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This Honors thesis entitled

“Keeping the Heart: Contemporizing the Parables of Jesus”

written by

Hannah Tullos

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

KEEPING THE HEART:
CONTEMPORIZING THE PARABLES OF JESUS

SENIOR THESIS

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APRIL 26, 2023

ABSTRACT

One of the main teaching techniques of Jesus was his usage of stories, also known as parables. Although the power of his words never fades, the impact of the details of his stories inevitably gets lost when the stories are read in a different cultural context. This thesis provides a method that brings Jesus's parables into a modern context. In being able to completely transform parables into a modern context, the message of the parables can reach wider audiences on a more personal level. The goal is to revive the heart of storytelling within the parables of Jesus and communicate the same truth centuries after they were originally shared.

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JESUS AS A STORYTELLER

There is something about storytelling that distinguishes it from other forms of communication. Stories create an environment where the creative intermingles with reality, and authors have the ability to reach their audiences both intellectually and emotionally. This craft of storytelling was a common teaching technique employed by Jesus during his ministry. As Jesus's words have been studied and taught, many think of him as a skilled communicator, and he has been known as a model teacher. One of the reasons he is viewed as such is his ability to capture the attention of an audience and speak in such a way that prompted life change. His primary method of engaging his followers was through telling stories, more commonly known as parables. Certainly, Jesus could have supplied well-reasoned speeches describing the character of God and the nature of his kingdom, and in some cases he did. But the majority of the time, Jesus drew on the culture of his audience, activated their imaginations, prompted discussion, and sent them away with a tangible picture of the kingdom of God using parables.

Stories interact with their hearers in a unique way because what they communicate reaches people differently than mere lecture or explanation.¹ This is due to entertainment and intrigue factors, of course, but it is mainly because the human brain stores abstract information more easily than a list of concrete facts.² It is easier to recall an image or a painting than a bullet point list of information. Storytelling involves taking a foundation of information and shaping it into a mental picture for the audience—a picture that can later be remembered and considered. This is because of the nature of narrative. Narrative is central to human perspective, as it is the

¹ Howard Woodhouse, *Storytelling in University Education: Emotion, Teachable Moments, and the Value of Life*, *The Journal of Educational Thought* (Calgary: Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, 2011), 218.

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1.

means of verbalizing one's perception of the world.³ In other words, experiences are given meaning through stories as they are processed through language and shared with others.⁴ The narratives that are shared carry cultural, social, and emotional connection to the speaker and the hearer, going beyond simple transference of facts. Experience is emotional, and stories connect to the emotional, especially when the reader's experiences resonate with that of the characters.⁵ This emotional connection creates a prime educational atmosphere. Deniston says "lived experience is the foundation for...learning."⁶ If this is true, it would prove exceedingly useful that Jesus utilized the concept of shared, lived experiences in his parables to teach lessons that go beyond earthly matters. The identities of people are linked to their experiences, and Jesus was able to connect with the identities of his first-century Palestinian audience by way of storytelling.⁷

Language is powerful, but mixed with creativity, its capacity for impact is broadened. Jesus understood the power of stories and was intentional in his incorporation of parables into his teaching. In his parables, Jesus was able to take his audience to another world yet remain in their realm of understanding. He created "an unreal, controlled universe" where life looked the same on the surface but was inherently different within.⁸ Stories are humanizing, as they allow for

³ Janice Huber, Vera Caine, Marilyn Huber, and Pam Steeves, *Narrative Inquiry as Pedagogy in Education: The Extraordinary Potential of Living, Telling, Retelling, and Reliving Stories of Experience*, Review of Research in Education (Washington D.C., American Educational Research Association), 218.

⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁵ Woodhouse, 217.

⁶ Grace M. Deniston-Trochta, *The Meaning of Storytelling as Pedagogy*, Visual Arts Research (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 104.

⁷ Huber, 214.

⁸ Snodgrass, 1.

their hearers to interact with and comprehend the material in a deeper way.⁹ Jesus shaped a world that was able to be understood by his audience while allowing space for the extreme to be recognized, noted, and oftentimes discussed. Hyperbole was far from absent from his parables, but it remained in the borders of the comprehensible.¹⁰ He made theology accessible to the crowds by communicating with them through relatable stories.¹¹ This is significant because it highlights Jesus' intention in his teaching: he wanted ordinary people to understand the things of God.

There are particular qualities of parables that allowed for Jesus to use them so effectively in his ministry. In many instances, parables were used to address some incorrect behavior or attitude of those listening. Instead of explicitly indicting the audience, Jesus used parables as a buffer, a way to communicate the same message without having to combat potential reactions from the listeners. The nature of parables allowed for truth to be seen through a specific, controlled lens. Parables presented stories that could be understood in their cultural context while being just far enough removed from any personal scenario that the audience would not become defensive in reaction to the lesson.¹² In essence, any resistance from the audience was lost, and the story had the freedom to penetrate their hearts and minds.¹³ Parables flood the audience with subtle truth and possible condemnation before the purpose of its content is even realized. It is a

⁹ Woodhouse, 217.

¹⁰ Norman A. Huffman, *Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus*, The Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1978), 212.

¹¹ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution*, The Jesus Library (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 13.

¹² Snodgrass, 8.

¹³ Robert H. Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38.

stealthy, strategic way of communicating, especially when the lesson of the parable may have been received with hostility and closed ears had the purpose been stated outright. Additionally, the concealed nature of Jesus's parables acted as an unforceful way to call people to believe what he was saying about the kingdom of God. The use of a story offered a way for some people to acknowledge and willingly accept the ways of the kingdom and for others to miss the ultimate meaning of the parable.¹⁴ This ambiguity, in essence, protected the sacred nature of Jesus's message. Rather than an explicit message, only those with ready hearts were able to discern the ultimate meaning of the parables.

INTERPRETING PARABLES

History of Interpretation

Unfortunately, parables are one of the most mistreated types of stories, which highlights a need for accurate exegetical work.¹⁵ Before proper contemporization of a parable can take place, responsible interpretation must occur. This allows the writer to have a deeper understanding of the purpose of the biblical text, leading the way for the modern version to be a more comprehensive example of what Jesus communicated in the first century. A brief history of interpretation of parables is beneficial in order to recognize the proper interpretive methods for today and what mistakes history bids us to avoid.

The form of parables implicitly welcomes analysis. Due to their representative nature and use of symbols, parables invite readers to discern what lesson or overall moral is being described by way of the story's details. This type of interpretation often led to allegorizing the parables in the early church. Viewing parables as allegory promoted a practice that ascribed

¹⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 64.

¹⁵ Snodgrass, 6.

meaning/theological significance to every detail in the story. The method of allegorizing had roots in ancient Greek culture, as they would often search for higher meaning in their texts.¹⁶ This method later emerged in the church in an effort to draw connections between the Old and New Testaments.¹⁷ The early church fathers sought to discover every layer of meaning associated with Jesus's words. This prompted an extensive duration when allegorization of parables was popular among Christians, some examples being Augustine's interpretation of the Good Samaritan, Irenaeus's laborers in the vineyard, and Gregory the Great's Barren Fig Tree.¹⁸ Each offered an interpretation giving the parables' details some biblical, modern, or theological equivalent that went beyond the intended meaning of the original author. Using allegory as a means to discover meaning in the parables remained a strong influence until the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Some church leaders throughout history such as Aquinas and Calvin discouraged such an interpretive method, believing the extent to which the parables' details were interpreted was unnecessary and went beyond the meaning of the text. Adolf Jülicher attempted to reverse the trend toward allegory, countering Augustine in particular. Rather than viewing parable as allegory, he equated parable with simile, arguing that the parables did not require interpretation because of Jesus's attempt at simple communication.²⁰ He held to the belief that each parable

¹⁶ Snodgrass, 4.

¹⁷ John W. Sider, *Nurturing our Nurse: Literary Scholars and Biblical Exegesis*, Christianity and Literature (John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 16.

¹⁸ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 35.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Klyne R. Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 6.

communicated a single point.²¹ Rather than particular or multiple theological applications, Jülicher reasoned that Jesus's parables taught general moralisms by which to abide.²² According to Jülicher, parable and simile were literal speech, meaning they were "self-evident" and required no interpretation, and allegory and metaphor were nonliteral, "saying one thing and meaning another."²³ This meant Jesus's parables would not include any sort of symbolism or representations. There would be no need for interpretation. As he attempted to disassociate Jesus' parables with analogy, it seems he watered down Jesus' message because of the details he minimized. The characters, setting, and situation of the parables were written off as simple realism, and the theological significance was claimed to only be provided in an extended simile form (whenever Jesus explicitly made comparison with *like* or *as*).²⁴ There was no room for interpretation beyond what was physically stated in the text. Some scholars have identified Jülicher's views about Jesus's parables more as a vehement opposition to allegory than a true belief in their simplicity.²⁵ Regardless, he paved the way for biblical scholars to adopt an anti-allegory mindset when interpreting parables that still remains in some circles.

From a literary standpoint, Jülicher seems to have put great limits to the breadth of Jesus's parables. Sider notes that Jülicher was not experienced with allegorical interpretation and disliked the writing style to such an extent he would never allow it to be associated with Jesus's words.²⁶ The twentieth century was characterized by a decline of support for Jülicher's strict

²¹ Sider, 18.

²² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 36.

²⁵ Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 8.

²⁶ Sider, 17.

claims about parabolic interpretation, although the skepticism of allegory did not entirely dissipate. Some still avoid associating Jesus's parables with allegory, believing any sort of symbolic or figurative understanding of the stories to be misrepresenting their purpose. Others openly equate parable and allegory. Blomberg identifies features of allegory that are present in Jesus's parables, such as their purposes and balance of realistic and extraordinary.²⁷ He holds strongly to the belief that Jesus's parables are allegories, but their interpretation obviously should not go beyond the natural interpretive boundaries of the text.²⁸ Snodgrass presents a similar sentiment—parables may be allegories, but they do not necessitate abuse by allegory. Their intended meanings must not be affected—a fact that is central to handling and comprehending the parables.²⁹

Interpretive Keys

The ultimate goal when approaching a biblical text is that Jesus's message be understood. Discovery and maintenance of the intended meaning is key to interpreting parables, and there are some steps to take in order to achieve this.³⁰ Wenham emphasizes a need to recognize the New Testament background of the parables. Being so far removed from Jesus's original audience, the modern reader does not relate socially, religiously, or politically and must familiarize himself with the first century Palestinian context in order to fully understand Jesus's purpose or content of his message.³¹ For parables in particular, what may be seen as abnormal for the modern

²⁷ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 60

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67

²⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Wenham, 15.

audience may not have been viewed as such for the original reader, so a proper historical context positions the interpreter to understand the parable with respect to its original nuances.³²

As for literary context, its identification in parables is two-fold. Snodgrass identifies the need to understand the literary context of the parable in context of Jesus's telling as well as the intent of the author of the book in which it is found. The parables were used by Jesus for one purpose and included in their respective books and chapters for another (although the purposes may be synonymous), so a complete interpretation would require an understanding of why it was included in its particular location by the author.³³ Sider agrees, encouraging a literary approach to the gospel parables to analyze *how* the stories were communicated in addition to what was being said.³⁴

Regarding the specific details of the parables, Wenham identifies the need to distinguish between "points of emphasis" and "details which simply add colour."³⁵ He acknowledges that there is no formula for this; rather, it requires sensitivity to literary and historical contexts.³⁶ With a proper general understanding of these contexts, the interpreter will be in a position to identify the important details of the parables and be better guarded against the temptation to allegorize unnecessarily. Identifying these points of emphasis also leads the interpreter to find the overall points of meaning in the parable. Scholars hold differing opinions regarding how many points of meaning a parable can have, ranging from one (as promoted by Jülicher) to as

³² Ernest van Eck, *Realism and Method*, Neotestamentica (New Testament Society of Southern Africa, 2017), 167.

³³ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 26.

³⁴ Sider, 18.

³⁵ Wenham, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

many as present themselves in context.³⁷ Blomberg has a more specific guideline, claiming the number of points of meaning correspond with the number of main characters.³⁸ Using Blomberg's method is a responsible place to start, as it ensures proper attention is given to every character and provides natural allegorical boundaries.

Following the identification of the points of emphasis separate from the colorful details, the reader should identify theological principles and compare them to other teachings of Jesus.³⁹ This is part of the concluding steps of the interpretive process, as it pinpoints the universal concepts of the parable that apply both in its original telling and in modern contexts. These theological principles allow readers to move beyond an appreciation for the parable itself and toward an understanding of how it could apply to their lives. A recognition of specific applications of the theological principles follows, bringing the parable from a story for first-century Jews to a specific way someone in the twenty-first century (and beyond) should live, think, speak, etc.⁴⁰

GUIDELINES FOR CONTEMPORIZING PARABLES

The Need to Contemporize

In evangelical circles, the most common step following interpretation of biblical texts is application. A passage is studied, dissected, and researched; theological principles are defined and processed; and modern day applications are identified and put into practice. This method is tried and true and has allowed people to properly handle scripture. Hermeneutical methods are

³⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 28.

³⁸ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 199.

³⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 31.

⁴⁰ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 31-32.

widely available and used to learn from every biblical genre, from wisdom poetry to parables. This might raise the question: what, then, is the need for contemporization? Why go beyond the typical interpretation and application pattern if it works? Oddly, the answer is, contemporization is not essential. Faithful Christians can go their entire lives without hearing the parables in a modern context and have just as strong a faith or biblical understanding as those who had. However, mere interpretation of parables loses one aspect of Jesus' teaching—the storytelling element. The benefits in communicating by way of relevant stories have already been made clear, but the parables used by Jesus lack some communicative value in a modern context. This is not to say the parables do not have inherent value and cannot be understood and applied. As described previously, parables can certainly be properly interpreted and comprehended. A method for contemporizing would simply allow for the same impact Jesus's stories brought to the original audience to be felt today.

Mere interpretation of a parable may communicate accurate information about it, but it lacks the emotional, imaginative, and creative elements associated with the nature of the parable. In short, the story loses its heart.⁴¹ This is likened to explaining the punchline of a joke. The joke may thus be understood, but it loses its inherent reason for being a joke—comical delivery!⁴² Similarly, parables recited in their contextual form but explained in modern form lose an important element of their nature that prompted Jesus to use them in the first place. Contemporizing the parables revives that lost nuance that characterizes storytelling.

⁴¹ Stein, 37.

⁴² Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 21.

Essential Elements for Contemporization

Whereas finding a responsible method for contemporizing parables proved to be a challenge, there were certainly resources that noted essential elements found within Jesus' parables. A portion of these also seemed to be essential in the process of contemporizing, as they would ensure a maintenance of biblical accuracy and structural similarity. The main element was the process of distinguishing between the point of the parable and details that were merely supplemental to provide the listener with a fuller picture of the scenario.⁴³ This was emphasized in order to prevent the excessive allegorizing popular in the nineteenth century. If every detail of a parable was given significance, the parables would prove to be (1) very difficult to interpret, as many people would come to different conclusions and (2) even more difficult to contemporize because every detail would have to be assigned a contemporary equivalent—a process so tedious it would likely prove to be unbearable.⁴⁴ Another element helpful for contemporization is an understanding of the intended meaning and imagery of the original parable. Wenham compares this to the job of a translator. Just as a translator is to be familiar with the language and idioms of the original and translated dialogue, crafting contemporary parables requires an understanding of the original meaning and culture in order to properly bring the parable into a modern light.⁴⁵ These are the two foundational elements upon which I have built a method of contemporization of parables.

⁴³ Wenham, 17.

⁴⁴ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 35.

⁴⁵ Wenham, 18.

My Proposed Method of Contemporization

With all of this in mind, I have created a proposed method for contemporizing parables. I have attempted to produce some guidelines for the process that promote a balance between biblical accuracy and creative license. Granted, it is not a short process. A heavy amount of work is involved, but I believe the thorough nature of these guidelines ensures a responsible handling of the biblical text.

Guidelines for Responsible Contemporization of Parables:

I. Follow an interpretive method of the parable.

Beginning the process of contemporization with study displays a respectful, responsible approach to the biblical text and puts the writer in a position to remain as close to a biblical representation as possible. Using a hermeneutical process is not a small task, especially when attempting to understand a story told in a different time period and culture. It does require time and study, but it is essential. Contemporization requires a firm understanding of what the parable meant to its original audience so it can be properly communicated in a modern context. The contemporary writer should complete the interpretive method with an understanding of both the general purpose/message of the parable and which details would be lost on a modern audience. The goal of contemporization is for the details that hold cultural significance to not require explanation to be understood. Rather, their significance should ideally be able to be understood by their audience upon a first hearing.

II. Identify and dissect the parable's story elements.

Admittedly, this step is the most tedious, but if done thoroughly, the writer should have no doubt that the contemporary version of the parable he/she created represents the

message of the biblical text with the most care. The most thorough dissection would involve (a) listing the details found in the parable, (b) identifying the essential elements/details of cultural significance and identifying a modern equivalent for each, and (c) identifying how the essential elements build on each other.

a. List every detail found in the parable.

This may seem unnecessary after having read through the text multiple times, but by creating a physical list of the details included in the parable, it is easier to identify which details must be represented in an equivalent manner and which details the writer has the freedom to alter. Think of this as an observation phase. There are different groupings of details that should be noted: characters, location/setting, and actions/dialogue. A detailed list of characters should include their genders, roles in society, relation to other characters, and personal qualities (compassionate, harsh, kind, unjust, etc.). The list of details about the location should include aspects like the climate, significance/function in the surrounding society, typical population (size, type of inhabitants, etc.), and economic status. The list of actions/dialogue is self-explanatory. It should include every behavior of the characters, who spoke to whom, and what they said.

Once this comprehensive list is created, the writer should refer to the research done in the interpretive step to identify what the original significance of the characters, location/setting, and actions/dialogue was. In some cases, the significance will be clearly identifiable by simply reading the text. In others, the completed background/interpretive work will be beneficial and act as an aid in this process.

b. Centered around the main characters, identify essential vs. nonessential elements of the parable in regard to what should be included in the

contemporized version, and note modern equivalents for every essential element.

