

# How to Speak in Parables

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There is no skill more useful in cross-cultural mission than the ability to speak in parables. This is especially so among Muslims, who usually value common sense above historical evidence, scientific information or verses from the Bible.

## A Good Teacher

When Jesus was with people ignorant of the truth, speaking in parables was his favourite teaching method. As we sit with such people in cafés and marketplaces, and as we ride with them in taxis and trains, we have opportunities to talk with them as he did.

Men and women will not give us their attention unless we awaken their interest. We may be naturally quiet and reserved; we may lack the gift of creative imagination; but for each of us, our communication skills can be significantly improved with careful thought and disciplined effort. A doctor or lawyer or engineer must study hard to become proficient in his calling, and a missionary of the gospel must work just as hard to acquire the skills needed for effective outreach.

How often we may preach from a pulpit and see our congregation yawning and fidgeting, and some even asleep! A week later few can remember the subject of our sermon. In contrast when Jesus taught, ordinary men and women hung on his every word. And they remembered what he said many years later. What was it that made his teaching so effective?

Firstly, he went out among the people where they were, and shared their life with them. He talked with them in their own world about their own concerns. And there he engaged them in discussion. His method was highly interactive. He raised questions, he answered questions, and he looked for a response. He demanded, “Whose face and writing is on this coin?” “What did you go to see in the desert?” “Who do people say that I am?” “What do you think?” “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?” These were questions that Jesus asked, and in each case he waited for an answer. He was effective because he was interactive.

The second reason for his success is that he told stories. We call them parables. When Jesus told a story, things happened. Many preachers today use stories and jokes to keep their audience awake – like a coffee break in a

business meeting, to refresh us before we return to the business. For Jesus, the story is never a pause for refreshment before or after the business. For him, the story is what does the business. Tax-collectors and prostitutes gathered round to hear him (Lk 15:1). Crowds were astonished at his teaching (Matt 7:28). Disciples asked him to explain (Matt 13:36). Pharisees took offence and resolved to kill him (Matt 21:45-46). One thing is clear. When Jesus told a story, he got a reaction.

His stories acted quickly, but they also continued to act long after they were told. Many years later people could recall, word for word, exactly what Jesus had said. A number of his parables are found only in Luke’s Gospel, collected by Luke from those who remembered every detail.

Evangelical Christians all claim to accept their *doctrine* from the New Testament. But some of us belong to evangelical movements that also learned their *methods* from the New Testament. For us, the techniques used by Jesus and his apostles are still relevant today. Believing what they believed, we try to do what they did, following their example as closely as we can. Our aim, then, is not merely to read and teach the parables of Jesus but to speak in parables as he did – to create parables of our own, and if possible, parables as good as his.

But can we really do what Jesus did? Is he not unique, the only Son of God, possessing the Spirit without measure and endued with wisdom from above? Yes, he is. But he encouraged his disciples, saying “Take my yoke upon you and *learn from me*” (Matt 11:29). Whilst we can never achieve his brilliance, we can certainly learn from his technique. And going out in his name, inspired by his Spirit, praying in his name, we may surely hope for a message of wisdom to be given to us, as it was to him, whenever we need it most.

This then is our starting point. From the parables of Jesus we may learn how to create parables of our own. Now we will identify four essential ingredients that combine to make an effective parable. Firstly, it is true to life. Then it clarifies a single issue, shakes complacency and demands a response.

## What Makes A Good Parable?

### 1) It is true to life.

An effective parable is believable. It could really have happened. The stories that Jesus told are not silly, or magical or trivial. They are not like folk tales with imaginary creatures or talking animals or miraculous transformations. There are no giants or ghosts or pixies or genies. People do not fly or turn into frogs or princesses. His stories are set in the real world

and follow a natural course of events. They are entirely believable. Everything in them might really have happened.

Jesus speaks of everyday objects – a patch on a garment, a lamp on a stand, a fig tree in leaf, birds settling in a bush, grain sprouting in a field, fish caught in a net. He refers to everyday events – a woman loses a coin, a child asks for something to eat, a tradesman looks for goods to sell, a traveller is found on a lonely road, workers complain about their wages. He describes everyday activities – making bread, picking fruit, building a house, dressing up for a wedding, obtaining oil for a lamp. He introduces everyday people – a sower, a landlord, a poor widow, a rich farmer, a manager and his labourers, fishermen, bankers, shepherds, servants, kings. He notes the normal quirks of human nature: tenants don't pay their rent, a judge is unjust, a son is wayward, a miser hoards up his wealth, a servant is lazy, a steward renders false accounts. These are situations that people really face, so the story immediately awakens their interest. They know it is worth listening to.

