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#74 Confused by parables

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What's with the persistent neighbour? What lesson should we take from the shrewd manager? Is the story of Lazarus and the rich man a lesson about hell? NT Wright answers these and other listener questions on the parables of Jesus

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Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premierinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello, it's Justin Briley, premier's theology and apologetics editor bringing you another edition of the podcast where we bring you the thought and theology of Tom Wright in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright Online. It's great to have you with us and it's always lovely to receive encouraging reviews of the program. Here's what Wendy said on our Adam and Eve episode from earlier in the year when Tom talked about

Genesis and the way he understands the Adam and Eve story, both spiritually and biologically as it were.

Wendy said, "Fabulous, thank you, so helpful to hear Tom's thoughts on Genesis." He does refer to it and to Adam and Eve in a lot of his teaching and I've often struggled with how to connect his detailed historical work with the Genesis story. I worry so much that the Genesis story is often the first put off from Christianity that non-believers encounter and thus won't allow themselves to explore further. I'm glad it has enabled you to think through that and help you I suppose in presenting Christianity to others, Wendy.

Great to have your review of the podcast. Don't forget you can rate and review the show wherever you're listening from. It helps others to discover the show as well.

And you can find out more about the program at our website, AskNT Wright.com, where you can sign up to ask a question yourself, get our regular newsletter and of course, being with a chance to win goodies as well. So do make sure that you're signed up if you want to be in the running for any competitions. We're going to launch one from next week.

So you'll want to make sure your name is in the hat by registering at AskNT Wright.com. Let's get into today's show. Welcome back to this week's edition of the show. We're talking about parables on the program today.

And just before we leap into this, Tom, and we've got questions here from Thomas and Rosha and Joshua. And if we get time for it, Joe as well. I'm interested to know, obviously Jesus used parables all the time in the gospels to bring his points across and for his teaching.

Was that a common way of teaching in his day and age? Yes and no. The rabbis often tell stories. To this day, if you ask a Jewish teacher a question on a particular subject, they may well respond by once upon a time.

There was a woman who had two daughters, or whatever it was. And if you go back in the rabbinic literature, there are lots and lots and lots of delightful stories, which end up coming back to something about God and Israel and the world and about the people of Israel within that. And so, yes, it is a classic Jewish thing.

And I think that goes back to the Jewish sense back all the way back to the Old Testament, that life is about a great story and that this great story comes down into lots of little fragmented stories, and that in any of them, you can see a glimmer of God's truth. But we don't have many examples in Jesus' own day of people doing what he did, and he seems to have adapted the tradition to his own particular vocation to be the one who was launching God's kingdom, which is what the parables are most all about. Absolutely.

Thomas asks, "Which of Jesus' parables are most misunderstood? And which are your favourites?" And also another question, which does the West need to heed most? Well, let's take a word at a time. Which parables most misunderstood do you think? Well, these may come up later as well, but the one at the end of Luke 16 about the rich man Lazarus is regularly taken, and it was taken in the Middle Ages and subsequently as a description of life after death. Here is somebody in heaven, Abraham's bosom, here is somebody in hell, and never the train shall meet.

And many people have pointed out in olden days as now that actually if it's a parable, it's not meant to be a literal description of life after death. And there are several problems about it being a literal description of life after death, but people still read it as such. Partly because, and the misunderstandings of all the parables occur because of the misunderstanding of the gospel, which says the gospel is about how we get to heaven instead of saying as we should, the gospel is about how God brings his life and love to birth on earth as in heaven.

And so many of the parables are about that. What does this look like on earth is in heaven? And if we try and turn them around and say, well, they've got heavenly meanings, then we'll misunderstand them all. Another one which does come up later again, Ken in Luke 16, interestingly, is about the unjust steward, the parable of the wicked Mammon so called.

We'll get back to that, I think, because it really is important. Let's do that. Do you have a personal favourite, Tom? Oh, goodness.

It's like asking, you know, we could bait over his quartets, do I like most? Or whatever it may be. I love the seed growing secretly. The kingdom of God is like somebody planting a seed and the person goes to bed and gets up and goes to bed and gets up and has no idea what's going on, but the seed is germinating and will grow.

And I love the sense of the echo of the person going to bed, getting up and not understanding, even though the seed is doing exactly the same thing, the seed has gone to bed and it's going to wake up. And so there's all sorts of lovely resonances there, but I find that very encouraging myself because there's many things we do in God's service, or we hope we're doing in God's service, which are like planting a seed, which looks as though it's doing nothing at all for months or years. And then a plant comes up, maybe not the plant we expected.

So I love that one. That's a short one too. Let's look at a few people's questions then.

Rochelle in Alberta, Canada says in Luke chapter 11, you have the parable of the persistent neighbour, the footnote in my Bible, though, has a very different translation of a phrase in verse eight than the main text. I typically hear this taught as a lesson to keep praying about an issue until God answers. But does he answer that persistent prayer

because of your shameless audacity, or is it to preserve his good name? My husband has been trying to figure this out.

