

What is the Purpose of Parables?

Scripture: Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Parables,

Introduction

Matthew chapter 13 opens with Jesus teaching from a boat on the Sea of Galilee while “great crowds” were standing along the beach listening to him (13:1). On this day, Jesus taught seven¹ parables. This chapter is the first place we find the word ‘parable’ in Matthew’s gospel.

It is also the first time that Jesus has used parables as the primary method of teaching, which is what prompts his disciples to ask a question about ***the purpose of parables***.

The disciples noted this change in Jesus and so they wondered why he had changed his teaching style.



Why Do You Speak to them in Parables?

After hearing Jesus tell the first parable, “the parable of the sower,” which we considered last Sunday, the disciples come to Jesus with a question about why he was speaking to the crowds in parables.

Matthew 13:10 (ESV) Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

We know from the gospel of Mark that this portion of the conversation took place later that evening after Jesus had returned to the house and gone inside with the twelve disciples (and

¹ The total may be eight if 13:52 is included.

other close followers²) who had gathered around him (13:36). The crowds were gone and Jesus was “alone” with the group of his followers.³ This was “a private conversation.”⁴

Two Reasons for Parables

In answer to the disciples’ question, Jesus offers two reasons for why he was now teaching the crowds in parables. First, he used parables to both *reveal and conceal* truths of the kingdom of heaven (vs.11-12). Second, he used parables in *fulfillment* of prophecy (v.13-15, 34-35). Answering the first reason will take us longer than second.

1) To Reveal and Conceal (v.11-12)

The first reason Jesus gives for why he spoke to the crowds in parables was because he was seeking to do two things at once. By teaching in parables, he was employing them as a means of both *revealing* hidden things about the kingdom of heaven *to his disciples*, while *concealing* them *from others* among the unbelieving among the crowds.

Matthew 13:11-12 (ESV) ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

To you it has been given. Matthew makes clear that the “you” to whom Jesus spoke these words refers to his *disciples* (13:10). This included the Twelve, but was not limited to the Twelve. Mark tells us that there were with Jesus other disciples there in addition to the Twelve.

Mark 4:10 (ESV) And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.

Jesus is here speaking to the twelve along with others who were following him and were seeking to understand why Jesus was teaching in this new way.

The word here translated as ‘*has been given*’ (*didōmi* δίδωμι) means, “to grant someone the opportunity or occasion to do something—‘to grant, to allow.’”⁵ This passive verb is known as a “divine passive since it assumes God as the acting subject.”⁶ Jesus is explaining



² Mark 4:10.

³ Mark 4:10.

⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 224.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 163.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 372.

that God has allowed them “to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” while God is not allowing the crowds to know this.

Notice that “*the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*” are not automatically made known to everyone. Rather, they are “*granted*” by God to some and not to others. It is to those who have committed themselves to following Jesus who have been granted insight into the nature and hidden working of the kingdom of heaven.

Wait. Is Jesus here saying that truth about the kingdom of heaven is revealed to some and not to others? Yes.

To you [disciples] *it has been given... to them* [crowds] *it has not been given*. God the Father, working through Jesus His Son, has granted to his disciples both permission and ability to know unseen and hidden things about the kingdom of heaven, but to the crowds this has not been granted. The teaching in Scripture that points us to the truth that God is completely sovereign over whom he chooses to reveal spiritual truth to is called the doctrine of election. Matthew has already introduced us to this subject. After doing many mighty works in the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Tyre, and Sidon and being rejected by them Jesus “denounced”⁷ them because of their unbelief and failure to repent.

Matthew 11:25-27 (ESV) “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Notice that final sentence. The Son is the one who chooses to whom he will reveal God the Father. Knowledge of the Father only comes through the revelation from the Son. The sovereign choice of the Son is decisive over the dependent choice of any person. The sovereignty of God in the salvation of man is here plainly put before us through the words of Jesus. Being “given” the blessing of knowing the Father and understanding the way of salvation is the result of the “*gracious will of the Father*.” Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is *primarily* dependent upon the “*gracious will of the Father*,”

No one gets into heaven because of their own “*wisdom*” or intellectual “*understanding*.” No one works or thinks his way into heaven. The Father in heaven “opposes the pride”⁸ of human wisdom and understanding. God has “*hidden*” the way of salvation from the arrogant and proud, but he “*has revealed*” it to those who humble themselves and become like little children. Thus, all who are humble enough to go to God through Jesus will find heaven opened to them for it is only to the humble whom Jesus “*reveals*” the Father.

⁷ Matthew 11:20.

⁸ James 4:6.

If this is offensive, consider the sweetest of words which immediately follow this sovereign declaration of Jesus.

Matthew 11:28-30 (ESV) ²⁸ "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Immediately after saying that the Son is sovereign over whom he chooses to reveal the Father to, Jesus invites his listeners to come to him. He invites all who are weary from trying to work their way to God to come to him and find rest from such work. Your own work will never open the gates of heaven. However, if you are humble enough to go to God through Jesus, then to you Jesus will reveal the Father. If you are not, then the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven," the way of salvation, will be concealed from you. All who "come to Jesus" are given rest, but all who refuse to come to him continue under the heavy burdens of trying to earn salvation, which never gives rest to the soul.