Each story introduces a fresh set of characters. If Jesus had always spoken about kings, or always about fishermen or farmers, people from other walks of life could soon lose interest. As it was, if one story failed to meet their need, the next, with different characters and circumstances, might well do so. They would continue to listen in expectation. Jesus once told three parables in succession to make the very same point, knowing that his hearers included children, women and men. Some would be touched by the thought of a lost sheep, some by a lost coin, others by a lost son (Lk 15).

Jesus sometimes engaged his hearers directly in his story by starting with a personal question: “Which father among you, if his son asks him for a fish...” “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight...” “What man of you having a hundred sheep...?” “What woman having ten silver coins...?” Responding to this, you become part of the story yourself. You are involved in it. You feel what its characters feel.

In every parable there is someone like you, or someone you recognise from your own experience. To make this effective, the people in the parables are identifiable types. A single word is usually enough to describe them. So, “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” The crowd knew what a Pharisee was like, and a tax collector. “There was a rich man who had a steward.” Everyone was aware of rich men, and stewards. “A sower went out to sow.” They had all seen a sower at work, and some had recently cast seed on their own fields. “A king made a marriage feast for his son.” Even this was not outside their experience, for many had served at such feasts or watched the guests arrive in the street.

But the people in these parables are not caricatures so exaggerated and distorted that they become comical or incredible. The participants are serious people doing serious things. The parables of Jesus never become funny sketches. Their purpose is to warn and advise rather than to amuse.

Then we see that his parables were rooted in the local culture. They did not refer to things that happened far away or long ago. This is very important. We will do well to tell our parables in Africa about Africans, and in India about Indians. Jesus spoke to the Galileans and Judeans about people and places they knew. They would look at one another and say, “This man understands our circumstances; he is one of us and knows the problems we face.”

We see then that the parables of Jesus were true to life. They expressed the culture of the people he was with. But how did he decide what details to include? What specific content is necessary in order for a story to communicate effectively?

## 2) It clarifies a single issue.

A wise teacher, before saying anything at all, will ask: What kind of people am I talking to? What questions do they have? What worries them? What problems do they face? What false ideas do they hold? What are their basic errors and besetting sins? Then before starting to teach, we must ask: What do these people need to *know*? And finally, What *change* would we like them to make?

The Gospel accounts of Jesus's life show us a highly sensitive and perceptive young man who can think extremely clearly. He understands people. He knows their hopes and fears, their desires and prejudices, their ideals and temptations, their ambitions and their enthusiasms, their apathy and hypocrisy. He is familiar with every quirk of human nature. Indeed we are told that “he knew what they were all like. He needed no-one to bear witness about mankind, for he himself knew what was in mankind” (Jn 2:24-25). We must learn to study humanity as Jesus did.

His parables are all sharply focused with a definite target in view. Each is designed to touch a particular human weakness, to clarify a particular issue, to meet a particular need or teach a particular truth. The meaning of a parable often becomes clearer when we consider: Who is this story intended for? What type of person would find it most helpful? What issue does it raise? What misunderstanding does it resolve?

Some people, for example, “were confident that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt”, so for them he created the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9). Some needed encouragement “always to pray and not lose heart” and for them he told the parable of the

lazy judge and the persistent widow (Lk 18:1). As some people valued this world more highly than the next, he told them about a shrewd manager who prepared for the future (Lk 16:1-9). When some said that sinners should be abandoned to their sin, he told them the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). When some called him Lord but did not do what he said, he told them about the two houses (Lk 6:46-49). When some said they needed more evidence before believing, he spoke of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:29). For a community steeped in law and ignorant of grace he spoke of the labourers hired at different times (Matt 20:16). Each of these stories dealt with a single specific issue. Each was so clear that nothing more need be said about that issue ever again.

We see that the characters in Jesus's parables are all simple and true to type. There is no subtlety or development in their personality. A bad man does not have a better side, and a good man does not have a worse side. Each type of person acts exactly as we would expect that type to act. They are simple characters doing simple things.

They are consistent; they do what they would normally do. But they do it to an extreme degree. The prayer of the Pharisee is what we would expect of a Pharisee but taken to an extreme. The prodigal son acts like many a foolish young man, but suffers the worst imaginable consequences. The landowner hiring labourers at different times is like many another, but he does so longer and later. The shrewd manager is like many a manager, but extends his shrewdness far into the realm of dishonesty.

