

# **Parable**

## **#8591**

### **Leaders Guide**

#### **Introduction**

A *parable* is a method of speech in which moral or religious truth is illustrated from the analogy of common experience. Although the Old Testament contains parables, Jesus is the only teacher of parables in the New Testament. Through these extended metaphors, Jesus conveys deeper meanings to his followers.

In interpreting a parable, you first must determine the particular spiritual truth intended to be conveyed. Then you must consider which details are meaningful and which merely are included to add interest and realism. As a rule, no doctrine of Christian faith is based on a parable, though a parable may illustrate a truth already clearly expressed in Scripture.

#### **Before Showing the Film**

Before showing the film, consider the following:

- *“Parable”* is not entertainment.
- In *“Parable”*, color, sound and the significant actions of people convey a message and tell a story. The viewer is challenged in 22 minutes to read and to interpret the characters’ actions and to integrate them into a unified message.

The theme of *“Parable”* is “The Man Who Dared to Be Different”. Seven main characters role-play the virtue-vice personalities of humanity. Into each character’s life comes the principle character, the clown. Each character reacts differently. The viewer must interpret the character from his or her actions. No verbal dialogue occurs.

The entire film is a parable, as is each sequence. In the contest of a circus, the artist epitomizes the history of humanity and of an individual. Each person’s task is to put meaning into life and to find purpose. Often this is obscure. Throughout the film, mirrors symbolize humanity’s search for meaning. This is the first task: to discover one’s self-image.

#### **Presentation Methods**

Several methods of presentation are suggested here, along with their advantages and disadvantages.

1. A single showing is hardly adequate to allow the average person time to comprehend and to analyze the symbolism of each sequence. However, this is the way the film was shown at the New York World’s Fair in 1964.

2. A double showing with a discussion before the second showing allows viewers to react emotionally and to identify symbols.
3. Interrupted viewing: This may have special value for viewers who obtain only superficial interpretation and understanding of the symbolism. The technique is to show the film up to the end of the scene where the puppets are lowered from the ceiling and the white clown gets into the harness. Discuss and analyze previous episodes. End with the question: What do you think will happen now? Rewind the film and reshow the first portion. With this fuller understanding of the Scriptural background and with much of the confusion resolved, the shock of the clown's death is more significant. The symbolism of the remainder of the film is easily perceived. The final question can be: Why do you think this happened?

After a showing, you might leave the room darkened and comment: Let's think for a moment about what we have seen: A man helps others; is accepted by some, rejected and killed by others. And another character decides to take up the work of doing good, recognizing her or she too might be killed!

*"Parable"* quickly isolates the viewer in a truly subjective experience. Resolve this isolation by discussing rather than interpreting and by helping each person verify his or her feelings against the group's feelings. This may be done quickly by asking: How do you feel after seeing the film? Do not wait for someone to raise a hand because you are likely to get a safe, thought-through answer. Rather, ask six or eight persons to share their reflections. Do not comment; simply verify. You and the audience will discover a convergence of sorrow, joy, anger and perhaps confusion. Then the group can discuss their feelings through several sequences of the film.

Here are possible interpretations of sequences to be used after at least a single showing:

**The Man Walking (puppeteer):** The symbolism of a resentful walking man can be interpreted as one reluctant to assume meaningless daily duties. Individuals frequently seek significance, but they seldom take time to discover life's purpose. The man walking, at least, is searching. He is unaware that today a man will enter his life and make it meaningful. The look in the mirror symbolizes his search for a true self-image.

**The Water-Bucket Man:** A monotonous, humdrum existence is filled with escapism, shown by the switching of hands to carry the buckets. This could perhaps illustrate the first beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit. There is little attachment to creatures here, only water buckets for the elephants. Hence, the water-bucket man is free to follow the clown. Symbolic of anyone's search for identity with Christ, he never quite catches up!

**The Clown:** All of the clown's gestures betray the man of the gospel story who "went about doing good." A Christ-figure, he is easily identifiable, at once

charming and warm. The tilt of the head and facial expressions show mercy, tenderness and love. He is an other-centered man who easily relates to the needs of others.

**The Ball Thrower:** Every gesture of this man signifies his inner conflict and insecurity. The act of getting on hands and knees perhaps could be interpreted as the loss of humanness that prejudice implies. The symbolism is obvious: When one hates another human, one hates Christ. The frustration of failing to hurt the African American is resolved by his discovery of a new target: the clown in white. The ball thrower has missed the message of mercy.

**The African American:** Symbolic of all racial hatred, the oppressed African American is sullen in the cage and casual when liberated; therefore, he can turn the ball-throwing exercise into a game. The African American quickly identifies with and relates to the clown when the clown is abused. He follows the clown to learn more.

**The Ticket Seller:** The music-and-gesture combination symbolizes a person absorbed in deceitful enterprise. The clown operates on a different set of values, so he bypasses the outstretched cane. Like the ball thrower earlier, he eventually gets on his hands and knees, symbolizing his loss of a sense of humor and his humanness.

**The Girl and the Spear Man:** The sexual significance is obvious here. The girl's slavery to the spearman, her cooperation in his stunt, the spearman's display of the spear (symbolic of his masculinity) symbolizes the sexual crisis of humanity. When the clown tries to disclose the deceit, the game ends, and the revenge begins.

