

The Purpose of Parables

Matthew 13:10-17

We come to a section on the parables this afternoon, though we'll wait until next week to study the first parable itself. That first parable and its interpretation surround several verses that describe the meaning the purpose of parables in general, so we will start there, beginning with this overview today.

Parables are stories, usually stories taken from ordinary daily life. They generally utilize an accepted familiar setting in order to teach a new lesson. The stories are true-to-life, and they can sometimes even be true stories. Usually, though, they are fictional, but always realistic. And they describe such common events as to require no explanation.

Parables are generally used to teach one basic truth. That's a point I'll come back to frequently as we go through these individual parables, because you get in trouble if you want to assign meaning and interpretations to all the particular details. So a parable is not an allegory, in which the symbol and the thing symbolized are blended together and all the details have significance or symbolic meaning. Nor is a parable simply a fable, for parables have reference to spiritual truth. A parable is not a myth, something made-up that presents itself as truth. Instead, a parable is an ordinary story from ordinary life that seeks to communicate the message of the gospel to ordinary people in a clear and simple manner, generally focused on one main point.

Usually, we think of parables just that way, as stories that help us understand the mystery of the gospel, stories that reveal the truth that God has given to his people. But actually, there is a second purpose for parables, a very different purpose. Jesus

uses parables to conceal the mystery of the gospel. He uses parables to hide the truth, to prevent those who hear from understanding. It might seem strange to think of it this way, but,

I. PARABLES CONCEAL THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL.

That's where I want to start today, and that is the clear implication of Jesus' answer to his disciples' very specific question.

v.10-11

Why do you speak in parables? Jesus immediately refers to those who are unable to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, and the emphasis is upon God's sovereignty, God's intention. To some, "to them," he says, "it has not been given... to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."

Then, even further,

v.12

But why is that? That's a fair question. Why does Jesus speak in parables in order to conceal the mystery of the gospel? The simple answer is that it is matter of God's judgment.

A. The judgment of God is evident in his withholding his own self-revelation.

Revelation is a gift of God's grace. God's self-revelation is an act of condescension on his part, choosing to reveal himself to his fallen creature because of his own gracious choice and determination. But just as obvious is the fact that sometimes God chooses not to reveal himself. Sometimes God chooses to withhold his word, to withhold his own self-disclosure.

So it has always been, as we can see from the quotation from Isaiah 6.

v.13-15

Those words really do mean what they say. Isaiah's ministry was one of judgment. Remember his call as a prophet,

Is. 6:8 "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." 9 And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' 10 "Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed." 11 Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered: "Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, The houses are without a man, The land is utterly desolate, 12 The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. 13 But yet a tenth will be in it, And will return and be for consuming, As a terebinth tree or as an oak, Whose stump remains when it is cut down. So the holy seed shall be its stump."

Isaiah's prophetic ministry was to announce and declare the judgment of God against the rebellious nation of Judah. The judgment was obvious. God would harden their hearts to his word. God would blind their eyes to his revelation. He would shut their ears. They would not hear. They would not understand. They would not believe. God would make their land desolate and take them away into the exile in Assyria. God would warn them of that impending disaster, and still they would not listen. Such was the judgment of God.

But don't think for a moment that that was unfair or unjust on God's part. Don't think for a moment that God did something wrong. When God, in his sovereignty, withholds the truth of the gospel, he does so toward those who do not believe. It is an act of judgment on God's part, a judgment well deserved by those

who are so judged. So it is not unfair, but it is sovereign. As Jesus says, "it has not been given...to them." As I just read from Isaiah, "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

God hardens their heart, as a judgment for their unbelief, a judgment for their sin!

B. The judgment of God is a response to hard-hearted unbelief.

They get what they deserve, what their sin has earned. And God is not obligated to be gracious to them.

v.15

God would not enable them to hear. He would not enable them to believe. He would not enable them to repent. They would not repent, and God would not forgive them. That's his judgment, and his own sovereign right.

We have a terrible view of God today in our popular culture, one that would view this sort of reaction on God's part as inappropriate, wrong. Many professed Christians simply cannot understand God responding this way, for they have all but lost a sense of God's holy justice and his hatred of sin. In the minds of people today, God is soft. God is benevolent, always. God is indulgent, and obligated to be gracious. But he is not! For many people, God is nothing more than a cosmic enabler, or a therapeutic counselor always ready to be empathetic and non-directive.

But that is not the God of the Bible! When those who claim to be God's people harden their hearts and dull their conscience,

when they stop listening to God, God stops talking to them! The ultimate expression of that judgment would be found in,

Rom. 1:24 “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

God gave them up. He gave them over.

Rom. 1:26 “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions...28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.”

So he speaks in parables, in order that they would not be able to understand. As this passage is recorded in Mark’s gospel,

Mark 4:10 “But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 so that “Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.”