For the purposes of contemporization, “essential” simply means the intent of the biblical text must be included in the modern form of the parable. This is not implying that portions of Scripture can be viewed as nonessential. Rather, “nonessential” elements would include details that are able to be adjusted without altering the intended meaning of the original text. A general rule of thumb is to determine if a certain detail being changed in some way would change the intended meaning of the text. For instance, if a male character in the original text was represented as a female character in the contemporary version, the theological purpose could still be understood. It goes without saying that the basic storyline should never be changed (i.e. the robbed Jew should always receive the Samaritan’s help, the scattered seed must always result in four different outcomes, etc.), but it should be clear that every aspect of the parable that was meant to communicate significance must be represented. Again, the goal of contemporization is to carefully approach the biblical text and accurately create a modern form that resembles the purpose of the original parable as closely as possible. This cannot happen if necessary details are neglected. Centering this process around the main characters is a way to provide structure in the detail identification stage. It is also helpful when creating contemporary equivalents because the list acts as a check during the contemporization phase to ensure all aspects of the characters are accounted for.

At this point, the interpretation history of parables provides a warning. An analysis of the details as essential/nonessential should not lead the writer to go beyond natural interpretive boundaries. It is better for the writer to work from the broad picture

discovered in the initial interpretive step and recognize that every detail included in the parable does not necessarily represent something theological or require an exact representation in the modern form. Jesus was a storyteller, and he was creative! Some of the parables' details are simply Jesus' way of creating this imaginative world, as is the case with any writer. Some details have meaning, others just add color. The writer of the modern version of the parable is at liberty to change the color.

When the details from the list are identified as essential and nonessential, the writer must find contemporary equivalents for each of the essential elements. If characters have a boss/employee relationship, that type of relationship needs to be represented. If the setting is known for its being dangerous, the modern story should take place in a region known for danger, or at least the details provided should create a picture of a dangerous place. Actions and dialogue should elicit the same feelings in the modern story as they do the original. Thinking through and identifying the modern equivalents requires some familiarity with modern culture, and it might necessitate some research. Any part of a parable that would require explanation in a sermon or lesson to highlight the significance to the audience must be included in the contemporary version in a form that maintains its original implied nature. Only if the essential details are accurately depicted in modern form will the parable function in the way it was intended, so the appropriate steps should be taken by the writer to ensure the correlation of the original and modern details. The beauty of contemporization is that no two writers will choose to represent the parable in the exact manner, but the same basic storyline and theological principles will be present.

c. Identify how the essential elements build on each other structurally and emotionally.

This step has to do with the literary structure of the parables. Oftentimes, it is the interaction of the story's characters, plot, and emotions that affects the reader to a similar degree as the story's elements themselves. Moments of anticipation, disappointment, shock, and the like should be reflected similarly in the modern parable as they do the original. Additionally, the general storyline of the original parable should be represented. This step can be done by outlining the original parable and idea for the modern version, which ensures that the storyline of the modern reflects the emotional and structural matter of the original. This allows for the previous identification of the parable's details to be organized, and it gets the writer in position for the best part—writing the story.

III. Write the story with modern parallels in mind.

This should be the most enjoyable part of the process for the writer, especially if thorough work was done in the first two steps. When all the details to be included are identified, the writer has the freedom to craft the story. All writers have their own writing processes, so this step does not include a rigid explanation on how the story should come about. With humility and an attitude of openness toward the guidance of the Holy Spirit (and careful attention to all the preparation that was done), the writer is in a position to create the modern form of the parable. Certainly, the writing process is not quick, and it does require editing, adjusting, and rewriting phases. Once these intricate details of the specific parables are established, however, the writer should follow the general advice of Snodgrass. Just as Jesus' parables did, the modern versions should (1) engage readers, (2)

create reflection, and (3) promote action.⁴⁶ In order to accomplish this, the writer must have a thorough understanding of the contemporary culture. Readers will only be engaged, reflective, and motivated to act if they relate to the story. Although these are subjective standards and cannot be quantified, the writer should take them into consideration when reading the finished work. Having other people evaluate the piece with these standards in mind might also prove useful.

IV. Compare the original parable with the contemporized version.

This comparison acts as a final check. With all the work completed before this point, ideally the writer should not have much (if anything) to change. The original parable should be read and followed by a reading of the contemporary version. The first list of details should be referenced in this rereading. Was every detail included? Do the characters maintain correct relationships, character qualities, actions, etc.? Are all of the points of emphasis clearly reflected? Additionally, the theological principles identified from the interpretive work of the original parable should be evaluated. Can the theological principles associated with the original be identified from the contemporary version? Is every representation in the modern version biblical? Finally, the basic storyline of the parables should be compared. Do they rise and fall in a similar manner? Do both parables elicit the same emotions? Does the modern parable stir the same thoughts, reflections, and reactions as Jesus's parable did? If everything is checked off, the modern parable has been completed, and the writer can rest knowing the biblical text has not been abused.

⁴⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 9.

The purpose of contemporization is to revive the heart of storytelling. With a responsible representation of the original parable in a modern form, that heart of storytelling is restored. With the utilization of this method, modern writers are in a position to create contemporary parables that function as Jesus's did. So go, share, and utilize the story! It is worth telling!

PHILIP YANCEY'S THE PRODIGAL SON: "THE LOVESICK FATHER"

Whereas a universal method of parable contemporization has yet to be popularized, there are some who have produced parables in modern form. In his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, Philip Yancey includes his version of the Prodigal Son, which he titles "The Lovesick Father." It was this contemporary version of a parable that prompted this study. The following is a quotation of the biblical text "The Prodigal Son," followed by Yancey's version and an analysis of it in accordance with the proposed method of contemporization included in the previous section.

The Prodigal Son

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast

and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

Luke 15:11-24

The Lovesick Father

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"—teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline: "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. *My dog back home eats better than I do now.* She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom,

it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes fit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *Oh, God.*

When the bus finally rolls into the stations, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."⁴⁷

This is an example of how powerful the contemporization of parables has the opportunity of being, if done responsibly and thoroughly. Whereas Yancey did not claim to follow any specific method of contemporization, his rendition of "The Prodigal Son" models what the goal of contemporization is. The following charts include a breakdown of the original parable and

⁴⁷ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 49-51.

Yancey's version. The paired areas correspond between the charts to indicate when an element of the original parable was represented in the modern one.

Characters

The Prodigal Son	The Lovesick Father
Father	Parents
Younger Son	Young Girl
Servants	Family Members

**The Prodigal Son does include mention of an older brother, but The Lovesick Father does not represent that portion of the parable, so his role is not included in the comparison/analysis.

Character Qualities

The Prodigal Son	The Lovesick Father
Father: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealthy • Accommodating • Compassionate • Willing to be viewed dishonorably 	Parents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old-fashioned • Forgiving • Willing to be seen as silly
Younger Son: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrespectful • Unwise • Hungry • Remorseful 	Young Girl: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edgy • Taken advantage of • Sick • Fearful • Hungry

<p>Servants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of the celebration 	<p>Family Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of the celebration
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Character Dialogue

The Prodigal Son	The Lovesick Father
<p>Father:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals for his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.” 	<p>Parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hush, child. We’ve got no time for that. No time for apologies. You’ll be late for the party. A banquet’s waiting for you at home.”
<p>Younger Son:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Father, give me my share of the estate.” • “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!” • “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son....” • “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” 	<p>Young Girl:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I hate you!” • “<i>God, why did I leave...My dog back home eats better than I do now.</i>” • “Dad, Mom, it’s me. I was wondering about maybe coming home.” • “Dad, I’m sorry. I know I was wrong. It’s not your fault; it’s all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?” • “Dad, I’m sorry. I know....”
<p>Servants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	<p>Family Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None

Character Actions

The Prodigal Son	The Lovesick Father
<p>Father:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divides property for sons • Runs, hugs, and kisses his son as he returns home • Throws a party for him 	<p>Parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground their daughter • Put out missing child signs • Greets her with party hats, noise-makers, and a “Welcome Home!” sign • Puts together a party for her return
<p>Younger Son:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaves home with inheritance from his father • Goes to a distant country • Wastes his money on wild living • Famine strikes; he starves • Remembers life with his father • Goes back to his father 	<p>Young Girl:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Runs away from home • Goes to Detroit and works for “Boss” • Lives in a penthouse and orders room service but is a prostitute • Gets sick, is sent to the streets without any money • Is in danger and starving on the streets • Remembers life back home • Goes home to her family
<p>Servants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the fattened calf and throw a party! 	<p>Family Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wait for the girl at the bus station with a huge “Welcome Home!” sign

Setting

The Prodigal Son	The Lovesick Father
A distant country	Traverse City, Michigan
Field with pigs	Detroit, Michigan

Theological Principles Evident in Both

Both <i>The Prodigal Son</i> and <i>The Lovesick Father</i>
God welcomes his children and offers restoration when they show true repentance.
No matter how far gone a believer thinks himself to be, the Lord is faithful to forgive and redeem all.

