we will see many have been interpreted that way throughout history). Rather, parables are more often metaphorical in the sense that it is the story as a whole that conveys the meaning, not the individual parts. Many of the overarching images Jesus uses did have familiar allegorical meanings that would have been readily understood by his audiences. These just would not be the kind of complex and detailed allegories sometimes seen in the interpretation of the parables by early theologians in the Patristic period. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown explains, "Simple allegory and metaphor, and allegories already familiar to his hearer from the Old Testament—these lay within his [Jesus's] illustrative range."[14] For example, for listeners familiar with the Jewish Scriptures where writers compare the people of Israel to a vineyard (see, for example, Ps 80:8–10 or Isaiah 5:1–7), a story about a landowner and his vineyard would carry obvious connotations as

[13] Green, *Like a Tree Planted*, 10.

[14] Raymond E. Brown, *New Testament Essays* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1968), 323.

being potentially a story about God and God's people. Similarly, with the biblical emphasis on God as king or God as a father, one might expect a parable about a king or a father to represent God. Those images sometimes *do* and sometimes *do not* seem to carry those meanings in the parables of Jesus. Often the parables challenge readers' presuppositions about those generic characters, inviting readers to wrestle with the differences. Thus, instead of asking whether a parable is an allegory or not, it will be more beneficial to note the range of degrees to which the narrative details may be understood to be allegorical, and to recognize the ways this varies from one parable to another.[15]

In this process of comparison, it is important to note also that parables show both what God is like and unlike. The comparisons can work two ways. And readers must be careful not to identify every act or deed or word of characters in a parable as expressing what God is like. The point may be that God is like one particular aspect of the story, but not others. Understanding this subtle dynamic is important, and it is where the process of interpretation, and interpretation in conversation with others, comes into play.

To take one quick example, in the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15–24, Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God, after someone dining with him proclaims, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" The parable concerns a master who gives a great banquet and invites many people. We might expect that the banquet represents the kingdom of God and that the master represents God. Thus, we may expect to learn something about God from the actions of the master. However, the parable goes on to show the master getting increasingly angry as individuals make excuses to avoid the banquet and do not willingly come to it. Finally, the master tells his servant to force people to come to the banquet, and also that those who would not accept the invitation will never dine with him again. These descriptions of anger, forcing people against their will, and holding a grudge clearly do not align with the explicit teaching about God from the rest of Scripture as a compassionate parent, or even from other

[15] Carey explains this noting that, "Every parable has elements that map onto realities beyond the world of the parable, but not every parable is an allegory. We discover that not all parables are alike." See Greg Carey, *Stories Jesus Told: How to Read a Parable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 102.

parables comparing God to someone who goes out himself and actively seeks what has been lost. This jarring parable should cause us to remember that parables both reveal what God is like and unlike. In this case, the parable gives us pause, and we can be grateful that God is not like that angry and spiteful dinner host. At the same time, what does this reveal about the kingdom of God? It may indeed be like a banquet which people choose not to attend, even though there is plenty of room and everyone, from the least to the greatest, is welcome. As a listener to such a parable I might then ask where I see myself in the parable: have I accepted the invitation, or am I like those who make excuses and prioritize other things over the kingdom? Or in a different vein, is there some area of life in which I myself am an angry, spiteful host toward people around me? The challenge of the parable is often found in our response, not in linking every character in the story to what God is like.

As an aside here, we might also ask why the master had such a difficult time getting people to come to his banquet. As listeners to this intriguing story we can only imagine. Maybe he was a terrible host. Maybe he was a tyrant. Maybe his (very obvious) anger issues were well known. Matthew's Gospel includes an even more extreme retelling of this parable with the host as a murderous king who sends troops to destroy those who would not attend and who had previously murdered his messengers (Matthew 22:1–14). Since the servants ultimately brought in whoever they could find off the streets, one man ended up there without a wedding robe. When the man cannot explain why he is not properly dressed the vengeful host gets even *more* unhinged (if that were possible!) and says to the servants: "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 13). Wait, what?! Again we are confronted with a gripping story that does not go as we expect it will. The challenge is to wrestle with what the parable says to us while recognizing that every detail is not a word picture of what God is like. The comparison of the parable invites us to consider critically what is being brought into focus.

So we see that a parable is a comparison, and often a narrative one, which draws the listener in with an interesting scenario built around experiences familiar to the audience. While the story may be interesting in and of itself, it is the comparison to another reality which is where the challenge for listeners lies. In this sense we can talk about the internal coherence of the story itself which is referred to by parables scholar Dan

Otto Via as the "in meaning." At the same time, we can consider the realities in the reader's world to which the story is pointing as capturing the "through meaning."[16] It is this challenge to the listener's values, this "more besides," that is of ultimate importance. But as we will see, unless we understand the realities of the actual story itself as much as possible—the in meaning—, we will be at a loss in considering the full range of challenge that a parable may offer to us today—the through meaning.

3. Why Parables?

As we start out on this exploration of the parables we should pause for a moment to consider why it was that Jesus taught in parables. From our modern vantage point we can see a number of reasons why this method of teaching was particularly effective. First, parables are entertaining—everyone loves listening to a good story. In this way parables are an effective way of capturing peoples' interest. Second, parables are memorable. Unlike a sermon or classroom lecture it is much easier to remember a story. One can recall a story and reflect on it. One can also retell it. And that is exactly what has happened with the parables: they have now been told and retold for centuries.

