
Justice Matters, But Which Justice? In the Case of Jesus' Parables

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Jesus' parables deal with many aspects of life in the here and now, ranging from personal attitude to social justice. Justice is a theme that Jesus emphasizes in many parables. Justice is needed for individuals, community, and society at large. When people are starving to death, justice means they need food and immediate support from others and society. When people are treated unfairly or unjustly in matters of economic life, they should be given the right to amend that injustice. When all people are not given equal opportunities to work, justice means giving them work to do and paying them what is right. When people work hard, they must get what they deserve.

Jesus' parables and different types of justice

Jesus deals with different aspects of justice in his parables. If we do not read his parables carefully enough to consider different kinds of justice, we are misled, and we misinterpret them. Even though Jesus' parables deal with many different aspects of justice, we cannot explore all of them.¹ Here we will examine the three most important types of justice addressed by Jesus in his parables: attributive justice, retributive justice, and distributive justice. Each will be illustrated with a corresponding parable.

Attributive justice

Attributive justice means that one needs to receive according to his/her work. Here the logic is "the more work, the more gain." This point of justice is found in the parable of talents (Matt 25:14–30). The servants who received five and two talents worked hard and produced much. They were given lots of money along

1. Justice derives from the concept of fairness. At the least, we may think of the following types of justice: attributive justice, retributive justice, distributive justice, social justice, and procedural justice. Attributive justice can be understood as follows: Each person needs his or her fair due according to the poured-out work. Retributive justice has to do with the following: The wrongdoers are to be brought to justice and evil must be checked. Distributive justice may be understood as follows: Members of society need the fair share of the income distribution. They all need work to do, expecting a decent income. They all need equal opportunity to work. Social justice is concerned with various types of social justice due to the problem of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Procedural justice has to do with matters of a fair procedure of decision-making in human business.

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with lots of responsibilities by the master. They were trusted to do good things. They worked hard and produced a good harvest. The master commended them not because they made lots of money and made him richer but because they worked hard. They did everything they could with this large amount of money. But even if they lost a significant amount of money or even all the money while diligently trying to make a good business, they would not have been scolded like the servant who received one talent. The point is they did not waste the money or opportunities to produce goods or hide it under the ground without doing anything. They did their best and got the most.²

The five or two talents may be compared to gifts and wealth given to people, who must use them properly to contribute to the well-being of society. If we think this master is a good one, certainly his servants must know what he wants. There is no decisive clue that this master is exploitive because he does not ask his servants to make lots of money. Rather, he entrusts his property to them. There is no hint that he is more interested in making more riches by use of his servants. Since he gives all that he has to them, he is at great risk. But he entrusts his everything to them and expects it to be taken care of in a good way. In this implicit context, the servants must know what they are supposed to do. They did their best and acted responsibly. Happily, the result was good for them. In this context, attributive justice makes sense to them. They are rewarded with good things.

But the servant who received the one talent did not try any-

2. See Yung Suk Kim, *Jesus' Truth: Life in Parables* (Eugene, Ore.: Resource Pubs, 2018), 41–46.

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thing but hid it in the ground. The result is he earned nothing. In fact, this person lost a social opportunity/capital which could have been invested in the society to produce goods. In fact, one talent is not a small amount of money; it is worth at least one million dollars. He was in fear that he may lose everything; he also had a fear that the master would punish him if he lost money. In a way, he was smart because he could maintain the one talent intact. Others say he was not only smart but was protesting against his master, because he refused to make lots of money for him. In other words, his act of hiding the money in the ground is deemed as smart, implicit resistance to the master.³ But this view, while not implausible, is not probable, given what the servant says and how the master responds to him. This servant says that his master is a harsh man who is exploitive to people (Matt 25:24): “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” He goes on to say: “...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (Matt 25:25). That is, he judged that his master would punish him if he lost the one talent. So, he did not do anything. This is exactly the problem that the master points out. The master replies: “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest” (Matt 25:26–27). The master clearly rebuts this slave’s judgment against him. That is, he does not agree with his judgment. He is not a harsh man who exacts profits. Rather, his point is that the servant did not try anything with this huge opportunity with the one talent (at least one million dollars). With this character of the master, even if the servant lost some or all of the money while trying hard, he may have not been scolded so harshly. This servant did not do anything; as a result, he did not get anything.

More than that, the master says: “take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents” (25:28). Here we must be careful to see that the master’s point is that opportunities cannot be wasted, and that the servant’s job is to do his best. Otherwise, it is hard to say that the master is unjust to the servant who received

3. This kind of reading is found in the following: Justin Ukpong, “The parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30): Commendation or Critique of Exploitation?: A Social-Historical and Theological Reading,” *Neotestamentica* 46.1 (2012), 205. See also William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, Ky.: WJKP, 1994).

the one talent, because his point is to establish the desirable work ethic based on goodwill and effort. In sum, this parable of the talents reminds us of the importance of attributive justice. One last caution is that verses 25:29–30, which appear to be Matthew’s addition to the parable proper, should not be the conclusion of this parable. Instead these verses bridge toward a different purpose in Matthew: “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Because of these verses, often the parable proper is interpreted in a way that the master is exploitive of the servants. The harsh judgment in 25:30 echoes the Matthean theme of the last judgment.