Humble Disciples, Proud People

The disciples were humble and were going to Jesus as God's only Son and Savior, while the crowds, Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees were not. They were refusing to go to God through Jesus. This is why Jesus began teaching and speaking to them through parables. They had been shown more than enough evidence through the mighty works and word of Jesus to know who he was and yet they stubbornly and willfully rejected the Messiah who was standing in front of them. This is why Jesus quoted Isaiah.

Matthew 13:15 (ESV)

For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'

Isaiah spoke these words to a persistently rebellious people who had abused the grace of God. The time of grace had run out for them and God was bringing judgment on them. Notice the "**dullness of heart**" that has resulted from the continual "**closing of their eyes**." They have willfully shut their eyes. They have "**closed their eyes, lest they should see...**" They **do not want** to see any further. Just as the people of Isaiah's day had willfully shut their eyes, so had the crowds of Israelites to whom Jesus was speaking. They had seen the work of God through Jesus, but they have decided that they have seen enough. They did not want to see any more. So they shut their eyes, "...**lest they see... and hear... and understand...**" In quoting this

passage, Jesus is saying that the crowds of Israel had seen enough to know that he was God's Messiah, but rather than rejoice in what they saw, they had rejected him.

What have the crowds and religious leaders seen of Jesus?

- At Jesus' baptism, they heard the voice of God the Father from heaven testifying to his favor upon Jesus saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17).
- At his baptism they witnessed the divine anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit as the heavens above opened and Spirit of God like a dove descended upon him and remained (Mt 3:16).
- They had heard his powerful teaching in all their synagogues and even in the open air grassy fields and on mountains (Mt 4:17, 23; 5-7).
- They had witnessed his powerful healing as "he healed every disease and every affliction" (Mt 4:23)
 - Cast out many demons (Mt 4:24; 8:28-34)
 - Healed lepers (Mt 8:1-4)
 - Strengthened weak limbs (Mt 12:9-13)
 - Raised up paralytics (Mt 4:24; 8:5-13; 9:1-8)
 - Took away fevers (Mt 8:14-15)
 - Calmed wind storms (Mt 8:23-27)
 - Demonstrated his authority to forgive sin (Mt 9:5-6)
 - Healed chronic illness which no other doctors could (Mt 9:20-22)
 - Opened blind eyes (Mt 9:27-30; 12:22)
 - Gave voice to the mute (Mt 9:32-34)
 - Raised the dead (Mt 9:18, 23-25)
 - Shared his power and authority with the Twelve (Mt 10)
- They saw him heal even the Gentiles of all sickness and pain (Mt 4:24; 11:22)

The crowds of Israel and their leaders saw all these things, and they did not welcome Jesus as God's Messiah, but rather they accused him of serving Satan (Mt 9:34; 12:24). The truth the Jesus had come from God was known. But they "**closed their eyes**" and so "**their heart has grown dull**" (13:15). This is willful rejection. They shut their eyes "... **lest they should see... and hear... and understand...**" They willfully shut their own eyes to avoid seeing the truth that was before them.

They shut their eyes from seeing any more of Jesus than what they had already seen. They were willfully stopping short of where there saw this road was leading. They wanted no spiritual healing from Jesus. They were preferring to continue in the present path of sin. The Holy Son of God leads a life of holiness, and thus they saw the beginning of where he was leading and they shut their eyes so they pretend to have plausible deniability.

The Pharisees, scribes, and crowds wanted to see no more of Jesus. Therefore Jesus would now begin speaking in parables, so that "*while seeing they would not see.*" Jesus would continue his ministry "to seek and save the lost,"⁹ but parables would now be used by Jesus as a kind of judgment against those who wanted to stay lost. Through parables Jesus would be able to *reveal* the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" to his disciples, while *concealing* that same truth from those who were determined to reject Jesus.

Matthew 13:12 (ESV) "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

The disciples who were with Jesus had a weak, childlike faith, but they were willing to remain with Jesus through their questions. They kept coming to him and seeking understanding. They did not fully understand, but they trusted Jesus and wanted to know him more. The Pharisees and the crowds did not. They did not fully understand Jesus either, but they neither trusted Jesus nor wanted to know him more.

Thus, to the disciples who had little faith, but welcomed Jesus, more revelation of the kingdom of heaven would be given to them. However, to the crowds who were rejecting Jesus, even the revelation that had already been given to them—in all the miracles that Jesus had done—the truth about Jesus to which those signs pointed, would now be taken away from them because they had neither welcomed Messiah nor his heavenly kingdom. The hearts of those who welcomed Jesus would find their hearts enlarged, while the hearts of those who rejected him would find their hearts shrinking in even greater hardness. This is part of the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven."