Beyond just being entertaining and memorable, a third reason for Jesus's teaching in parables is that parables have the power to engage the mind on a deep level. On the level of the story being told, they involve the imagination of the listener in picturing the scene that is unfolding. And because they move in the realm of comparison rather than straightforward assertion, they also require the listener to think and actively question what is going on in the story and why. And here is the brilliant effect of a parable which is captured well by C. H. Dodd:

> At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought.[17]

[16] Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 83–84.

[17] C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1961), 16.

This "leaving the mind in sufficient doubt" is a key aspect of what parables do in such a unique way. Because of this puzzling dimension of parables, Howard Thurman half-jokingly referred to parables as "can openers for the mind."[18] They get the listener thinking about how such an interesting concrete, this-worldly occurrence can reflect a spiritual meaning. Whether one wants to or not, when listening to parables one almost automatically begins to ask questions such as: What is the comparison that Jesus is making here? What does this story have to do with understanding God, other people, or myself in relation to them? Where do I see myself in the parable? Metaphor has the capability to engage the mind in deeper and more powerful ways than other more direct forms of communication.

Fourth, parables have the power to engage the heart. Though they feature common occurrences and scenes, they often contain a twist that brings an element of surprise and which may cause an emotional response in the reader. The twist is often what makes the parable interesting or even disturbing. In addition to engaging the imagination of the listener, this element of a parable is one that holds the potential to engage the emotions. Greg Carey refers to this feature as a "hook" and what he describes as "a point at which the story jumps off the rails of normalcy."[19] The banquet parables noted above are great examples of parables where a fairly standard scene becomes anything but. And such a departure from audience expectations invites further consideration of both the story itself and one's own emotional response to it. It is also commonly in that twist or surprise element that the significance of the parable is to be found. Carey puts it this way: "A parable's hook challenges us to open our imaginations to the possibility that the things of God are not as we'd expect. Parables with hooks refuse to wrap spiritual lessons in fancy paper and tie them up with a pretty bow."[20]

Fifth, because of the above dynamics, the parables are a disarming way to raise difficult issues. They cause the listener to let her guard down as she thinks about the features of the story. And suddenly, when she realizes the significance of the parable, she is faced with a challenge of accepting it or not. Green notes how parables "sidle up" to us

[18] Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 8.
[19] Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, xi.
[20] Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, 105.

innocently and then "blindside us, suddenly disclosing to us something we might have screened out had we seen it coming."[21] This is much different than starting with a difficult truth and trying to explain it directly. In this way, parables are an indirect and less threatening way of inviting listeners to consider challenging realities. Crossan cleverly notes: "Parables are traps for thought and lures for participation."[22] He uses the phrase "participatory pedagogy" to describe the ways parables invite the listener to engage with their significance. Megan McKenna suggests that parables are the "arrows of God" that have the capacity to pierce the hearts of listeners.[23] What each of these writers is getting at is the unique way in which parables draw readers into a consideration of their own values, often without their realizing it until it is too late.

The features above combine together to suggest the power of parables to engage a listener at multiple levels of their consciousness, including the mind, the heart, and the imagination. For teaching religious ethical concepts that his listeners would not only remember but enact, Jesus chose a very powerful instructional tool. Ethicist and theologian Lisa Sowle-Cahill explains, "To be practically effective, theological and ethical ideals must grip people and communities at more than an intellectual or theoretical level. They must have an imaginative and affective appeal."[24] The power of parables is found in that they possess this very quality.

The gospel writers tell us that Jesus had other reasons for speaking in parables. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each recount that Jesus explained his use of parables to the disciples (see Mark 4:10–12; Luke 8:9–10; Matt. 13:10–17, 34–35). Notably, Matthew, Mark, and Luke's explanations

[21] Green, *Like a Tree Planted*, 20.

[22] John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 244.

[23] Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

[24] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics* (New Studies in Christian Ethics; New York: Cambridge University 2013), 6. Along these lines Cahill also notes theologian Jon Sobrino's linking of orthodoxy (right thinking) and orthopraxis (right acting) with what he calls *orthopathy* (right feeling): "To do what is right requires an attraction to the good, commitment to its reality, and the imagination to see possibilities of goodness that stretch beyond present conditions" (7). Thus the importance of symbol, story, art, music, and ritual in promoting ethical values.

each connect the use of parables with fulfillment of prophetic expectations as Jesus quotes from Isa 6:9–10 and Ps 78:2. The passage in Isaiah speaks of listeners whose hearts are hard and who refuse to hear the message of healing and forgiveness—a passage that was likely very important to the gospel writers themselves as they wrestled with issues in their own day of who would or would not accept the message about Jesus. The verse from Ps 78 suggests that Jesus's use of parables was a fulfillment of prophecy:

> Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."
>
> (Matt. 13:34–35 citing Ps 78:2)

Matthew clearly understood that Jesus's choice to use parables was a visible demonstration of the arrival of the new age, the kingdom of heaven, and that it was what the prophets had foretold. Seen in these ways, teaching in parables takes on some added depth of significance. We will consider this dimension of the significance of parables more fully in the next chapter.

Finally, we can add one additional reason for parables. Concepts like the "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven" are ultimately divine mysteries that exceed human understanding. "God" is ultimately beyond human understanding in any direct sense. The divine exceeds the capacity of human language, so analogy and comparison are needed. These are spiritual realities that cannot be seen and observed around us with just our five senses. They are mysteries that cannot be directly described. As Carey puts it: "The parables call us to look through them to other realities."[25] Parables, through the language of comparison, give insight into unknown things by comparison with things that are known. Hultgren explains, "The verbal images and the behavior of the metaphorical figures described are more powerful than propositional language about God could convey."[26] Norman Perrin puts it even more directly: "The parables of Jesus mediated to the hearer

[25] Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, 106.

