

Luke's Special Parables: What if the Kingdom Appeared Now?

Luke 19:11-27

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We start by asking the obvious. How could this be a parable that is unique to Luke if we already know the parable about the talents. Isn't that the same parable told by two different gospel writers?

It is only when we study this parable in its own historical and religious context that we can understand how unique it really is. Sometimes we miss some of Jesus' valuable teachings because we assume that some gospel stories we learned about over the years are just like the others. This one is different enough to raise our eyebrows. How is it possible that Jesus would choose to use this kind of language with his disciples, right?

So, first, we need to hear the parable just as Jesus expected the disciples to hear it: they needed to hear the whole story before they jumped to any conclusions. We need to do what we can to do that, too. However, when we hear the parable, we don't have the same historical context they had when they listened to it. Even the audience is different. The talents story was likely told to the scribes while the minas story is told to his disciples.

The parable of the pounds, or minas, is a variant, or something different than the story about the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. By variant I mean that there are other stories like this one that were circulating during the time of Christ. Matthew tells one version that Jesus used. Mark only offers a couple of lines about the subject. However, Jesus takes the same kind of parable to a whole other dimension along with a surprise meaning and the differences do make it clear. Let's start working into the framework of the parable we have today.

The parable of the minas¹ was told on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem; the parable of the talents was told later the Mount of Olives. The audience for the parable of the minas was a large crowd; the audience for the parable of the talents was for the disciples by themselves. The parable of the minas deals with two classes of people: servants and enemies; the parable of the talents deals only with professed servants. In the parable of the minas, each servant receives the same amount; in the parable of the talents, each servant receives a different amount (and talents are worth far more than minas). Also, the return on investment is different: in the parable of the minas, the servants report double earnings for the investments except for the one; in the parable of the talents, all the good servants double their investment. In the former, the servants received identical gifts; in the latter, the good servants showed identical faithfulness. Really, it is the end of the story that is the most distressing. How could a nobleman or a king, especially a king, not have more regard for his subjects? The end of the parable that Jesus tells concludes in the heartless destruction of his own people. With all that said, how then does Jesus use this parable? If it doesn't represent him or some final judgement, then what can it possibly mean? Let me give you some historical context that may help you.

¹ "A mina was a Greek monetary unit worth one hundred denarii or about four months' wages (some references say three month's wages) for an average worker based on a six-day work week." A talent was the equivalent of 60 minas. So a weight on one talent was equal to about 240 months, or 20 years of 6 day work weeks for the average worker.

The parable is not about a king who is like Jesus but a king who is totally unlike him. I think you will see the connections when I tell you this story. Did you ever hear of Archelaus? Certainly the disciples had and lived in a place that was sorely affected by Archelaus, Jesus was using a case in point the disciples knew well. It is certain that the daily news of three Herods was something that the Jews were familiar with for almost forty years. First, Herod the great who died in 4 BC the year when Jesus was born. Herod the Great had been a treacherous king known for his extermination of people in Galilee before his death. Then there were two others, both his sons. Herod Archelaus was ethnarch (ruler over a single ethnic group) of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea (biblical Edom), including the cities Caesarea and Jaffa, for a period of nine years (*circa* 4 BC to 6 AD). Archelaus was removed by Roman Emperor Augustus when the Judaea province was formed under direct Roman rule, at the time of the Census of Quirinius. Remember where you've heard about the census? It's in Luke 2. The Census of Quirinius is not just incidental to Luke's story, and neither are the three Herods. Archelaus was the son of Herod the Great and Malthace the Samaritan, and was the brother of Herod Antipas, Herod Archelaus preceded Herod Antipater, known by the nickname Antipas. Antipas was a 1st-century ruler of Galilee and Perea, who bore the title of tetrarch ("ruler of a quarter") and is referred to as both "Herod the Tetrarch"^[1] and "King Herod"^[2] in the New Testament although he never held the title of king.^[3] He is widely known today for accounts in the New Testament of his role in events that led to the executions of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.²

Bad king-Good king tension

The two sons of Herod the great, Archelaus and Antipas traveled to Rome to seek appointment as controlling parties over Judea. However, a crowd of Jews opposed Archelaus because of his greed and cruelty. Fifty of them showed up in Rome to oppose the appointment of Archelaus because of his cruelty. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote that Archelaus "had indeed reduced the entire nation to helpless poverty after taking it over, and he was wont to kill members of the nobility upon absurd pretexts and then take their property for himself. Remember, this is what was happening when Jesus was a little boy, from his birth to age ten. An atrocity that you hear little or nothing about, according to Josephus, is that Archelaus had brought about his vengeance on 3000 of his countrymen in the temple district at one point. Finally, the Romans deposed Archelaus because of his excessive cruelty."³ But, how does this relate to this story of the minas? We have often heard of how hard things were on the lives of people were in the days of Jesus. Now you know. This explains why. Study the oppression and cruelty of Archelaus in Josephus. you will have the setting for what the Jews were undergoing at the time.