EXAMPLES OF THE CONTEMPORIZATION METHOD IN PRACTICE

This section takes three parables and puts them into a modern form using the proposed contemporization method. In an effort to provide broad examples for this method, the three parables vary in communicative purpose, theme, and number of characters. Additionally, the modern forms were written with varying audiences in mind, so they will not necessarily resonate with all ages and genders. The following are included for each parable: the quotation of the parable from the biblical text, a brief background and interpretation, the contemporary version of the parable, and an explanation/comparison of the details included in both.

The Ten Virgins

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight, the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

“No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

“But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

Matthew 25:1-13

Interpretive Work

The parable of the Ten Virgins is part of the Matthean eschatological discourse. The parable depicts a typical Palestinian wedding. The job of the virgins was to provide light for the wedding feast whenever the bridegroom arrived.⁴⁸ When the bridegroom arrived, the festivities would begin.⁴⁹ It was expected that the virgins would have enough oil in order to light their lamps, no matter the delay of the bridegroom.⁵⁰ In this parable, the number of the virgins does not have theological significance. Ten virgins divided into two groups is an appropriate sample size to fulfill the parable’s comparative purpose.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Wenham, 80.

⁴⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 513.

⁵⁰ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

When the cry rang out to prepare the virgins for the approaching bridegroom, it is likely this call was given more than once. This emphasizes the irresponsibility of the foolish virgins.⁵² Their lack of preparation for the bridegroom consisted of their not bringing enough oil for their lamps at the start in addition to their not heeding the first cry. When the wise virgins were able to trim their lamps, the foolish were left to find more oil at the last minute. The wise cannot be blamed or viewed as uncompassionate because they did not share oil with the foolish virgins. If they had shared, all of the oil would have gone out and no light would have been provided for the coming bridegroom.⁵³ Their refusal also signifies the individual responsibility associated with a response to the offer of salvation.⁵⁴ Wenham holds that the oil represents good works done by believers in preparation for Christ's return, but Blomberg and Snodgrass find no theological significance in the oil.⁵⁵ Blomberg notes that the need for the virgins to have oil does not mean believers must have something to be accepted by God. The emphasis is on the preparedness of the virgins, not the substance of their preparation.⁵⁶

In this parable, the bridegroom's arrival represents the coming of Christ, the wise virgins are faithful believers, and the foolish virgins are those who do not respond to God's call of salvation. The delay of the bridegroom likely symbolizes the unknown day and time of Christ's

⁵² Ibid., 240.

⁵³ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 517.

⁵⁴ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 242.

⁵⁵ Wenham, 82.

⁵⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 242.

second return.⁵⁷ The final call to “keep watch” does not imply that believers cannot sleep.

Rather, it is a call to be ready and prepared for the second coming of Christ.⁵⁸

The Ten Contractors

A wealthy man resided in the small town of Honey Grove, Texas. This town was not the source of his wealth but his place of respite from the fast-paced life of the metroplex. Every day, he commuted two hours to his office in Dallas and usually didn’t get home until after eight o’clock that evening. Some weeks, he would stay in his Dallas apartment to avoid the commute. He was home most weekends, but his schedule was never regular. When asked why he didn’t live closer to his job, he replies, “It worked for my grandfather and my dad—no reason it shouldn’t work for me. Country living’s in my blood. A job is just a job.”

One summer, he was informed that his niece and her husband were taking regular trips to Dallas from Broken Bow, Oklahoma to see a health specialist. The trip took about six hours total, and it went directly through Honey Grove. When he heard of this, he wanted to offer his home should they ever need a place to rest or want to divide the travel time, but his house could only comfortably accommodate one or two for the night. Although he was wealthy, he typically lived within his means, only buying what was necessary—hence the one bedroom house. With his niece in mind and his more than available funds, the man reasoned to build onto his house in order to provide free housing for his niece and her husband whenever they needed it. He hired ten men who were skilled contractors and had experience building houses and asked them to build a separate wing including a bedroom, small living area, and full-sized bathroom. This job would include framework, walls, flooring, painting, lighting, and a few amenities. Money was no

⁵⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 516.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 517.

object, but they were responsible for buying the resources and transporting them to his house. He would stay in his apartment in Dallas until the house was finished, and he would surprise his niece with the addition. His only request was that it would be complete before his niece's next trip, although he didn't tell them when that was.

The contractors were pleased to do the job. They coordinated with the man, drew out a blueprint, and figured which materials would need to be used and their necessary quantity. Five contractors were to build the bedroom and the bathroom, and the other five the small living room. When the man finished giving the contractors their instructions, he went to Dallas, and the contractors drove to Home Depot to get their supplies.

The five who were building the bedroom and the bathroom split from the five working on the living room so each group could gather their specific supplies. After a reasonable amount of time, the ten regrouped at the front of Home Depot to charge everything to the wealthy man's account. There was a significant difference between the amount of supplies the bedroom/bathroom crew had gathered compared to the living room crew. The bedroom/bathroom five had intentionally chosen to gather all the supplies listed on the blueprint for their section, including some amenities the wealthy man had specifically requested be installed. The living room five had gathered only the supplies needed for less than a quarter of their job to be completed. They claimed it would be easier to get supplies as they needed, rather than creating a cluttered area at the house.

When the supplies had been purchased and transported back to the wealthy man's house, all ten men began working. Their unknown deadline caused some initial nerves, but as the weeks passed and the man did not come, the contractors relaxed some. The five who worked on the bedroom and bathroom had a consistent schedule, coming in five days a week for eight hours

each day, using the supplies they had purchased on the first day and being diligent in each step of the building process. They would take weekends off to be with their families, but their progress was never slacking. The five who worked on the living room did not have a similar working schedule. Because it seemed the wealthy man was not coming back anytime soon, these five were lax when it came to the work week. A few would show up one day, some another, and rarely was anyone there for eight hours. They also ran out of supplies as they worked and would have to pause to drive the thirty minutes to Home Depot to get what they needed and drive the thirty minutes back. Their work was unorganized and scattered. Whereas they were making progress on the living room, it did not compare to the work done by the other five contractors.

Early one morning, the contractors received a call from the wealthy man. He was coming home that day and bringing his niece and her husband with him. The five contractors working on the bedroom and bathroom were excited for him to see their work. They went up to the house to clean off a few areas and make sure it looked presentable. However, the five contractors working on the living room were caught off guard by the wealthy man's phone call. He had been gone so long, they assumed they would have all the time they needed to finish the living room. Instead, he was coming that day, and they still needed to paint and install flooring. They decided to split up, two working on painting and three installing the floors. It wouldn't be completely finished by the time they arrived, but it would at least look more like what the finished product was supposed to be.

As they were gathering their supplies to paint the walls and install the floors, the living room crew realized they did not have enough supplies to finish their part. They went to the other five contractors asking for extra paint and floor panels, but they did not have enough to cover the entirety of the living room.

“The man’s traveling from Dallas, so it’ll take him at least two hours to get here,” the five bedroom/bathroom contractors said. “You could go to Home Depot and get the supplies you need before he gets back.”

So the other five contractors made the thirty minute trip to Home Depot to buy the necessary paint and flooring. While they were away, the wealthy man pulled into the driveway and another car followed. They parked, and the man walked into his house with his niece and her husband. He was explaining what the addition was for when he walked into the new, unfinished living room. His face dropped and eyes widened with shock. The five contractors who worked on the bedroom and bathroom explained that the other five had not finished their portion of the project and needed to take a last minute trip to Home Depot. They then led the wealthy man, his niece, and her husband to the fully finished bedroom and bathroom. The wealthy man was very pleased with the work and proud to offer it to his niece anytime she needed. He thanked the five contractors who were faithful to complete the task he had asked of them and paid them more than he initially indicated.

Meanwhile, the other five contractors arrived back at the wealthy man’s house. They parked behind the two vehicles in the driveway, so they realized the man had returned home. Frantically, they unloaded the supplies from their trucks and walked to the front door. When they knocked, the wealthy man opened the door with a frown. The contractors started to explain.

“Sir...we didn’t realize you were returning so soon...we have the supplies to finish the job!”

