

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## SANCTIONS AND PARABLES

Parables are a kind of **Divine** riddle. **They** are used to sanction, which was nothing new to the ancient world. Whether the riddle of the Sphinx or the riddles of Ulysses, they customarily performed the useful purpose of rendering a judgment.

This is all well and good for the secular world, but are parables used to sanction in the Bible? Consider an event in the life of Samson. The powerful Judge of Israel saw a Philistine woman whom he wanted to be his wife. The relationship was trouble from the start but he probably reasoned that he could convert her, so that he could live in marriage without violating Torah. They were married, but at the prolonged wedding feast a parable was told that served as a means of contest and sanction, an ancient practice.

Then his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for the young men customarily did this. And it came about when they saw him that they brought thirty companions to be with him. Then Samson said to them, "Let me now propound a riddle to you; if you will indeed tell it to me with the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes. But if you are unable to tell me, then you shall give me thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes." And they said to him, "propound your riddle, that we may hear it." So he said to them,

Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet.

But they could not tell the riddle in three days. Then it came about on the fourth day that they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us to impoverish us? Is this not so?" And Samson's wife wept before him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me; you have propounded a riddle to the sons of my people, and have not told it to me." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told it to my father or mother; so should I tell you?" However she wept before him seven days while their feast lasted. And it came about on the seventh day that he told her because she pressed him so hard. She then told the riddle to the sons of her people. So the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, "What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, and he went down to **Ashkelon** and killed **thirty** of them and took their spoil, and gave the changes of clothes to those who told the riddle. And his **anger burned** and he **went up to his father's house**

But Samson's wife was given to his companion who had been his friend. Judges-I 4:10-20.

### Combat by Riddle

The role of the riddle **was** to sanction. Samson perhaps did not intend this purpose. Some might say that he wanted only to play a friendly game. I rather suspect that he was once again trying to defeat the Philistine. We should remember that the man of God first and foremost competes with mind not might, wisdom not warfare. Such was the purpose of Samson's combat by riddle. The **parable** was simply another aspect of holy war.

The effect of this pugilism by parable was sanction. Samson had intended to remove the valuable garments of the **Philistines** by his ability to stump them with the riddle. He failed because of the unfaithfulness of his wife. Her tactic was a reverse application of the covenant. She appealed to his covenant loyalty to her: "If you love me then you will tell me the answer." She preyed on his commitment to the covenant of God. She got what she wanted. He honored the covenant and she did not. She became the Eve-like instrument by which he fell. The answer to the riddle sanctioned him, however, not the intended **Philistine**. Nevertheless, the role of the parable was to sanction, which repeats itself time and again throughout Scripture and reaches its high point in Christ. He uses the parables to sanction both ways.

I have previously established Jesus' direct use of sanctions language in reference to the purpose of parables; they are to bless. Since they are to bless, they are a means of sanctioning. This form of revelation is therefore circumscribed by the sanctions of the Old Testament, particularly in Deuteronomy 27-28. In the following study, I hope to show the value in this observation by actually interpreting some of the parables. I should hasten to add that sanctions are not the **only** factor of interpretation. Nor are the sanctions of the covenant only mentioned in Deuteronomy 27-28; other Old Testament passages unfold diverse nuances of the sanctions. In my opinion, nevertheless, the sanctions of the covenant are the most important factor in the interpretation of the parables. **Without** them, the specific context of Israel is lost on any number of bizarre **extra-biblical** grids foisted on the Bible. A brief introduction to the sanctions features some of the parables proves the point.

### The Parable of the Good Samaritan

And Jesus answering said, A certain [man] went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among **thieves**, which stripped him of his **raiment**, and wounded [him], and departed, leaving [him] half dead. 31 And **by** chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him he passed by on the other side 32

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked [on him], and passed by on the other side. 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion [on him], 34 And went to [him], and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave [them] to the host, and said unto him, "Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee" (Luke 10:30-35).

The issue is, "Who is a person's neighbor?" It is a question asked by a lawyer, just as we might expect. Christ gives the barrister more than he bargains for. He defines the neighbor in such a way to reveal the need for salvation.

