

Overflowing Extravagance

Call: Ps 36:7-9

Scripture Reading: Eph 1:3-14 (adaptation)

I. Introduction

Today, we begin our new summer series on Jesus' parables.

Psalm 78 begins this way:

1 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth!

2 I will open my mouth in **parables**;

Ps 78:1-4 (ESV)

The Psalmist looked forward to a day when God would speak to all people in parables. Jesus fulfills this prophecy when he speaks his parables.

Ask anyone who Jesus of Nazareth was and they will tell you one of three things:

- He was a great teacher, preacher and/or healer.
- He was crucified in Jerusalem.
- He taught in parables.

Jesus of Nazareth is known to have taught in parables. Now, he didn't only teach in parables. He also taught in exhortations, such as the Sermon on the Mount, which we will finish up this fall. But, he is known to have taught in parables. And, according to one count, he taught 55 of them in the New Testament (Snodgrass, 17). Now, we did not think that we should spend 55 weeks on the parables so we are only going to spend 10 weeks.

And, really, we are only going to spend nine weeks because ministry faire Sunday is in August. This series will take us through Labor Day. As we do each summer, we will be team teaching the series due to staff trips and vacations. But, one thing I want to point out right away is that as we were studying for this series as a staff, the overwhelming sense was that this series is going to challenge all of us. We are going to hit some tough topics, and I would encourage you to find a small group to discuss this series with, maybe a guys group, ladies group or growth group. The youth are doing parables as well, so maybe it's simply within your family. But, I would encourage you to seek out a small group to discuss these parables with.

So, what are these parables of Jesus about? Well, in a nutshell, Jesus' parables are all about the nature of the kingdom of God and/or the God of the kingdom. What kind of kingdom is the kingdom of God? And, what kind of God is king over this kingdom? Our title helps answer these questions. The series title is "*Overflowing Extravagance*". What we will find this summer as an overarching theme is a God who is overflowingly extravagant. His goodness overflows like this waterfall. But, it doesn't just overflow, it extravagantly overflows. There is no lack of restraint on God's part. He lavishes his goodness and grace and beauty on us. His mercies are new every morning. He gives not just life, but an abundant life.

As the children's storybook Bible puts it: His love ... "is a never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love." Our God is an overflowingly extravagant God, which means that the kingdom that He reigns over is an overflowingly extravagant kingdom as well. As this picture shows, Jesus takes 2 fish and 5 loaves and feeds 5000 men, not counting women and children. And, there are 12 baskets of bread leftover! It's an enacted parable to show the abundance and extravagance found in this kingdom.

And, as an introduction to the parables today, I want to answer three questions this morning:

- What is a parable?
- Why does Jesus speak in parables?
- How do parables work?

So, what is a parable?

II. What is a parable?

The word parable comes from the Greek word παραβολή (*para-bolē*). For you Greek scholars, the Greek is derived from para (alongside) and ballo (to throw or place). In other words, a parable is placing two things alongside or making a comparison between two things.

Commentator Klyne Snodgrass defines parables this way: "*they are story-analogies intended to engage, reflect and act upon*" (Snodgrass, 9). He captures the purpose of the parables in that they are meant to compel us to do something. He also captures the fact that they are stories, story analogies.

A. They are stories

But, they are stories with imagery drawn from everyday life, the reality which is accessible to everyone. They are "*narratives of normalcy*." (Snodgrass, 18). They are narratives, stories, which mean they are attractive and compelling. Stories allow us to make sense of life in a way that mere facts do not. Children don't ask to tell them facts. They ask for stories. Why? Because stories invite participation, and a good story will invite you to evaluate your own life, which may lead to reorienting your life (NIDNTT). Humans are wired for stories, which is why Jesus does not teach with profound theology as much as with down-to-earth, real-life stories: family life, farming, trees, birds, money, commerce, weddings, politics, etc. This is the stuff of real life. Jesus teaches this way because we are ordinary people wired for stories.

B. They are central to Jesus' teaching

Parables were very common in Jesus' day. He is not doing anything unusual or unique in his use of parables. What was unusual is that parables for him were absolutely central to his teaching. Paul pops a parable in every now and then, but Jesus taught mainly in parables. And, by him teaching us this way, tells us who he is. He is no ivory-tower theologian. As Kenneth Bailey says, "He is a metaphorical theologian." (279). The incarnation is that Jesus became an ordinary man and identified with ordinary people like you and me. And, so, he teaches in parables, "ordinary stories of ordinary people in ordinary places doing ordinary things" (Sweet, 36).

That's the what question. Now, the why question. Why does Jesus speak in parables?

III. Why does Jesus speak in parables?

One answer, as we said earlier, is to illustrate the good news about the Kingdom of God and/or the God of the kingdom. But, what is the kingdom of God? Let's take a moment to set a foundation for understanding the kingdom of God.