The wealthy man answered. “I’ve been away for months, giving you ample time to finish a simple living room. When I sought workers for this job, I hired capable, experienced, diligent contractors. You are not those men. Leave—I don’t know you.” With that, he shut the door.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:13)

Analysis

Characters

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Contractors
5 Wise Virgins	5 Bedroom/Bathroom Contractors
5 Foolish Virgins	5 Living Room Contractors
Bridegroom	Wealthy Man
	*Niece and Husband

Character Qualities

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Contractors
5 Wise Virgins: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible • Prepared 	5 Bedroom/Bathroom Contractors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible • Practice good time management
5 Foolish Virgins: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irresponsible • Unprepared 	5 Living Room Contractors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irresponsible • Poor managers of time
Bridegroom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexpected arrival time 	Wealthy Man: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexpected arrival time

Character Dialogue

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Contractors
<p>5 Wise Virgins:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No...there may not be enough for both us and you.” • “Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.” 	<p>5 Bedroom/Bathroom Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *They did not have enough supplies to cover the entirety of the living room. • “You could go to Home Depot and get the supplies you need before he gets back.”
<p>5 Foolish Virgins:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.” • “Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!” 	<p>5 Living Room Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *They went to the other five contractors asking for extra paint and floor panels.... • “Sir...we didn’t realize you were returning so soon...we have the supplies to finish the job!”
<p>Bridegroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.” 	<p>Wealthy Man:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’ve been away for months...I hired capable, experienced, diligent contractors. You are not those men. Leave—I don’t know you.”
<p>*Cry unattributed to a character:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” 	<p>*A phone call informed the 10 contractors of their boss’s arrival</p>

Character Actions

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Contractors
<p>5 Wise Virgins:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took oil with their lamps to meet the bridegroom • Fell asleep • Trimmed their lamps with ample oil supply • Did not give oil to the foolish virgins • Went with the bridegroom to the wedding banquet 	<p>5 Bedroom/Bathroom Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered all the supplies necessary for the job • Worked consistently, but still took time to rest, spend time with family, etc. • Finished their portion of the job on time • Did not provide extra supplies for the other contractors • Praised by the wealthy man
<p>5 Foolish Virgins:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took lamps without oil • Fell asleep • Trimmed lamps, but their oil ran out • Asked wise virgins for more oil • Went away to buy more oil • Pleaded to be let into the wedding banquet but were not allowed in 	<p>5 Living Room Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered the supplies needed for a limited portion of the job • Irregular and inconsistent with work schedule, took time off often • Did not finish their portion of the job on time • Asked for more supplies from the other contractors • Asked to finish the job for the wealthy man • Denied by the wealthy man
<p>Bridegroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was delayed in arriving • Arrived and let the wise virgins in • Did not open the door for the foolish virgins 	<p>Wealthy Man:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took his time in coming home to see the addition • Returned home to the finished bedroom and bathroom and an unfinished living room • Did not allow the living room contractors to finish the job

Setting

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Carpenters
Wedding Banquet	Wealthy man's house (Honey Grove, Texas)
Bridegroom's location	Wealthy man's apartment (Dallas, Texas)

Details Requiring Interpretation/Explicit Modern Equivalent

The Ten Virgins	The Ten Carpenters
"and they all become drowsy and fell asleep"— connotes a necessity to be prepared for the coming of Christ without neglecting regular daily activities	The bedroom/bathroom carpenters maintained a healthy work schedule while still taking time off, spending time with family, not working on weekends, etc.

Theological Principles Evident in Both

Both <i>The Ten Virgins</i> and <i>The Ten Carpenters</i>
The hour when Jesus returns is not known.
Remaining alert and prepared for the return of Christ is important.
Preparing for the return of Christ might just look like living life responsibly as he commanded.

The Unjust Judge

“In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”

Luke 18:2-8

Interpretive Work

The inclusion of a judge and a widow in this parable exemplifies two different ends of the social spectrum, the judge being a highly respected, authoritative individual, and the widow having little to no standing in society.⁵⁹ God often gave the command in the OT Prophets to care for the foreigner, orphan, and widow, so despite the difference in social standing, the judge would have been expected to especially care for the widow and treat her fairly.⁶⁰ Seeing as this was not the case, the judge violated the “double love command” by neither fearing God nor caring for other people.⁶¹ According to Jesus’s final statement in this parable (“And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones...?”), the judge represents a lesser version of God.⁶² This would also imply that the widow represents God’s people.

The specific reason for the widow’s visit is not important, evident in its vague description.⁶³ The existence of an adversary acting unjustly in this parable is a general

⁵⁹ Walter L. Liefeld, “Parables on Prayer,” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 254.

⁶⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 451.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶² Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 369.

⁶³ Snodgrass, 454.

representation of evil in the world. Just as the widow had someone against her, believers fight against the powers of darkness. The widow's persistent plea for justice is an example for believers to continue to cry out to God regarding instances of injustice. Jesus promises at the conclusion of the parable that God will one day provide justice for his children. The resulting question echoes Rev 6:10: "How long, Sovereign Lord?"⁶⁴ It is not a matter of *if* God will judge evil but when. Whereas this parable does not answer that question beyond Jesus's promise of justice coming "quickly," it does assure believers that justice will come and urges them to continue crying out to God for justice.⁶⁵

An interesting thing to note is the judge's motivation to grant justice for the widow. It was not a change of heart but a fear that the widow would "eventually come and attack [him]" that prompted his response (v. 5). This rendering of the original text should most likely be taken as figurative rather than literal. This statement could be a reflection of the honor/shame culture among the Palestinian audience, communicating that the judge was afraid for his reputation. This position can be argued against, seeing as the judge is first described as not fearing or man, but it is more probable than the threat of literal violence from the widow.⁶⁶ Ultimately, the emphasis of the parable is that it was the persistence of the widow that prompted a response to injustice, and if that was the case with an unjust judge, how much more will God respond to his people's cries of injustice.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 455.

⁶⁵ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 370.

⁶⁶ Liefeld, 257.

The Persistent Student

“You can’t pretend like this is fair!” Abigail held up her last four papers, all adorned with glaring red Fs.

Mr. Stanley didn’t look away from his computer, continuing to type.

“You’re accusing one of my most successful teachers of something unheard of. Ms. Kinder assigns grades as she sees fit.”

“You cannot tell me that I deserve failing grades for every paper I’ve written this semester. I’ve never failed anything in my life!”

He continued typing.

“That doesn’t mean you’re immune to failure. Senior year is hard. Besides that, you’ve transferred in. The work here may be a bit more rigorous than you’re used to.” Mr. Stanley moved his attention from his computer to the planner on his desk.

Abigail let out a small scoff. “I guarantee you it’s not.”

At that, Mr. Stanley’s head snapped up. He glared at her, his words sharp.

“I suggest you keep your attitude in check, Ms. Hassely. The success and efficiency of this school is a product of a decade’s worth of my work and attention. I hired Ms. Kinder, and she has produced the highest reading and writing test scores to date.”

“But—”

“It’s your word against hers, and frankly, Ms. Hassely, I don’t know you. I trust her standards, and apparently you’re not performing well enough to deserve anything higher than an F. It would behoove you to spend more time working on your papers and less time whining to the principal about alleged discrimination.” Mr. Stanley picked up his desk phone. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a phone call scheduled for 12:15.”

Stunned, Abigail picked up her bag and left Mr. Stanley's office. Her best friend, Megan, was waiting in the hallway for her.

"Well? How'd it go?"

"How you thought it would."

Megan grimaced, and they started walking down the hall toward the cafeteria.

"Usually, I like being right. I'm sorry. I know you wanted to get this whole thing figured out."

Abigail sighed. "I just don't get it. I've never had a principal be so blatantly *rude*. He just doesn't care about students' perspectives, or feelings, for that matter. Or fairness in general. I know for a fact my work hasn't deserved all failing grades." Abigail found an empty lunch table and sat down. "It just doesn't matter to him."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know. He won't listen to me."

Abigail pulled out her lunch sack and grabbed her sandwich. She couldn't rationalize the failing grades nor Mr. Stanley's actions. Being a new student at Belle-Stanton High School had been more challenging than she had anticipated. Whereas she thought her biggest problem would be unwelcoming students, she found out her real adversaries were those in authority. Her supposed advocates were unfair and inconsiderate, and it made for a frustrating senior year.

"Did you tell him about the GPA problem?"

"I didn't get a chance. He had a phone call and practically pushed me out the door."

Abigail had maintained a perfect GPA throughout her time in high school, and even as a new student this year, she was vying for the Valedictorian spot. The failing grades in English Literature were making that goal impossible.

The only reason Abigail moved to this school was because her mom wanted a fresh start after going through her divorce. This meant Abigail was also served a fresh start, whether she wanted one or not. She had come to realize minors don't really have much say in custody matters. Or lifestyle matters. Or anything, really. The only control Abigail had was academics, and up until this year, she exercised that control exceedingly well. Especially in English. Her teachers in her previous school raved about her "near prodigy" writing skills. Writing was going to be her source of stability in this new place. No matter the condition of her life outside the school walls, grades were objective. She could rely on their consistency and fairness.

Or so she thought.

Megan took a bite of her salad and chuckled. "You could always camp outside his office with your papers and demand he do something to make sure you get the grade you deserved. Paint a sign. Get t-shirts made."

Abigail took a bite of her apple and chewed slowly. "You know, that's not a bad idea."

Megan shot Abigail an "*are you kidding me?*" look and set down her fork.

"Abs, I'm totally kidding. That was just a ridiculous suggestion."

"No, listen. If I don't drop it, he'll have to listen to me eventually."

"I think that's a long shot. He has the power to, like, expel you or something. He doesn't answer to anyone, especially a disruptive student."

"I won't be disruptive. Maybe just annoying. He'll have to listen to me if I'm at his office every day."

"I don't know...I feel like it would just make it worse."

"What's worse than an F?"

Megan let out a dry laugh. "I guess you've got a point."

The next morning at eight o'clock, Abigail was sitting on the bench outside Mr. Stanley's office, papers in hand. She heard the sound of his voice coming up the hallway.

"No, Shelley, I don't care about his title. Being superintendent doesn't mean he gets to dictate how I run my school. My ways have worked for years. I don't need some fresh know-it-all coming in here and changing it up...yes, I'll be home at six...tacos are fine...yeah, okay, love you, too."

