

The Purpose of Parables
Matthew 13:10-17
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Matthew 13 begins a new section, where Jesus employs a series of parables in order to instruct His disciples. There is a direct correlation between Jesus teaching His disciples in Matthew 13 and turning from those who did not respond to Him in the prior chapter. Jesus adapts His teaching method to teaching His disciples regarding the coming kingdom rather than to continue to instruct those who are unrepentant among the people of Israel. The use of parables is to further teach those who have ears to hear (Matthew 13:9), while obscuring His teaching from those who do not hear and do not understand (Matthew 13:13).

Parables are a comparison for the purpose of metaphorically illustrating spiritual truth, a literary convention designed to convey a lesson of universal truth, and in the case of Jesus, a heavenly message. They are a fictional, earthly, comparative story with a spiritual meaning.

Although Jesus used parables earlier in the book of Matthew to communicate spiritual truths (cf. Matthew 7:24-27; 9:15-17; 11:16-19; 12:33, 43-45), Matthew 13 is a series of eight parables all in one discourse. In prior cases, they supplemented the direct teaching of Jesus, where in this chapter, parables were the essence of the teaching. Each of these eight parables involve truth regarding the kingdom of heaven.

The first parable of Matthew 13 is the Parable of the Sower, which is foundational, for if we do not understand this parable, we cannot expect to understand any of the parables of Jesus (Mark 4:13). This parable instructs the reader about the nature of responsiveness to Jesus. The message of the kingdom will be heard by many, but not all will understand it in order to become fruitful in their service to our Lord. Jesus makes this clear in His explanation of this parable in Matthew 13:18-23.

The disciples' interrogation (13:10)

Matthew 13:10 informs us of the response by the disciples to Jesus' parable. Their question was, "*why do you speak to them in parables?*" This appears to be an odd question, since Jesus has only taught one parable to the crowds.

We learn in Mark 4:10 that this question was asked by the disciples "*as soon as He was alone.*" Therefore, they asked this after Jesus had concluded His teaching in parables to the large crowd.

This is another instance of Matthew's common practice of arranging his material topically, rather than always chronologically. Matthew desired the reader to be aware of the purpose of Jesus teaching in parables before they read the rest of the parable of Matthew 13. Mark and Luke also insert this statement of Jesus after the Parable of the Sower, showing the importance of understanding the purpose of parables.

Mark 4:10 also informs us that more than just the twelve disciples were listening to Jesus and asking Him about the parables. Mark tells us that "*His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.*" The disciples, or followers, of Jesus were numerous and made up a significant subset of the large crowd.

The divine intention (13:11-12)

Jesus answered His followers with a surprising statement that some people have not been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. The passive nature of the verb "granted" means that Jesus is providing the knowledge of these spiritual truths to some and not to others. Any confusion regarding this statement is eliminated by the words, "*but to them it has not been granted.*"

Those who receive this truth are Jesus' disciples and those who will not be given this truth are those who have been opposing Jesus. Yet Jesus taught the entire large crowd the parable rather than refrain from teaching them. Therefore, the nature of the parables was that the teaching was given to everyone in such a way that allowed "*He who has ears, let him hear*" (Matthew 13:9). We can conclude from this that God had given some of those in the crowd the spiritual insight to understand the meaning of what Jesus taught, and God had not given others in the crowd such spiritual understanding.

The understanding that has been granted to some is "*the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.*" This obviously means the teaching about the kingdom of heaven but in what sense are these "mysteries?" This term "mysteries" is only used in this question by the disciples in the Gospels. However, Paul uses this term more than twenty times in his epistles. In those instances, we learn that certain divine revelation was not given by God until His own appointed time. Therefore, there are some aspects of the kingdom that will be revealed by Jesus in these parables that were not previously known in the existing revelation that the Lord had provided to Israel in the Old Testament.