A. Aside for the Kingdom of God

If someone were to ask you what the kingdom of God is, what would you say? Here's what I would say. The Kingdom of God is not a geographic domain with set boundaries and settled laws (Sweet, 67). The Kingdom of God is anywhere God reigns as king. A simple way to say it is "The kingdom of God is where the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven." So, when you or someone else submits to God's rule, his values and his purposes, the Kingdom of God invades the earth.

We are gathered every Sunday to get to know Jesus. Then, we are sent out every Monday to every area and region of society to make him known by submitting to God's rule, values and purposes. Knowing Jesus and making him known. And, when we make him known by submission to him, the Kingdom of God becomes manifest on earth. This is God's way of transforming the world. At work, at school, on the road, at home, at Starbucks, at Peets, when you submit to God's rule in love, in faith, in forgiveness, in caring for another, etc. etc. the kingdom of God breaks out on earth. His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

1. Kingdom of God Personified in Jesus

Now, Jesus lived God's will, his rule, his values, his purposes every moment, so he is the Kingdom of God personified. He is the kingdom of God with sandals on and walking around.

2. Kingdom of God Characteristics

What are some key characteristics of this Kingdom? Gift, it is already/not yet (the kingdom came with Jesus, but not completely), presence of the HS, forgiveness and faith, hope and love. And, of course, the theme we will hit all summer is extravagance.

B. Do Parables Make Things Simpler?

Back to our question – why does Jesus speak in parables? To illustrate the good news for sure. But, ask anyone why Jesus spoke in parables and typically they will say that he does so to make things simpler, or to make things easier to grasp. But do they?

In Mark 4, after Jesus speaks the parable of the Sower, which we will look at in two weeks, a parable that does not seem to be very hard to grasp. But, the disciples simply do not understand. And, Jesus says to them, Mark 4:13, *"Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"*

In Luke 18, Jesus speaks a few parables, the rich young ruler scene happens, then Jesus teaches some more and Luke finishes with this statement: *"34 The disciples did not understand any of*

this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” (Lk 18:34).

So, do parables make things easier to grasp? Before we laugh too hard at the disciples, perhaps we are no different today. We have mis-named the parables in multiple places. We misname them because we misunderstand them just like the disciples. For example, in the Workers in the Vineyard, next week’s parable, the workers are not the central characters in the story. The main character is the owner who gives equal pay for unequal work. And, the prodigal son is not about the son, it’s about the father. It seems, we may be just as confused as the disciples. So, this summer, I want to encourage us to approach these texts with utmost humility and try to hear them with fresh ears. (Capon, 8).

So, why does Jesus speak in parables?

C. Isaiah 6 as Key to Understanding the Parables

Well, the foundational parable is The Parable of the Sower and it provides the key to the parables. It is contained at the beginning of the main parable sections in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in all three Gospels, there is a reference to Isaiah 6:9-10.

*9 And he said, “Go, and say to this people:
“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
10 Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*

It seems to be a bit of a confusing text doesn’t it? And, yet, it is contained at the beginning of the parables sections in those three Gospels, so it must be important for the parables. What is even more confusing is when we see how Matthew and Luke record Jesus’ quotation:

In Matthew, Matthew records Jesus saying this: 13 *This is why I speak to them in parables, **because** seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand (13:13).* It appears he is teaching in parables **because** the people don’t see and hear, and the parables will **enable** people to see and hear?

However, in Luke, Luke records Jesus saying: 10 *he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, **so that** ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ (8:10)* So it appears in Luke that Jesus is teaching in parables **so that** his hearers will not understand.

So, is Jesus speaking his parables in order to **reveal** as in Matthew, or to **conceal** as in Luke? I said it would be a challenging summer didn't I? Certainly, Jesus is using parables to make us think. That is without doubt. But does this thinking open up the message or hide the message of the king or the kingdom? Do the parables help us or hinder us from understanding the message.

To answer this, I think we need to understand how parables work. And, this brings us to our third question – How do the parables work?

IV. How do Jesus' parables work?

I want to explain this with three words: Usual, Unexpected and Unsettled. These three words will be our interpretive lens for understanding how the parables work this summer.

A. Usual

Nearly every parable Jesus speaks begins with the usual, ordinary world. They are “narratives of normalcy” as I said earlier. He begins with something out of everyday life. Anyone who hears him can immediately connect with what he is saying. When Jesus begins his parables, the immediate response would be, *‘Yes, Jesus, I am with you so far.’*

For example: The sower went out to sow his seed. Anyone listening could picture that.

A landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. That happens in everyday life in the real world.

A certain man had two sons. Everyone could understand, could associate with, that picture. It was accessible for everyone.

B. Unexpected

But, as Jesus continues to speak, he surprises us with something completely **unexpected**. He speaks, and we say, ‘Hold it Jesus, what did you say? Whoa, Jesus, you can't be serious, can you?’