Mr. Stanley hung up the phone as he rounded the corner to his office. He cleared his throat as he pulled his keys from his pocket.

"Ms. Hassely, my office is open by appointment only."

Abigail put on her best attempt of a pleasant face.

"Yes, Mr. Stanley. I was just hoping to catch you before class so I could talk to you about these grades..."

"We settled that yesterday. Teacher trumps student. The grades are final."

Mr. Stanley entered his office and began unloading his briefcase. Abigail followed behind him.

"Well, I was hoping I could explain more of my situation. I really think these grades are unfair, and I—"

"I told you; the grades are final. Have a good day, Ms. Hassely."

Mr. Stanley extended his hand toward the door.

"But Mr. Stanley—"

"Good-bye, Ms. Hassely."

With that, Abigail left his office. She was more angry than disappointed, and more determined than ever to push him to his breaking point. She would get the grades she deserved.

For the next month, Abigail sat outside Mr. Stanley's door every morning, waiting for him to arrive. She always held her growing collection of unfairly graded papers and stood as he approached, greeting him with a smile and a pleasant, "Good morning, Mr. Stanley." Her welcomes were met with glares, eye rolls, or grunts. After a while, a bit of a routine developed. Mr. Stanley would enter his office, and Abigail would follow. She would begin to ask him to do something about her unfair grades, and he would hold the door open until she left, closing the door behind her when she finally did. After weeks of the same interaction, Abigail wondered if this plan would ever really work.

At the start of the fifth week, when Abigail arrived at her regular spot, two students were already there. One had a camera and the other a microphone.

Abigail looked confused. "Um, what's going on?"

The student holding the microphone stood up from the bench.

"Megan told us about what you've been doing the last few weeks to change your grade. We're with the student broadcasting team that puts together the video announcements every week, and we thought this could be a cool segment. Might help you get Mr. Stanley to change his mind and actually do something about your grade problem."

Abigail shrugged. "Well, I guess it's worth a shot. I'm honestly starting to get tired of the whole thing, so if this doesn't work I might just accept my fate."

He shook his head. "Don't give up just yet. It's amazing what less-than-perfect publicity can get people to do."

The student with the camera set up just as Mr. Stanley rounded the corner to his office. The student with the microphone approached Mr. Stanley, putting the microphone near his face.

“Mr. Stanley, is it true you’re acting as an obstruction to justice?”

Mr. Stanley rolled his eyes. “This is ridiculous. Take your equipment and get to class.”

He pushed past the students and entered his office. As usual, Abigail followed.

The student with the microphone continued.

“Mr. Stanley, Abigail Hassely has asked you every day for the past month to consider her grades which she believes are an unfair representation of her work, and you have refused to give her due attention. What do you have to say to that?”

“I say if you don’t exit this office right now you’ll face due consequences.”

Abigail stepped forward. “Mr. Stanley, I really do just need a minute of your time...”

Mr. Stanley’s face burned bright with rage. “Ms. Hassely, I am well acquainted with the reason of your visit, and you have done this long enough! I have told you my answer. You need to leave my office this instant. All of you.”

All three students shuffled out of the office. Before Mr. Stanley closed the door, the student with the camera yelled out, “Thanks for this week’s footage!” Abigail chuckled, her discouragement subsiding slightly because of the unexpected characters that accompanied her that morning. She was grateful for the comedic relief, even though she felt her grade-changing endeavor had reached its unsuccessful end.

Later, as Abigail sat in her fifth period calculus class, her teacher received a phone call.

“Abigail Hassely, you’re wanted in the principal’s office.”

The entire class watched her wide-eyed as she gathered her things. She figured she was going to face the inevitable consequences for pestering him the past few weeks.

She approached the familiar office door and knocked.

“Come in, Ms. Hassely.” His voice was gruff.

Abigail entered and sat down in the chair across from Mr. Stanley’s.

“Your antics the past month have been unacceptable. I am the principal of this school, and I deserve respect.” He let out a long sigh and fingered a nearby pen. His next words were quieter and forced. “I did talk to Ms. Kinder about your grades. She has agreed to allow you to work with her privately and rewrite your papers. She recognizes how the transition between schools might have prevented you from being aware of her standards and the exact elements she was looking for in your writings.”

Abigail’s jaw dropped slightly. “Wha...what? I...I don’t know what to say.”

He held up his palm to stop her then pointed out the door. His sharp words and harsh demeanor returned. “I expect that bench to be empty tomorrow morning and this week’s video announcements to maintain its usual form and content.” He turned to his computer and began typing. “You’re free to go.”

Abigail slowly stood up from the chair. She gave a slight head nod in the principal’s direction.

“Thank you, Mr. Stanley.”

He grunted in response. With that, Abigail left and walked back to her class. She had actually done it. After a month of persistence, he’d finally listened to her.

“And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” (Luke 18:7-8)

Analysis

Characters

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
Judge	Mr. Stanley (principal)
Widow	Abigail (student)
Adversary	Ms. Kinder (teacher)
	*Megan, student film crew

Character Qualities

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
<p>Judge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not fear God • Did not care what people thought about him • Motivated by self-interest 	<p>Mr. Stanley:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not care about superintendent • Did not care about students' opinions • Motivated by desire to keep himself from embarrassment/damaged reputation
<p>Widow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determined • Persistent • Desiring of justice against adversary 	<p>Abigail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determined • Persistent • Desiring of justice for unfair grades

<p>Adversary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implied injustice 	<p>Ms. Kinder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumed injustice in grades
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Character Dialogue

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
<p>Judge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!” 	<p>Mr. Stanley:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I did talk to Ms. Kinder about your grades...I expect that bench to be empty tomorrow and this week’s video announcements to maintain its usual form and content.”
<p>Widow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Grant me justice against my adversary.” 	<p>Abigail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You can’t pretend like this is fair!...I really think these grades are unfair....”
<p>Adversary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	<p>Ms. Kinder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None

Character Actions

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
<p>Judge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refused to respond to the widow • Eventually decided to grant justice to the widow out of fear for his reputation/position 	<p>Mr. Stanley:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refused to respond to Abigail • Eventually decided to address the unfair grades out of fear for his reputation
<p>Widow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeatedly went to the judge asking for justice against her adversary 	<p>Abigail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeatedly went to the principal asking for justice regarding her unfair grades
<p>Adversary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acted unjustly against the widow in some capacity 	<p>Ms. Kinder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave Abigail unfair grades

Setting

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
A certain town	Belle-Stanton High School

Details Requiring Interpretation/Explicit Modern Equivalent

The Unjust Judge	The Persistent Student
Judges – high in society, respectable position, expected to care for the underrepresented and treat all fairly	Mr. Stanley – long time principal, respectable position, expected to care for students and treat all fairly
Widows – low in society, little to no respect, expected to be cared for by those in authority	Abigail – new student, child of recently divorced parents, expected to be treated well by those in authority at school
“so that she won’t eventually come and <i>attack me</i> ” – figurative; bruised reputation, reference to honor/shame culture	Student film crew catching Mr. Stanley’s response on camera and threatening to use in the video announcements the following day

Theological Principles Evident in Both

Both <i>The Unjust Judge</i> and <i>The Persistent Student</i>
God listens to the cries of his people, especially regarding instances of injustice.
God’s response to injustice is somehow connected to the prayers of believers.

The Barren Fig Tree

“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

Luke 13:6-9

Interpretive Work

This parable includes some symbolic imagery that would have been understood by the Palestinian audience but may be missed by modern readers. In Jewish culture, fig trees typically represent peace and prosperity, and the absence of fig trees represents curse and punishment.⁶⁷ Using a vineyard as the setting for this parable also provides a connection to Israel because vineyards are strongly associated with Israel throughout the OT.⁶⁸ Wenham believes the three year period in which the owner searched for fruit from his fig tree is representative of the time a fig tree is expected to grow, aiding in the realistic nature of the parable.⁶⁹ Blomberg and Snodgrass find the three years insignificant, merely pointing to the “complete failure and seeming hopeless of the tree.”⁷⁰ Neither party hold the mention of three years to have any theological significance, so the detail is not worth much debate.

⁶⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 259.

⁶⁸ Wenham, 198.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 263; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 364.

The underlying meaning in these images seems to communicate a call to repentance for Israel, a message that can transfer to the church.⁷¹ Israel had failed to produce fruit because they failed to repent and acknowledge Christ as the Messiah. Their religious façade was not enough to save them. The owner, representing God, orders the tree to be cut down. This order shows the imminence of judgment.⁷² Although the man taking care of the vineyard was able to stay the owner for another year, the threat of being cut down remained. The owner’s consent to delay his command represents God’s continual mercy that is offered in hopes that people will repent.⁷³ The time we will have to account for our lives is unknown, so it is important to accept the mercy offered by God and repent.⁷⁴ This parable is speaking of the repentance that acknowledges sin and transfers allegiance to Christ. It is not implying that God will cut genuine believers who are living in sin out of his family.

The Unproductive Employee

Nathan took a breath of the autumn air as he walked briskly through Central Park. It was crisp but slightly chilled, so he was grateful his commute to work from the Subway was only three minutes long. New York was always the quietest in October—at least, as quiet as New York can get. It was nothing compared to autumns in Nathan’s home state of Illinois where even the dogs were still asleep at seven a.m. and you could hear your neighbor’s alarm clock down the street. Still, Nathan would take the slower New York pace when he could get it.