Now he's got me really curious too. And Rochelle says she loves the podcast. Thank you very much Rochelle.

OK, so why does, yeah, just sketch out what you think the parable is trying to bring across in the end? Yes, well, I think it is advocating and urging us to what I often think of as fairly classic Jewish prayer. If you go to the Psalms, you find the Psalmist saying, "Hey God, wake up. This is a really bad thing that's going on.

What are you doing about it? You're supposed to be in charge here." Now many of us, especially English and Anglican, would never dream of addressing God like that. That's too shameless, too brazen. And Jesus is saying, "Go right ahead.

That's how God wants you to do it." And I think of Moses when God says after the making of the golden calf, that's it. You take your people off to the Promised Land. I'm not coming with you.

And Moses says, "No, they're your people. You brought them out of Egypt. It's your honour that's on the line.

So you, Jolly Well, are coming." And God says, "Yeah, you're right, actually." And it's that kind of shamelessness. And the Greek word "an idea" in verse 8 there, I think means exactly that. The fact that the person having woken up the neighbour at midnight or whatever it is, instead of thinking, "Oh dear, that was a bit of a social faux pas." No, I'm Jolly Well, going to wake you up because I'm hungry and we need some help here.

Have you heard of this different translation, though, that Rochelle seems to say? I'm reading from the NRSV here. And I don't have a footnote around verse 8, which Rochelle's Bible obviously does, where instead of because of your shameless audacity or, in my version, his persistence, apparently in Rochelle's, it says, "To preserve his good name because, you know, to preserve his good name, he will get up and give him whatever he needs." Have you heard of that way of translating? I've been a little bit puzzled about that. I mean, I'm looking at my own translation here, the New Testament for everyone.

And I've just got, because of your shameless persistence. Again, I just going with that tradition. I mean, I've got a dozen different modern translations of the Bible here, and I could check out one or two, but I wonder if that translation was a bit worried about shameless persistence.

And maybe, as it were, for the sake of God's name, it must have meant something like because you were almost putting God to shame. And in a sense, I mean, there is that. It is like what Moses says to God.

Yet another very recent revised translation here, see what they do. Moses almost putting God to shame. For the sake of his name, you've got to do it.

But I don't think that's in the text. I think that's perhaps cautious interpretation. As with many things, one might be wrong, but the point of the parable, obviously, is joy well to go on.

And just because the prayer doesn't seem to be answered at this point, then that doesn't mean you stop. The revised New Jerusalem Bible simply says, if he doesn't get up and give it him for friendship's sake, persistence will make him get up and give his friend. I think that's a bit of a... We can't find the alternative translation, Rochelle, in our Bibles, but I hope the general sort of thoughts on that have been helpful in some way.

Hi there. Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special e-book we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This e-book draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rassolberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church, and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel? I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful e-book as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week.

You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible. So please go to [premier insight.org/give](https://premierinsight.org/give) and make a donation today.

That's [premier insight.org/give](https://premierinsight.org/give) and don't forget to download our newest e-book Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. Joshua is an Edinburgh and he's got another one here that you mentioned earlier. My question is about the parable of the shrewd and unrighteous manager.

Frankly, what is up with it? This is Joshua. I've read many interpretations and just keep getting more and more confused. What does Jesus mean when he says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings." He's suggesting some position for the unrighteous in the new creation.

Any light you could shed on this would be helpful. Thank you. Now, just for those who don't know our Bibles back to front where can we find this? This is Luke 16 and it's Luke 16, 1 to 9. It then does get a bit confusing because then from verses 10 onwards there's stuff about money in general which does seem to look a bit different.

I remember once being in a church service, actually it was in a college chapel just a few

hundred yards from where I'm sitting now, where the Old Testament reading in the service was all about the wickedness of Israel caring about money rather than about the poor, et cetera. And then the New Testament reading was this one and somebody came up to me afterwards, quite agitated. Tom, I need to know what on earth was that about? Those two readings seemed to go in exactly the opposite direction and I felt her pain.

I see exactly where you're coming from. Okay, my own personal reminiscences, I remember the first time I ever had to preach on this text, realizing here is a passage right in the middle of Luke's Gospel. If I as a young New Testament scholar as I then was, "I haven't got anything to say about it, shame on me." And I went back and ferret it away.

The thing is, in Jesus' Jewish world, any story about a business manager and a servant would be a story about God and Israel. And you then have to realize that throughout Luke's Gospel particularly, it's quite explicit. Jesus is warning the people of his day, the Jewish people of his day, that they are in serious danger of being unfaithful to God and that therefore the Kingdom of God is being taken away.

And something totally new is going to happen. And so it looks as though Jesus is saying, this is taking for granted his critique of the Judaism of his day, that they are not being the light to the nations, that they are not serving God in the way that God wanted. People get very upset sometimes when I say that, but that does seem to me what Luke and the others actually is saying.