[26] Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 10.

an experience of the Kingdom of God."[27] Through parables readers come into contact with deep truths in ways that are less amenable to direct assertion, but nonetheless very real.

4. The Parables as They Were Originally Heard

Reading the parables of Jesus in the twenty-first century requires us to be aware of several things that we may not immediately recognize. First, it is important to keep in mind that the daily life experiences and worldview assumptions of Jesus's first-century Jewish audience were very likely quite different from the daily experiences and worldview assumptions of any of us reading the parables today. That means that if we are to try to understand what Jesus intended his first audiences to "get" out of his parables, what the challenge was that he intended to convey, we will need to make a concerted effort to understand the perspectives and experiences of first-century people. Since the parables involve stories which include things like farms, vineyards, slaves, kings, and sheep, those of us with no day-to-day experience of these things need to do a little bit of work to understand them and their significance to first-century life. That is not easy, but it is possible thanks to the research of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and others who have studied life in the ancient world. We will get to some of those details of ancient life later, but for now it is important simply to recognize that "our" world and "our" assumptions about life may be quite different from those of Jesus's listeners. At the very least, we should not assume that our own views or experiences are normative. If we can recognize that and keep it in mind, we can avoid the trap of assuming we know the meaning of a parable just by taking it at face value.

Second, if it is hard to get back into a first-century mindset, there is another complication. When we read the parables in the Gospels, we are not hearing the stories directly from the lips of Jesus. Instead, we are reading the parables given to us in ways based on the purposes and understanding of each gospel writer whether Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

[27] Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 56.

The Gospels were written in the generations after Jesus, only after the disciples had been telling and retelling the parables for many years. Since parables are open to a variety of interpretations (that is part of the challenge of parables—they get us to think and consider how the parable applies to us), we need to keep in mind that the particular interpretation that one of the gospel writers gives to the parable may not be the only possible one. When Jesus originally spoke the parable, what did he mean? What range of possibilities did he have in mind for his listeners?

In some instances the gospel writers will give us the interpretation of a parable. We may have cause to wonder, though, whether that interpretation was Jesus's intention or was an explanatory comment by the gospel writer. The gospel writers were communicating about Jesus with a message that was suited for their day, decades after Jesus first taught the crowds in parables. By this time communities of Jesus-followers had been formed and new sets of issues had arisen within these communities. The gospel writers conveyed their understanding about the reality of Jesus and his teaching, but certainly did so in ways that were designed to speak to the needs of their audiences. We might keep this in mind as we consider the significance of any particular parable: it may have had different significance at different points in its being told and retold.

There is a third challenge to reading the parables as they were originally heard. We may have some unrecognized biases and assumptions about these parables which unconsciously shape how we interpret them. This is particularly true with regard to how some parables have been interpreted, in some cases for centuries, in ways which present a false picture of first-century Judaism. "Anti-Judaism" is a word that describes approaches to reading the New Testament that denigrate and devalue Jewish belief and practice.[28] This is seen most readily in assumptions that Judaism was legalistic, hard-hearted, unmerciful, and hypocritical (often represented by Pharisees in the parables), while Jesus and Christians, by sharp contrast, brought a message of love, mercy, and grace. When the good character in a parable is understood to represent Christians, and the bad character is understood to represent Jews, then it is easy to fall into the trap of adopting an anti-Jewish interpretation.

[28] For readers for whom this is a new concept, "anti-Judaism" as understood here with regard to Jewish religion is distinct from "anti-Semitism," which is a racist ideology. But the two are obviously closely related as one often justifies the other.

But there are serious problems with that approach. The first problem is that Jesus was Jewish and not a Christian. Christianity did not exist when Jesus was speaking to his audiences and sharing the parables. "Christianity" as a religion only developed as followers of Jesus formed communities of faith in Jesus after his death and resurrection. Even then, the first followers of Jesus were Jews. So when Jesus spoke to the crowds, he was a Jewish teacher speaking to Jewish listeners. Rather than trying to contrast "bad" Judaism with "good" Christianity, Jesus was challenging Jewish listeners to put into practice the kinds of teachings that were already part of Judaism. And that is the second problem with anti-Judaism: the teachings of Jesus were not in contrast to Jewish teaching but are drawn directly out of Jewish teaching. Love, grace, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy are all part of the rich tapestry of Jewish teaching found in the Jewish Scriptures, which Christians came to refer to as the Old Testament.

With this in mind, we will need to be cautious about using the parables to bolster one group's legitimacy at the expense of another group. One writer who has done a good job of helping contemporary readers understand and resist anti-Judaism is Amy-Jill Levine. In several of the parables we study, we will turn to her insights about the deeply Jewish nature of the parables to help us ensure that we are hearing the parables as they were originally heard. And it is important to recognize that this is not just a matter of getting interpretation "right." There are significant ethical and practical implications to reading parables well. Dominic Crossan observes, "The trajectory of human violence escalates almost inevitably from the ideological through the rhetorical to the physical."[29] Interpreting the parables in anti-Jewish or other ways that dehumanize, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is a first step on this trajectory of human violence. Sadly, one can see this trajectory illustrated in the shooter at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. In his online rantings against Jews, New Testament scripture was directly quoted as justifying his beliefs and actions. It is thus incumbent on anyone who wishes to interpret the parables of Jesus to be mindful of this reality and to ensure that the good news about Jesus is not distorted by being read through a lens of hate that is completely out of line with what Jesus was about.

[29] Crossan, *Power of Parable*, 247.