The story of the minas is in keeping with Luke's gospel theme. How Jesus comes to liberate the people from a dastardly king and oppressive poverty. That's why Luke introduced this gospel with a reference to the "king Herod of Judea." (1:5) and shortly thereafter alluded to the wicked things Herod had done (3:19). These references play an indispensable role in the telling of the

² Jeremias and *NIBC*.

³ Throughout history we have studied despots who have brought deadly revenge on innocents. In more recent history consider Oliver Cromwell and the Siege of Drogheda, when over two thousand opponents were killed and 50,000 shipped out of Ireland as indentured servants. Most such events are planted in the long memories of the masses it affects.

gospel and now 2000 years later in understanding what it meant. What then is the parable saying? despots

Jesus's parable underscores not the similarity between the king's servants and the followers of Jesus but the contrast between such a king and the kingdom of God.⁴

Like the king in the story Jesus, too, had been on a journey. He is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be hailed as a king. When he makes his triumphal entry, it is clear that Jesus is not an ordinary king, though he does come with authoritative judgement. He does confront the authorities in the Temple. He condemns the scribes for devouring the widows' houses. He praised a widow who gave two copper coins. And, he did announce the imminent destruction of the city (21:20-24). But wait? How is that different? The answer is that in Jesus's kingdom the standards for reward and punishment are reversed. The enemies of the kingdom of God will be punished no less severely that if they had opposed one of the Herods. But, in God's kingdom the greedy will be driven out of the Temple and the generous will be rewarded. This parable plays well in Luke's narrating of the gospel. The parable of the minas is a hard parable to reflect on because it calls on the disciples to reflect on Jesus as king when monarchs in the time Christ were understood as uniformly corrupt, greedy, and violent.⁵

The parable invites us to reflect on what it means to claim Jesus as "the king who comes in the name of the Lord." (NIBC) What first appears as a parable about judgement is not that at all. Like then, we live in time when God as king has not yet come. The parable begins with the message that the kingdom of God has not yet come. We are called to live faithfully, anticipating that the kingdom is near. One writer put it this way, "Read it this way, the parable calls for faithful allegiance to a king whose kingdom is opposed to the quest of earthly kings for vengeance and profit at the expense of the poor." The parable seeks to address power as a force for good or evil, justice or injustice, mercy or vengeance. What do you understand about this parable that refers to servants and enemies in the same conclusion? The parable the disciples heard called them to examine their motives about their place in the new kingdom. What role did they expect privilege play in their expectations of rewards, or even vengeance? Didn't Peter cut off the ear of the soldier only to have Jesus heal it? I agree with the social scientist Noam Chomsky who has said what he believes about privilege. It holds water, too, for our own humble and sincere walk of faith with Jesus.

⁶"Responsibility I believe accrues through privilege," he said. "People like you and me have an unbelievable amount of privilege and therefore we have a huge amount of responsibility. We live in free societies where we are not afraid of the police; we have extraordinary wealth available to us by global standards. If you have those things, then you have the kind of responsibility that a person does not have if he or she is slaving seventy hours a week to put food on the table; a responsibility at the very least to inform yourself about power. Beyond that, it is a question of whether you believe in moral certainties or not."

⁴ NIBC, 363.

⁵ Ibid., 363, 364.

⁶ Noam Chomsky, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noam_Chomsky (accessed February 16, 2019).

God calls us to live responsible with the dissonance of the kingdom of this earth with the kingdom of God. What if God's kingdom did appear now? How will we assess the institution of the new power with clear and certain moral certainties applied by the new king? How will some Christians explain to the king how and why they made unjust decisions based on privilege rather than justice? What does it mean when we pray "your will be done earth as it is done in heaven"? Finally, what does this story say about the variety and kinds of politics we experience day to day in our global lives?