

PARABLES

Parables are simple stories that convey a single point of truth. It was Jesus' practice to teach the crowds in parables:

All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He was not speaking to them without a parable so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world." (Matthew 13:34-35)

And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them, as they were able to hear it; and He was not speaking to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples. (Mark 4:33-34)

In this chapter Jesus speaks to the crowds, as well as privately with His disciples.

He gave the crowds these parables:

- The parable of the sower, the name Jesus gives it: Matthew 13:1-9. This parable explains why the Gospel doesn't have the same impact on everyone.
- The parable of the tares in the wheat field: Matthew 13:24-30. This parable explains why some are saved from the judgment of God and others are not.

These two parables He privately explained to His disciples.

- The parable of the mustard seed: Matthew 13:31-32.
- The parable of the leaven: Matthew 13:33.

These two parables explain the growth of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also used three more word pictures with His disciples, which are not introduced as parables:

- The hidden treasure: Matthew 13:44.
- The costly pearl: Matthew 13:45-46.

These two word pictures describe the incredible value and worth of eternal salvation and the Kingdom of God.

- The dragnet: Matthew 13:47-50, which He also explains to His disciples. This illustrates what will take place at the final judgment.

In our passage today, Matthew 13:10-17, Jesus explains why He taught the crowds in parables.

WHY PARABLES?

“Why do You speak to them in parables?” Jesus’ disciples ask. It’s a good question. He hadn’t been speaking to them in parables, after all. Of

course, Jesus used figurative language like metaphors and similes. But we can see in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus taught His disciples in plain language. At the same time, Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and His disciples noticed it. Their question was prompted by the first parable Jesus speaks to the crowds, the parable of the sower.

Quite a few people in our time think that Jesus used parables because stories are easier to understand than plain language, or because people respond better to stories than doctrine. But that's not the reason that Jesus gave. After all, Jesus had to explain the parables to His disciples, and He didn't explain them with more parables, but with clear, plain language.

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matthew 13:10-13).

Jesus taught His disciples plainly – not in parables – because they had been granted the privilege of knowing the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. And He taught the crowds in parables – not in plain language – because they had not been granted the privilege of knowing the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but rather were under the judgment of God.

Jesus repeats a principle here that appears elsewhere in the Gospels:

“For whoever has [understanding], to him more [understanding] shall be given, and he will have an abundance, but whoever does not have [understanding], even what [understanding] he has shall be taken away from him.” (Matthew 13:12). Another way to put this would be to say that understanding is rewarded with greater understanding, while blindness is punished with greater blindness.

Kingdom truths are for Kingdom-minded people. God is not obligated to give understanding to anyone, especially to those who have rejected His truth.

TRANSITION: That doesn't sound very nice, does it? It almost sounds like people without understanding are being condemned. In fact, that's exactly what is happening. But that condemnation didn't happen overnight. Jesus didn't show up, point to Peter and say “you're in,” and point to someone else and say, “but not you.” In these words we are seeing prophecy fulfilled in history.

GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE WILLFULLY IGNORANT

Listen to what Jesus says:

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah [found in Isaiah 6] is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, lest they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart

and return, and I would heal them.’ (Matthew 13:14-15)

In Isaiah 6 the prophet has a vision of Yahweh in heaven, surrounded by angelic creatures, who ceaselessly proclaim the holiness of God, while His glory fills heaven and earth. Isaiah recognized his own sinfulness, and is filled with terror at the judgment he deserves, but receives mercy and is cleansed from his sin. Then the Lord sends him to the people of Israel with this command:

He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not know.’ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9-10)

In the book of Isaiah we see that the prophet did his job. He spoke the Word of God to the people of God, and the hearts of the people became insensitive, their ears became dull, and their eyes became dim.

Why would Yahweh send His prophet to do this to His own people? Because His people had spent the better part of 1,000 years in stubborn rebellion. God gave them His Law, His “righteous ordinances, true laws, good statutes and commandments,” as Nehemiah 9:13 describes it. And then we see this in Nehemiah 9:

But they, our fathers, acted presumptuously; they became stiff-necked and **would not listen** to Your commandments. (Nehemiah 9:16)

They refused to listen, Nehemiah 9:17 says.

God listened to their cries of pain when they suffered, and delivered them over and over again. But, Nehemiah 9:29 says,

Yet they acted presumptuously and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your judgments, by which if a man does them, he shall live. And they gave a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen. (Nehemiah 9:27)

This was Israel's historical pattern; it repeated itself from the exodus from Egypt to the ministry of Jesus, more than 1,400 years.

This is why in Isaiah 6 God passes a serious, irrevocable judgment on His people. Since they *had not* heard Him, He would numb their hearts, blind their eyes, and stuff their ears full of cotton, so that they *could not* hear Him. His judgment was final; there was no turning back. He sentenced them to the very blindness, deafness, and unbelief that they had chosen all along.

