



The Parables – Introduction

(Matt 13:10-17)

Psalm 78:1 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. 2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old-- 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.

Matt 13:10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" 11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' 16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

On Sunday evenings over the next few weeks we are going to be exploring some of the parables of Jesus. There are things that Jesus wants us to realise as we study these very well-known stories. In fact, this passage in Matthew 13 is quite an interesting one as we all know it's there, but you'll be hard-pushed to find a lot of information about it in commentaries and all that. It's almost as if preachers and commentators say "we all know about that stuff so we'll get into the parables and give it a miss". Never do that to the Word of God! It is all intended for our teaching and guidance.

Jesus taught in parables – in fact over 60 are recorded in the Gospels. So what is a parable. It comes from the Greek *Parabole* which in sort means the placing of one thing beside another such as ships lined up for battle. It's a story that compares one thing with another – a similitude if you want some old-fashioned English. When we speak in parables, we describe the nature of something by comparing it to something else. It's a useful form to use when you are trying to explain something that you have never seen or experienced with something you have.

How do I describe somewhere I've been to someone who hasn't been there for example? For example, how would I describe Diss Baptist Chapel. Well, it has a very similar design to ours, with two towers, identical front windows, and a similar interior layout. Of course, it's not exactly the same as those of you who have been there know. There are some notable differences. But one can be used to give people a picture of the other.

Parables go a step further in using whole stories to describe basic principles and concepts. It was a common form in Jesus' day where people used stories to explain deep philosophical ideas – parables. It had a long history in the Old Testament where prophetic language was in pictures e.g. when Nathan used a story about a man who stole another's lamb to challenge David about his adultery and murder. A definition on person gives is *A parable is a word-picture which uses an image or story to illustrate a truth or lesson.*

They had another where they used exaggeration to make a point and that was called hyperbole. So take these two phrases

The boxer was built like Frank Bruno – parable
The boxer was built like a Chieftain tank – hyperbole.

Jesus used both. He commonly used parables and sometimes used hyperbole when he wanted to make a point strongly such as when He said “you try to take the speck out of your brother’ s eye when you’ ve got a tree trunk sticking out of yours!”

But in scripture, parables are more than just similitudes; they have deeper spiritual meanings. So in our Psalm it said *2 I will open my mouth in parables , I will utter hidden things, things from of old-- 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.*

A definition I was brought up with was “a heavenly story with an earthly meaning”. That comes out of this passage was Jesus’ disciples ask Him why he spoke in parables and didn’ t speak things as they were. It was rather an obvious thing to ask because Jesus used them constantly. People were fascinated by His ability to tell stories and followed Him around to listen to Him and watch the miracles. Maybe they thought that they understood. But how much did they understand? Not much if these words of Jesus were to be understood.

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16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

In other words, the people understood something. Maybe they heard the parables of the kingdom and thought He was preaching a restoration of the Kingdom of Judah. Sometimes they heard His parables and were confused because they flouted social conventions – the Good Samaritan glorified hated Samaritans. Even more confusing to the listeners would be the story of the Prodigal Son when the son asked for his father’s inheritance, that was equivalent to saying he didn’ t care if his father lived or died. He just wanted his money. A son never ever asked for an inheritance until after the death of his parent, so that the focus of the story was quite a hateful person because he desired that his father were dead. The father does not come out much better as a nobleman of ancient Israel did not run, but walked at a dignified pace. This one ran to meed the nasty son.

But it doesn’ t baffle us because these stumbling blocks become significant spiritual truths that describe our relationship to God and his relationship to us in Christ. To the people, the stories meant something however strange, but to the disciples they were intended to convey truth in a form that would make sense and in abundance.

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That’ s the difference when we read a parable and when the world does, because the Holy Spirit reveals to deep truths to us. They make sense in the context of what we belief. So Jesus amused the crowds with His stories but to those whose lives God was working in, deep truths were being laid down.

Jerome, an early church father and biblical scholar remarked: *"The marrow of a parable is different from the promise of its surface, and like as gold is sought for in the earth, the kernel in a nut and the hidden fruit in the prickly covering of chestnuts, so in parables we must search more deeply after the divine meaning."*

Before we congratulate ourselves that God has given us the grace so that we may understand the words of Jesus, we should beware that we do not fall into the same trap as some of the crowd that came to hear Him. Many of those people came to hear Him with their minds made up so they could not see beyond the story. We can sometimes do the same with not just parables, but God’ s word too. I know with what I preached on this morning that most people have their minds made up according to the values they were brought up with. But what does God’ s word say?

We know that sometimes that the Word of God conveys truths to us that we find difficult. What do we do? Do we face up to them and re-examine ourselves? Or do we try to concoct some other

meaning which suits us? Or worse, suggest that the preacher who points it out must be in error because that is not how we were taught it, although we can't remember who taught us what, when or which part of scripture they may have used to justify themselves.

Parables encourage us to let God speak. Yes, they do convey deep truths. But they are rarely deep philosophical truths, but truths that cut us to the heart and challenge our values. God can only reveal the secrets of his kingdom to the humble and trusting person who acknowledges the need for God and for his truth and who lets the Holy Spirit minister to him or her. It's easy to be looking but not seeing and hearing but not listening. This was true in the Isaiah 6 prophecy Jesus quotes, it was true of the crowd that followed Jesus and it's can be true of us today. Let's listen to what God has to say to us in humility.

The parables of Jesus will enlighten us if we approach them with an open mind and heart, ready to let them challenge us. If we approach them with the conviction that we already know the answer, then we, too, may look but not see, listen but not hear or understand. That applies to all scripture. So next time someone questions your values, don't bristle but look in God's Word and see what He is saying to you and act on what He says.



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9th January 2005
Scripture Quotes from NIV*