Some have erroneously concluded that the kingdom of heaven being revealed as only spiritual in nature. The Old Testament concept of the kingdom of God was consistently revealed as existing on earth. This literal, earthly kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament was not a mystery and was never corrected by Jesus or any other New Testament teacher. Indeed, Jesus encouraged His disciples with the presumption of the kingdom as they had understood it as recorded in Acts 1:6-7, *"So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.'"* (cf. Matthew 19:28; 20:20-23). Jesus will return to earth with His kingdom at a time appointed by the Father (Acts 1:11).

Jesus will teach about this future coming kingdom in each of the eight parables of Matthew 13. Each parable will elaborate on at least one aspect of the kingdom that will be established by comparing the kingdom to some metaphor of comparison. There will be additional revelation about the kingdom of heaven that had not been previously given by God until now for those who have been granted the ears to hear the teaching of Jesus. This additional revelation includes the nature and future arrival of the kingdom.

One might wonder how those to whom knowledge had not been granted can be accountable for what they were not granted the ability to understand. This question involves God's sovereignty in salvation. Paul addresses this question in Romans 9:14-20, *"There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?"*

All men are guilty and under the judgment of God by the effect of our sinful nature. No one is condemned for what they did not know, for *"there is none righteous, not even one"* (Romans 3:10). The parables are a means of providing those who are responsive with the knowledge of spiritual truth, and such blessed knowledge is not a right that anyone has, but a gift of God in mercy to sinful men.

Jesus speaks to those who have not been granted the understanding of such spiritual truth in parables in order to limit their further judgment for truth that they have already proven to oppose. Those who do not know will only be responsible for what they do know (cf. Luke 12:47-48). By the use of parables, Jesus was able to instruct all but only those with ears to hear would understand and be further accountable.

Mark 4:11 makes an even clearer statement about the use of parables to conceal truth, *"To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables."* Those who are on the outside of the followers of Jesus will be taught in parables because they have not been given the mystery of the kingdom of God. It is now being hidden from them.

This also corresponds to the earlier teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:6, *"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."* To continue to teach those who have rejected God's revelation will result in a disregard for God's glorious word and will lead to the messenger being attacked. In Matthew 13, Jesus turns the focus of His teaching to the disciples and begins to seek to delay His impending arrest and crucifixion to prepare His followers for their future service to God.

Matthew 13:12 states a proverbial truth found elsewhere in the Gospels. Jesus repeats this nearly verbatim in Matthew 25:29 in regard to the judgment of the unbelievers at the second coming. Jesus also taught this principle in the Parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:26). This is a fundamental concept of the righteous judgment of God regarding the application of our knowledge. We must recognize the privileged position we hold as followers of Christ. When we hear the words of our Lord and respond, we will grow in our further understanding (cf. Hebrews 5:14). If we hear His words and dismiss them, what we have learned will be lost. The ultimate end of this unbelief is destruction.

The declaration to Isaiah (13:13-15)

The quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Matthew 13:14-15 is prefaced by the reason why Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables, *"while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."* In other words, Jesus taught in parables because many in the crowd did not understand His teaching because of their unbelief.

These words about seeing but unable to see and hearing but unable to hear and understand echo other passages in the Old Testament beyond Isaiah 6:9-10.

“Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear” (Deuteronomy 29:4).

“You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; Your ears are open, but none hears” (Isaiah 42:20).

“Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, Who have eyes but do not see; Who have ears but do not hear” (Jeremiah 5:21).

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, you live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear’” (Ezekiel 12:1-2).

In each case, the people of Israel are rebuked for their lack of understanding. This then parallels the words of Jesus to the evil generation.

Matthew 13:14-15 is almost an exact quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). The structure of this text is the inverted restatement of what Jesus said in Matthew 13:13, followed by a chiasm of the body parts.

*A FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
B WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
C AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
C' OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
B' HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
A' AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN*

Jesus explicitly states that these words of Isaiah were being fulfilled as He was speaking. Isaiah was sent to sinful, hard-hearted people to bring the message of repentance for their rebellion against God. Their land will be destroyed because of their unbelief. Isaiah's prophecy was not completely fulfilled with the Assyrian captivity of 722 A.D., for there remained unbelieving Jews in the day of Jesus. This prophecy of condemnation upon the people of Israel was fulfilled by the dullness of hearing with the people who were listening to Jesus. Ultimately, it is those Jews who will dwell in the kingdom of God who will not be the subjects of Isaiah's prophecy.