With the above considerations in mind about cultural distance and cultural assumptions, it is clear that interpreting parables is a challenging task that happens on several levels. In considering the meaning of parables, Hultgren identifies two types of translation that must occur. By "translation" he is not speaking simply about moving from the language of the Gospels (Greek) to our language. Instead he is speaking about conveying the message of the parables across the divide of two millennia. The first type of translation, cultural translation, is the work of moving from the worldview of the ancient listeners to a contemporary worldview. The second type of translation is translation from one mode of discourse to another—in this case from parable speech to declarative speech. As Hultgren puts it, this is a move "from one mode of expression (parable) to another (descriptive discourse)."[30] He suggests that in both processes there will naturally be some loss from the original impact—and we need to keep this in mind for each parable we explore. Given the power and imagery of the parables, and the changing nature of culture, the parables present an opportunity for fresh interpretation in every generation and culture. In fact, they require it. What might have been "lost in translation" in an earlier generation may be able to be recovered anew through the act of reading together in our present moment with all that it entails.

5. Parables and Mercy: An Entry Point into Social Justice

As we will see, through the parables Jesus touches on many different aspects of what it means to be fully human and to live according to the values of the kingdom of God. Topics include fundamental things like forgiveness, humility, generosity, compassion and priorities. One theme that is prominent in the parables is the notion of mercy. Mercy is brought into view sometimes explicitly (i.e. the word "mercy" is used in many parables) and sometimes implicitly in the parables. While there are many parables which speak to mercy—both the mercy of God and the imperative for us to be merciful to one another—one parable stands out

[30] Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 17.

from the rest in this area, and that is the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable, found in Luke 10:25–37, is among the most well-known of Jesus's parables, with a character whose description has become synonymous in Western culture with one who helps others in times of need. We will examine this parable in detail in Chapter 3. For now, we will note the centrality of mercy in this parable. The whole point of this parable revolves around the recognition that the one who is the true neighbor to the injured man is "the one who had *mercy* on him" (Lk 10:37). As we will see, the twist in this parable is not as often recognized, however: the one who was merciful was the one Jesus's original listeners would least expect to show it. And so Jesus complicates things and provides a more challenging picture of mercy than simply the notion of helping someone in need.

Mercy is certainly well-known as a dimension of Christian faith. It is also common, to some degree, in contemporary culture. Catholics may be familiar with what are called the corporal works of mercy and the spiritual works of mercy.[31] The importance of mercy today can be seen by the books and titles that have come out in recent years. From Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, a powerful book and movie, to Pope Francis's first book as pope, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, it is clear that mercy themes resonate with our world today. Even John Grisham's latest thriller bears the title, *A Time for Mercy*. Surprisingly though, as recently as 2014 Cardinal Walter Kaspar could claim that mercy as a theological concept had been "criminally neglected" and that the results were "catastrophic." He wrote, "What is now required is to think through anew the entire teaching about God's attributes and, in the process, to allow mercy to assume its proper place."[32] Engaging the parables with an eye toward understanding mercy themes is an important aspect of allowing mercy to assume its proper place. Indeed, Jesus famously taught that "blessed are the merciful." What does it mean to live a life of mercy in our current climate? And what is mercy really? Is it an attitude? Is it an action? Is it a feeling we have toward others? These are some of the questions that the parables will help us to answer. Of course, they do

[31] See James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

[32] Walter Kasper and William Madges, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014).

not define mercy for us; as parables they offer us metaphors in motion that invite us to think more deeply about what mercy really is.

Theologian Jon Sobrino has written some of the most insightful works on the concept of mercy, and his insights will help us as we wrestle with the concept of mercy throughout this book. Sobrino is a Jesuit theologian from El Salvador whose writings focus on bringing into reality the promises of the kingdom of God, particularly for those in the world who are poor, oppressed, and suffering. He is associated with what has been called "liberation theology," an understanding of the good news of Jesus that seeks not only to promote the embrace of biblical values and teachings at a personal level but also to promote political structures and systems that can make those promises a reality for the poor. The practical, political dimensions of liberation theology have sometimes brought this form of teaching into conflict with expressions of theology which are less threatening to the status quo. The emphasis on fostering systemic change as a practical implication of the message of Jesus has also brought liberation theology into conflict with corrupt and oppressive governments, particularly in Latin America. So much so that Sobrino's work has become a matter of life and death. Such risks are common in countries with authoritarian regimes where those who speak out are imprisoned, killed, or simply disappear. As one instance of this harsh reality, six colleagues at Sobrino's university in El Salvador, including a bishop, were murdered by government sponsored killers in 1989. Sobrino was away at the time, and so his life was spared. But this horrific crime impacted him greatly, and much of his work has been dedicated to promoting the positive vision of social change for which his colleagues died. The reality of the struggle in his country to bring about systemic change, and the threat that Christian theology potentially poses to those in power, are both very real and ongoing. Living out God's mercy in such an environment is difficult for many reasons.

Given this challenging context, Sobrino has written a lot on issues relating to the poor and the wealthy, the oppressed and the oppressor, the victim and the victimizer. He draws on deep theological resources to understand the complex interrelationship between individual sin, collective sin (the sin of a community or society in fostering inhumane conditions for others), and the dehumanizing values that often prevail in our world. He also attends to the possibilities for forgiveness of those agents of great evil who themselves are dehumanized by those forces.

Sobrino ultimately promotes a vision of reality in which the values of equality, solidarity and the brotherhood and sisterhood of all peoples are guiding principles. For purposes of our study of the parables, it is important to note the very strong connections between Sobrino's teaching and the teaching of Jesus through the parables.

