

The purpose of parables

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- [0 : 0 0] Shall we turn now for a few moments to words which are found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 13. Matthew, chapter 13, at verse 10.
- And the disciples came and said to Jesus, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.
- For whosoever hath to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.
- Therefore speak I to them in parables, Because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.
- For this people's heart is wax gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed. Lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.
- [1 : 2 1] But blessed are your eyes for the see, and your ears for the hear. 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 hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.
- Especially the words of verse 10. Why speakest thou unto them in parables? Why do you speak to them in parables?
- The question of the disciples to Jesus. Jesus was a popular communicator.
- We read elsewhere in the Gospels that the ordinary people heard him gladly. And one of the secrets of Jesus' success as a communicator was that he used parables.
- He used stories. He used illustrations, which were taken from the everyday life of the people among whom he was brought up, and to whom he preached.
- [2 : 3 9] He had that gift of taking something in the ordinary everyday life, and using it as a model, using it as an illustration of what he wanted to say.
- This perhaps surprised the disciples. Because they were used to the more ponderous teaching of the rabbis. And even today, many people have a kind of false respect, in a sense, for people that they find difficult to understand.
- I remember as a youngster in the Highlands when we had visiting preachers at our communion. If the preacher, or the preachers were people who were readily understood, the comment was that they were good.
- That if the preacher was someone who was more obscure and more difficult to follow, invariably the comment was, he was very able. Now, no one could have said that of Jesus.
- Of course, Jesus was able. But Jesus was not obscure. Jesus was profound. He wasn't shallow. He was profound in such a way that we can never glean all the elements of meaning from these parables and from his teaching.

[4 : 10] But the disciples were surprised. They were surprised that at this point in his ministry he began to teach in parables. He took these illustrations from the actual world in which his Galilean peasant hearers lived.

He took his illustrations from the human relationships to which they were accustomed to the activities such as sewing, fishing, baking, plowing, digging, and so on.

He presented the gospel in pictorial form. And I believe that there are lessons here for the church today. Because if ever it was necessary for us to rediscover how to communicate in parables or in pictures, surely it is today when we live in an age of visual communication.

And we have to recognize that many men and women find it difficult to think abstractly. They find it difficult to absorb abstract concepts.

And we need to go back to this model of teaching, of communication that Jesus has given us, of communicating through pictures, of communicating through parables or through analogies.

[5 : 34] But let's come back to the disciples' question. Why should Jesus change his teaching method at this particular point of time? And the reason, the answer rather, that Jesus gives to this question in verses 11 to 17 constitutes one of the most difficult passages in the entire gospels.

Although having said that, it may not be as difficult as it appears at first sight. Jesus answered and said unto them, because it was given, it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

But to them it is not given. Now this word mystery is a difficult word for us to understand.

It really means secrets. It's a secret. It's a originally a Greek word and it referred to something which was made known only to those to whom it had been revealed.

In the society of the ancient world of the Roman Empire, there were many secret religious societies. And only those who were members of these societies knew what was involved.

[6 : 49] To all others, what was involved in each society was a mystery. It was something unknown. The secret was known only to those who were initiated into it.

And Jesus uses this word with reference to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, he said, is something which you must experience for yourself in order to know it.

It's not something that you can learn about in a book and say that you know it. It's something into which you yourself must be initiated.

What it means to be saved is a secret known only to those who are saved. In other words, Jesus is teaching us here that Christianity can only be investigated adequately from the inside.

died. And Jesus is saying that he uses parables because the people were outsiders. He used parables because it was given to the disciples to know the secret that it was not given to those who opposed him.

[8 : 09] you see, at this point in the ministry of Jesus he was beginning to experience opposition. Opposition which began over what the Pharisees and the scribes considered to be Jesus' loose observation of the Sabbath.

And this led to the blasphemous accusation that Jesus was of the devil. And Jesus begins to tell parables at the point at which the Pharisees and the scribes reject him.

So we find at the beginning of this chapter, chapter 13, Jesus is teaching the people not in the synagogue but in the open air on the shore from a boat.

The pulpit of the synagogue has been closed to him. He's been rejected. His pulpit has become a boat. His synagogue is the open fields.

