

Luke's Parables and Today's Church

Purpose for writing (Lk 1:1-4)

- ❖ To a patron (Theophilos), based on prior narratives concerning “matters fulfilled” (as prophesied) among us. Prior narratives themselves reflect a tradition derived from eyewitnesses and “servants of the word”, a “third generation” retelling framing the narrative for a new context.
- ❖ Church needs it (author’s rationale): diligent, detailed sequence to make clear the certainty [Gk. *asphaleia*; cannot be overthrown, as in a legal challenge] of information (if reader is ‘outsider’) or instruction (if reader is a believer) received. In either case, reader has some familiarity with Jesus movement.
- ❖ Cultural, socio-economic profile of Luke’s “implied” audience differs from originating Jesus movement: not Jewish, urban centers of Roman spread in Asia Minor/Greece (area of Paul’s missionary activity), moderately affluent (reconfigures “option for the poor” element of the Kingdom preaching of Jesus to one of hospitality and solidarity), apologetic in face of 1st century suspicion of “foreign cults” underlines values that can be associated with enlightened, philosophical pedagogy.

Narrative tactics of Luke the master story-teller

- ❖ Characters as “stock” figures, plots comparable to popular novels, drama or moralists; exaggerated situations; humor (at the expense of those who get themselves into a mess).
- ❖ Mixes use of stories or parables in ethical instruction literature, which underlines a point that the story is intended to prove with the more open-ended stories of comedy or mime in which the audience has to sort out the “meaning” of the (often chaotic) ending. Likely that technique develops what was already in the oral tradition of the parables.
- ❖ Larger narrative framework provides applications of a parable to what is “going on” in the story about Jesus and his disciples. Majority of Luke’s most famous parables in the “journey section” (Lk 9:51-19:27).

NARRATIVE PARABLES IN LUKE 10-19

Lk 10:30-37. Good Samaritan	To: “who is neighbor” in love command (v. 29) Conclusion: “who was neighbor?..Go and do (vv. 36-37)	L (= Lk’s special material) Neg. saw, passed Pos. pity [actions] mercy
Lk 11:5-8. Friend at Midnight	To: Lord’s Prayer (vv. 2-4) Conclusion: “I tell you, if he won’t give because he is a friend, will because of <i>anaideia</i> (= lack of respect for convention (v. 8)	L Neg. irritated, not respect convention Pos. (missing) friend
Lk 12:16-21 Rich Fool	To: brother wants Jesus to make his brother divide inheritance; greed “life is more than possession” (vv. 13-15, 21)	L Neg. greed; self-absorbed Pos. (missing) share excess

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Lk 13:6-9 Fig Tree spared	To: disasters (not) signs of end, Pilate massacred Galileans; Tower of Siloam fell; need to repent (vv. 1-5)	L
Lk 13:18-19 Mustard Seed Lk 13:20-21 Leaven	Images for the Kingdom	Mk 4:30-32; Mt 13:31f Mt 13:33
Lk 13:25-27. Locked out by the master of the house	To: Qu: why are few saved? (v. 23)	Mt 25:11-12, fate of foolish servant girls <i>Neg.</i> annoyed; assume prior relationship (social) will excuse violation of convention; in Roman comedy: drunken partiers disrupting households of "friends" <i>Pos.</i> (missing): respect
Lk 14:16-24. Rich Man's Big Supper	To: guest's comment "blessed those eat the bread of the kingdom" (v. 15)	Mt 22:1-10 Wedding Feast for King's Son <i>Neg.</i> disrespecting host; man's anger (?) <i>Pos.</i> solution: invite the "outcasts"
Lk 15:4-7 Lost Sheep Lk 15:8-10 Lost Coin	To: accusation that Jesus is a "sinner" because he associates with tax-collectors and sinners (vv. 1-2) Conclusion: counter-image of joy at finding what has been lost (applies in heaven)	Mt 18:12-13 (sheep) L <i>Neg.</i> anxiety over lost <i>Pos.</i> rejoicing (with others) over finding
Lk 15:11-32: Father and 2 sons, prodigal (younger), dutiful (elder)	As in previous case	L <i>Neg.</i> [Bible assumes younger sons must leave home]; vices, wasted inheritance; elder's complaint <i>Pos.</i> repentance, self-recognition as "sinner", recognition that his father (unlike his boss) is a righteous person; rejoicing (with others) over return of son
Lk 16:1-8a, Scheming Steward	Followed by sayings on proper attitude toward money	L <i>Neg.</i> assorted fraud, especially over interest transactions <i>Pos.</i> uses the "system" to secure himself; admired "cleverness" . Fits pattern in comedy of the scheming slave who outwits a master (audience is not supposed to like either one of the characters)
Lk 16:19-31 Rich Man and Lazarus	Conclusion: "banality of evil", some won't listen no matter what (v. 31)	L <i>Neg.</i> greed; excessive display of one's wealth (something emperor's, kings had initiated, it had downward creep among the super rich) <i>Pos.</i> (missing): ordinary compassion, concern for the poor Exchange with Abraham: comedy in rich man's demands, blindness