Then Jesus shows the logical consequence of such typical behaviour taken to its extreme. The Pharisee is humbled and condemned. The landowner explains the meaning of generosity. The manager is commended for his shrewdness. The prodigal is so desperate that he comes to his senses.

Yet Jesus takes care to avoid irrelevant detail. He did not add anything that might distract attention from the point he was making. His characters, for example, do not have names. If he had told us that the Good Samaritan was called Simon and wore a leopard skin hat we would wonder, "Which Simon was it?" and "Why a leopard skin hat?" He did not say that the foolish man who built on sand had a spotted dog and a blue front door. He was making a serious point and took care that nothing would distract from it. The only exception to this rule is Lazarus in the parable of the great gulf, whose name means "God is help" – and indeed this may have been a generic name for anyone in need of help.

So we see that each parable is as simple as it can possibly be, addressing a single issue for a particular type of person. Each story is a specific medicine designed to cure an identifiable spiritual malady. But what effect would the parable itself have on a person suffering from that disease?

### **3) It shakes complacency.**

The purpose of a parable is firstly to unsettle us and then to change our way of thinking and behaving. For this reason it will be short and sharp, with an obvious meaning and a simple conclusion. It is not a rambling entertainment that leaves the hearers smiling. On the contrary, the tension and discomfort will usually build as the story progresses towards a climax of intense embarrassment.

Sometimes at the end of a story Jesus summarized his conclusion with a direct challenge. Speaking to the Jewish priests and elders about wicked tenants who killed the owner's son, he concluded, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (Matt 21:43). Following the parable of workers hired at different times, he cautioned, "So the last will be first and the first last" (Matt 20:16). Concluding the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, he declared, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14). Following the story of the girls who lacked oil, he warned, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt 25:13).

In each of these cases, the meaning could hardly be more clear. The parables of Jesus were intended to clarify and never to obscure the truth. If his hearers did not get the point, it was simply because they did not wish to. "Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt 13:13).

On all such religious questions Jesus was transparent, but political affairs were a different matter. Some of his parables touched on extremely sensitive political issues. Indeed many of them referred directly to the kingdom of God. For us the idea of the kingdom of God may arouse pleasant comforting thoughts but in first century Palestine the term was a hot political issue. Indeed it was something to die for. The Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God would come (Lk 17:20). A man could be executed by the Romans if he gave the wrong answer, or even if he gave the right answer.

In such circumstances an indirect reply may often be the wisest course. By means of parables Jesus tells us a great deal about the kingdom of God that could not be stated directly without provoking a riot, endangering his followers as much as himself. Many of the obscurities and apparent contradictions in the parables of the kingdom may be attributed to the physical danger they all faced from military authorities. But anyone with an ear to hear could understand what he or she needed to know. By a story Jesus could answer religious questions without committing himself or his

followers on political issues. This is important to remember when we are working in dangerous parts of the world today.

His concern, and ours, will not be to shake political systems but to upset personal priorities. By showing that Caesar would expect to receive what is Caesar's, and God to receive what is God's, Jesus challenged his hearers to religious commitment. This was undoubtedly unsettling for his hearers: "When they heard it, they were amazed. And they left him and went away" (Matt 22:22). Strictly speaking, the face on the coin was an object lesson rather than a parable, but it illustrates the principle he followed.

Each story introduced something surprising, uncomfortable, shocking, that required a higher level of religious commitment than his hearers had anticipated. It might be a paradox, a contrast, a different way of looking at things. Their complacency would be shaken.

Hearing, for example, that a man fell among thieves, the people might expect a priest and a Levite to pass on the other side, but the kindness of the Samaritan would surprise and embarrass them, especially if they knew how Jesus had just been rejected in Samaria (Lk 9:53). Again, they would expect a rich man to be annoyed when the guests he invited did not come to the banquet, but none of them possessing a fine house would be comfortable with the idea of opening it to the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind (Lk 14:13).

Many parables end unhappily. Knowing how the guests at a dinner will choose the top places for themselves, Jesus upsets them by imagining how they might be told to find a vacant seat somewhere at the bottom (Lk 14:9). Knowing how a lazy servant will do as little as possible for an earthly or a heavenly master, he flusters such a servant by taking away the talent he failed to use (Matt 25:28). Knowing how people will abuse the little power they have, he worries them with the thought of their master's return at an hour when they least expect it (Lk 12:46). Knowing how people make excuses to ignore God, he unsettles them by imagining how rejecting an invitation in these days may bar them from the coming kingdom forever (Lk 14:24).

