

The Parables of Jesus and the Covenant of Grace

Mark 4:10-12; Isaiah 6:9-10 (texts)

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Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Rev. Mike Brown preached a sermon on the Lost Coin, one of Jesus' parables. I have preached on a few parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the Sower, but never had a series on the parables.

Many pastors and teachers love the parables of Jesus not only for their moral content, but as justification for using illustrations in their sermons. They point out that Jesus used illustrations, so they too can use them to make their sermons clearer and more interesting to their audience. The problem with illustrations used by pastors today is that they almost always end up being humorous anecdotes and worse, funny jokes.

And our text today only supports the idea of using illustrations partially. In response to his audience's question about why he uses parables, Jesus answered by addressing two kinds of people who hear his teachings. On the one hand, to his true disciples, he says, *"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God."* Addressing others, he says, *"For those outside everything is in parables."* And then he adds a reference to the second group a striking, yes, even a scary quotation from the prophet Isaiah. He uses parables so that *"they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven"* (Mark 4:12; Isa 6:9-10). What does Jesus mean by this saying about the parables?

Today, we introduce our sermon series on the parables of Jesus with the theme, **"The Parables of Jesus and the Covenant of Grace,"** in three parts: (1) **"They Asked Him About the Parables";** (2) **"To You Has Been Given the Secret of the Kingdom of God";** and (3) **"For Those Outside Everything is in Parables."**

"They Asked Him About the Parables"

Matthew and Mark says that one day Jesus got into a boat in the Sea of Galilee because of the great crowds, and then taught the crowds from the boat. While teaching there, Jesus used many parables. Our text tells us that after the crowds left and he was alone, the Twelve and his other disciples asked him about the parables. In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus explained why he used parables after he taught the crowds about the Parable of the Sower.

First of all, what is a **parable**? Literally, a parable means placing two things side by side for comparison. So, it can be a simple metaphor or simile, such as when Jesus introduces a parable by saying, *"The kingdom of God is like a ..."* One Bible dictionary defines it in terms of illustrations, "a form of teaching which presents the listener with interesting illustrations from which can be drawn moral and religious truths."¹ Jesus did not teach in vague, abstract

¹ *The New Bible Dictionary*, 877.

terms, but used real-life illustrations from first-century life in Palestine. Parables, then, are stories “told to provide a vision of life, especially life in God's kingdom.”²

And what a variety of true-to-life analogies! Jesus used pictures of farming, wedding feasts, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, trade and commerce, masters and servants, and righteous and wicked people. His topics range from calling people to a decision, to kingdom life, to neighborly relations, to business affairs, to preparing for his Second Coming. But all of these parables are about the kingdom of God—entering into it, its people and life in it, and its completion.

Jesus was almost exclusively the only parable storyteller among Biblical writers. Ezekiel was the only other one who used parables in Chapters 17 and 24, and most Biblical writers used only metaphors and similes. Most of the parables of Jesus are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark has four, and John has none.

“To You Has Been Given the Secret of the Kingdom of God”

In answering his disciples, Jesus divided his audience into two groups: those to whom God has revealed the secret of the kingdom of God; and those to whom everything remains as unintelligible parables.

Jesus addressed the first group as “you” in plural—*“those around him with the twelve”*—the twelve apostles and other followers. What was “given” to them? Jesus says they have been given the *“secret of the kingdom of God.”* What is this “secret”? Here, the word secret is a translation of the Greek word *musterion*, which is transliterated also as “mystery.” In the Bible, a mystery is not just something hidden or mysterious, but something that used to be hidden, but is now revealed. Paul says that the gospel of Jesus Christ was *“the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages”* (Rom 16:25). This mystery is revealed in Christ, *“the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God”* (Eph 3:4, 9). This mysterious plan includes the salvation of Gentiles, *“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”* (Eph 3:6).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are blessed beyond imagination. Did you know that the Holy Spirit has revealed to you these “secrets” that the prophets of old inquired for ages? Jesus tells us, *“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”* (Matt 13:17). In addition to your inclusion into God's salvation plan, the Spirit has revealed to all of you the *“secret and hidden wisdom of God”* (1 Cor 2:7), the incarnation of the Son of God (1 Tim 3:16), the indwelling of *“Christ in you”* (Col 1:27), and your final resurrection and transformation (1 Cor 15:51).