Sobrino draws deeply from the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) as an illustration and explanation of what mercy is all about.[33] In short, he views mercy as the natural human response to the suffering of another person. One who shows mercy is one who is living into their full humanity. The Samaritan in the parable cares for the injured person not out of duty to obey a command but out of compassion. He allowed himself to be moved because he saw, really saw, the suffering of his fellow human. On the flip side, one who does not show mercy and is not moved to feel deeply and take action to help another in need may be closing off an important dimension of what it means to be fully human. Even worse, based on his context of facing evil head-on in Latin America, Sobrino talks about not only those who overlook mercy but also those who actively work against mercy, "who are governed by the principle of active anti-mercy."[34] In the parable of the Good Samaritan, that negative principle might be seen to be embodied in the robbers and thieves who cause the suffering of the traveler. In light of that reality, Sobrino suggests that those who would live out the principle of mercy in their lives today must not only show mercy but must also work against anti-mercy in order for mercy to become the "enduring mercy" which leads to love. For Sobrino, confronting anti-mercy "means necessarily stepping into society's conflicts, running personal and institutional risks."[35] To be merciful in this sense is a challenging call to see where human dignity is being compromised in the world around us, to identify with those in need, and to work alongside them to restore their dignity as fellow human beings.

We have engaged here briefly with Sobrino's insights as one example of considering what it can look like to read the parables through a lens of social justice. We can now turn toward a broader overview of how it is that we can consider the ethical implications of the parables today.

[33] For the full analysis of this parable, see Chapter 3.

[34] Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 179.

[35] Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy*, 179.

6. Exploring the Ethical Implications of the Parables through a Social Justice Lens

As we have begun to recognize, through metaphor, imagery, and story, the parables prompt listeners to consider questions of mercy, justice, community, and forgiveness as they invite them to consider a way of being that recognizes the dignity of every person and what it means to live into being fully human. The nature of parables with their surprising twists and their surplus of meaning ensures that listeners in every time and place can reflect on what the message of a given parable might suggest in their own lives and their own circumstances. You may not have thought of it this way, but the process of moving from the "then and there" of the original story Jesus told to the "here and now" implications for today is a process of ethical reasoning. If readers do take the teaching of Jesus seriously as carrying some weight today (whether as committed followers of Jesus or as those who simply recognize the potential for some contemporary relevance in his message) an implicit question they are asked to consider is, "What is the right thing to do in light of this parable?" This book is a conversation partner that invites readers to work through the process of ethical reasoning together, showing some ways this has been done effectively and offering some tools for doing the work afresh.

The process of ethical reflection on the parables begins with "biblical interpretation"—an entire field in its own right. In the pages ahead we will be concerned with a process of interpretation that, while not a recipe for success, is a guide for the journey. Interpreting any ancient text is a challenge, but especially one that is as revered and sacred to Christians as "the Bible." When it comes to interpreting the parables, we will see that the process is even more challenging since, as we have already seen, we are dealing with metaphors and trying to translate cultural meanings across two millennia of historical and cultural change.

While the process begins with biblical interpretation it does not stop there. It continues on to include investigation of one's own social location and situation, in light of the teaching of a given parable. This is where we make the move to ethical implications and wrestling with what a particular parables means for us in the "here and now." We might say that with this step we move from interrogating the parable to allowing the parable to interrogate us. As we will see, throughout

history there have been many Christians who have seen in the teachings of Jesus a call to bring about change not only in their individual lives but in their society. Like Jon Sobrino, there have been many who have been passionate about identifying places where human dignity has been compromised and finding ways to restore it. Reading the parables with these thinkers, we will consider the ethical implications along with them and see what we can learn both from the parables themselves and from our fellow interpreters.

Richard B. Hays is a New Testament scholar who has been influential in shaping New Testament ethics as a theological discipline. He advocates thinking through the interpretive and ethical reasoning processes outlined above as four tasks of New Testament ethics.[36] The first two tasks address the "then and there" while the second two speak to the "here and now." These tasks are: (1) the descriptive task: reading a passage carefully and understanding what it actually says; (2) the synthetic task: placing the particular text in conversation with the rest of the Bible in light of the guiding focal images of the New Testament;[37] (3) the hermeneutical task: relating the text to our current situation through an integrative act of the imagination; and (4) the pragmatic task: actually living out the text. For Hays, "The value of our exegesis and hermeneutics will be tested by their capacity to produce persons and communities whose character is commensurate with Jesus Christ and thereby pleasing to God."[38] While Hays's is obviously a Christian approach to this process, the method is not an exclusionary one. With an emphasis on interpreting texts in context and within community, interested readers from any faith tradition can engage this process to consider how the ethical teachings of Jesus may offer rich material for reflection on issues of character formation and community today.

It is safe to say that with regard to the biblical message and its ethical implications each generation has had to wrestle with the interpretive

[36] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

[37] For Hays these guiding images of the New Testament are the focal images of community, cross, and new creation. Given our narrower focus on the parables of Jesus, we will see that a different set of themes emerge within this smaller set of texts, but with multiple connection points to the larger themes of the New Testament.

[38] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 7.

and ethical reasoning process themselves, making sense of the message of Jesus in their own day. It is also safe to say that it is not always done as consciously, as neatly, or with as explicit attention to a process such as Hays outlines. Nevertheless, for two thousand years people have been working through a very similar practice in interpreting not only the parables of Jesus, but the entire message of Jesus and the message *about* Jesus contained within the New Testament and within the teaching and tradition of the Christian church.