He entered his office building and smiled at the receptionist. “Chilly one today, huh?”

⁷¹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 260.

⁷² Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 364.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 265.

She smiled. "Fall has arrived, that's for sure. There's coffee in the breakroom if you need some."

"I think that'll be my first stop." Nathan offered a polite wave and went down the hall. The breakroom coffee was never the best, but he hadn't had time to make himself a cup at home that morning. He was more looking forward to warming his hands than drinking any.

"You desperate today, Nate?"

Nathan turned his head as he helped himself to the untouched pot of coffee. Rodney, his co-worker, was scouring the donut boxes, likely trying to track down a bear claw. "Just been one of those mornings, man. And it's cold today."

"I thought you Illinois-an would be used to the cold." Rodney successfully pulled out a bear claw from the bottom box and took a bite.

"I never had to walk in it. Always drove to work."

Rodney shrugged. "Eh. You'll get used to it. You catch the Jets game last night?"

Nathan nodded as he took a sip from his mug. He decided he better stick with letting the coffee warm his hands. "Looking good this season. Not that the Dolphins are much competition, anyway."

Rodney nodded in agreement as their boss's assistant stuck her head in the breakroom.

"Carrie wants us all in the conference room in five." Her words were quick, and she left abruptly.

"That's never good," Rodney muttered as he tossed the rest of his donut in the nearby trashcan.

"I guess we'll find out why soon enough."

Both Nathan and Rodney walked down the hall to the conference room where almost all of their co-workers were already seated with Carrie Stokes standing at the head of the long table. They found two empty seats and joined the silence.

Once every seat was filled, the conference room door closed and Carrie began pacing slowly, the echo of her heels reverberating throughout the room.

“It is no secret that I am new to this company. That’s just the nature of businesses.” She paused and placed her hands on the back of her chair. Her eyes traveled to every person in the room. “It is also no secret that my predecessor left much to be desired, and I intend to tighten up some things.” She extended her hand to the side, and her assistant passed her a tan folder.

“This folder will eventually determine your future with this company. Starting today, all productivity and analytics reports will be filed and evaluated.” She lifted the folder. “Should this folder show me efficiency, nothing has to change. But I expect excellence. The unproductive will be cut out.”

The air in the conference room was tangibly tense. No one shifted a seat. Nathan glanced at Rodney, but his widened eyes were fixed on Carrie.

Carrie began pacing again. “I recognize the fear that may cause some of you, but my goal is not to scare you. Rest assured—I take care of those who do good work. If you follow my lead, there’s no need for worry.”

A timid hand was raised near the back of the conference room, and Nathan turned his head to see its owner. An entry level employee from HR. Carrie pointed in her direction and gave a nod. “Yes?”

“Yes ma’am, um, when will these evaluations take place?”

“Throughout your time here. They are a continual process.”

“Will we know when they’re happening?”

“It will be safest to assume you’re always being evaluated. I don’t let laziness slide.

However, if you’re fulfilling your tasks as assigned, you really don’t have to worry. All I expect is you do the job you were hired to do. If you do that, we won’t have a problem.” Carrie offered a slight smile.

Nathan was both impressed and slightly intimidated by Carrie. His old boss never would have acknowledged any questions during an all-staff meeting, especially from someone so low on the career ladder. He also never laid out standards quite like this.

Nathan’s thoughts were interrupted by Carrie’s voice. “If that’s all the questions we have, I think we’re finished here. You’re free to continue working. Thanks for your time this morning.”

Everyone stood and shuffled back to their offices. Rodney leaned over to Nathan in the hallway.

“Can you believe that?” Rodney’s tone was laced with disbelief.

“Believe what? That she actually spoke to that HR girl?”

“What? No. That our progress is about to constantly be watched by some woman who hasn’t even been here a month.”

Carrie Stokes was the new CEO of Branch Marketing. She had worked her way up in their office in Chicago and had applied for the CEO position once it was available in New York. She started in September and held a brief introductory meeting her first day, but no one really knew anything about her.

Nathan shrugged as he opened the door to his office. “It doesn’t sound like she’s asking anything extra of us. We just have to fulfill our job description. Keep doing what we’re doing.”

“I guess. I just don’t want people looking over my shoulder while I work.” Rodney patted the door frame. “Anyway, let me know if you want to get together this weekend, maybe watch a game or two.”

Nathan nodded. “Will do.” With a returning nod, Rodney closed Nathan’s door and walked down toward his office.

Nathan found Rodney’s comment interesting. Sure, Carrie’s policies differed from their previous boss’s, but they weren’t necessarily intrusive. In fact, Nathan thought they were a good measure of accountability. A company can only survive with an efficient staff, after all, and it can only reach peak success if everyone is utilizing their skills to their extent.

He made a mental note to do a better job of defending Carrie’s authority should Rodney bring it up again. No one needed to be up in arms over something like this.

There was a knock at the door a few minutes after Nathan had gotten settled at his desk. It was Carrie. He motioned her to come in, and she entered, shutting the door behind her. Nathan’s mind raced, trying to think of any reason she might be there.

Carrie walked toward Nathan and extended her hand. “I don’t believe we’ve officially met. Nathan Carston, right?”

Accepting the handshake, Nathan responded, stumbling over his words. “Yes...yes ma’am. Nice to officially meet you, Ms. Stokes.”

She pointed to the chair opposite his desk. “Mind if we chat for a bit?”

“No, not at all.” His hands were shaking slightly, so he clasped them and put them in his lap when he sat down. “I have to admit, I thought I’d have more time than thirty minutes to prove my productivity.” The attempt at humor was met with a slight eyebrow raise and pity chuckle.

“Yes, well, you do. I’ve come to talk to you about one of your co-workers.”

Nathan relaxed some. “Oh. Who is it you need to know about?”

Carrie opened a folder she had carried in with her, the same one from the meeting. She looked through a few papers and pulled one out.

“Rodney Smith. I’ve been told you two are friends?” She looked up from the paper. There was an intensity about her eyes that made Nathan feel like she was looking straight into his soul. He broke eye contact.

“Yes ma’am, I would consider him as such.”

“Then you’re just the man for the task.” She reached across the desk and handed him the paper she was holding. Nathan accepted the paper and quickly scanned it over. It was a list of Rodney’s assignments, along with his job profile.

“What task is this, if I may ask?”

“Think of it as a supervisory type of position. Specific accountability, if you will. Your job is to make sure Rodney is performing to the best of his ability, and in essence, you’re protecting him from elimination.”

A process like this was new to Nathan. He had been in marketing for fifteen years and hadn’t experienced anything like it. His puzzled face seemed to speak for him because Carrie went on to explain. “I understand this is highly unusual, but I need you to trust me.”

“I don’t think I really understand.”

“I need you to hold Rodney accountable for his performance in this company.”

Nathan set the paper down and shifted in his seat. “But why Rodney? And why am I the one to ‘supervise’ him?”

Carrie leaned forward and folded her hands on the desk, lowering her voice. “As of now, Rodney is the lowest performing member of our team. His focus isn’t where it needs to be. Now, that’s shared in confidence, so I expect that to stay in this office. It’s not my intention to clean house. That’s not how I operate. But if Rodney doesn’t improve, his time at Branch Marketing is nearing its end. You, however, are one of our highest performing members, and you’re friends with Rodney. I think you can be a big help.”

With a sigh, Nathan responded. “Respectfully, ma’am, I don’t understand why you couldn’t tell Rodney this yourself. I can’t help but think hearing from the CEO might be more of a motivation than a mere co-worker.”

She nodded. “I understand your perspective. But the next time I talk to Rodney, it’ll be to discuss a termination of his position. I expect employees to be intrinsically motivated, not just scared of their boss. You can be an unthreatening example.”

Nathan hesitated before asking his next question. “Is Rodney the only one being monitored?”

“As of now, yes. I need to see if this process produces the improvement that I expect before making it widescale.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

Her eyebrows raised, the look on her face answering for her.

“Pardon my frankness,” he cleared his throat, “but if I agree to this, am I somehow held responsible for some degree of Rodney’s productivity? Will my evaluation suffer from his performance?”

Carrie shook her head. “My evaluation of my staff consists of comparing the work that they produce to what is required of them. This is doesn’t fall under any category of your job description, so it doesn’t have any effect on you.”

That’s slightly relieving, he thought. But what would Rodney think if he found out?

Seeming to read his mind, Carrie said, “This will all be done subtly, as well. Rodney never has to know this conversation happened. All I ask is you keep him on track. He’s been here five years, and according to these reports, he hasn’t seen much of any progression in the areas that actually benefit the company. I think a friendly push would do him some good.”

Nathan nodded, looked out his office window, and looked back to meet Carrie’s intense gaze. “Okay. I’ll do my best.”

Carrie stood and offered a small smile. “Thank you. Let me know if you have any questions or need anything. You have my contact information.” With a light tap on his desk and a turn on her heel, she left his office. Nathan let out a slow exhale and leaned back in his chair. He didn’t know what he just agreed to, but he felt the burden of his friend’s potential extermination.