Sometimes the story progresses towards an inevitable conclusion, as for example with the good tree that bears good fruit, or the man who builds his house on the sand, or the weeds burned at harvest time. But the outcome is often unpredictable, as with the girls who have no oil for their lamps. We may hope that the bridegroom will let them in, until the very last moment when he says "I don't know you!" (Matt 25:12). We may imagine that the rich man with his barns has many years ahead of him to seek God and help the poor: "But God said to him, 'You fool! This night your soul is required of you!'" (Lk 12:20).

Often there is an unexpected twist of this sort, and not always for the worst. We may expect the barren fig-tree to be uprooted and burnt, but to our surprise it is offered nourishment and care for one more year in the hope of some good fruit (Lk 13:8-9).

In several parables there is even a happy ending, at least for some of the participants. The seed which falls on good soil does produce a mighty harvest. The bread is all leavened. The sheep, the coin and the son are found.

So we see that a good parable will shake our apathy, challenge our assumptions, leave us feeling insecure. But having knocked us down it will also pick us up. The story itself allows a measure of hope for better things if we will take its message to heart.

#### **4) It demands a response.**

Jesus never forced people to agree with him. He did not score points by outwitting them or proving them wrong. In fact he always showed the utmost respect for the personality and intelligence of his hearers. He expected them to think as sensible people and judge for themselves.

He frequently concluded with the words, "He who has ears to hear let him hear!" Responsibility was passed in this way to his hearers. They have heard the story so they must decide what to do with it. They must make up their own mind and act accordingly.

Every parable in fact implies a reasonable question and demands an intelligent response. Sometimes indeed Jesus pauses, waiting for a reply. After speaking about two sons, he asked, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matt 21:31). After describing three travellers on a dangerous road, he enquired, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?" (Lk 10:36). Imagining a moneylender who cancels a big debt for one man and a little debt for another, he asked "Which of them will love him more?" (Lk 7:42).

Every parable forces a decision. In many cases Jesus clarified the options for his hearers. Imagining a servant thrown into jail for squeezing a poor debtor after his own debt had been cancelled, Jesus concluded, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt 18:35). They must now decide whether or not to forgive. For people who thought that prayer was merely the recitation of religious words, he told the story of three friends, one who was hungry, another who had bread, and a third who went at midnight to request it. They must now decide how they will speak to God (Lk 11:9). Describing the wide and narrow gates, he urged his hearers, "Enter by the narrow gate." The choice was now theirs to make (Matt 7:13). With the parable of the

barren fig tree he clarified the spiritual crisis faced by the Jewish nation, and he warned, “Unless you repent you will all perish” (Lk 13:5-9). They had the possibility of repentance if they would seize it.

When challenged to love his neighbour, a lawyer enquired “Who is my neighbour?” It was a question of definitions, the sort of question beloved by lawyers. In response Jesus introduced the good Samaritan and then told the man, “You go, and do likewise” (Lk 10:37). The lawyer had asked a fair question; Jesus had given a fair answer; the lawyer himself was now responsible to deal with the answer.

The purpose of every parable is to change people. Not to please the mind but to pierce the heart and precipitate a spiritual crisis and a decision. Not to amuse them, not to instruct them, but to shock and then transform them.

Finally we should note that Jesus never weakened the effect of his parables with lengthy explanations. He never preached a sermon about a parable. The parable would do its own work without any further moralising.

A parable that I have taken to heart will be an event in my life. It will change my behaviour. Having diagnosed my illness, it will prescribe a medicine, marking my first step towards spiritual health. That is what a story can do when told by a skilful teacher filled with the Spirit of God.

## **A Skill To Be Learned**

We might wonder if each of the parables came to Jesus in a flash of inspiration. Or did he prepare them carefully in advance? Did he have a store of them ready for suitable occasions? We cannot be sure, but he probably used the same stories many times in various places. That is why they appear in slightly different form in each of the four Gospels.

Some stories certainly sprang from special circumstances. When Simon the Pharisee complained about a waste of perfume, Jesus spoke about the two debtors. When the Pharisees grumbled about his friendship with sinners, he told them about the lost sheep. When someone spoke about feasting in the kingdom of God, he spoke of a rich man preparing a banquet. When someone wanted help with an inheritance, he told about the rich fool.

