

Parables Session 4

Introductory Comments

1. The Parable of the Empty Jar (also known as the Parable of the Woman With a Jar), is a parable attributed to Jesus. However, it only appears in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas (not in any of the Synoptic Gospels). The scholars of the Jesus Seminar gave the Parable of the Empty Jar a "pink" rating, indicating that it is in their opinion probably, but not certainly, an authentic saying of Jesus.
2. While a majority of scholars agree that this parable reflects the teachings of Jesus, there is disagreement as to its meaning. Part of the challenge is that, since the Gospel of Thomas was only discovered in 1945 (as part of the find near Nag Hammadi), and since there is no synoptic corollary, there is no tradition of interpretation to lean on. So, what do we make of this parable? Is it a negative example of loss, of not paying attention to the arrival of the Kingdom of God? Is it a positive insight into the fact that the Kingdom is dispersed in imperceptible ways and not according to our expectation?
3. As we have seen with the first two parables we looked at, it can be helpful to view them in relation to the parables that appear next to them. In this case, the Empty Jar is immediately preceded by the parable of the leaven. Indeed, some have pointed out that these two parables share a similar structure. The Empty Jar has a surprising and provocative ending: the woman comes home with an empty, rather than a full, jar. A full jar would be the expected metaphor for God's imperial rule, so this ending is startling. But what does it mean? In many ways, this parable is a perfect opportunity to ask participants: "Well, what do you think?"

Questions

Read Thomas 97

1. **Some scholars, like Brandon Scott of the Jesus Seminar, interpret this parable quite negatively. What are some potentially negative elements of this parable?** The jar is leaking meal; the woman doesn't perceive it until it's too late; the focus seems to be on the loss of this meal; the jar is broken and empty by the time she gets home; she may have no meal to feed her family. **Some scholars have viewed this parable in a more neutral or even positive light. How might this parable be viewed neutrally or even positively?** There is no evaluation of pouring meal or the empty jar – the parable simply reports that both of these things happen; there is no judgement of the woman – she is simply reported as being unaware of the leaking jar; because the parable provides no evaluation or judgement, it is appropriate to view the parable as happening exactly as it should – this picture is indeed what God's kingdom looks like. And if that's so, God's Kingdom IS a good thing. Our task is to figure out *how* this parable communicates it... **What unanswered questions do you have by the end of this parable?** How was she carrying the jar if the handle broke and she didn't notice it? How could she not feel the weight lighten as the meal seeped out? What did she do next?
2. **Scott points out some connection in details between this parable and the story of Elijah's miracle for the widow of Zarephath (read 1 Kings 17:8-16). What points of connection do you see?** There is a woman (widow) and some meal; there is an apparent focus on lack or loss (the widow lacks the meal to make enough to support herself and her son, let alone Elijah, and is resigned to death; the woman loses the meal

as she walks, but doesn't realize it until she is home, apparently now with nothing to bake with). **What are points of disconnection?** In the Hebrew story, the widow is helped by a prophet who aids her. In the Thomas version, no one shows up to rectify the situation.

3. **Is the woman in the Empty Jar parable presented as being abandoned or without help?** The fact that no one shows up to replenish or help her (as Elijah does in the Widow of Zarephath story) does not mean that she is abandoned. Once again, the parable simply states that the jar is empty.
4. **As previously noted, this parable follows immediately after the Parable of the Leaven in Thomas. Taken together, what might these two parables be saying about the Kingdom of God?** They both convey a sense that there's something imperceptible about the coming of the Kingdom of God – it's beyond our view, or easy to miss. There's also an element that the Kingdom of God happens outside of us – it's not all about us or our actions or expectations. Just as the leaven does its secret work inside the flour, the spilled meal and empty jar may represent another secret, unexpected aspect of God's kingdom.
5. **There are several scholarly interpretations of this parable, and no definitively correct one. Before going into some of those – what meaning do you make from the parable?**
6. **Some proposed interpretations are as follows:** A) Some scholars (A. Hultgren, Jr.) think it may be a warning against letting the "Kingdom", which according to Thomas 3 is "inside of you and outside of you," slip away like the lost flour. B) Others claim it's a simple warning against self-confidence (G. Bromiley). C) Brandon Scott says that "the presence of the empty jar represents the paradox of divine emptiness – the Kingdom of God is something which cannot be pointed to, yet it is somehow still present. It is spread upon the earth but is unseen. There is divine intervention in God's Kingdom, but it cannot be observed." D) Others posit that the emptiness of the jar may represent an empty life: "People who live their lives in the world ... carry jars they think are full, but discover, even after much activity, that they are empty" (R. Valantasis). And taking D) further is E), summed up by Christian Amundsen: "Like people who are unaware that they are leaking the stuff of their being, they walk along a road mindless until they find themselves empty... Our lives, Jesus is saying, are lived by accident. We become 'broken jars,' with nothing inside. This story, like any good parable, leads to a question. What does the woman do when she finds her jar broken and empty? This is where the true drama unfolds, and so we are left to fill in the blank. The meal that was contained in the jar is the important thing. Perhaps the spirit cannot escape its bondage until the jar is broken, until all our avenues of material reality are discovered to be simply a 'broken jar'."

****For next session, read Matthew 13:44-46, the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price.*