Though it goes far beyond the scope of this book to consider the differing ways that ethical interpretation of the message of Jesus has been approached through history, one can readily observe the kinds of shifts that occur from one era to another as culture, education, geographical location, and social and political realities change the context in which the Bible is read. As an example, we do not need to look any farther than Jesus and the first and second generation of his followers. The ethical teaching of Jesus in his own time was geared to the concerns of Jews in a particular time and place who were reckoning with the reality of the Roman occupation of Palestine in light of their understanding of the covenant promises, the Jewish scriptures, and the importance of the worship of God centered in the Temple. Yet the not-so-much-later teachings of Paul about Jesus, while drawing on that framework, were geared to a much wider set of concerns related to Jews of the diaspora (i.e. outside of the boundaries of the land of Israel) and non-Jews who were embracing the message about Jesus and gathering in communities together throughout the Roman Empire. Within another century, the dominant discourse of early Christian writers which had already moved from an initially Jewish framework to a Hellenistic-Jewish one, would engage a new context in which Christian thinkers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen were explaining Christian teaching in light of the Greek classical tradition. In each new generation these ongoing and expanding engagements with historical, cultural, and political realities have required and invited new understandings of the message of Jesus—new enactments of Hays's hermeneutic and pragmatic tasks.[39]

[39] The story of the development of Christian ethics over the centuries is a fascinating one. For an overview of the interrelationship between church history, ethics, and Christian ethics, see Samuel Wells, et al., *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), esp chs 2–4.

As readers today approach interpreting the parables for our own current contexts in the turbulent 2020s and beyond, we can work through a process of interpretation that includes the four tasks that Hays outlined. What is exciting at this point in history is the opportunity to consider the tools and perspectives that have become available to us through the work of individuals who have brought new approaches to the study of the Bible and to the study of our own times. Alongside centuries of tradition, more recent critical explorations of social realities and societal forces that have shaped our modern world have given rise to some new lenses through which to see the message of Jesus and see our own lives. These include but are not limited to:

- Theologies of liberation, drawn from the experiences of people like Sobrino, which seek to take seriously the societal implications of the good news about Jesus for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, originally focusing on South America but now looking at global realities;
- Black theology which looks at the message of Jesus and its complex interrelationship with slavery and racism particularly within Black and Brown communities in North America;
- Feminist and womanist theologies which take a similar approach recognizing the patriarchal structures which guide Western society and serve to continue a legacy of silencing or diminishing the voices of women, particularly women of color;
- Post-colonial approaches which examine the legacies of colonization and the ongoing dynamics of the colonizer and the colonized; and
- De-colonial and de-colonizing approaches which actively seek to give voice and place to cultures and traditions which colonial mindsets have devalued and pushed to the margins.

We will have the opportunity to engage in more detail with insights from many of these approaches, and individuals who have developed and applied them, in the chapters that follow.

For now it is important to note that what each of these approaches has in common is careful attention to matters of social justice. Ethical concepts related to social justice include looking at individuals and communities, understanding one's social location, and exploring power

dynamics, oppression, and the societal forces that contribute to human suffering or promote human flourishing. While dominant discourses give attention to those with privilege and power, these various approaches seek to understand the position of those without privilege and without power. Scholars use different terminology to express these social dynamics whether referring to the marginalized, the oppressed, the disinherited, the colonized, the under-privileged, or the victimized. Further, these approaches recognize that for one to be oppressed, there must be an oppressor; for one to be colonized there must be a colonizer; and so on. As we will see, the ethical implications of these approaches engage the realities and dynamics of both groups, and also recognize the complexity of individual and communal dynamics. One can be both oppressor and oppressed. One can be both victim and victimizer. The concept of intersectionality—an analytical tool that "investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies"—brings to light the ways in which identity is complex and how various aspects of one's identity can impact how one experiences the world.[40]

As just one example of how these more recent approaches invite ethical exploration of our current realities, womanist ethicist and theologian Emilie Townes expresses this well. The following short paragraph introduces some important concepts around the need to recognize one's own social location and inevitable biases, noting that all discourse comes from a particular place with particular perspectives:

> A womanist perspective argues that because all discourse is rooted in the social location of those who speak (or are silent or silenced), such discourse is particular and ultimately biased. The task of womanist ethics is to recognize the biases within particularity and work with them to explore the rootedness of social location and the demands for faithful reflection and witness in light of the gospel demands for justice and wholeness.[41]

[40] Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Key Concepts; Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 4.

[41] Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (eds. Cannon, et al.; *Library of Theological Ethics*; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35–50, here 37.

As Townes suggests, the goal of examining social location, bias, and related aspects of human experience in this way is to move toward "faithful reflection and witness." Understanding the particularity of our own experiences, and making room for the very different experiences of others, creates a space where faithful reflection on the parables of Jesus can occur with an openness to learn from one another.

Writing a generation prior to Townes, Howard Thurman—teacher, author, mystic, and mentor to the leaders of the Civil Rights movement—connected such concerns back to the person of Jesus. Thurman points out what modern Christians sometimes overlook: that Jesus himself was among the marginalized. Further, though it has not always been heard this way, the message of Jesus was one from the marginalized to the marginalized. Thurman explains,

> It seems clear that Jesus understood the anatomy of the relationship between his people and the Romans, and he interpreted that relationship against the background of the profoundest ethical insight of his own religious faith as he has found it in the heart of the prophets of Israel. The solution which Jesus found for himself and for Israel, as they faced the hostility of the Greco-Roman world, becomes the word and work of redemption *for all the cast-down people in every generation and in every age* … Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.[42]

Rather than responding to social situations of marginalization with fear, deception, and hatred, Thurman shows how Jesus challenged his followers to embody a "love-ethic" which was countercultural and ultimately cost him his life. Such an ethic of love required as a starting point a "common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value" grounded in authentic human to human exchange; it includes a deep and difficult recognition of the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor.[43] With these insights, Thurman is able to connect the

[42] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 18–19 (italics added for emphasis).