The theme of this, of the rejection of Christ and of his message is obviously revealed in the first parable that Jesus told, the parable of the sower.

[9 : 26] which presents to us four different types of reacting to the message of Jesus concerning the kingdom or the kingship of God. And three of these four illustrate different ways to a greater or lesser extent of rejecting the message.

And so the context in which Jesus begins to tell parables is a context in which the authorities, the religious leaders, reject him. and it's interesting that it is at this point that he employs a method of communication which is popular rather than specialized.

He seems at this point deliberately to bypass the leaders who had rejected him, the professors, the theologians, the rabbis, to address himself to ordinary people who had welcomed his message.

And so he uses these parables, this simple means of presentation, which no doubt the scribes and the Pharisees and the theologians of the day thought was far too simple. And he uses this form of communication in order to reach the section of society which welcomed or was welcoming his message.

basically Jesus tells us here that there are two reasons why he taught through parables. And the first is to create faith.

[11 : 00] Parables were given to create faith. The Pharisees and the scribes as we have seen had rejected the teaching of Jesus.

On the whole that teaching had been given up to this point in words rather than in pictures. But now Jesus begins to present his message in pictures in order that ordinary people might have a greater opportunity to understand.

These pictures, these parables made the abstract truths which he sought to communicate concrete. They were stories which compelled popular interest.

Obviously the more readily they were understood, the more likely the hearers would be to believe. And so Jesus is giving men and women an opportunity to believe.

It may be in fact that he was still addressing himself to the scribes and the Pharisees using a different method, a different approach to see if in that way he could, he would win their allegiance.

[12 : 11] perhaps here we have a mark of his, an evidence of his grace approaching the same audience in a different way, seeking to reach them, seeking to effect a positive response.

And this reminds us of the love and of the grace of the Lord Jesus who although we may reject his message, it comes to us again and again and again.

And so Jesus paints these pictures, these verbal pictures, and we have them recorded in all of the Gospels.

And we read several of them together. we read these parables. I wonder, as we read these parables, did they speak to us this morning?

Did they help us to hear Jesus Christ calling us to follow him? The parable of the lost sheep.

[13 : 25] The parable reminding us that although we have wandered away from the paths of God, although we have left, we have left his flock, but in his mercy and in his grace he still seeks us and searches for us and looks for us.

The purpose of that parable, especially as Jesus told it in Luke's gospel, is to help men and women who are away from God to come back.

Jesus told that parable in another occasion and Matthew tells us about that. And he used it in that occasion of people who had backslidden, Christian people, believers who had turned their backs on the Lord.

And he uses the parable in that context of the importance of the church caring for those who have drifted away. And then to underline the ministry of care and compassion in the church for the one single person who may have drifted away from the people of God.

The question I want to ask you and to ask myself this morning is whether that particular parable has fulfilled that purpose in our lives. Has it been a means of bringing us back to God?

[14 : 56] Or again we take the parable of the rich fool which we also read. We live in an age in which we are being constantly urged by the advertising agent, by the advertising industry and by the very nature of our consumer society to do what that farmer did.

to lay up treasure on earth, to pile up literally, to pile up material things. And probably most of us have far more things than we need.

The point of the parable is to warn us of the danger of these things becoming the object of our trust and the object of our lives. Have we been delivered by that parable?

from materialism? Have we been delivered from making these things little gods, little idols in our lives?

Has that parable fulfilled? Is it fulfilling the purpose which it has in our lives? world? Or again, take the parable of the virgins.

[16 : 19] A parable which reminds us that Jesus Christ will come again. Behold, the bridegroom comes. Is that parable fulfilling its function in your life and in my life?

Living as we do in a society which is essentially worldly, which regards life and human existence as being bordered by birth and by death?

Do we allow that parable to speak to us and to remind us that one day Jesus Christ will come again? That there is eternity as well as time? That there is life hereafter as well as life here?

Or do we allow ourselves to be squeezed into the mold of our secular society? We need a parable such as that one to deliver us from being squeezed and being molded into the worldly outlook of the society in which we live.

And so Jesus has given us these parables in order to create faith, in order to help us to believe, in order to maintain our faith, in order to develop our spirituality.