Other stories, such as the good Samaritan, came in response to a specific question. But most of them could be used anywhere, in any situation. On many occasions it seems that he simply began to teach in parables. “Listen!” he said. “A sower went out to sow...” (Mk 4:3). “A householder planted a vineyard...” (Mk 12:1). “The kingdom of heaven is like...” (Matt 13:31).

Many of the parables were not complete stories. Some were quite short, no more than a single sentence, or a series of sentences all making the same point. So for example, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end” (Mk 3:24-26). We have the impression that Jesus had thought carefully about all these issues and accumulated a fund of stories that would illustrate all the teaching he wished to impart.

Winston Churchill is known as one of the greatest orators of all time. To those who heard him, his speeches seemed entirely spontaneous, but in fact they were all thought out in advance – written, memorised, practised in front of the mirror – with pauses for effect, certain words emphasized, gestures and posture all carefully planned. He worked hard at his craft, for he depended on it to influence his generation. Many of his best ideas came to him in the bath and from there he would call for his secretary to take dictation. Churchill, of course, was gifted with a creative mind and a love of words. But he became great at his chosen craft because he was disciplined. He prepared ahead of time and always carried with him a rich store of things to say. He simply waited for the right moment to say them. Churchill was not alone in this. Mark Twain said it usually took him three weeks to prepare a good spontaneous speech. Preparation is essential for anyone aspiring to be a good speaker.

Jesus reminds us, “Every scholar who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder, who brings out of his storeroom what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52). That is exactly what Jesus himself did. He was always listening, always observing the people around him, always sensitive to what they were doing and what they were thinking. He discovered the questions that needed answering, the misunderstandings that needed clearing up, the human weaknesses that needed identifying, and the choices that must be made. He created simple stories to clarify all these issues, and with these stories he changed people. There is no reason why we should not do the same. A gift for telling stories may be given in large measure to some, and in some measure to all. But like any talent entrusted to us, we must put it to good use and make it profitable. We must either use it or lose it (Matt 25:29). Paul says, “Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you” (2 Tim 1:6). Jesus simply says: “Learn from me!”

We have seen that a good parable will be true to life. It will clarify a single issue, shake complacency and demand a response. It does not need to be a long story. In fact, the shorter the better. But it needs to be told confidently. It needs to be told well. Once you have created your first few

parables, you will need to practise them on your own, then with someone else. Gradually you will become so familiar with your growing collection of parables that you will enjoy telling them at every opportunity, and people will be glad to hear you.

Now it is time to put our theories into practice. We will create some new parables for today. The first step, as we have seen, will be to identify a truth that needs to be taught. Then we will imagine some people in a scenario where that truth becomes central. The course of events in the story will challenge some assumptions and conclude with a crisis demanding a response. Our parables have been translated into English from an African language. They are told by a believer named Abdelmasih who is questioned and opposed by a group of Muslim men.

## A Growing Collection

### *The Parable of the Cook and the Stew*

One day as the men were talking about religious obligations and the requirements of Allah one of them said, **“Good deeds will cancel out bad deeds.”** So Abdelmasih replied with this parable: “Once there was a king who was a very religious man and never in his life ate pigmeat. He had a cook in his palace who prepared his meals every day. One day this cook made a stew for the king. He put some beef in the pot, and some lamb, and some pigmeat, then adding salt and vegetables he stirred it all together until it was well cooked. It gave off a wonderful aroma so the king was ready to eat with a good appetite.

“When the cook brought it in, the king said, ‘This is an excellent stew. What did you put in it?’ ‘A little beef,’ the cook replied, ‘a little lamb, and a little pigmeat.’ The king rose in anger. ‘You wretch!’ he shouted, ‘Did you suppose that the beef and lamb would purify the pigmeat? On the contrary, that pigmeat has corrupted the whole stew!’ Turning to his servants he commanded, ‘Tie up this pagan. Cut off his head and throw him in the dark pit along with his stew! He has brought corruption into my presence. Death is all he deserves!’

“That’s what will happen to anyone who stands before Allah bringing into his presence evil mixed with good. And what will Allah say to him then? He’ll say, ‘Throw this wretch into the Pit! He’s brought corruption into my presence! Hellfire is all he deserves!’ And I can tell you that good deeds will never remove evil deeds, because the evil deeds have corrupted the whole person. ‘For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it’ (Ja 2:10).”