The Apostle Paul knew about that judgment of God as well, for although his ministry was not entirely focused on God’s judgment as it was for Isaiah, still he understand that effect in the lives of those who continue in their unbelief. He writes,

2 Cor. 2:14 “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. 15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.”

The gospel can become the aroma of death! It pronounces the judgment of God. The gospel itself, we are told, can become the stumbling block. So, you see, this declaration of judgment is part of the revelation of the glory of God, the glory of his justice.

Isaiah’s only response was, “How long, O Lord?” And the Lord’s answer couldn’t have been very encouraging to him nor to the people of his day—This is how long, “Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, The houses are without a man, The land is utterly desolate.”

So why does Jesus speak in parables? That’s why! To conceal the mystery of the gospel. But that’s only half the story. The same parables, the same stories, at the very same time, reveal the mystery of the gospel!

II. PARABLES REVEAL THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL.

This is the more familiar usage of parables, stories enabling us to get the point clearly and easily. So the same verses, the other half of the equation,

v.10

v.11 “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven...”

Then, with the promise of additional blessing,

v.12 “For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance.”

So if you hear the word today, with faith, more will be given to you! If you receive the Holy Scripture as the word of God, then more will be given. You who believe this word to be true, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven...”

Sometimes that word mysteries is translated “secrets,” but that misses the significance of the biblical word mystery. The definition of a mystery is something that is known only by revelation, hidden until it is revealed by God. So the main idea of a mystery in the Bible is, in fact, something that is known! The “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” are not secret. They can be known, known, when God reveals them. So “mystery” and “revelation” are two words that belong together in their understanding and usage.

Consider,

1 Cor. 2:7 “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” 10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.”

Do you see the point, the connection? Mysteries are things which God has revealed. And Paul continues,

1 Cor. 2:12 “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”

So the Holy Spirit is crucial. The work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary, “that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.” The mystery revealed!

The mystery of the gospel is now revealed, and Jesus uses parables to accomplish that great purpose. God made sure that the mystery would be revealed, because he had the very word of God take upon himself a human nature and dwell upon the earth. And for Paul, this whole idea of a mystery revealed becomes the

subject of a doxology of praise,

Rom. 16:25 “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began 26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith — 27 to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.”

Why does Jesus speak in parables? As a revelation of the mystery of the gospel. “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” And clearly,

A. The mercy of God is evident in his own self-revelation.

v.12 “For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance.”

Or as Paul would later put it, at the end of that passage in 1 Corinthians 2 I just read,

1 Cor. 2:16 “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.”

There is no special knowledge needed to receive God’s own self-revelation, nor is additional or continuing revelation necessary. We don’t need some advanced knowledge available only to the intellectuals. It is not a matter of subjective experiences or feelings. It is not an emotion, nor is it a matter of merely intellectual or academic pursuit. It is a matter of receiving the word of God as God’s own self-revelation. So great is his mercy in granting to us all that marvelous blessing.

These parables are a demonstration of the mercy of God, because they enable you to see, to hear, to believe, and to

understand. And so whenever you open the Bible, whenever you read the Bible, you are the recipient of God's own self-revelation. And that is a great blessing, to be sure.

B. The blessing of God comes to those who hear the Word of God.

v.16-17

Do you realize the greatness of that blessing? Do you recognize just how magnificent that blessing is, the blessing of God's word.

Reading your Bible every day is a great habit, even a necessary discipline as you nurture your faith and mature as a Christian. But there is a danger in that habit, that it become routine, ordinary, merely a ritual you perform out of habit. If it becomes that, if your reading of the Bible becomes that mere performance of a habit, then you miss the blessing of hearing the Word of God. You miss the blessing of God speaking to you.

Let me encourage you to identify that blessing, and learn to seek after it and appreciate it always. So whenever you open the Bible, be ready to receive the very word of God, spoken to you in written form. Be ready to listen to God, as he would speak to you through the words which he has revealed in Holy Scripture.

Come, therefore, whenever you have opportunity to hear that word preached as well, for that is the means God has ordained to have his word proclaimed to his people. The preaching of the word is the blessing which God has designed for the revelation of the mystery of the gospel. So here is the word of God revealed, proclaimed as a blessing to you who hear it and receive it. Here is the word of the gospel, the mystery now revealed. As Paul puts it in,

Rom. 10:8 "But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

Paul is quoting from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, emphasizing the blessing enjoyed even by the people of God in the Old Testament. And that blessing comes with a challenge, an exhortation.

Deut. 30:11 "For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. 15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... 19 I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; 20 that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

So choose life, as that life is proclaimed to you through this revelation we call the word of God. Choose life, by believing that word to be true. For "it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."