The sower went out to sow his seed. Some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate them up. “Hold it Jesus - why is he sowing on the path on hard ground?” Other seed fell on rocky ground, in shallow soil. “Hold it Jesus - why is he wasting his seed on rocky ground?” Still other fell among thorns. “Jesus, surely the sower knows better than to do that!” Still other seed fell in good soil, and the seed produced a crop 100 times the normal harvest. “WHOA! Jesus! Wait a minute Jesus! You know things like that do not happen in the real world. Maybe 2 times normal like some of the crops we get from the central valley, maybe 3 or 4 times, but never 100 times!!!”

The landowner sends the first group of workers into the vineyard. A few hours later, he hires another group. A few hours later, he hires another group. Toward the end of the day, he hires yet another group. And when it comes time to pay them, they all get the same amount!

“Whoa, Jesus. No way! That is no way to run a business, especially if the business is the Kingdom of GOD. I mean, we thought You were talking about the Kingdom of God here Jesus.”

The shepherd leaves the 99 in open pasture in order to go find the one lost. “What Jesus? Palestinian shepherds would never do that - risk the well-being of 99 just to find one lost sheep?”

The younger son who has hurt his father deeply returns from the far country. And the father has been waiting for him “Whoa Jesus ... waiting for him? The father has been waiting for the dirtbag?” The father picks up his tunic and runs to meet his son at the village gates. “Whoa, Jesus... the father runs? Jesus, you know that a man of his age and stature never runs in public for any reason.” And the father embraces the son, and kisses him, and calls for the best robe to be put on him, and the father throws a party! “Jesus, what kind of kingdom are you in this? You’re out of your mind - the son should be punished ... instead he gets a party?”

In every parable, Jesus shares an **unexpected** twist, which surprises us. He takes the story in a different direction, one we would never have thought of and for which shatters all our preconceived notions. As the brilliant writer Robert Capon says, *“Nowhere in the Bible is an un-made-up mind more called for than when reading the parables of Jesus.”* (4)

C. Unsettled

And, in the end, Jesus catches us off guard, and we are left **unsettled** and disoriented. The parables call into question our entire view of reality. Jesus makes claims about the Kingdom of God, and the God of the kingdom which confront us and our understanding of the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom. But, it is all done intentionally in order to engage us, cause reflection and compel action. In our unsettledness, we either embrace the unexpected as truth, or we reject it as a distortion of the kingdom. We either take our stand on the truths that are presented in each parable about the King or the kingdom, or they become stumbling block over which we trip.

So, we either hear and truly hear, see and truly see, and turn and be healed. Or hear and not hear, see and not see, and not turn and not be healed. It all depends on what we do with our **unsettledness**. We either believe it, take our stand on it, or we reject it and harden our heart.

After all, the parables are a confrontation of worlds. They produce a crisis because they challenge all of our assumptions, all of our priorities, all of our idols. The parables explain God’s new order and way of life, which inevitably is a threat to the current order of this world. This inherently means the parables will attract and repel at the same time.

Either way, a decision is required. And, most of the time, that decision involves the ‘*extravagance*’ within the parable. In the parable of the sower, the seed is thrown everywhere! It also produces 100-fold. The vineyard owner pays everyone the generous wage. The father throws an extravagant party for his prodigal son. So, the question is this, will you embrace the overflowing extravagance or will you reject it? That’s the question.

But, of course, the question is even bigger than that. The question ultimately boils down to a person.

V. Jesus

In the end, the real unsettledness surrounds the preacher of the parables. For, the kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom have both been personified in Him. He is the kingdom of God with sandals on and walking around, but he is also Immanuel, God with us, the God of the kingdom. And, it is in him that we ultimately find overflowing extravagance.

As we read in our scripture reading today in Ephesians 1, Paul explains how we have been extravagantly blessed in Christ. He uses the word riches. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing. Every blessing. Of all the blessings, Paul lists these: we have been chosen, redeemed, forgiven, adopted, made known to us the mystery of his will, obtained an inheritance, given hope, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. We are much richer than we think or feel! God has lavished on us his overflowing extravagance in Jesus Christ.

Will you embrace him or reject him? It all boils down to him. Will you embrace him as the way, the truth and the life and turn and be healed, or will you reject him and not turn and not be healed.

VI. Conclusion

In Matthew 11:6, Jesus says, *"Blessed is the one who is not offended by me."* Blessed are you if you do not stumble over Jesus. If we see him and truly see him, hear him and truly hear him and understand, we will turn and be healed. When we embrace the extravagance. When we embrace Jesus and his extravagant love, we will be healed.

Amen.

Benediction

- A. Prayer team
- B. May our extravagant God, made manifest in Jesus, open your eyes and ears this week so that you will see and truly see, hear and truly hear and turn and be healed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

References:

Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*

Robert Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*

Malcolm Guite, *Parable and Paradox: Sonnets on the Sayings of Jesus and other Poems*

Darrell Johnson, *The Parables of Jesus*, Regent College MP3,

<https://www.regentaudio.com/products/the-parables-of-jesus>

Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*

Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed*

David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*