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Lk 18:2-5 Widow persuades a corrupt judge	By negative contrast: God's fidelity to the prayers of God's people	L <i>Neg.</i> corrupt judge with no morals or fear of human censure; ancient courts were generally biased toward the rich (only rich widows have a chance!); uses a "boxing" metaphor for judge's thoughts: he'll side with her before she "gives him a black eye" <i>Pos.</i> (missing) concern for justice
Lk 18:10-13 Pharisee and Tax-collector praying in the Temple	To: those consider themselves just; scorn others (vv. 9, 14)	L <i>Neg.</i> tricky, because the behavior of the Pharisee is not all bad; thanking God for not being "sinner", tithing; it comes with the glance toward the "other" <i>Pos.</i> humility as "sinner" pleading with God (cp. Lk's more famous tax collector, Zacchaeus)
Lk 19:11-27 Slaves entrusted with (royal) master's goods	To: end of journey, Jesus is approaching Jerusalem and popular impression that the Kingdom is about to appear (v. 11)	Mt 25:14-30 <i>Neg.</i> fear of harsh master; not acting as (knew) was expected <i>Pos.</i> carried out orders; trustworthy gets put in charge of much more Comedy: ancient audience expects "harsh" masters to deal appropriately with bad slaves
Lk 19:11-27, as setting, a throne claimant who must receive his power from abroad (Rome?) deals with his enemies upon returning	Indirect comment on the "power politics" of smaller kings and governors in the Roman system (?); vv. 12-15a, 27	

Some traps to be avoided in reading these parables:

- ❖ Anti-Jewish sentiments: Samaritan version of Mosaic Law was just as concerned with ritual purity as Jewish one so Samaritan's compassion is not "anti-priest, Levite/anti-Jewish" but takes him beyond the enmity between the two groups; similarly, Pharisee/tax collector is not "Jews" vs. Christians
- ❖ Rich men, kings, masters, even fathers are not direct images of God; Luke's parables depict fictionalized, comic representations of situations in life – the literary technique draws on a number of negative elements that one would not presume to be true of God, e.g. the winning through public humiliation in the Friend at Midnight or the Corrupt Judge
- ❖ The positive virtues being recommended in these parables are not unknown prior to Jesus (nor does Luke claim that they are): both the Jewish Torah properly interpreted and the classical moralists that Luke's Gentile audience heard growing up would agree with all or most of them.

Luke's Christian: living in the "real world" of flawed humans with a Kingdom attitude:

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- ❖ Major concern with the proper attitude toward material wealth, money: dangers of greed, being dominated by possessions; requirements of charity toward those in need; hospitality that incorporates persons not able to “pay back” the host.
- ❖ Major concern with the boundaries along which there is hostility: Jew/Samaritan. Or internally: “the righteous”/sinner, rich/poor.
- ❖ Acknowledged sentiment that perhaps God’s justice doesn’t seem all that present in the world of (a) big natural disasters; (b) all sorts of human injustice. Luke affirms the reality of divine judgment – rich man (and eventually his even worse brothers) really are toast!
- ❖ Luke squares judgment with compassion by insisting that humans have a time for repentance; by making the “bad guys” who are locked out stock figures determined to pursue the path they’re on, Luke may assume that most of his audience would say, “thank God, I’m not like that...”
- ❖ Luke also has some characters who pose a challenge as positive examples: the good Samaritan or the father dealing with his two sons or the rich man, sending out a second time to get even more “street people” into fill the banquet. So there is something of a stretch to Christian virtue that goes beyond to social conventions for “good” as opposed to “bad” behavior or character.