On the face of it, this parable is about a man who is beaten and left to die. No one is willing to save his life, not even the religious leaders of Israel, except one Good Samaritan. If we probe deeper and keep the larger context of the Old Testament in mind, particularly the sanctions, we can begin to see the intent of our Lord's parable.

The sanctions of the covenant of Deuteronomy had specified that Israel would be deprived of its possessions should covenant-breaking occur. With this covenant sanction background in mind, the parable says,

And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind **gropeth** in darkness, and thou shalt not prosper in thy ways: and thou shalt be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man shall save thee (Deuteronomy 28:29).

The curse of Deuteronomy was that Israel would be robbed. They would be left destitute, and they would reach a point where no one would come to save them. They, like the man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, would be beaten, robbed and left to die. As Moses goes on to describe,

So that the man that is tender among you, and very delicate, his eye shall be evil toward **his brother** (28:54).

The priest and Levite who passed by the man in need were Israelites. They were not strangers in the land. They were fellow-citizens. This too is the curse. In other words, Israel's failure to love its own was a sign of curse, which brings us to the point of Jesus' parable.

Christ was indicting this lawyer by the parable. If the lawyer had to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" he was already displaying a mark of the curse; he was playing sophistic games to avoid the force of Jesus' words. Jesus powerfully answers the lawyer's evasive question with a convicting story; it kind of reminds one of Nathan the prophet when he tells David a story to convict him of sin. Our Lord tells the lawyer that by even asking such a silly question he has already admitted that he is under the curses of the covenant. The lawyer is neglecting and abusing his neighbor by casuistry. While he waits for a clear definition of his neighbor, people suffer and die. Christ in effect says to the lawyer, "By evading the thrust of loving your neighbor by asking, 'Who is my neighbor', you have become like the calloused religious leaders."

Christ also points out the lawyer's need of salvation, when he speaks of the Samaritan as the means of delivering the hurt individual. The point seems to be that only someone from outside the land, not natural to it, was willing to help the Israelite. Who else would better fulfill this than Jesus Himself. The Lord was not completely native; He is the **God/Man**. He comes from eternity to become humanity. In a sense, He is like the Samaritan. Elsewhere

in the text, He is even called a Samaritan (John 8:48). To the lawyer, therefore, He is saying, "You need me, because the religious leaders of your land are not even able to save you, let alone even attempt to help." Christ was declaring the Gospel to him.

The parable indicted the priesthood of Israel, for the man in the story is left to die by the religious leadership. What does this have to say for their understanding and lack of application of the law? The priesthood had become cursed, as Moses said, "The man that is tender among you, and very delicate, his eye shall be evil toward his brother" (Deuteronomy 28:54). These priests, who neglected their neighborly duties, had gone from tender to evil. They were no longer loving toward their neighbor. They were under the curse because they had broken the covenant.

Moses says something else in Deuteronomy that sheds additional light on the parable. He says,

The stranger that is within thee shall get up above thee very high; and thou shalt come down very low. He shall lend to thee, and thou shalt not lend to him: he shall be the head, and thou shalt be the tail (Deuteronomy 28:43-45).

In an interesting way, Jesus' parable describes the partial fulfillment of this Mosaic curse. Notice who comes to the aid of the hurt man, a Samaritan. The Samaritans were half-breeds who were always considered aliens. In the parable, the Samaritan even serves the injured **traveller** and lends to him by taking him to an inn and paying for him to stay there for a few days of convalescence.

Finally, the parable raised the conviction level for the Jews themselves. It conveyed that the curse was on them. Perhaps the lawyer as a Jew personifies Israel. Beyond this, however, Christ was talking about the state of the land through the people in the parable. On the one hand, the lay people of Israel had become like the victim on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. They had been left to die by the violence of the land. They were ignored by the priests and Levites. They were not served by the servants. No one was left to save them, except someone from outside, the Good Samaritan. Thus, the parable is about their own destitute state, a condition of being cursed.

On the other hand, the Israelites are a reflection of the priests and the Levites, who are like the lawyer. They had abandoned the law and they had lost love for their neighbor. They no longer cared for the poor and the needy, as indicated by many other passages of the Gospels. The poor were left to die on the streets of Israel. They could not look to the priests and the servants for help. This was the condition of Israel.