But you, who belong to this church, are greatly blessed because the Spirit has revealed to you the great doctrines of the Reformation that remain as a mystery to a majority of our

² *The Holman Bible Dictionary*, 1071.

brethren: God's sovereignty in salvation; justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone; covenant theology and its related doctrines of covenant children and covenantal perspective on the last things; the regulative principle of worship; and the great creeds and confessions of the ancient, historic church.

They remain mysteries to many Christians, because the Spirit has not opened their eyes and ears to these great Biblical truths. What a blessing you have in this church! We do not boast, but we boast only because of the mercies of God the Father, who have chosen us in the Lord Jesus Christ. God has chosen you to be “insiders,” to whom he has revealed these truths.

“For Those Outside Everything is in Parables”

But Jesus calls the second group of people among his audience “*those outside*.” Outside of what? The answer lies in other Scripture passages where the same Greek word *exo* is used. Jesus himself used this word in some of his parables. In the Parable of the Narrow Door, he called evildoers those who “stand outside” knocking at the narrow door to enter in (Luke 13:25). He also frequently referred to those who were not saved as being “outside” of the house where the Bridegroom is (Parable of the Ten Virgins, Matt 25:10-12), or outside Noah's Ark of salvation (Luke 17:27). The word *exo* is also used in John 6:37, where Jesus says he will never “*cast out*” those who come to him.

Other New Testament writers also use “*outside*” or “*outsider*” to refer to the unsaved. The church cannot discipline “outsiders” because those who are “outside” the church are judged by God (1 Cor 5:12-13). Jesus himself suffered the judgment of God as the substitutionary atonement for our sin “*outside the camp*” (Heb 13:11-13). Finally, in Revelation 22:15, the unsaved are referred to as dogs “outside” the new heavenly city. Jesus often calls this place outside heaven as the “*outer darkness*” (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

For unbelievers, Jesus's teachings in the parables will forever remain a “mystery.” The secrets of entering the kingdom, kingdom life, and the completion of the kingdom will forever be hidden from them. Why is this so? Because they have not been given the Spirit of God in Christ. It is the Spirit who regenerates, reveals, teaches, illumines, and sanctifies “insiders.” Those outside are passed by the Spirit who gives life and light. This is why Paul says, “*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Cor 2:14).

So at the end of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus calls out, “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (Mark 4:9). But God does not give “outsiders” ears to hear, eyes to see, and minds that understand. He quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, and puts an exclamation point at the end, saying, “*lest they should turn and be forgiven*.” Though Isaiah was describing unrepentant Israelites, Jesus used these words to warn unbelieving Jews of coming judgment against them because they rejected Jesus the Messiah of God. But at the end of Mark 4, Jesus leaves room for repentance, “*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it*” (Mark 4:33).

Thus, Jesus used parables as a two-edged sword: to reveal his kingdom to believers, and to hide it from unbelievers.

Dear Chosen Ones: You may be thinking, How does God choose who will be “insiders” and who will be “outsiders”? Paul says that this choice was a mystery revealed to Christians alone, “*making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ*” (Eph 1:9). It was only according to his perfect, sovereign will and purpose.

So do not say, “How unfair! How unjust!” because he is God, and we are not. Instead, praise and glorify God for his mercy to you who have merited death when Adam disobeyed God's law. But instead, he saved you from your sin, from being blind, deaf and mindless to God's revealed Word. In his covenant of grace, he has chosen you before creation, from among all hopelessly sinful humanity, to free you from the bondage of sin, Satan and death.

Election and predestination are not bad words, as many evangelicals today see them. Instead, they are words of God's mercy, love and compassion for you in Christ. Do not let your finite minds make you blind and deaf and mindless to “*the things that are revealed ... to us and to our children forever.*” Do not inquire of the “*secret things*” of the LORD. Instead, be thankful that God has chosen you to be “inside” the covenant of grace, “*that we may do all the words of this law*” (Deut 29:29). Let us be mindful of Paul's doxology when he saw the incomprehensible wisdom of God in saving you—rescuing you from the outer darkness, and bringing you inside the kingdom of Christ:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33)