

THE PERPLEXITY OF THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

INTRODUCTION: Would it be wrong to say that Jesus was *the Greatest Teacher* that ever lived? I don't think so! But *why? What made* Jesus the Teacher *par excellence*? There are certainly more, but here are **three reasons** Jesus was the Teacher above all teachers.

1) **First**, because of **Who** He was! He was God in the flesh...who was called "the Truth" ...and in whom were hid all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). So the **source** of wisdom would certainly be the **authority** of wisdom—and the best **communicator** of wisdom!

2) **Second**, because of **what** He taught! What Jesus taught mattered because it had spiritual—and **eternal**—importance and relevance.

3) **Third**, because of **how** He taught! He knew the nature of man...and the needs of man...and how people learned, so He could teach spiritual truth to them in a way that **they could understand**. And **one** way Jesus did that was through the use of **parables**!

So this morning, we are going to begin a series on the "Parables of Jesus." **How many** are there? Depending on how you **define** a parable, there are at least 38—and some suggest as many as 60! Are we going to go through all of them? **Obviously not!** How many are we going to go through? **I don't know!**

But before we begin to look at some of the parables Jesus taught, I believe it is important to think about **why** Jesus used parables. It may surprise you to learn that that is a question **the disciples asked**—and that **Jesus answered**—in Matthew 13. So let's turn there; please follow along as I read verses 10-17.

What was Jesus' response to the question, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" At first glance—and especially in light of vs 11—it seems like Jesus is saying that **He wants** some people to understand—but **not everyone**. It gets even more confusing if you compare what Mark has recorded regarding the same parable in Mark 4. Notice **Mark 4:11-12** on your outline: "And He said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins be forgiven them."

Although it **may seem like** Jesus doesn't want people to understand and be converted, how can you read the parable of the prodigal son and conclude that Jesus doesn't want people **seeing their need** to come to God for mercy and forgiveness? The point is simply this: **there is some perplexity** in what Jesus says is **the purpose** for His use of parables and that is what we are going to be looking at this morning.

1. The disciples' puzzlement over parables (vs 10)

Notice again vs 10. Please know that the parable of the sower is **not the first** parable Jesus told. They **were not asking**, "Why are you **starting** to use parables?" The question is, "Why is that your **"new normal"** way of teaching the crowds?" Were the disciples being disrespectful—or curious? I believe they were just being curious—especially when we consider **the situation**. Was there **anything unusual** about what was going on at this time that would have led Jesus to use parables more than He had before?

--In vs 1, we see that Jesus "sat by the sea side." Was being **by the sea** what made this situation unique? No. In Mt 8:18 we read of Jesus by the sea.

--In vs 2, we see there were "great multitudes gathered together unto Him..."

That wasn't unusual either, because we see multitudes following Jesus in Mt 4, 8, 9, 11, and 12!

So what had changed? G. Campbell Morgan points out **one significant change** that was taking place at that time, and it is this: the **opinions about Jesus** were becoming more and more divided!

--In Mt 9:3, a group of scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy because He forgave a man of his sins.

--In Mt 9:11, Pharisees complain that Jesus ate with "publicans and sinners"?

--In Mt 9:34, the Pharisees said that Jesus “casteth out devils through the prince of devils.”

--And in Mt 12:14—after Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath—it says, “Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against Him, how **they might destroy Him.**”

And this **open hostility** toward Jesus may have had a part **in why** Jesus began to use parables when He taught the multitudes.

Next, let’s look at Jesus’ response where we see... **2. The perplexity of Jesus’ answer (vss 11-12)**

As mentioned in the introduction, verses 11 and 12 are two of the **more difficult** verses in this passage. They are also—in my opinion—the two **most important** verses for understanding the rest of the passage so I’ll be spending some extra time on them.

Notice again what it says in vs 11. Here we have...

A. Understanding given to some—but not to all (vs 11)

1) “To know” comes from the Greek word “ghin-ocē’-ko” and means to “come to know, perceive, recognize, understand.” I’ll be mostly using the meaning “understand” as we go through the passage.

2) You versus them. **Who** is the “you” that Jesus is talking to? The **disciples**, right? But is it **only** the disciples?

I believe we’ll see as we go through the passage that it is **all those who follow Jesus**—which was more than just the 12 disciples! Verse 12 bears that out because Jesus uses “whosoever” instead of “you” and “them!”

--**Who** is the “them” that Jesus is referring to? Certainly, the scribes and Pharisees that rejected Jesus and were plotting His death, but it extends to **all those** who **do not** follow Jesus.

3) The understanding of what was given to the followers of Jesus—**but not given** to those who didn’t follow Jesus? The understanding of “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” A “mystery” in the Bible—especially in the NT—is something that was **previously hidden** that is now being revealed.

But what is the **kingdom of heaven**? The kingdom **of heaven**—also called the kingdom **of God**—has **several different aspects** to it and we’ll be looking at what those are as we study the parables themselves. For now, just think of the kingdom of heaven as **a spiritual kingdom** where God rules in the hearts of true believers.