The sanctions of the covenant provide a background by which to begin to understand the correct interpretation of the parable. They surface in a significant way. They reveal the immediate application to the lawyer and to Israel itself. Most importantly, they keep the proper context before the interpreter, one that leads ultimately to the redemptive work of Christ.

### The Parable of the Rich Fool

And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. 14 And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? 15 And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life **consisteth** not in the abundance of the things which he **possesseth**. 16 And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: 17 And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I **have no room** where to be-

stow my fruits? 18 And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take **thine** ease, eat, drink, [and] be merry. 20 But God said unto him, **[Thou]** fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou **hast** provided? 21 So **[is]** he that **layeth** up treasure for himself, and is not **rich** toward God (Luke 12:13-21).

The Mosaic sanctions apply to this parable at a couple of points. Moses says, "The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish **quickly**, on account of your evil deeds, because you have forsaken Me" (Deuteronomy 28:20). There is an obvious sanction message in the parable. The rich fool suddenly loses his inheritance, a curse of the covenant, when he thought that his inheritance was secure. He apparently gave no thought to God nor was he concerned to tithe. He died suddenly and could not enjoy the fruits of his labor.

Another Mosaic curse is referenced when Moses says, "You shall build a house, but you shall not live in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not use its fruit" (Deuteronomy 28:30). The parable of the Rich Fool again proves to be obviously related to the Mosaic curses. This man built things expecting to live in and possess them for his own comfort. He did not expect to see them taken away. Perhaps he thought that he could never lose them. He was wrong. He made a world that would never be his.

And so the Jews had done the same. They thought that their inheritance would go on forever. Their land would always belong to them. Their houses and possessions would automatically revert to the original owners according to the cancellation of debt cycle and Jubilee Year. Not so. A time would come when they would be disinherited just as Moses had promised hundreds of years prior to Christ. They were sanctioned then and they were sanctioned through Christ's parable.

### The Parable of the Great Banquet

And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed [is] he that shall eat bread the kingdom of God. 16 Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: 17 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. 18 And they all with one [consent] began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must **needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused**. 19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. 20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. 21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. 22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. 23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel [them] to come in, that my house may be filled (Luke 14:15-23).

This parable is a meal scene, so prominent in the Gospel of Luke. The gospel writer is fond of banquets and parties. He records more meal scenes for us than any of the other writers. Whether a party at someone's house, a feast in Israel, or a parable about banquets (Prodigal son etc.), Luke presents Christ as providing the ultimate sacrifice. The Gospel writer wants to contribute to a larger

priestly theme. He presents Jesus as the true Priest of God.

Priests largely concerned themselves with food either for God or for man. They prepared food for God through the sacrifices. For an offering to be made to God, they had to receive, kill, present, and in some cases, eat the sacrifice. In one sense, they spent their entire life dealing with sacrificial food. But they did not simply feed God. They appeased the Lord's wrath through the sacrifices so that man could have a meal (communion) with God, the peace offering. When they offered the peace offering, they actually sat down with the offerer and his family to eat the sacrifice.

The priests taught the basic lesson that man eats when God is fed, or satisfied. They communicated this message by serving God that man might be served. They sacrificed that man might eat. They made it possible for man to come to God's table. They were even responsible for distributing benevolence of food to the poor. Once again the message seemed to be that man eats when God is satisfied.

This message appears many times in Luke's Gospel. The book begins when the sacrifice of **Zacharias** is interrupted to reveal the birth of the forerunner, John. It ends when the road to Emmaus culminates in an enlightening meal with Christ, where the participants literally do not recognize Christ until they eat with Him. In between the halted sacrifice and the finished meal, the Gospel of Luke virtually moves from meal to meal. Luke wants us to see the message of halted sacrifices upon the advent of the revelation of one to come. And then, he leads us to discover that once the revelation has come, Christ goes to feed the people, to act as a priest. Theologically in the book, Luke reveals Christ as the one who will feed the people of God. Why? The Lord goes to their houses and parties for a meal that they might come to His banquet. He goes to them that they might come to Him, which brings us to the Parable of the Great Banquet.