Retributive justice

Retributive justice means, on the one hand, that an evil act or person must be questioned and punished and, on the other hand, that the victim should be granted justice. A widow in the parable of “a widow and an unjust judge” (Luke 18:1–8) seeks such retributive justice, which is so important to her. That is why she asks: “Grant me justice against my opponent” (Luke 18:3). Those who are held accountable for injustices must be brought to justice. That is an important part of justice that we need in our lives. Easy forgiveness without justice or merely condoning evil is itself evil, because the victim will never recover from the damage done without seeing that injustices are dealt with properly.⁴ In this parable, we do not know details about her situation, for example, where she was treated inhumanely or unjustly in the matter of personal or economic relations. The bottom line is that she demands that her case of injustice be heard.

Until she is heard, she keeps coming to the judge, who is evil and uncaring. Finally, he yields to her request, not because he understands or cares for her but because he does not want to be bothered further. He is very selfish and uncaring. Nevertheless, she got what she wanted: justice was granted to her. Then she may return home and rest with peace. Otherwise, this parable is not about the need “to pray always and not to lose heart,” as in Luke 18:1, which is the Lukan introduction to the parable proper. In other words, Luke uses this parable to underscore the importance of praying all the time. But in the parable proper (18:2–5), there is

4. Kim, *Jesus' Truth*, 104–106.

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no reference to prayer; rather, the parable is about justice, retributive justice in particular. In 18:6–8, Luke again emphasizes the importance of prayer without referring to the need for justice to her.

Distributive justice

Distributive justice means that members of a society must be given the fair distribution of goods or resources. Simply, it is economic justice. The best example of this justice is found in the parable of “vineyard workers” (Matt 20:1–16).⁵ The landlord takes care of all workers in his vineyard, regardless of how many hours they worked. He also tries to hire all he could find in the labor market. He goes out to the labor market five times, from early morning to late afternoon, even at an hour before the vineyard closes. He is a very unusual, atypical landlord.⁶ More than that, he pays all of them the same, the usual daily wage, which is good enough for their daily needs. This wage is referred to as “what is right,” which is not too small or too big. Legally speaking, those who entered the vineyard earlier cannot complain about the equal amount they received because they agreed to this when they were hired. In fact, the usual daily wage is good enough for their daily needs. On the other hand, some scholars think that the landlord ruined attributive justice, because he did not pay more to those early laborers.⁷ But there is no guarantee that they worked harder than those who joined later in the day. We do not know whether they have worked harder or not. They stayed a whole day. That is true. At any rate, the landlord provides full employment and a proper wage for all, so that they may live and support their families. If some were left without finding work, they would return home without wages.⁸

Against the complaints from the early laborers, the landlord defends himself, saying that he is good (*agathos*), not merely “generous,” as the word is usually translated, for example, in the NRSV and NIV. His point is not that he could do anything because everything belongs to him. No, he did not act like an exploitive ruler because he promised to pay “what is right” (the usual daily wage) to them. The problem is that he paid the same amount to those who came to the vineyard in the last hour. Those who came early in the morning *thought* that they would receive more. Their thinking is misguided by envy as they forgot about their contract. Against their grudges, the landlord justifies his act of justice by saying he is “good,” which means that he is righteous. That is, his character and actions are good because he cares for the needy. Even if he did not promise how much he would pay to those who joined in the last hour, he already knew that they also needed the usual daily wage. That is economic justice or distributive justice

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for all. We should take note that those who came in the last hour wanted to work but were not hired early enough. It is not their fault that they were hired late. They were not lazy. When they were finally hired, they must have been very happy and may have worked harder than the others. To the eyes of envious minds, the landlord’s act may seem inequitable or manipulative, but to those who need economic justice, what he did is authentic justice.

Conclusion

Parable interpretation is extremely difficult because Jesus’ parables are seemingly familiar yet subversive stories about human life. Justice is as important an issue today as it was in Jesus’ time. The concept of justice is not singular because human life is complex and needs diverse solutions. Therefore, when we interpret Jesus’ parables, we should pay attention to which aspect of justice was mainly addressed in them. Otherwise, we lose Jesus’ point and misinterpret him.

5. Kim, *Jesus’ Truth*, 56–63.

6. See Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 197–219.

7. For example, David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 114.

8. See Pablo A. Jiménez, “The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading,” *Journal for the Preachers* 21.1 (1997): 35–40. See also Justo L. González, *Tres meses en la escuela de Mateo* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 118–119.