

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Power of Parable

by

John Dominic Crossan

PROLOGUE

1. John Dominic Crossan opens by establishing that a parable is “a metaphorical story” that “always points externally beyond itself” and is never about its own content (pp. 8–9). Why do you think Jesus chose this way of communicating rather than straightforward teaching?

PART 1
PARABLES TOLD BY JESUS

Riddle Parables

So That They May Not Understand

1. Crossan asserts that Mark, in his retelling of Jesus's parables, uses "lethal parables" as a means of rejecting those who rejected Jesus (p. 27). Has reading the parables of Mark in this way given you a new or different understanding of them? Explain.
2. Jesus intended to be understood through his parables. Crossan argues that Mark's use of the parables for incomprehension contradicts Jesus's intention. What might have been Mark's motivation for presenting Jesus as rendering judgment against his hearers when Jesus's intentions were otherwise? Does it make you question Mark's trustworthiness? Or does he seem like a good friend trying to do right by Jesus?

Example Parables

Go and Do—or Don't Do—Likewise

3. Crossan defines example parables as "moral models or ethical stories that consciously and deliberately point beyond themselves" (p. 30) to inspire people to lead better lives. He explores whether Luke is interpreting

Jesus's parables as example parables or if this was Jesus's intention. After reading Crossan's explanation in chapter 2, especially regarding Luke 15, what do you think? If Jesus didn't intend his parables to be moral stories, does Luke's use of his parables seem less meaningful to you?

4. If Luke superimposes on Jesus's parable narratives a motivation that Jesus himself did not intend, does this compromise the integrity of Jesus's teaching?

Challenge Parables:

Part I

Down from Jerusalem to Jericho

5. After highlighting the vast tradition of "challenge parables" in Old Testament times, Crossan focuses on the parable of the Good Samaritan, suggesting that Jesus meant to encourage hearers "to think long and hard about their social prejudices, their cultural presumptions and, yes, even their most sacred religious traditions" (p. 62). Does this interpretation alter the impact of this parable? Does it "challenge" you? In what way? Which do you prefer—the "go and do likewise" model (in Luke's gospel) or the "think long and hard" model?

Challenge Parables:

Part II

The Word Against the Word

6. In his discussion of challenge parables written before the time of Jesus, Crossan highlights the story of Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite woman, and thus non-Jewish, in the direct line of ancestry of King David. Her story “challenges” Judaic law because the reforms outlined by Ezra and Nehemiah forbade Jews to marry foreigners (p. 74). How do you understand the “challenge” of Ruth’s story?
7. Keeping with the theme of challenge parables, Crossan next highlights Jonah, a prophet of God who “was childishly disobedient,” in contrast to the Ninevites, who were “unbelievably obedient” (p. 79). How does this upside-down picture of God’s election challenge your notions about how God works?
8. Crossan calls the dramatic sweep of Job’s life “a minor speed bump in the Deuteronomic superhighway” (p. 86). Though the laws in Deuteronomy clearly indicate that God blesses the obedient and curses the wicked, Job provides the counterexample of an honest and God-fearing man who was beset with catastrophic tragedies. Does this kind of challenge story console or trouble you? How does it deepen your understanding of challenge parables?

Challenge Parables:
Part III

Let Anyone with Ears to Hear Listen!

9. In contrast to both riddle parables and example parables, which can be judgmental, Jesus's use of challenge parables "cedes control to the hearers" and "submit[s] their destiny to their audiences" (p. 110). Can you think of a time in your life when you heard a parable that challenged you to make decisions and choose your own destiny? What are the benefits and pitfalls of having the listener, rather than the storyteller, decide the outcome?
10. Crossan says that "challenge parables foster not periodic doubting, but permanent questioning" (p. 111). How do you understand the difference between "periodic doubting" and "permanent questioning"? Do you think permanent questioning is beneficial in a person's faith journey?

The Kingdom of God

The Challenge of Collaboration

11. Challenge parables invoke what Crossan calls collaboration for a "Great Divine Clean-up of the World" (p. 135). He cites the parables in Matthew 13:44–45 as cases in point. Jesus uses these parables to challenge humans to collaborate with God in bringing justice to

the world. In what way do Matthew's parables challenge you? What do you think of this approach to Jesus's parables?