### *The Parable of the Cigarette Smoke*

Another of the men then said, **“But if we repent, our sins will all be forgiven.”** Abdelmasih replied, “Once there was a man who smoked fifty cigarettes a day. His clothes and his hands and his body were full of cigarette smoke. One day when he got home, his wife complained to him about the stench. So he went and had a good wash in the public baths; he changed his clothes and he came back clean from the stink of cigarettes.

“But it wasn’t really that simple. On the outside he was fine, but what was he like inside? What about all the smoke that had gone inside him? The smoke that had fouled up his lungs: that’s what was killing him. And every man is in the same condition. He can wash his skin; he can wash his clothes; but inside he is still full of all kinds of evil. And how can it be made clean? ‘Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart (Ps 24:3-4).”

### *The Parable of the Unworthy Guests*

One of the men replied, **“But Allah is merciful, and he will forgive everyone who prays and fasts.”** Then Abdelmasih said, “Once there was a king who invited some men to eat supper with him in the palace. They entered into the king’s presence and bowed to the ground before him with the utmost reverence. They did not smoke or spit; they did not dare to ogle at the servant girls of the palace, nor did they allow a single coarse word to slip from their lips. These were clearly men of excellent character, and the king was delighted with them.

“However, he was a man of intelligence and he knew what people are like. So when his guests had gone, he sent his servants to ask their neighbours how these men acted in the market, and to enquire from their wives how they behaved at home. When the servants returned to the palace, they reported to the king, ‘Those men beat their wives; they cheat in the market; they quarrel with their neighbours. Each one fights for his own advantage – they are not worthy to be friends of yours.’ The king replied, “Let them never again be seen in my palace!”

“In the mosque, people bow to the Great King and do all they can to show how good they are. But when they come out of the mosque, that’s when the King tests them to see what they’re like. What do you think? Prayer and fasting that fail to make a man treat his family well, what use are they? And one who doesn’t deal honestly in the market, how can he satisfy Allah in the mosque? This is why there’s no longer any security in the world – because people no longer know how to please Allah through decent honest behaviour. Instead they try to please him by reciting words and skipping meals. ‘Woe to you... hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and

the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence' (Matt 23:25)".

#### *The Parable of the Selfish Man*

Then a young man spoke up and said, **"But we can wait till we're old before we start to worry about judgment."** Abdelmasih replied, "Once there was an old man who had a large house and many fields. All his life he'd bought and sold and accumulated wealth for himself. He thought about nothing except what would be to his own advantage. He had no time to consider the hardship faced by others; he turned a blind eye to any who were sick or in need. That's how he lived until he got old. Then he began to think about the hereafter. He said to himself, 'I'll do some good deeds to balance the Scales before I die.'

"So this old man went out and began to give to the disabled and the blind; he gave to the mosque and to the poor. What do you think will become of that old man in the Scales of Allah? He spent sixty years indulging himself for the present, and now he wants to spend one year providing for his future. Will he purchase a place in Heaven that lasts forever with the alms of one short year? What will Allah say to him on the Day of Judgment?

"He'll say, 'You foolish man! Did you think to get for yourself in the hereafter more than you got for yourself in the world? Hell is the place for you and for all who care only about themselves!' 'A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire' (Matt 7:18-19)".

#### *The Parable of the Bridges*

Someone said, **"But if we do what Allah requires he will accept us into Paradise."** Abdelmasih replied, "Every year people make wooden bridges across the river and every year the flood carries them away. Wooden bridges are fine for a while, but when the rains come they collapse.

"The things we do and make are like that. What we do and make is fine for a while but eventually it collapses. Someone may do his ritual washing and say his prayers and keep the fast and do all that religion requires in order to draw close to Allah. The things he does may be fine for a while, but he never knows if they'll endure to eternity or not. People are all in need of a bridge to cross over from this world to the next but they're always in doubt whether a bridge made of things they do will take them to the other side. They're afraid they'll just get carried off in the flood that comes with death... because the bridges they build always fall down!

"We need a firm high bridge, one that will carry us from this world to the next without doubt or fear. There is someone who is a firm bridge. No one

on this Bridge will slip or fall into the Abyss. He'll get us safely to the other side, because he himself said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one will enter the presence Allah unless I take him there myself' (see Jn 14:6)."

