

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Short Stories by Jesus

by

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INTRODUCTION:

HOW WE DOMESTICATE JESUS'S PROVOCATIVE STORIES

1. What has been your experience of reading Jesus's parables? How were you taught to read them and apply their lessons to your life? What do you hope to gain by reading this book?
2. Amy-Jill Levine writes that "what makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives" (p. 3). She argues that we are more comfortable accepting a creed and a universal moral truth than inviting multiple interpretations and conversation. What is your reaction to this statement? If you agree,

why do you think this is true of human nature? When we limit a teaching to a platitude, what do we miss?

LOST SHEEP, LOST COIN, LOST SON

1. Levine writes, “Both Matthew and Luke have provided our parables with a context, and in so doing they have begun the process of interpretation” (p. 34). How does the audience influence the readings? Would you understand these stories differently if you were rich or poor? A woman or a man? A slave or a free person? A Jew or a Gentile? By reading the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son anew and considering what they may have meant to a first-century audience, what insights did you gain?
2. In the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, the main character “loses” something of value. Since God does not “lose” us, why is the idea that the sheep owner is God so compelling to so many readers? Why in turn do many of these same readers resist the idea that the woman is also God? What message do you get if you conclude that the man and the woman are just our neighbors and not images of the divine?
3. Do these parables focus more on repenting and forgiving, as the Gospel writer suggests, or on personal responsibility for counting everyone and not discounting anyone, as Levine suggests? What do you make of the comparison of the first two parables to the third, given that (a) sheep and coins do not repent and (b) in

the first two parables, the hundred and then the ten are restored before the celebration begins, but in the third, one son out of two is still missing when the party starts?

4. How do these stories remind you of narratives in the Old Testament?

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

1. Levine challenges the stereotype of what the “Good Samaritan” means in our day. “To Jesus’s Jewish audience as well as to Luke’s readers, the idea of a ‘good Samaritan’ would make no more sense than the idea of a ‘good rapist’ or a ‘good murderer’” (p. 96). She later shares a necessary lesson: “Those who want to kill you may be the only ones who will save you” (p. 103). Is this lesson an example of mercy, justice, or compassion? What examples from history or current events resonate with Levine’s statement?
2. How do you feel encouraged to “do good” for your neighbor and even your enemies? What are some ways this can be a continual action rather than a one-time event?

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE YEAST

1. Do you agree with Levine’s assessment that the purpose of this parable was *not* to convey that God’s kingdom

was a kingdom of the “unclean,” with the idea that ritual purity is a bad thing? If so, what was the purpose of Jesus? Does it relate to the multiple images in the Gospels of “bread”?

2. Jesus often used images of women in his parables. Do you think a parable about a woman conveys a different message than one about a man? What do the parables tell us about women’s lives in the first century? How do these stories about women relate to earlier Bible stories about women (e.g., Ruth, Esther, Judith)?
3. Some translations say the leaven was “mixed,” while others say the leaven was “hid,” which drastically changes the meaning of the parable. Levine also suggests, “What is hidden must be made manifest” (p. 120) or be brought into the light. When has something that was hidden in your life been brought into the light? How did you feel after it was brought out of darkness?

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

1. Why do you think Jesus would teach with possible negative connotations (merchant, yeast, leaven)? Was it an effort to attract attention or some other communication technique?
2. Levine writes that the merchant “has not only fulfilled a desire he did not know he had, he has also changed his identity” (p. 138). When in your life have you pursued a dream and found that the outcome was different

than expected? When have you acted contrary to your character? Do you see yourself in this parable?

3. Levine believes that the merchant raises questions about our desire to seek continually for something more. Think about a time when you acquired something you wanted. Did the nagging for something else subside? What are you seeking now? What is your pearl? Are you “willing to step aside from all [you] have to obtain what [you] want” (p. 147)?

THE MUSTARD SEED

1. Reflect on the significance of the seed in this parable, and consider that “even small actions, or hidden actions, have the potential to produce great things” (p. 166). What other examples in history have had this effect—either good or bad? What about in your own life?
2. Here Jesus again focuses a parable on the kingdom of God. Levine believes that “the kingdom is present when humanity and nature work together” (p. 167). When have you caught glimpses of this interplay? If you haven’t seen this, what might it look like?

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

1. Regarding the Pharisee, Levine states that “the problem with his prayer is not in his personal religiosity; it is in his negatively judging someone else” (p. 173). When do

you most often fall prey to negatively judging others?
What could help break that habit?

2. Levine suggests the possibility that the final verse of this parable was later attached by Luke to control the meaning of the story (p. 191). If Jesus didn't end the parable with this explanation (Luke 18:14), how would it alter the meaning?
3. Luke also presents a depiction of a "good tax collector" and a "bad Pharisee" in his Gospel, although that is not how first-century Jews would have understood those roles. Reread this parable from the perspective of a first-century Jew, who would regard Pharisees as righteous and caring and tax collectors as agents of the occupation government. What stands out? What new insights do you gain?
4. Levine notes how we can become trapped by this parable when we judge one as better than the other (either the Pharisee or the tax collector). When do you find yourself trapped in the judgment seat? How is your sense of justice limited? How can it be stretched to be more generous?

THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

1. Levine steers readers to consider a different message for this parable, focusing more on the marketplace and love of neighbor over a message of salvation. Do you agree? What insights do you come away with when viewing the parable through this different lens? How

does it change the meaning of the parable? If this parable is about “who gets into heaven,” how would that message prompt complacency, as Levine suggests?

2. The workers express their frustration with the householder and judge him according to what they believe to be fair. “The householder teaches them a lesson by showing them what is ‘right’” (p. 213). What is the difference between being “fair” and “right”? How has this played out in your life?

THE WIDOW AND THE JUDGE

1. Prior to reading this chapter, how would you have characterized a “widow” or “judge”? Did your description fall into a general stereotype? Levine writes that once we stereotype, we lose the challenge of this parable. How did this chapter help you challenge your stereotypes?
2. For Luke, and for many biblical commentators, this parable is about persistent prayer. But Levine writes that this tidy interpretation is an allegory and “hardly an appropriate theology of prayer” (p. 236). What is a better theology of prayer?

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

1. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus suggests that those who suffer in this world will be comforted in the next. Do you believe that those who suffer injustice or

poverty today will receive recompense in the afterlife? Do you believe that those who cause the suffering—either directly or by failing to stop it—will be punished in the next world?

2. To whom do you feel more sympathetic: the rich man or Lazarus? Are you indifferent toward either? Do your views change once you have the picture of them in the afterlife? What is your notion of justice? Does it include eternal torture?
3. Levine highlights the significance of how the parable identifies Lazarus's name. Because of this, we are forced to notice him. Do you know any homeless people by name? If so, how has that changed or softened your heart toward them? If not, where are some homeless people you can reach out to this week? As Levine challenges, "Know the names of the destitute; each has a story to tell" (p. 272).

THE POWER OF DISTURBING STORIES

1. Will you read parables differently after reading this book? How do the parables continue to provoke, challenge, and inspire you?