

The Purpose of Parables

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 28, 2019.

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 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. 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. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. 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.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 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” (Matthew 13:10–17).

Jesus is often referred to as a “good teacher,” a seeming compliment but often couched in a denial of His divinity. Such a dichotomy need not be implied. He is indeed the Son of God, the Christ, the Savior of sinners, and He was a brilliant teacher. One of His primary pedagogical tools was the parable, a simple story used to teach a profound spiritual truth. Drawing from examples of everyday first-century life, Jesus captivated His audience with the power of a story. This does not mean, however, that Jesus’ parables were easily understood.

Perhaps even more intriguing is why Jesus chose to teach with parables so consistently. In our age of pragmatism, the more important the topic the more we want the teacher to “get to the point.” In an entertainment age in which we are amusing ourselves to death, we classify a story as entertainment not education. In the case of Jesus Christ, as moderns we would like Him and His apostles to be more forth coming at times. Frustrated by the depth and complexities of God’s Word, we, like the Jews of Jesus’ day, demand, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (John 10:24). The curiosity was no less for Jesus’ closest friends, His disciples, who inquired, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” The implication is that Jesus taught plainly, without the use of parables, when with the twelve, but when teaching to the crowds, He used parables.

What then was the purpose of Jesus’ parables? What Jesus reveals is quite stunning and may surprise many who consider Jesus merely a good teacher. To summarize, what Jesus reveals is: First, saving knowledge is not gained by effort but is received as a gift; second, those who have received the gift of saving knowledge have been given the grace of ears to hear and eyes to see; and third, parables reveal not merely a moral but more importantly the grandeur of knowing Christ.

The Gift of Saving Knowledge

Jesus' disciples asked, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Listen carefully to the first words of Jesus' response: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." Let us consider carefully everything this one sentence reveals.

To whom is something given? Jesus' response is to those asking the question, His disciples: "To *you* it has been given..." In contrast, to whom is something not given? Jesus says, "...to *them* it has not been given." The greater context of this passage reveals that "them" is the children of Israel who were listening to Jesus teach. In fact, based on Jesus' quotation from Isaiah, we may deduce that "them" is national Israel as a whole. Or, in contextual contrast, we may deduce that "them" is simply not those who receive what is given.

What is given or not given? The gift given is "to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." We often think of knowledge as comprehension achieved but here it is revelation received. Similarly, "secrets" are not known, and were not known by others, but are known by the revelation given to Jesus' disciples. These aren't worldly secrets but heavenly, "secrets of the kingdom of heaven," of which Jesus has been preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Therefore, we must be careful here not to obsess on the word "secret." The point is simply that it is something that has been revealed to some and not to others.

What has been revealed is the incarnation of the Son of God as prophet, priest, and king to be realized completely in His perfectly righteous life, substitutionary atoning death, and resurrection from the dead. The kingdom of heaven indeed is at hand in the Person of Jesus Christ, but in the moment of our passage the disciples are the recipients of the gift that would eventually be revealed to them fully through the Spirit of Christ, a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' various parables He will refer to this gift with examples of uncalculatable worth, but given such an extraordinary gift do we know who is the giver? While not stated specifically we may easily deduce that the only one who may give the secrets of the heavenly kingdom is our heavenly Father, God almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. This point, while it may seem obvious, is not to be missed: God is the Giver.

James writes, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). As the Giver, of every good and perfect gift, God gives according to His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, for His own glory, having foreordained whatsoever comes to pass (WSC 7). Jesus' disciples did nothing to merit the gift of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven but were simply the recipients of it. That's what a gift is. Even their selection as disciples was not their doing, as Jesus said, "Did I not choose you..." (John 6:70). Jesus wasn't encouraging groupies; He was building a kingdom.

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This of course runs contrary to the human concept of “fair play.” It only seems fair that everyone should be in on the secret; everyone should be able to merit a place at the disciples’ table; everyone should receive the gift of saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We want the right to choose or reject Jesus, not the other way around, but this misses the point of a gift, doesn’t it? The giver of gifts may give to whom he pleases, when he pleases, and how he pleases.

To this point, the Apostle Paul doesn’t hold back when He reveals to the church this heavenly knowledge: “For [God] 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 depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16). Therefore, because God is the giver and those of His choosing are the recipients, He may give according to His mere good pleasure.