[17 : 38] He has given us parables for that purpose. But Jesus says that this is not the only purpose for which these parables have been given.

The reason for parables is not only to create faith but also to confirm unbelief. Jesus speaks about people quoting from Isaiah of people seeing yet not seeing, of hearing yet not hearing.

He quotes the commissioning of Isaiah, the great prophet, in the temple at Jerusalem in the year that King Uzziah died. Isaiah's ministry was to be one of judgment and its effect, its effect would be that the people would not see and the people would not understand.

And it is this particular part of Jesus' answer which makes this passage so difficult for us to understand. It appears that Jesus is saying here that he used parables in order that people would necessarily fail to understand his message.

In other words, that parables were employed by Jesus not only to challenge unbelief but in a sense to confirm it.

[19 : 09] how then can we reconcile this with the words of Jesus in verse 11, that the purpose of the parables is to initiate others into the secret of the kingdom of God.

How can we reconcile verse 11 with the verses which follow? How can we square it up with the message of the parables such as the hidden treasure, the priceless pearl, etc.

of which is clearly to urge people to seek with all their power to enter the kingdom of God. I think the only way we can reconcile Jesus' two elements in Jesus' answer is to recognize that there is a dual purpose, a double purpose in the telling of parables.

First of all, parables are told in order to create faith. faith. But if a parable does not create faith, then it will fulfill its second purpose of confirming unbelief.

And what is true of parables is also true of the gospel. We speak of people becoming gospel-hardened. God has given us his word to create faith, but if we persist in rejecting it, if we persist in refusing to follow it, we will find that that word which was given us to be a word of life will become a word of judgment.

[20 : 44] How can a parable do both? Well, a parable both reveals and conceals truth.

Parables are simple, yet cryptic. The truth in a parable is made concrete, but not necessarily self-evident.

The truth of parables does not very often stare you in the face. Jesus deliberately taught his parables in such a way that his hearers had to draw their own conclusions.

And so it is today, we must discover the message of the parables for ourselves. A parable does not give us the answer all prepackaged on a plate.

The parables are things we have to work on, we have to look at, we have to ask questions about. A parable demands activity on our part.

[21 : 53] A parable reveals truth to those who want to find it, but it conceals truth from those who are too lazy or too prejudiced to bother. And this is how a parable can both create faith and harden unbelief.

It both challenges and confirms unbelief. Now what Jesus is saying here was also said by the Apostle Paul in the passage which we read from 2nd Corinthians chapter 2.

He speaks there of God always causing us to triumph in Christ. And the allusion of Paul's writing there is to what was known as a Roman triumph, which was given by the emperor in Rome to all victorious generals when they returned to the capital.

In fact, we can perhaps translate Paul's words as follows. Now thanks be to God who always gives us a place of honor in Christ's triumphal procession. When a general, a victorious general returned to Rome, he would have a great parade, a victory parade, right through the city in front of the emperor.

His soldiers, his victorious soldiers would follow him. And behind the soldiers would come the prisoners of war who had been captured. Perfumes were released into the air, incense was burnt.

[23 : 32] There was a fragrance in the air which was sweet to the victors, but which must have been bitter to those who were captives. And Paul speaks of Christ having a triumphal procession.

And he says God causes us to triumph with Christ. God causes those of us who believe in him and who are saved by his grace to join in this procession as the victors.

But he goes on to say that those who are lost are also in that procession but they are there as captives. And that gospel which is a sweet fragrance to those who believe in Jesus Christ and who are victors in his triumph becomes a savor of death and to death to those who have rejected Christ and who on the day of judgment have to acknowledge him under coercion.

The New English Bible renders the phrase as follows a vital fragrance that brings life and it compares it with a deadly fume that kills.

And what Paul is saying here is that the gospel which is a vital fragrance to those who believes can become a deadly fume to those who persist in their unbelief.

[25 : 09] Those who believe the gospel and those who do not. And so the gospel saves but the gospel also condemns.

If the gospel does not create faith the gospel confirms and ratifies unbelief. John Calvin the great reformer comments on this verse as follows.

The gospel he says is preached unto salvation for that is its real purpose but only believers share in this salvation. For unbelievers it is an occasion of condemnation but it is they who make it so.