The disciples' insight (13:16-17)

The ability the disciples enjoyed in seeing and hearing and understanding was solely due to being blessed by God. They ought not view themselves as enjoying the desire to follow Jesus based upon any other reason other than God's gracious blessing alone. Their eyes were able to see and ears were able to hear only by the blessing of God. This echoes the sovereignty of God in the illumination of our heart and minds with spiritual truth.

Matthew 13:17 references the prophets and righteous men that preceded Christ's disciples. These men did not fail to see and hear because of their unbelief, but rather because of their lack of opportunity. They were not the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy regarding people whose heart had become dull. Unlike the evil generation of Jews in the day of Jesus, they eagerly wanted to know what the disciples of Jesus saw and heard.

The reason they did not see and did not hear was because of the progressive revelation of God. Throughout human history, God has provided an increasing amount of spiritual truth to His people. With the coming of Jesus Christ, there was an unprecedented display of the works of God and an unprecedented divulgence of the words of God.

The evil generation of Jesus' day were the offspring of the rebellious Israelites of Isaiah's day. Likewise, the disciples were in the spiritual lineage of these prophets and righteous men who desired to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven that the disciples had been given. The contrast between Isaiah and those who he spoke about in Isaiah 6:9-10 is the same contrast between the disciples and those who were opposing and indifferent to Jesus. Later in His ministry, Jesus restates these words, "*Turning to the disciples, He said privately, 'Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them.'*" (Luke 10:23-24). Our Lord emphasized the blessing that His followers enjoy because of God's grace.

Matthew 13:17 is also a strong statement about the nature of Christ. He was greater than any prophet who came before Him. These Old Testament prophets and righteous men were the greatest people in the history of Israel, and Jesus states that they longed to see and hear the things that He was doing and teaching. He places Himself in authority over them as the unique revelation of God to man. This is another implicit support for His messiahship.

Conclusion

God, in His sovereignty, has granted us to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Those who are the good soil of Matthew 13:8 will respond to this knowledge with understanding and fruitfulness. Those who are unfruitful are like the people of Isaiah's day, whose hearts had become dull and who had closed their eyes. We either respond to the Lord in faith or we lose the opportunity to see and hear the things of the kingdom of God.

This has been the history of people. From the people in the day of Noah, to the nation of Israel in the wilderness, to Isaiah's contemporaries who were conquered by the Assyrians, to the people of Judea taken to Babylon, there has always been the remnant who honored God with their lives in the midst of those among the many that were religious but did not understand in their unbelief. When people continue to resist the word of God there will come a time when *"it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame"* (Hebrews 6:6). Even the understanding that they have will be taken away in their lack of interest in learning.

This has also been true in the church age as well. Whether it be the heretics of the early church, the establishment of the state church in the Holy Roman Empire, the evil practice of the Inquisition, the doctrines of works that infested the Roman Catholic Church, the opposition to the gospel during the Reformation, or the attack on the Scripture during the enlightenment and theological liberalism, there has continued to be a large portion of Christendom that opposed the knowledge of the Lord. The remnant of the good soil, blessed with eyes to see and ears to hear, will always be surrounded by religious opposition to the will of God.

Our response to those who hear but do not understand should be gratitude for the blessing of the Lord in granting us the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. When people are either in open opposition to the Lord or decidedly indifferent to His word, we should diminish our engagement with them regarding the truth lest they turn and tear us to pieces (Matthew 7:6; cf. Matthew 10:14). However, we do not fully know how the Lord might work in the lives of others in the future, so we ought to continue to pray for those who have become dull of hearing and be ready and willing to engage spiritual truth with them at a time when they may develop a genuine interest. *"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves"* (Matthew 10:16).