12. These parables remind us that "the Bible is still our story about God rather than God's story about us" (p. 136). What do you make of this statement? Do you agree or disagree?

Interlude

The Lure of Parabolic History

Caesar at the Rubicon

1. Crossan shows how a historical event—Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon—is recounted and embellished by various writers to serve different agendas (p. 152). In this way he sets up the second part of the book, in which he explores how the gospel writers embellished historical events about Jesus to serve a purpose. Do you feel this is a legitimate comparison? What do you make of Crossan's conclusion that the gospels are megaparables about Jesus, utilizing fictional elements to serve an agenda? Does this change your sense of the value of the gospels?

PART II PARABLES TOLD ABOUT JESUS

A Hymn for the Nameless

The Parable Gospel according to Mark

1. Mark's account of Jesus's experiences seems spare and at times harsh. Crossan explores whether Mark's rendering of Jesus's story serves as an "attack parable" or a challenge parable, ultimately concluding that it is a challenge parable (p. 175). Do you agree or disagree?
2. Crossan cites Jesus's words in Mark 8:17b–21: "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (p. 174). What is the challenge that Mark makes here to his audience? Is it still relevant today?

Rhetorical Violence

The Parable Gospel according to Matthew

3. Crossan wonders whether Matthew is portraying Jesus as "rhetorically violent" or if Jesus truly spoke using violent images and stories. After reading this chapter, do you think Matthew's Jesus reads as rhetorically violent? Why or why not? What does it change about Jesus's character if he's presented as speaking harshly?

Is Matthew a trustworthy guide for understanding Jesus?

4. In the end, Matthew's text serves as an attack parable, ultimately (and unfortunately) setting up Jesus to look like a hypocrite: "The Jesus of Matthew is regularly and rhetorically violent, but that is not Jesus himself; it is Matthew who is speaking" (p. 195). Why do you think Matthew recreated a Jesus diametrically opposed to the essential nature of the true Jesus? How do you feel about Matthew's message?

Rome as the New Jerusalem

The Parable Gospel according to Luke-Acts

5. In this chapter, Crossan highlights the contrasting ways the parable gospel of Luke-Acts defines the religious and political sectors of Judaism and Rome. According to Crossan, Luke is setting up the "riotous and murderous Jewish religion [that] opposes Christianity" against "Roman law, order, and administrative justice that protect and defend that embattled Christianity—from Judaism" (p. 212). Why do you think Luke would emphasize this point?
6. Luke's portrayal of the Roman Empire is positive, highlighting a Christianity that works in negotiation with (not against) the *Pax Romana* (p. 216). Does this suggest to you that Luke-Acts imposed a political

agenda in its description of Christianity? What might have motivated him to write his gospel this way?

7. Crossan maintains that Luke-Acts serves as an attack on Judaism and a challenge to Rome (p. 218). Does this interpretation justify accusations that Christianity is inherently anti-Semitic? Why or why not?

The Visionary Dream of God

The Parable Gospel according to John

8. Crossan asserts that the parable-gospel writer John was a Samaritan convert to Christianity (p. 239) who, because he was part Jewish, both understood and attacked the Jews. Does this help you understand the parable gospel of John? If so, how?
9. Crossan asserts that John's gospel is an attack parable on Judaism as well as a challenge parable aimed at Roman authority. Moreover, the challenge John levels at the Roman authority is not simply for "noninterference" but for "accommodation" (p. 242). History shows that this challenge to Rome was ultimately ignored and that many Christians were tortured and executed in Rome in the early centuries of the church. How does Crossan's interpretation help you understand the hopes and fears of John the writer? Does this appeal to secular authorities teach us anything today about the relationship between church and state?

EPILOGUE

1. Crossan concludes that, while the various parable gospels in the New Testament are filled with embellishments by Jesus and about Jesus, the singular birth, life, and death of Jesus are true historical facts (p. 251). What difference does it make, in the relevance of the gospel, that Jesus himself actually lived? Would it make any difference to your faith if Jesus were made up, as Crossan asserts parts of the gospels are? Why or why not?
2. Has *The Power of Parable* informed your understanding of Jesus and his parables in new or surprising ways? If it has, does this new understanding change how you approach reading the parables in the gospels? What about how you apply them to your life?