4) Why did God give some—but not all—the ability to understand? Did God just **randomly pick** some people to understand—and **skip others**—or was there more to it than that? **It wasn’t because** some people **had the Holy Spirit in them**—and **others didn’t**—because the Holy Spirit did not permanently indwell believers **until after Jesus rose** from the dead.

So **what was the difference** between the “receivers” of understanding—and the “non-receivers”? Are you ready for the answer? Here it is! The difference between the two groups is **their hearts!**

‘That’s it, Pastor? You make this all suspenseful—or at least tried—only to tell us something **we already know?**’ To which I reply, “Yep; it’s that simple! Your ability **to understand** spiritual truth is determined by your **heart’s desire to understand** spiritual truth!”

So the question is not how **educated** or **intellectual** you are. The question is do you have an **open** heart—or a **closed** heart? The prophet Jeremiah—as he watched the destruction of Jerusalem—wrote in Lamentations 3:51 “Mine eye affecteth mine heart...” In other words, what **he saw moved his heart.**

Here, we have **the opposite!** Jesus is teaching that **our hearts affect our ability to see, hear, and understand** spiritual truths! **One writer** put it like this: “Those who did **not** follow Jesus or believe Him had hearts that were **closed** to what He taught. The people’s closed hearts **did not grant them** the capacity to fully comprehend what Jesus taught through His parables. The disciples were granted (made able) to hear and know the mysteries (v 11) of His parables because they had **an open heart**. They would have an open heart by virtue of **having decided** that **they wanted to see** what was true, and real.” (From “TheBibleSays.com”)

So here’s a recap of vs 11: The followers of Jesus were given—by God—the ability to understand spiritual truths because they had an **open and seeking** heart. Those who did not follow Jesus were not given the ability to understand because their hearts **were closed and they had no desire to know** or do what He said.

And these truths—from vs 11—help us to understand what Jesus is saying in vs 12.

Here we see... B. Understanding added to some—but taken from others (vs 12)

The **first** part of the verse is pretty straightforward.

--“For whosoever hath...” Has **what?** An open and seeking heart!

--“...to him shall be given...” Given **what?** The ability to understand spiritual truths.

--“...and he shall have more abundance...” Have an abundance of **what?** Understanding! Pretty simple, isn’t it? The way to understand spiritual truth is to have an open and seeking heart. And the more you seek truth from God and His Word, the more you will be able to comprehend truth!

Now for the **second** half of the verse...

--“...but whosoever hath not...” Has not **what?** An open, seeking heart.

--“...from him shall be taken away...” What is **taken away?** The ability **to understand** spiritual truth! Makes sense, doesn’t it? If you have a closed heart...a non-seeking heart...a heart that doesn’t want to know truth—or obey truth—your ability to understand truth will be taken away!

But the verse doesn’t end there, does it?

--“...from him shall be taken away even that he hath.” What is **taken away?** The last little bit of ability to understand spiritual things! **MacArthur** put it like this: “If you refuse that light, then deeper darkness ensues.... No man stays static. The longer **you know** Jesus Christ, the more faithful He is to **reveal His truth**. The longer **you refuse** Jesus Christ, the deeper the pit of **darkness becomes**.” (“Kingdom Parables, Part 2;” gty.org).

And that brings us to verses 13-15 where we have....**3. The purpose of parables stated (vss 13-15)**

Why did Jesus use parables in His teaching? Based on what we’ve already looked at—and verses 13-15—here are **two** reasons.

A. To reveal the condition of the heart

--Vs 13 “Therefore speak I to them in parables...” Who is the “them”? According to verses 11 and 12, the “them” is those who have **closed, non-seeking hearts**. But let’s not forget, Jesus spoke parables **to everyone**—not just to them!

--Vs 34 “All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake He not unto them:”

--**Mark 4:33-34** “And with many such parables spake He the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake He not unto them: and when they were alone, **He expounded all things** to His disciples.”

--**Why** did Jesus expound on the meaning of the parables to **the disciples?** Because they wanted to know!

--Why didn’t Jesus explain the meaning **to everyone?** Because not everyone wanted to know!

--Back to vs 13. There were some that had **eyes** that didn’t see...and **ears** that didn’t hear...and **minds** that didn’t understand. **Why?** Notice vs 15 “For this people’s heart is waxed **gross**...” “Gross” here means to be **dull, insensitive, unfeeling**. In other words, their hearts **were calloused and hardened!**

--And let’s not miss the fact that they had **done it to themselves!** The middle of vs 15 says “their eyes they have closed...”

In a nutshell, then, **non-working “senses” indicate a non-seeking heart!**

What about you? What is **your heart** like? Do you have a **seeking** heart that **wants to know** truth—or do you have a dull, insensitive, **non-seeking heart?** The end of vs 15 says **they closed** their eyes...and ears...and minds because they **didn’t want to understand** with their heart—and be converted!