Because the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is not achieved by human effort but is received as a gift from God, it is God’s choice who receives the gift. And to those to whom He has given the gift, He continues to give and bless them. As Jesus explains, “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.”

We refer to a “gift that keeps on giving” as having perpetual benefits, but the gift of God’s grace in the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is an eternal gift and includes our eternal inheritance. This cannot be said of those who do not receive the gift. To ears that long to hear the results of a performance-based salvation, Jesus’ words are defeating. To ears that believe in the universal option to choose Jesus, His words are harsh. But to those who have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and believed in Him, His words sound like the unmerited favor of God, or grace.

The Grace of Ears to Hear and Eyes to See

In the re-defining-of-terms culture in which we live, the word grace has come to mean (for the moment, anyway) the undiscerning tolerance of human liberty, which explains why “Amazing Grace” can be sung by so many but understood by so few. The biblical definition of grace is significantly different. It is the unmerited favor of God ordained by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit. The grace of God is monergistic in its very nature and revealed gloriously in the gospel.

It is in this definition of grace that we understand both the gift of saving knowledge and the grace of ears to hear and eyes to see: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Even the faith to believe is a gift from our gracious God. Jesus explains it to His disciples this way: “This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

Is there gospel truth in Jesus’ parables? Indeed. Is it obvious to all who hear them? It is not. The human desire to strive for understanding is thwarted by what is divinely hidden.

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Even if there is intellectual comprehension it is foolishness, apart from the grace of God. In the understanding of an unconverted heart the parables of Jesus are at best moralistic fables and at worst jaded hate-speech. Unless God acts in His sovereign grace, ears are shut and eyes closed to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Regarding the unbelieving eyes and ears of Jesus' original audience and those today, the Prophet Isaiah declared that they would "hear but never understand"; they would "see but never perceive." Sadly, having heard the truth and seen the truth of Christ, their hearts grew dull, unreceptive to the gospel. Paul describes their condition not as striving to live for Christ but as "dead in trespasses and sins," walking in "the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air," living in "the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind," not as a child of God but under His wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). And, such is the state of every person apart from the grace of God in Christ, but this does not mean there is no hope.

Isaiah's prophesied judgment upon Israel describes dull hearts, deaf ears, and blind eyes but also a factual statement of ability: "I would heal them." As a visible revelation of this spiritual truth, Jesus came healing the blind, the deaf, the sick, and the lame. Yet, judgment was pronounced upon Israel through His simple parables. As national Israel rejected their God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, by God's grace some eyes and ears were healed to see clearly and savingly believe in Christ alone. To see and hear as we were originally created is a beautiful thing. To hear the gospel, to see Christ, is glorious. The gospel is good news and such is the grandeur of knowing Christ.

The Grandeur of Knowing Christ

Jesus explained to His disciples, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 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." While the crowds heard the parables of Jesus, His disciples grew in their knowledge of Him, fulfilling what the prophets longed to hear and the angels long to see (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

By God's grace they understood, especially after His death and resurrection, that every parable He told contained the seed of the gospel. Every parable that we study together as a church will point gloriously to Christ. Such was the grandeur of knowing Christ, that the Apostle John wrote to the church, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:1-4). Such is the spirit in which the gospel is to be shared, rejoicing in the grace of God.

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The historical record of Acts reveals that thousands saw with their eyes the power of God and heard with their ears the gospel of Jesus Christ. They heard and finally understood: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39). From a people who had not eyes to see or ears to hear, by God’s grace three thousand souls received the gift of faith in one day (Acts 2:41). No longer children of wrath, the God who could heal them indeed did.

Therefore, the purpose of Jesus’ parables is less in the story told but of whom the story tells. He is the central theme of every parable, a truth understood only by receiving the gift of saving knowledge in Him. His gospel is seen and heard in every parable but only by God’s grace. And, Jesus’ parables reveal to every child the grandeur of knowing Him. For those who are in Christ, we joyfully study the ordinary means of grace of God’s Word.

We thank God for the gospel truth contained in Jesus’ parables and for the gift of saving knowledge in Him. We thank God through His ordinary means of grace of prayer that we who have eyes to see and ears to hear to believe in Him will have open eyes and ears to His Word. And, we thank God for the gracious gift to know Christ, our Savior and Lord. “To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).