The next few months, Nathan took note of Rodney’s unproductive tendencies. He hadn’t noticed before, but Rodney wasn’t exactly the picture of a reliable employee. His lunch breaks lasted well beyond their allotted hour, and he often left work early in the afternoons. As for his marketing projects, Nathan realized Rodney took much longer in securing clients and working with them. On more than one occasion, the client would get frustrated with Rodney’s lack of urgency and find another marketing company to work with. Because Rodney wasn’t one of Branch Marketing’s top employees, these unfinished jobs often went unnoticed.

Nathan attempted to help Rodney take more responsibility for the jobs he was expected to do. For months, Nathan invited Rodney to be his partner in jobs he had secured, giving him tasks to complete that might prompt a stronger work ethic. Unfortunately, this usually ended in Nathan doing the work he assigned to Rodney due to Rodney's poor quality of work or failure to do the job by a specific deadline. Nathan didn't realize how little work Rodney was actually doing.

Being Rodney's silent supervisor was anything but easy. Nathan visited Rodney's office much more than in the past. He tried to make small talk that would lead to discussion about work, but oftentimes their conversation revolved around Rodney's latest sporting endeavor. When Nathan did ask specifically about work, Rodney always gave some generic response and returned to their previous topic of conversation.

In the break room one morning, after Nathan suggested Rodney partner with him on another project, Rodney commented on Nathan's sudden interest in working together.

"Don't get me wrong, man. I've enjoyed the collaboration. But you've been really pushing the teamwork thing since October. That was fine through the holidays, but I think as things slow down this spring, I'll take my own jobs. Nothing against you, Nate."

Nathan nodded, trying to mask any hesitation he felt about distancing himself from Rodney. "Not a problem. Just don't be afraid to reach out if you need anything."

"I won't. Hey, we still need to get together sometime outside of work. You into March Madness at all?"

"More of a football guy, myself, but I can make it through a basketball game."

Rodney chuckled. "I can work with that. I'll get a plan together and let you know the details."

Nathan tried to make his smile seem genuine and walked back to his office. He wished Rodney was as committed to marketing as he was to sports.

For the next few weeks, Nathan loosened the reins a bit when it came to supervising Rodney. He was worried Rodney's productivity wouldn't see any improvement, but he resolved that if Rodney were fired, it was a result of his own doing. Nathan couldn't have tried any harder than he did to be a subtle motivator.

Nathan tried to convince himself that giving Rodney space might be a good thing. Maybe Rodney would come to realize how his productivity compared to Nathan's and want to make a change.

He was wrong. Exactly six months after their first meeting, Carrie came to Nathan's office, another folder in hand. She closed the door and sat down, skipping any sort of pleasantries.

"Your attempt to keep Rodney accountable hasn't gone unnoticed, I want you to know that. Unfortunately, he is more of a liability to our company than an asset. I'll be letting him go this week." She held the folder out for me to take. "Here are the resumes of people interested in filling his position. I want you to be a part of the hiring process."

Stunned, Nathan pushed his chair back slightly from his desk. "But Ms. Stokes, it's only been six months! Could you possibly give him any more time? Maybe we can try some other motivational method? I really think Rodney has potential." Nathan knew Rodney's firing was not a reflection of anything Nathan did, but he couldn't help but feel slightly responsible. If he had more time with him, or if he were more upfront about the prospect of Rodney losing his job, maybe he could have more of an impact...

Carrie interrupted his thoughts. “Rodney has not brought me any sort of profit in my time here. Why should I keep him in his position when someone else would have the drive and capabilities to produce the results I need?”

“I haven’t been pushing him as much the past few weeks. Give me another month. I’ll encourage him to spend more time on his projects, improve client relationships, and cut down on his lunch breaks. If he doesn’t show improvement by mid-April, I will help you find his replacement.”

“You have a month. If nothing changes, he’s gone. End of story.”

Nathan knew that getting fired from Branch Marketing would smear Rodney’s reputation forever. He had his work cut out for him, but he knew it was not all on his shoulders. Ultimately, all he could do was hope Rodney would make the changes that would save his career. Rodney’s career hung in the balance, yet he had no idea his termination was imminent.

“If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.” (Luke 13:9)

Analysis

Characters

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
Owner	Carrie Stokes (CEO)
Gardener	Nathan Carston (Employee)
Fig Tree	Rodney Smith (Employee)

Character Qualities

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
<p>Owner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical • Merciful 	<p>Carrie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strict • Kind but serious • Organized • Merciful
<p>Gardener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerned for the fig tree • Responsible 	<p>Nathan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible • Concerned for Rodney's job
<p>Fig Tree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barren 	<p>Rodney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unproductive • Irresponsible

Character Dialogue

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
<p>Owner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?” 	<p>Carrie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m letting [Rodney] go this week.” • “Rodney has not brought me any sort of profit in my time here. Why should I keep him in his position when someone else would have the drive and capabilities to produce the results I need?”

<p>Gardener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sir...leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.” 	<p>Nathan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Give me another month. I’ll encourage him to spend more time on his projects, improve client relationships, and cut down on his lunch breaks. If he doesn’t show improvement by mid-April, I will help you find his replacement.”
<p>Fig Tree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	<p>Rodney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

Character Actions

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
<p>Owner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Went to look for fruit on the fig tree for three years • Told the man who works in the vineyard to cut the tree down 	<p>Carrie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyzed Rodney’s productivity reports • Monitored Rodney’s productivity through Nathan for six months • Told Nathan that Rodney would be fired because of unproductivity • Gives Nathan one more month to prompt change
<p>Gardener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has taken care of the vineyard • Begs on behalf of the fig tree 	<p>Nathan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has looked after Rodney • Begs for more time on Rodney’s behalf
<p>Fig Tree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not produce fruit 	<p>Rodney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not improve productivity levels

Setting

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
Vineyard	New York City; Branch Marketing Co

Details Requiring Interpretation and Explicit Modern Equivalent

The Barren Fig Tree	The Unproductive Employee
Fig Tree – associated with prosperity	Rodney – employee of a successful company
Vineyard – central to God’s people; place of productivity; common place of work	New York – career productivity
“I’ll dig around it and fertilize it” – could possibly imply “insult humor” ⁷⁵ toward the Pharisees, or describes regular tending process	“I’ll encourage him to spend more time on his projects...” – represents the latter interpretation; indicating regular tasks for productivity

⁷⁵ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 364.

Theological Principles Evident in Both

Both <i>The Barren Fig Tree</i> and <i>The Unproductive Employee</i>
God provides mercy before enacting judgment.
Judgment is imminent, so people should repent.
The time of judgment is unknown.

DISCLAIMERS/NOTES

My proposed method of contemporization is my best attempt to provide a way to handle the parables with respect and a maintenance of the original intent while bringing them into a modern form. However, it is unwise and unrealistic to claim this is a faultless method. This is not to say that the proposed contemporization method as a whole is incapable of producing a biblically accurate, creatively excellent product. (Otherwise, there would be no reason to create, defend, and apply the method.) There are, however, a few disclaimers associated with its use. These are meant to act as a caution when using this contemporization method.

To begin, contemporizing a parable somewhat forces the writer's interpretation onto someone else. If sections of the passage spur debate, the writer inevitably has to choose a side, and that side would be represented in the modern version. More often than not, these debated sections are going to have little effect on the theological significance of the parable, so this is not a danger to the biblical text. Rather, this is a recommendation to attempt to remain neutral on

interpretation when possible, and when a specific interpretation must be represented, do so with humility.

Additionally, a contemporized parable does not automatically speak to all people, just as the modern parables do not make sense to all people on the surface. Just as there was an intended audience in the original parables, the contemporized parables also have an intended audience. Following the interpretive method, the writer is at liberty to choose characters, storylines, and details that cater to certain demographics. The only requirement is a maintenance of the points of emphasis and the intended meaning of the biblical text. Within those bounds, there is freedom to create a story that would resonate best with a particular audience.

One important warning is that when contemporizing, the writer must be careful to avoid simply creating a story that teaches the same lesson. The modern version must resemble the story line of the original parable. It is easy for stories to promote the same moral, but that is not the purpose of contemporizing. Maintaining the same details, structure, and emotive qualities present in the original brings Jesus's stories back to their storytelling purpose. The writer should work to adhere closely to the interpretive work and analysis done before writing a contemporary version.

Finally, sometimes the elements that were attempted to be brought out in the modern parable still may go unnoticed by the reader, especially if the original story is unfamiliar to the audience. This might be remedied with a reading of the original parable alongside the contemporary version.

CONCLUSION

My hope is this method of contemporization can prove useful. The message of Jesus's parables is for all people, and bringing his stories into a modern context revives some of what was lost as they have traveled continents and centuries. We certainly cannot add to his words or

make them more relevant, but I do think there is space for creativity. If anything, contemporizing a parable might be the initial interaction with a scriptural message someone needs. Contemporary versions can be a starting place. They can aid in understanding. They can display timeless theological truths. Ultimately, they can bring parables back to the heart of storytelling—a worthwhile, satisfying endeavor that praises the creative abilities given to man by God.

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