Not every single Jew was wicked because, but the general drift was in exactly the wrong direction. Jesus is saying, that is the way to disaster. In other words, you're the steward, but you're going to be put out of your stewardship.

You're no longer going to be the people through whom God is going to be running his world as it were. And so then what are you going to do? Well, in that context, there may be things which you might otherwise have thought, no, I can't do that because my local rabbi says, we've got to do this or this and not that or that. But actually you may need to sit loose to some of that.

What comes immediately before this parable, and I think it's very significant in Luke, is the parable of the prodigal son, where the whole point is that the scribes and the Pharisees are agitated because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and the people of the Bible. Tax collectors and sinners and all the wrong sort of people. And the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son is all about, hey, God is having a party and he's welcoming all sorts of unlikely people.

Get used to it. This, your brother was dead and his alive again was lost and is found. And that idea of somebody being raised from the dead comes back again at the end of the parable at the end of Luke 16.

So it looks as though it's a way of Jesus saying, look, this is a crisis moment. Israel is being held up to judgment. In this moment, don't think that you can preserve your safety by saying we've got to keep all the little rules that are rabbis of tortoise and not have anything to do with these tax collectors and sinners.

Maybe we need to make friends where we can, even in unlikely places, because in the great turnaround that is coming, then this is going to be a new world and we'll need all the friends we can get. That seems to me where it's going. So we have to be very careful about what in technical terms is the difference between metaphor and metonymy.

This is a metaphor about God and Israel. It's not a metonymy. That is to say, we can't take the individual bits of the parable and say, oh, Jesus is encouraging this guy to cheat.

In other words, Jesus likes it when we cheat on our paying our bills or whatever it may be. No, it's a vivid metaphor for saying in the great turnaround that's coming, all the little rules and regulations that the Pharisees have invented. They're not actually going to matter.

And if I'm making friends with tax collectors and sinners, then maybe you should as well, or something like that. That is the best reading that I can see of it. I have, of course, written this up at more length in Jesus and the victory of God, and perhaps elsewhere, but that will be the primary place.

Yes, and obviously for everyone's series, obviously deals with all of the parables as you come across them in the gospels. I suppose I did do that. Yes, I have no memory of what I said.

I wrote that button for everyone about 20 years ago, so couldn't know what it's about. Anyway, you already really did respond to Joe in a highest question, which was about the significance of Lazarus and the rich man. And just asking, you know, is it an exact description of the post-mortem state of man before the resurrection? Quite, quite.

And yeah, it's important to just, I suppose, as you said, the outset, we need to be careful not to over interpret the parables in that sense. Absolutely, and the trope of Abraham's bosom. This was regular in some Jewish circles as a vague way of talking about Abraham's family being gathered to Abraham, obviously prior to the resurrection.

This is not a final state. I heard a sermon just this last Sunday on this, where somebody pointed out that Lazarus is the only person named in a parable, and it's significant because, not because it's a real person, certainly not the Lazarus who lived at Bethany who Jesus raised from the dead in John 11, but rather because he is a down and out. He is utterly poor.

He's destitute. The dogs are licking his sores. And Jesus gives him the dignity of a name.

Nobody else in any of the parables has the dignity of a name, but this is just in the course of telling this story. And there may be significance in Lazarus, Eliazza, that God helps, et cetera, maybe that he is a sign that God helped or something. So there may be other echoes as well, but it isn't a description of life after death per se, because as with the prodigal son, it ends with a very interesting note of resurrection.

And here's the thing, it was quite a well-known folktale theme in the culture of the time that somebody realizing the post-mortem consequences of their immorality would then say, please, can you send somebody to warn those back home? And usually in the folktale, the answer is yes, we better do that. We will send somebody back and then tell people. And here Jesus says no, it's not like that, because Abraham says to the rich man, they've got Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.

Oh no, no, but if somebody went from the dead, they would repent and then the crunch. If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, even if someone were to rise from the dead. Hang on, go fast forward to Luke 24, where Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted to them, all the things concerning himself.

Moses is the one who rises from the dead. And Luke 16 is a warning from Jesus, but then as Luke writes it up for his own day as well, that if they haven't heard Moses and the prophets, well, Jesus is risen from the dead. Don't assume that that's going to make all the difference you might want into, because God is doing new things, and those who turn their backs on God in God's ways may not be convinced even so.

So the parable has many levels, and it's really our post-medieval culture that has wanted to turn the gospels into a story about heaven and hell that have seized on it and made it again, a metonymy rather than a metaphor. Tom, thank you again for your input on these parables. It'll make me go back and read some of them afresh.

But for now, thanks for being with me, and we'll see you next time. Yes indeed.

[Music] Thanks for being with us on today's edition of the program, and next week, Tom will be looking at your questions about Jesus, so look out for that.

In your podcast feed next week, don't forget to, you can get more from one of our podcast partners, SBCK, Tom's UK Publisher, with special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners. We've got some links to them in the show notes from today's show, but for now, thanks for being with us, and thank you for being with us. And don't forget to check out more from the show at AskNTRight.com.

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