#### *The Parable of the Minstrel*

A man said, **"But we do not need a mediator between us and Allah."** So Abdelmasih told this parable, "A musician arrived one day at the gates of the king's palace, asking to play for the king. The door-keeper cursed him and sent him away saying, 'We've got plenty of musicians.'" He went sadly and sat in the forest. As he began to play a sad song to himself, the prince, the king's son, came riding by and stopped to listen. The prince was so delighted with the song he asked the musician to join his companions and follow him. When they reached the palace the gates were opened and they all went in. The musician had his wish and played for the king, because he had become a friend of the prince. 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5)."

#### *The Parable of the Broken Window*

A man said, **"But no one else can redeem us. We must each bear our own sins."** Abdelmasih replied, "Once there was a village magistrate (*qadi*), a good man who always kept his word and judged justly and wisely. One day a boy went out hunting birds with a catapult. He shot a pebble which shattered the window of the magistrate's house. They seized him and brought him before the magistrate.

Trembling with fear, the boy fell to the ground saying, 'O Sir, may Allah lengthen your life!' The magistrate told him to be quiet, then asked, 'Was it you who broke this window?' 'O Sir,' he replied, 'I didn't mean to – the wind just carried the stone!' 'Whoever breaks a window,' declared the magistrate, 'must fix it!' 'Oh please forgive me,' begged the boy, 'I'm very sorry for what I've done!' 'How are you going to fix it?' asked the magistrate. 'I won't ever break another one,' replied the boy. 'How are you going to fix it?' insisted the magistrate. 'O Sir, I'll do a good deed. I'll go and give two loaves of bread to those blind men at the door of your house.' 'Do you think that food for beggars will mend the window? Come on now, how are you going to fix it?' 'O Sir, I don't know,' said the boy, 'No one can mend a pane of glass once it's got broken.' 'You'll pay for a new pane,' replied the magistrate. 'But Sir,' said the boy, 'I haven't got any money to buy a pane of glass.'

"He bowed then to the ground saying, 'O Great Magistrate! O Great Magistrate!' 'That's not how to pay for the window,' said the magistrate.

The boy continued, ‘O Magistrate, great is your mercy! O Magistrate, great is your mercy! Just forgive me this one time.’ ‘No,’ insisted the magistrate ‘You must fix what you’ve broken.’ The boy bowed his head: he didn’t know what to do. He had no money to pay for the glass he’d broken. He just stood there in silence.

“Then the magistrate asked him, ‘Have you parents or brothers with money who can come and free you from this debt?’ ‘I’ve got an uncle,’ he replied, ‘but I don’t know if he’d come.’ His uncle was sent for. When he arrived, he took two silver coins from the pouch of his robe and gave them to the magistrate. Then the magistrate said to the boy, ‘Go in peace, son! Your uncle has paid for you!’

“Did you understand this parable? The magistrate is like Allah, and the boy is like me. The window that got broken represents the bad things I’ve done and the good things I’ve not done. But as for the boy’s uncle, who is he? The one who paid our debt – we call him our Saviour. Because really we’re all like that boy: we haven’t enough to settle up what we owe. So Allah sent one who was able to settle up for us. He came to pay for you and me, and each one of us, to save us from our doom. And on the Day of Judgment the Great Magistrate will say to us, ‘Go in peace, son! Your Saviour has paid for you!’ He is ‘our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed’ (Tit 2:13-14).”

#### *The Parable of the Banknote*

Someone then said, “**The Injil is useless, and so is the Tawrat. Only the Qur’an is perfect.**” “We all know,” said Abdelmasih, “that anyone who has bought a Peugeot will say a Renault is no good.” The man insisted, “**But the Bible has been corrupted.**” Abdelmasih replied, “Once there was a youth with a bank note worth 20 dirhams. He took a pen and wrote 50 dirhams across the note and gave it to the shopkeeper for a large bottle of gas (Butagas) worth 50 dirhams. The shopkeeper laughed in his face. For the rest of his life the youth went from town to town writing 50 dirhams on all the 20 dirham notes he could find all over the country. But not one of them bought him a bottle of gas. What is written is written for ever, and no one can change it. Corruption may be found in some Christians who do not follow the Injil, but the Injil itself can never be changed.”

#### *The Parable of the Car Papers*

A taxi-driver said, “**But you don’t need the Tawrat or Zabur or Injil. Everything you need to know is written in the Qur’an.**” Abdelmasih replied, “Once there was a man who went and bought a tax disc (vignette)

for his car. He said to himself, ‘Now I’m okay. When the next Gendarme stops me, I’ll tell him: You don’t need to see my insurance certificate, or my safety test certificate (visite technique), or the ownership document (carte grise). All you need to know is written in the tax disc.’”