### Sanctions Themes

As in so many of the other parables, sanctions themes appear. They confront us at the beginning when Christ says, "Blessed [is] he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many." Our Lord uses the word, "blessing," to describe a meal in the kingdom. When He does, He draws on ancient Biblical language. The blessing in its broadest sense was the promise of the coming Seed of Genesis. In a narrower application, it was the outworking of this promise in the promises of the covenant such as: "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl" (Deuteronomy 28:5). This is a picture of grace. God's promise brings about a full basket of bread, food. God graces because of His grace covenant of promise. Of course, all one must do is receive and live by the promise.

The system of promise in the Old Covenant connected the big promise with other specifications. Israel was never to think that they could have anything without God's promised Seed. Yet, when they were faithful to God, they **saw** the outworking of life under the promise. They received the blessings of Deuteronomy 28 and in particular they literally were promised a full table of food. They were sanctioned positively.

How does this have its fulfillment in Christ? The parable explains. The point seems to be that through Christ the people of Israel get to come to the banquet. They refuse and so others are invited. In effect, they fulfilled negatively what Moses had promised. They do not receive food (the full basket). They are cursed because of their unwillingness to come.

The people in the parable **give** excuses for not coming,

which makes another important connection with Deuteronomy. In the Old Testament, a person was allowed several legitimate excuses for not going to war. They are recorded in the following:

When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord **your God who brought you up from the land** of Egypt is with **you**. . . . The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, "**Who** is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, lest he die **in the battle and another man dedicate it. And who is the man that** has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and **return** to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man begin to use its fruit. And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her." Then the officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say, "**Who** is the man that is afraid and **fainthearted**? Let him depart and return to his **house, so that he might not make his brothers' hearts melt like his heart.**" (Deuteronomy 20:1-8).

God granted legitimate excuses for not going to war. He **allowed** the religious dedication of a building. He did not **want** another person to **dedicate** a person's house. He desired for the warrior to dedicate his own home. God gave the warrior an opportunity to dedicate himself and his possessions with this stipulation.

God **also** permitted the use of ripened fruit. He prevented its spoiling. Fruit was a gracious provision of God. He did not want His own grace to be spoiled.

God gave a married couple time to consummate and solidify their marriage to establish firmly the new covenant.

Finally, God allowed the weak warrior a leave to prevent morale problems.

**These** legitimate excuses were blessings. God provided **all of these covenantal** avenues for protecting and **preserving** aspects of the covenant relationship. Whether the consecration of possessions, the conservation of fruit, the consummation of marriage, or the consideration of **personal** problems, God prevented some sort of **covenantal** breakdown.

When we turn to the Parable of the Great Banquet, the same kinds of excuses show up. They are similar, although they are not one for one at every point. The issue, however, is that excuses for avoiding war were given to escape a banquet, specifically bread. What is the difference?

War has to do with the curse and coming under judgment, even though it was allowed under certain just circumstances. Nevertheless, it was clearly the result of sin on someone's (nation) part. It at least risked and even took human life, guilty and innocent. It was usually provoked by sin or a broken covenant of some sort. It required the nation of Israel to be numbered, a judgment process whereby a war price was **payed**. After the conflict, it necessitated the offering of sacrifices. War is certainly **part** of the curse on man. Thus, to be allowed to avoid it was a blessing.

A banquet concerns blessing (Deuteronomy 28), especially the one in the parable. People **basically** receive something without having to pay for it, grace. They are invited by the host. They have a meal prepared for them. They have the meal paid for by the **host**. They receive personal invitations. A banquet is grace.

The indictment of the parable for the Jews is that they are like the people who use war excuses for a banquet. They cannot tell curse from blessing. Moreover, they construe a blessing to be a curse. They avoid the blessing and are therefore excluded.

Thus, the parable of the Great Banquet is about proper excuses for the wrong event. It was perfectly acceptable to use excuses. It was allowed even to use those particular excuses; God provided for them. But, it was not acceptable to use these particular excuses for avoiding the grace of God. Such an action is an **aff** rent to God. Such rejection is **a** denial of grace. Such behavior loses blessing and results in cursing, the negative sanction.

In conclusion, the parables are forms of sanctions, or judgments. To be addressed in a parable was a judgment process. To receive it involved a sifting process. Not to understand it meant possible judgment. Not to respond favorably and penitentially implied certain sanction. The Divine riddle of God therefore applied the sanctions of the covenant to Israel.