The proper function of the gospel is always to be distinguished from what we may call its accidental function which must be imputed to the depravity of men by which life is turned into death.

The proper function of parables the proper function of the gospel the proper function of the word of God is to create faith in the hearts and in the lives of men and women.

[26 : 14] That's why God has given us his word to create faith in your heart and in mine. That's its proper function. But if as Calvin says because of our depravity we reject that gospel then that gospel this gospel is word which we have before us this day has an accidental function of condemning us.

And perhaps even at this very hour there may be someone in this church and you're being condemned by this word because you're rejecting it because you're spurning it.

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. That's its proper function. But the gospel has an accidental function for those who reject it and who spurn it and that is it becomes a power to condemnation.

This perhaps has been vividly and grimly illustrated in recent weeks in the nuclear accident in the Ukraine. We think of nuclear power which many people have regarded as the answer to the energy needs of the world in the 21st century.

And it's undoubtedly true that nuclear power can create many things that are good in our society. But it had an accidental effect in Chernobyl. And it brought death.

[27 : 47] It brought contamination. It brought judgment in a sense. And the gospel is not, I don't think, too far-fetched to say that that in a sense is a modern parable of what Jesus is saying here.

That there is an element in the gospel which speaks to us not only of the goodness but of the severity of God. Not only of the justification of sinners which is available freely in Christ Jesus but of the judgment of God which comes upon those who reject it.

It is, as Luther said, God's strange work but it is still God's work. And we must learn, we must recognize that the God with whom we have to do is a God of justice as well as a God of mercy and of love.

But the proper purpose, the proper purpose of God's word and of God's gospel is to create faith. He is not the author or the instigator of unbelief.

And so if the gospel in all its simplicity fails to create faith then it confirms unbelief. Men and women can become gospel hardened.

[29 : 02] And you can find people in churches where the gospel is preached who have in their hearts an unbelief which is as hard if not harder.

And men and women who live in animism, who live in communism, men and women who are officially card-carrying atheists perhaps have an unbelief which is softer.

than the unbelief that you can find in men, some men and women who have rejected the gospel. So this is the point that Jesus presents to us.

The gospel has been given to us in order to create faith. And I would urge you to make use of the gospel to this effect. To respond to the gospel by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the proper function of it. This is the proper function of these parables. But if like the scribes and the Pharisees whom Jesus met, you persist in rejecting and misrepresenting and spurning that gospel, then be warned that that gospel itself will affect its own judgment upon you.

[30 : 16] And so therefore let us respond to the gospel. Let us respond to the word of God. Let us respond to it now.

While God's word is having some effect upon us. While it engages our attention. While it brings us to realize something of our need.

Let us respond now. Let us recognize that the gospel is not like some commodity in the shop which you, if you don't want today, you can go back and have tomorrow.

God in his mercy and in his grace is giving us today an opportunity to repent and to believe. And who knows if we will have that opportunity tomorrow. Who knows if we will have that opportunity tonight.

The gospel may be preached tonight. It may be preached tomorrow. And you may hear it again and again and again. But God may not speak to you. As he may be speaking to you today. Therefore respond now to the gospel.

[31 : 19] Lay hold upon it with both your hands. And trust the Christ of that gospel. The Christ who tells these parables is the Christ who offers himself through them.

And who offers himself to you and to me afresh this morning. May each and all of us individually and collectively by his grace respond to him.

And may we receive him as our savior and as our lord. And may we accept his teaching as the scepter with which he will rule and reign in and through our lives.

Amen. Let us pray. Our father in heaven.

We pray that thou will help us to have ears to hear. And that we may indeed know the secret. of the kingdom of God.

[32 : 23] Deliver us oh God from persisting in remaining outsiders. Help us to enter through the door into the kingdom while it is open for us.

May we indeed come. Now. May we respond now to our lord Jesus Christ. May we trust him.

Forbid oh lord that any of us should become hardened by this gospel. Forgive that any of us should experience its accidental purpose. Rather may we may experience its proper purpose.

Its proper function. That of bringing us to faith. In and obedience to. Our lord and savior Jesus Christ. For his sake.

Amen. Amen. Amen.