TRANSITION: Let's turn back to Matthew 13 now. Jesus tells His disciples that the judgment prophesied in Isaiah 6 was being fulfilled before their very eyes. But they have been spared that judgment.

WHAT ABOUT THE DISCIPLES?

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they

hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matthew 13:16-17)

The hearts of the disciples are not numb; their eyes are not dim; their ears are not deaf. They see, and hear, and believe. They have been blessed by God with understanding. They see the Messiah, the Christ, with their own eyes. They hear Him daily. They are getting to see and hear and experience what so many prophets and righteous men longed to see in ages past.

The book of Isaiah is a wonderful book, full of incredible promises and blessings for the people of God, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But Isaiah didn't see any of that fulfillment. Jeremiah gives this incredible promise:

Jeremiah 23:3–6 (1995 NASB95) — 3 “Then I Myself will gather **the remnant of My flock** out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. **4** I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, **nor will any be missing**,” declares the Lord. **5** “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. **6** In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The Lord our righteousness.’”

But Jeremiah didn't get to see any of it fulfilled.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had the privilege of putting the New Covenant into words:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to do My judgments. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

But neither had the privilege of seeing the New Covenant instituted.

The disciples had that blessed, that gift from the Father. Their eyes were blessed to see, and their ears were blessed to hear.

What we see happening in the Gospels is not a radically new idea of religion, but the continuation and fulfillment of what we see beginning in the Old Testament. God sent His Holy Servant, His Prophet, His own Son, Jesus, to pronounce judgment on those who remained in rebellion, and to announce salvation for all those who hear and repent and believe. Jesus is speaking of the promise of the New Covenant when He says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." No one enters the Kingdom of God without the New Covenant, without being cleansed with the water of the Word of God, without being forgiven of sin and idolatry, without receiving a new heart and a new spirit, without receiving the Spirit of God, who causes us to walk in new obedience.

Those who are not born again in Jesus Christ cannot enter the Kingdom of God. It doesn't matter that someone is Jewish; even a Pharisee like

Nicodemus was outside the Kingdom until he was born again. That new birth is what is depicted in the New Covenant.

So, why did Jesus teach the crowds in parables, and the disciples in plain words? Because He came to fulfill the Law and the prophets, not to destroy them. The judgment of the Old Testament was not erased and replaced; it was fulfilled. The same willfully blind nation continued on, and the judgment of God continued against them. The same promises to redeem a remnant continued on, and were brought to perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of the Kingdom is the power of God to save all who hear and believe. Those who do not hear, and will not believe, remain under the judgment of God. Jesus' disciples were granted the grace of knowing the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

BRINGING IT HOME

PERSONALIZATION

As Jesus' disciples looked out at that crowd, the ones to whom Jesus spoke parables, did they see Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus, perhaps? Was Nicodemus there? We know that when Jesus was crucified there were more than 500 who had believed in Him. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 would believe. Not long after another 5,000 would believe.

There in the crowd of unbelievers were those who had not yet trusted in

the Lord Jesus, but in God's time would trust in Him. If that describes you – someone who has not trusted yielded your life to the Lord Jesus Christ – then I urge you to do so today. Today, the Bible says, is the day of salvation. If you understand today, see today, hear today, then believe today, trust today, repent today. Don't wait. Don't be like those who were arrogant and presumptuous, who assumed that they were in control of their lives. The Bible says you don't know what your life will be tomorrow; you are a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away. For your own sake, and for the glory of God, believe in Jesus Christ today, and bow your heart to Him as Lord and Savior.

If you have heard and seen and understood the Gospel, it is because God has given you ears to hear, eyes to see, and a heart to believe. You have been made a party to the New Covenant. You have been cleansed. You have been given a new heart. You have been given a new spirit. You have received the Holy Spirit, so that you live pleasing to God. You didn't do this for yourself. You are not a Christian because you were smarter, or better, or holier. You are a Christian because God mercifully chose you. He chose the foolish, weak, insignificant, and despised things of the world – that's what Christians are. Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble. Through Jesus Christ we have been made new creations; the old things no longer exist.

We don't want to lie to ourselves, I know, but at the same time we must think of ourselves biblically.

But [we] are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light; for [we] once were not a people, but now [we] are the people of God; [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy. (First Peter 2:9-10).

God chose us. God called us. God made us His own people, His own possession. God showed us mercy. It was, and is, and evermore shall be, all of Him.

APPROPRIATION

How do we really make this passage ours? How do we appropriate it to ourselves?

We take Jesus' words seriously. To understand and see and hear the things of God is a tremendous privilege. Most people don't have that privilege, just the remnant that the Lord has chosen. Moses longed to see what you see; Isaiah did; Jeremiah did. They didn't see it. You have it in your hands. Being in Christ is not being part of a religious group; it's not a membership that we have. We are joined to our Savior and reconciled to our Creator, to live for Him with faithfulness and joy.