[43] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 79, 90.

experience and message of Jesus in his context with the experience and needs of the disinherited in contemporary times.

Each of these recent approaches has brought important new questions and considerations to bear on thinking about contemporary ethical issues. Focusing as they do on social dynamics and the implications of Christian beliefs related to human dignity, mercy, and justice, it is clear that these writers offer perspectives that will help us with the "here and now" considerations of the implications of Jesus's parables for today (what Hays referred to above as the hermeneutic task). However, it is important to notice that these social justice perspectives will also help with the "then and there" analysis, the first parts of our interpretive process which seek to understand the parables' meanings in the first century. This is possible because the dynamics of social power and oppression were very much a reality in the first century. As Townes observed above, "All discourse is rooted in the social location of those who speak."[44] When we attend to questions about those social relationships in the time of Jesus, we can gain new insight into the parables.

Of course, the specific social and historical dynamics in our days which have given rise to liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and post-colonial and de-colonial approaches are far removed from the social and historical dynamics of Jesus's day. So it needs to be clear that we cannot simply import ethical imperatives or critical concerns of these approaches back into the teaching of Jesus. In doing so we would risk doing violence to the teaching of Jesus in the name of justice.[45] However, what is possible and of immense value is to engage the questions and perspectives that these approaches provide to give us new insight into the particular social dynamics that were at play in the time of Jesus—a time of empire, patriarchy, and economic upheaval. As we

[44] Townes, "Ethics as an Art," 37.

[45] Such a concern about anachronistically reading our own perspectives into the message of Jesus is significant. We should note, however, that using the dominant discourses of Western theological approaches from the Enlightenment already runs that risk of importing the values and ideals of far-removed times and places into the teaching of Jesus. The anti-Judaism that we mentioned above is just one example. See NT Wright's observation about ethics in Paul as another: N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 24.

will see, rather than just bringing an otherworldly spiritual message, the teaching of Jesus was deeply connected to concrete social realities where injustice needed to be challenged. As William Herzog explains, "Jesus' ministry was concerned with political and economic issues. Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel but were at the heart of his proclamation and practice."[46] This observation yields the conclusion that "justice was at the center of Jesus' spirituality" and that "Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, including its attendant theology and ethics, grew out of his social analysis."[47] Contemporary tools of social analysis can give us a hand in understanding the message of Jesus in its time as a message that was both spiritual in nature (intended to lift the human spirit) and grounded in the needs he observed around him (intended to bring about real change in the present).

In the chapters ahead, with each parable we explore we will work through a process of interpretation that engages the parable in its first-century context. We will also bring to bear the thoughts of individuals who can help us engage an aspect of that parable in our contemporary context. In this way, we will model an approach that allows the parable to speak for itself in its context, and an approach which uses critical lenses to look at what the teaching of the parable might mean for us today. This will enact a process of ethical reasoning in conversation with some very influential Christian thinkers, writers, and activists.

The apostle Paul, our earliest interpreter of the Jesus tradition, had a great deal to say about ethics, character, and virtue. He famously summed things up this way: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). We will see that these themes are woven together within the parables. While "love" may seem to be a rather squishy concept to our modern ears, we will see that the love referred to in the New Testament (from the Greek *agape*) is a specific kind of love. It is a love that is geared toward seeking the good of others and is closely connected to the mercy themes we noted above.

[46] William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 264.

[47] Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 264.

Bishop Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and one of our conversation partners in this book, puts it this way: "Love is a firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself" and "a commitment to seek the good and to work for the good and welfare of others."[48] Seeking the good and working for the good of others brings us directly into the realm of ethics as we consider what is "the good" in any given situation. Curry goes on to explain the expanding circles of obligation that such a love places on those who accept it:

> It doesn't stop at our front door or our neighborhood, our religion or race, or our state's or your country's border. This is one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth, as the hymn goes. It often calls us to step outside of what we thought our boundaries were, or what others expect of us. It calls for us to sacrifice, not because doing so feels good, but because it's the right thing to do.[49]

With these lines, Curry explicitly connects the biblical message of love with ethics: "the right thing to do." In the pages that follow, we will seek to connect informed study of the parables of Jesus with engaged reflection on the significance of those parables for our actions in the world today. In the final section of this chapter, we conclude with a short outline of a framework for how we can profitably read the parables today through the lens of social justice.

7. Reading the Parables through the Lens of Social Justice: A Proposal

Over the centuries many, many volumes have been written about the parables and how to interpret them. The recommendations here are not a "new and improved" way to read the parables but rather an attempt to highlight some of the key components of careful reading that can lead

[48] Michael B. Curry and Sara Grace, *Love is the Way: Holding onto Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Avery, 2020), 14, 23.
[49] Curry and Grace, *Love is the Way*, 23.

to the startling and fresh insights to which the parables invite us. This process can also be seen to follow the basic impulse of Hays's four interpretive tasks for New Testament ethics although focusing here mostly on his "descriptive task" (understanding the text) and his "hermeneutic task" (imagining its implications for our time and place). While these are enumerated as steps in order, many of these interpretive activities will be happening simultaneously as we read and re-read the parables to understand them. Even so, each step deserves its own attention in the process, recognizing that it is interconnected with the others.