#### *The Parable of the Wind and Rain*

The men said to him, “**But Mohammed is the seal of the prophets and the greatest of them all.**” Abdelmasih looked round at them and replied, “See how a strong wind blows, uprooting all the dry grass from the surface of the earth. The words of the prophets are like a strong wind, sweeping away the primitive ignorance of mankind and showing us what is right and wrong. We thank Allah for them all. But the earth needs more than wind to uproot the dry grass. The earth needs rain for new grass to grow. We need more than commands to sweep away the old evils of this unhappy world. We need blessing from heaven to give us new life. Masih came down to fill us with his Spirit, so his goodness will grow within us and guide us in all we do. Each of us can have this wonderful blessing from heaven. Allah has sent the true rain that gives life to a thirsty heart.”

#### *The Parable of the Three Dossiers*

Finally they asked him, “**Why do you put your trust in Masih alone, rather than all the prophets?**” Abdelmasih smiled at them and said, “Each of us has three dossiers (Arabic *milfat*), and in each dossier there is a problem. There is a problem between me and Allah (sin and judgement), a problem between me and other people (conflict and injustice), a problem between me and myself (illness and death).

These three dossiers are open. Every day something is added to them. And because of these three dossiers, we live in constant doubt. We have no confidence in our relations with Allah, or with people, or with ourselves. We have no confidence that the dossiers we prepare will be accepted by the highest authority. All our lives, we hang somewhere between fear and hope. We long for security and peace in this age and the next. We hope and we fear. We are never sure.

Masih came into this world. He saw the problem that we have with *ourselves*, the issue of illness and death. He went everywhere healing people. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and he straightened crooked limbs. He even raised the dead. He showed us *he can deal with that dossier* – he alone.

Masih saw the problem we have with other people, the issue of conflict and injustice. He showed us how to do good to our enemies. He taught us never to take an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth. He never picked up a

sword, never seized anyone's land, or wealth or wife, and when they nailed him to a wooden pole he said, "O Allah forgive them – they don't know what they're doing." Then he put his Spirit in us to make us like him. Among his followers there is security and peace. He has shown us *he can deal with that dossier* – he alone.

He saw the problem we have with Allah. This is the difficult one – the issue of sin, guilt and judgment. How can any man complete a dossier that concerns Allah? We have all done evil and failed to do good. But Masih himself carried the weight of our sin. He bore in his body the judgment of Allah on the sin of the world. He paid the account; he wiped the slate clean. He submitted to Allah more than any man, to the point of death. Then Allah raised him up, victorious. Masih showed that *he can deal with that dossier* – he alone.

Masih has shown us he is able to complete the dossiers and satisfy the highest authority. Soon he is coming back. And when he does, he will close those three dossiers and burn them. There will no longer be an issue between me and Allah, an issue between me and other people, an issue between me and myself. The old earth will be burned up with all its wicked deeds. When he comes, there will be a new heaven and earth, a place of security and peace.

Who has done this for us? Masih our Saviour. Who will live there? Those who believe in him... those whose names are written in his book of life. That's why we put all our trust in him."

## A Creative Opportunity

The parables outlined above took shape during many conversations with many men. Working among women, or with children, you may need a different set of stories.

There could be other important questions or misunderstandings that need addressing in your own gospel outreach. Try creating your own parables to deal with them. Make sure that your story is true to life, clarifies a single issue, shakes complacency, and demands a response.

In a Muslim context, for example, the following assertions could be answered with a story.

1. As I was born a Muslim I can never be anything else.
2. It is more important to please Allah with religious duties than to please people with good behaviour.
3. No one can be sure of going to heaven or hell.
4. In a Muslim country it is safer to follow the majority.

5. Allah can condemn anyone and forgive anyone.
6. If I could move to Europe I would become a Christian.

Or in a different cultural context, a story might answer the following objections:

1. If I can't see it I won't believe it.
2. Science will find a way to solve all our problems.
3. I'm okay because I do believe in God.
4. We're only human so God won't expect too much of us.
5. All religions are basically the same.
6. It's better to die than remain old and sick.

"All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable" (Matt 13:34).

Some of these stories first appeared in a modern folk-tale called *The Quest of Amsiggel*, now accessible in several languages at [www.amsiggel.com](http://www.amsiggel.com).

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