The secrets of the kingdom of heaven. What are "the secrets of the kingdom?" The Greek word behind the English word '*secrets,*' is a word that refers to "the secret thoughts, plans... of God which are hidden from human reason... but are revealed [by God] to those for whom they are intended."¹⁰ Paul used this word often to refer to divine truth that came only "by revelation, not by natural insight."¹¹ This is what Jesus is explaining to this disciples. The truths

⁹ Luke 19:10.

¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 372.

¹¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 225.

of the kingdom of heaven are not automatically revealed to everyone. They are only revealed to those to whom Jesus chooses to reveal them.

This Is Not Fair

But some may object saying, "That's not fair!" This is correct. Salvation is not fair. Salvation is not just. Salvation is grace. It is not just or fair for the guilty to go free. It is just and fair for the guilty to be condemned. And every human being is guilty. Every human being is a sinner and therefore every human being justly deserves condemnation.

1 Kings 8:46 (ESV) "...for there is no one who does not sin..."

Proverbs 20:9 (ESV) Who can say, "I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?"

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (ESV) Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

Psalms 14:1-3 (ESV) There is none who does good... not even one.

Romans 3:23 (ESV) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

1 John 1:8, 10 (ESV) If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Mark 10:18 (ESV) "No one is good except God alone."

God owes no one salvation. No sinner has a right to be saved. When mankind sinned the only right we had was the right to death. God established the rules of the world He created and he said to Adam, "In the day you disobey me, that is the day you die" (Gn 2:17). When we sinned, disobeying a perfect and holy God, we forfeit all rights. God could condemn every single sinner for all of eternity and he would be doing no one any wrong. He would be in fact doing what is perfectly just.

God could be just to us all and if he was all of us would be eternally condemned. But to some of us he chooses to be gracious. "**For such is his gracious will**" (Mt 11:26). The fact that God chooses to be gracious to some, rather than being just and condemning us all, is not fair. But which do you want, God's justice or his grace?!

2) To Fulfill Prophecy (v.13-15, 34-35)

This leads us to second reason Jesus uses parables, because it fulfills prophecy.

Matthew 13:34-35 (ESV) ³⁴ All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

This is a quote from the beginning of Psalm 78. This psalm is one extended recounting of God's grace to a persistently rebellious people. The parable in Psalm 78 is one of the repeated rebellion of hard-hearted people and the unbelievably kind grace of God.

God revealed himself to Israel through the Exodus and the wilderness. He showed his power and might to them again and again. Yet these hard-hearted people continued to push against and abuse the amazing grace of God. The psalm pleads with the people to remember God's goodness in the past so that he will be trusted in the present. The psalmist pleads with parents to teach these truths to their children so that they will see God as the one true and living God and so avoid the mistakes of their unbelieving forefathers. If only this truth could be seen, then so much suffering could be avoided.

By speaking in parables, Jesus is warning the people. He is saying that there is a time when God's grace will come to an end. And when it does a hardening begins. And so he constantly repeats, "*He who ears, let him hear,*"¹² and he who has eyes, let him see. For there is great blessing in seeing Jesus as sovereign Son of God.

Blessed Are Your Eyes & Ears

Note the blessing Jesus speaks to his disciples.

Matthew 13:16-17 (ESV) ¹⁶ "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

These disciples sitting alone with Jesus were so blessed to see the messiah in front them. Many prophets and people more righteous than they had yearned to see what they saw and did not see it. Yet these disciples were given the gracious gift of seeing God's messiah and king of the kingdom of heaven. These disciples were common people who had been give an incredible gift, the gift of seeing the fulfillment of all of God's great promises to Israel. They heard Jesus preach, they saw him heal, they watched him cast out demons, and saw him raised the dead. They witnessed lives being transformed and people changed. They saw hearts changed and prisoners set free from the chains of the enemy.

¹² Matthew 13:9.

Conclusion

And we have seen more than they. We have all of this recorded for us to see and hear. But will we? Will we humble ourselves before the Savior and plead with him for forgiveness of our sins? Will we humble ourselves by falling on our faces before him and pleading with him to remove whatever pride remains in our hearts? Will we cry out to him for forgiveness for abusing his great grace? Will we persist in rebellion? Or will we turn away from all sin and cling to him? Will we cry out to him to give us a new heart? Will we ask him to fill us with his Holy Spirit? Will we seek him for the gracious blessing of having eyes to see and ears to hear?

Where are you this morning? Are you in the house sitting at the feet of Jesus seeking to know and love and obey him? Or are you still standing on the beach from some distance?

Hear the words of Jesus,

“Come to me, all who are weary, and heavily burdened;
And I will give you rest.
Come to me, and learn from me,
And you will find rest for your souls.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus speak to the crowds in parables?
2. What two reasons did Jesus give for his use of parables?
3. To whom does Jesus reveal the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven?”
4. What are some of the “secrets of the kingdom?”
5. What is the doctrine of election?
6. Why did Jesus quote from Isaiah 6:9-10 to explain his use of parables?
7. How was the Isaiah quote fulfilled by the crowds to whom Jesus spoke?
8. Why do some people willfully shut their eyes to who Jesus truly is?
9. Describe the blessing Jesus was referring to in vs.16-17.