So parables have the same impact that preaching does—it **reveals the condition** of your heart! Can I look into your pupils and see an “S” if you are saved—or an “L” to indicate you are lost? No; I can’t! But I can see **your facial expressions** when I preach! I can see on **some** of your faces that you **want to hear** the Word of God because you **love** Him and want to **obey** Him! But sadly, I don’t see that on **all of your faces!** Some of you don’t want to hear because **you’ve closed your heart!** Oh, may you open your heart before it’s too late!

So Jesus told parables **to reveal the condition of the heart** of the hearers. A second reason Jesus spoke in parables is... B. To reveal the necessity of faith

--**Why** do I say that? Think about the parable of the prodigal son. Taken at face value, it's a heart-moving story about an incredibly **loving father who longed for his wayward son** to come home. I can't say for sure, but my guess is that some of the original hearers may have thought, 'I can't give up on my wayward son! And if he comes home, I need to **celebrate his return**—not scold him for wasting what I gave him!'

But the **eye of faith** says, 'Jesus is the storyteller—and Jesus came from heaven to earth! He knows God the Father—and is teaching us truths about God the Father. Not only that, Jesus associates with people that the Pharisees don't—and won't! Could it be **that I am the prodigal** that has wasted all God has given me, but that **He will receive me** when I acknowledge that I have sinned against Him and need forgiveness?'

Same parable—but two different applications! The one **without faith** missed the main point—but the one **with faith** saw the truth that Jesus was teaching!

G. Campbell Morgan put it like this: "He [Jesus] gave them parabolic pictures, so that they might enquire. The purpose of the story, the picture, was to lure them to think, in order that they might find their way into the higher mystery.... If men will consider the picture, and enquire, He will always answer." (*The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord*, pg 16).

So Jesus told parables to reveal the condition of our hearts—and the necessity of faith!

Lastly, let's consider... **4. The pronounced blessing on the disciples (vss 16-17)**

--Vs 16: "But blessed are **your** eyes, for they see: and **your** ears, for they hear." **Why** did Jesus say they were blessed? **Two** reasons; one in vs 16, the other in vs 17.

A. Blessed because of their perception of Jesus (vs 16)

--Was Jesus saying that the disciples were blessed just because they got to see Him in the flesh? No; it **means more than that** because there were multitudes that saw Jesus with **their eyes** and heard Him with **their ears**.

--Jesus says they were blessed—meaning in an **enviable and fortunate and happy position**—because they have hearts that grasped **Who** Jesus truly was!

--In **Matthew 16:16**, Peter said: "...Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

--In John 16:30, the disciples said "...by this we **believe that thou camest forth** from God."

--And in John 6—when some of the followers of Jesus "walked no more with Him"—Jesus asked the twelve, "Will ye also go away?" Notice Peter's response in **John 6:68** "Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life."

So the disciples were blessed because their truth-seeking-hearts allowed them to perceive that Jesus came from heaven...and was the Son of the living God...and the One who spoke the message of eternal life!

What about **you**? What is your **perception** of Jesus? Do you believe what Jesus **said about Himself** in John 14:6 "...I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

--Do you believe **what Peter said about Jesus** in Acts 4:12 "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

--Do you believe the unmistakable, frequently stated message of the New Testament that says "...the Father sent the Son to be the **Saviour of the world**" (1 John 4:14)?

Not only were they blessed because of their perception of Jesus, they were also...

B. Blessed because of their place in history (vs 17)

--Vs 17: "For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them."

--In Gen 12:3, Abraham is promised that "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." We know from Galatians 3:16 that **Christ is Abraham's offspring** that all people would be blessed through. So Abraham is certainly one of those righteous men who would have loved to experience what the disciples experienced.

--Abraham did see when Jesus came to earth, though, according to John 8:56! "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad." He just wasn't on earth when it happened!

--**Moses** was led of God to prophesy that one day there would be a prophet "like unto him" (Deut 18:15). Jesus was that prophet—and Moses certainly would have liked to be on earth when Jesus was. How do we know? Because God sent Moses to visit Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17)!

--**And Isaiah** certainly would have desired to see the suffering Savior that he wrote about in Isaiah 53:5-6 "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

So **the disciples were blessed** because they got to do something that prophets and righteous men desired to do—be on earth when Jesus was to **see what Jesus did**—and **hear what Jesus taught**!

But let's not forget—we are blessed, too! **John 20:29** "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: **blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.**"

What about you? Are you part of this group? Have you believed in Christ—and trusted in Him alone—to forgive you and save you from the penalty of your sins?

So what would God have us do in light of what we've heard this morning?

1. First and foremost, what kind of heart do you have?

--Do you have an open, seeking heart that wants to know what God says—and do what He says?

OR --Do you have a hard-heart that says, "I am fine just the way I am—thank you very much!"

You've heard it a couple of times already, but here it is again:

"You are responsible for the softness of your heart!"

And if you choose to insist on not believing that Jesus is the only way—**and die unforgiven**—you will have no one to blame but yourself!

2. But what about those of us that are God's children? What would God have us do?

--Have a soft heart—and ask God to give you a softer heart.

--Seek God through His word—and ask Him to give you more understanding.

--It is God's love letter to you—and instruction manual for life!

Do you look at it that way—or is it just something you "get around to reading"—**if** you have time?