**The Tent Scene:** The puppets could be interpreted to symbolize birth, marriage, death and the Old Testament. The conflict between people (often at the expense of the innocent – the throwing away of the baby in the scene) often is resolved only in death. Meanwhile, the child audience is mystified by the adult drama. They are fascinated by the puppeteer's ability to control the puppets' lives. The clown enters, and the children realize true happiness in life—through meaningful service to others—is quite simple. The significance of the clown lowering the puppets may be interpreted as Christ replacing the old law with a new law of love. Therefore, he identifies himself with the puppets (humanity) by getting into the harness and becoming a part of the "Circus of Life." The three whose value judgments he has upset kill him. The cry reaches out beyond the circus and is heard around the Earth.

The puppeteer, who has witnessed all of this, slowly realizes the clown also has ruined his act. His frustration eventually expresses itself in the wild thrashing of the dead clown.

In his wrath, the puppeteer finally comes to his senses. The symbolic removal of a glove is the beginning of the decision for the puppeteer. He begins to read significance into his life from the clown's symbolic actions.

The scene of emptiness without the clown needs no explanation. Three figures—the water carrier, the girl and the African American—have withdrawn from the circus. They have learned a partial message of community love. The use of mirrors on the side of the cars perhaps signifies history repeating itself. But the conflict within the puppeteer's soul continues. Once again discovered before the mirror, he takes a painfully long look at himself and his uncertainty. With deliberate choice, he reaches for the white makeup cream, and the conversion is accomplished! He will not be the same clown, but he can put on the characteristics that made the life of the clown—the man who dared to be different—truly significant.

**Magnus: This character symbolizes all people.**

Initially "*Parable*" may seem to be a series of disconnected morality plays with the clown imposing the continuity. Viewers may tend to focus on the clown. As each moral issue is encountered, the clown evaluates the situation, acts and endures the consequence—the think-judge-act technique. People follow him in love or hate. The principles of his actions are quite simple: honesty, purity selflessness – the timeless truth of humanity's search for meaningful happiness, the beatitudes.

The key character, however, is not the clown but Magnus, symbol of humanity. It is Magnus who begins and ends the film. The other characters, even the clown, are nameless. His name "Magnus" symbolizes egocentric humanity.

The psychological growth of each individual from childhood to adulthood is a slow transition from self-centered value system to spontaneous, other-centered activity. A measure of one's maturity is the capacity to respond affirmatively to the needs of others. The growth process toward maturity can occur at various rates; some people take a whole lifetime; others respond early in life to a challenge or a demand for courageous selflessness, and this becomes the pattern for subsequent decisions. True charity cannot be taught; it must come from within. It is infectious, for it creates within the observer a discontent with one's failure to grow toward the ideal self; it creates a desire to imitate.

Thus it is in "*Parable*". Each character is exposed to the clown's value system and is challenged to grow, to become selfless. But Magnus' encounter is somewhat different.

Early in the film, Magnus already is discontented with his self-image. His response to the clown has a deeper impact. His task in the circus is to entertain, to make people laugh. His life work is only moderately successful because when the clown almost effortlessly upstages him and captures his audience, he is

deeply jealous. His job is in jeopardy. When the clown resolves his loss of puppets by substituting himself in the harness, the crisis is temporarily solved, but then the clown is killed. Once again, Magnus' act for the circus has disintegrated.

Now the conversion! It begins at the base of Magnus' "throne" after he witnesses the clown's death. Conversion is symbolized by the tossing aside of the glove. It has been triggered by the purging effect of his wrathful yanking of the clown's body. His anger toward the clown backlashes into his life, resulting in a new self-examination. The decision is further developed in the privacy of his dressing room. The long look at the self with which he is so dissatisfied allows for the rebirth of a new person. The single encounter with the clown—because Magnus was ready for this change, because he was so unsure of his life purpose, because he was willing to change—effects the change. Unlike the girl, the African American and the water-carrier, who merely withdraw from the circus, Magnus experiences a total conversion. In the symbolic presence of the white grease paint, he assumes the clown's role. Continuing the clown's work, Magnus becomes "the man who dares to be different."

### **About This "Parable"**

It is generally agreed that to deserve the name of "*Parable*", a complete thought or narrative in figurative language must impart or illustrate a religious truth through an expressed or implied comparison between the figurative example and the religious reality. "*Parable*" is basically a comparison, and to discover the lesson, one must know both terms of the comparison. Just as a prudent person builds a house on rock, not sand, so one seeking God's reign must listen to Christ's message and put it into practice. When the comparison is not explicit, one must seek clues to the nature of the truth, which "*Parable*" is meant to illustrate. Not every detail in the story needs to be taken up in the application; some of these are at times without significance.

### **After the Showing**

Possible discussion questions:

1. What is the significance of the circus as the context in which the film is set?
2. What is the significance, if any, of the work of the three people who follow the clowns?
3. What is the significance of the barker's long string of tickets?
4. Why is the clown dressed in white?
5. Why are only children in the tent?
6. What is the significance of what the clown does to the children?
7. Why do you think the clown gets into the marionette harness?
8. Is the clown the same man at the end of the film as he was in the first part of the film?

9. Why does the clown ride on the shoulder of the road at the end of the movie?
10. Why do you think the movie ends as it does?
11. Why is there no caption at the end?
12. What is the film's message?

### **Suggested Scriptural References**

- Exodus 20:16
- Isaiah 53:5
- Matthew 5:5, 10, 13; 6:19; 16:24; 25:31-46; 27:24
- Luke 10:25-37
- John 3:3-16; 11:25; 13:15, 34; 15:1-7, 13
- Acts 9:38
- 1 Corinthians 4:10
- Galatians 8:2
- Ephesians 2:5
- 1 Timothy 2:9, 6:10

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