1) Grasp the story

As with reading of any biblical text, before trying to interpret it is important initially simply to try to understand what is happening in the text. In the case of parables, it is important first to try to grasp the basics of each individual story. Who are the main characters? What actions do they undertake? What is the conflict or turning point? What is the outcome? Why do they act the way they do in the story? It can also be important to understand the circumstances in which Jesus is telling this parable. Understanding the literary context can help shed light on how the gospel writer wanted the reader to understand the parable.

2) Ask questions to gain understanding

Since the parables are set in an ancient, agrarian culture that is vastly different than ours, we must identify those aspects of the parable that are not immediately understandable to us and ask good questions so that we can make sure we are not overlooking an important dimension or misunderstanding something important. In addition, questions about the social dynamics at play within the parables are particularly important. While being careful not to force our contemporary concerns into the text, modern theologies of liberation and other post-modern approaches can help us ask questions about dynamics of power, status, privilege, and economic realities in the world of the text that the predominantly euro-centric, Western tradition of biblical interpretation has not normally prioritized. Asking good questions about what the parable conveyed in its original social, cultural, and economic setting can help open up new ways of understanding the parable in our own time.

3) Spot the twist

As we have noted, parables often have a twist—something that catches the reader off guard or signals that the parable is not just an entertaining story. Identifying that moment or aspect of the parable that introduces a new twist can help us hone in on where in the parable we might identify the challenge of this parable.

4) Consider the metaphor

Once we understand the basics of the story (step one), have some initial questions about the parable (step two), and have a sense of where the parable offers a twist on conventional thought (step three), we can then turn to thinking about what the comparative aspect of the parable entails. Careful consideration of what two things are being set alongside each other for comparison can help get us to the challenge aspect of the parable, the "something besides." Returning to the image of parables as a butterfly in motion that captures our attention, Barbara Green writes, "A parable is a narrative metaphor—a metaphor in motion—that by the peculiar working of its juxtaposed elements startles the mind into fresh awareness."[50] To understand the "peculiar working" of a parable we need to consider carefully what elements are juxtaposed and how they work together to create meaning. This is where both the imagination and the emotions connect with the story and begin to connect the story to the real word of the listener. The metaphor is the place where Jesus chose to actively enter the world of the listener to enable the listener to be able to engage with his vision of faith and community.[51]

5) Articulate the challenge

Once we grasp the story, the context, and the comparison we might then try to put into words what the parable is challenging readers to do, think, or feel differently. This is that second type of translation where the significance is translated from story speech to declarative speech. How does the vision of the world that the parable shows us challenge our own assumptions about the way things are or the way things ought

[50] Green, *Like a Tree Planted*, 10.

[51] On the power of imagery in the teaching of Jesus, see Chapter 6, "Pictures and images in the teaching of Jesus," pp. 85–104 in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Power of Pictures in Christian Thought: The Use and Abuse of Images in the Bible and Theology* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2018).

to be? In light of the purposes of this volume, we will be looking here especially to articulate the challenge in terms of where mercy, justice, and values relating to human dignity, human flourishing, and well-being may be at play. With this parable how did Jesus seek to transform his listeners' view of the world and invite them to imagine the world in a new way? Because of the nature of metaphor the challenge often takes the form of several related threads that are interrelated and can be interwoven as we consider the point of a parable.

6) Consider implications

Once we have understood the basic elements of the parable and have made an effort to articulate its challenge, we can then allow ourselves and our world to be interrogated by the parable. Is there a value or human principle in the parable that we are being called to return to? What does this mean for me? What does this mean for my community? What does it mean for the world around me? It is here where the insights of theologians, ethicists, activists, social critics, and socially engaged scholars can help us look at the world around us with attention to power dynamics, systems of oppression, and other subtle factors that may be less visible to some of us depending on our position and privilege. It is with these insights that we can hope to see the butterfly in flight as Jesus's ethic of love, mercy, and justice finds its way into practice in our lives and out communities.

As we move toward considering implications in contemporary social issues, it will become clear that we will move beyond what the parables explicitly teach. Moving away from the biblical text in this way may be of concern to some readers, particularly those who might see this as using the biblical text as a "springboard" to jump into whatever issue comes to mind. However, such a move is necessary if we are to have any chance of bringing the ethical insights of Jesus to bear on concrete issues of our time—issues that were not even contemplated in the first century. As we explore issues like racism, economic injustice, human rights, and environmental justice we will see that, although the specific nature of these issues today is not addressed in the parables, the underlying themes of human dignity, love, justice, and mercy have enduring relevance. We thus will use an "integrative act of the imagination" to give attention to how the message of Jesus in the parables can invite us to engage the world around us in new ways.

It is a process like this that lies behind each of the chapters ahead of us. I hope you will accept this invitation to engage with the parables, to encounter the teaching of Jesus, and to dialogue with others about what God's mercy means for all of us in our present day.

One final caveat. In exploring the eight parables under discussion here, it will become evident that this is a selective analysis. One reason for choosing these eight parables is that I have been inspired by the work of Amy-Jill Levine in her *Short Stories by Jesus* which I regularly use as a textbook in my own course on the parables. As noted already her treatment of many of these same parables provides a rich context for understanding the anti-Jewish bent of much of the history of interpretation; for appreciating the parables in their context; and for considering contemporary implications. Though my conclusions do not always align with hers, readers can find across her volume and mine a commitment to these same intentional approaches. In particular, by referring to her work on anti-Judaism in these parables I have been able to build on that position and take additional steps in outlining the contemporary implications in relation to other conversation partners Levine does not engage. Our different volumes on the same parables thus show the plurality of meaning that can be found in the parables. These same approaches have great potential to be brought to bear on the remainder of the parables and it will be exciting to see how other readers, writers, and activists take us further down the road in engaging social justice in the stories of Jesus for future generations.

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