

PARABLES: DOORWAYS TO TRUTH

MATTHEW 13:10-17; MARK 4:21-24

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In our scripture reading today, we find what some people consider to be one of the most difficult passages to understand in the New Testament. It is the passage where Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah to explain why he used parables when he taught people. I think that the difficulty of the passage can be seen even clearer when we read how it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark. In MARK 4:11-12, Jesus told His disciples, "*The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven!*"

If we just look at these two verses without considering any other scripture, we almost have to conclude that the reason Jesus spoke in parables was to keep people from perceiving and understanding the truth. And the reason why Jesus did not want people to understand the truth was because, if they did understand the truth, they might turn from their sins and be forgiven.

But anyone who has read through the New Testament should realize that such thinking is entirely opposite from everything Jesus said and did. His whole mission was to save people from their sins. So, this presents us with a problem. Why did Jesus use parables to teach people? Why didn't He just teach the truth directly?

In order to answer this question, let us first consider the events that were taking place when Jesus started using parables to teach the crowds that were following Him.

According to all the gospel accounts, the first lengthy parable that Jesus taught was the parable of the sower. Prior to that time, Jesus taught truth directly without using parables. When Jesus taught truth directly, He often used certain figures of speech to illustrate His point. For instance, in JOHN 4:14, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the water He gave would become "*a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" In MARK 1:17, Jesus called Simon and Andrew to follow Him and said, "*Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" And, there are many other examples like these of Jesus using figures of speech to illustrate a point.

But when Jesus spoke the parable of the sower, He was not just using an illustration to support something He was teaching. The parable itself was the main point. The parables are stories. And Jesus would often just tell a story, and then He would stop and let those listening try to figure out the meaning of the story.

So when Jesus began to use parables to teach the crowds, it was a major change in His teaching style. For more than a year He taught truth directly, but then He began to use parables to teach the crowds. And once Jesus began to use parables, He did so right up to the very end of His earthly ministry. Such a big change in teaching style should make us wonder why Jesus needed to switch from teaching truth directly to using parables. The answer to this question is very important. I personally believe Jesus changed his teaching style, because the attitude of the people who were listening to Him had changed.

At the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, people were very curious. They listened to what Jesus had to say with honest interest. They watched Jesus carefully and sometimes questioned His actions. But then, people began to form opinions about Jesus. They determined that He was a bad person. They decided to kill Jesus. Their hearts became hardened so that it was hard for them to receive the truth. They began to question Jesus's motives. And, the fact that the hearts of people were becoming hardened caused Jesus to feel distressed. MARK 3:5 tells us that Jesus looked at some these people who had such a stubborn attitude toward him, and He was distressed at their stubborn hearts.

Now, it is at this point that we see Jesus begin to speak in parables to teach the crowds. It appears that Jesus adopted this new method of teaching to respond to the hardened mind-set of the Jews that had made Him feel distress. The new method would attract them and, at the same time, hide from them the deeper truths and mysteries

which tended to offend them and drive them away from Him.

If Jesus didn't want the Jews to know truth, all He had to do was to stop teaching them altogether. But, I believe He deeply wanted even those who hated Him to know truth, so He changed His method of teaching in order to help them.

Now, with this in mind, let's look again at the words Jesus quoted from Isaiah. This time, let's do a comparative study of the passage, looking at it as it is quoted from MARK 4:11-12 and MATTHEW 13:13-15.

I want you to notice that there is a big difference in the ways Matthew and Mark record what Jesus said. Mark said that Jesus taught in parables so that people would see and not perceive; hear and not understand. Matthew said that the reason why Jesus taught in parables was because people saw but did not really see; and they heard but did not really understand. Another big difference is that Mark seems to indicate that the reason why Jesus did not want them to understand truth was, because if they did, they would turn and be forgiven. Matthew also uses the word "otherwise," but he first quotes more of the words from Isaiah. He uses the quote from Isaiah to tell us that the people's hearts have already become callused; otherwise, they could understand the truth and they would repent and God would heal them.

So when we look at these two passages side by side, we can see a big difference in the meaning of what Jesus was saying. The question is, which passage is correct? Both meanings cannot be right.

In this case, I believe that we must use the Gospel of Matthew to interpret the Gospel of Mark. What Mark wrote was a condensed version of what Jesus said. We need the words of Matthew to help us understand the true meaning. And, the true reason why Jesus began to use parables was because the hearts of many of the people had become hardened. They were no longer responding to the truth when it was presented to them in a direct way. In fact, the more truth that Jesus gave them directly, the more they reacted and the more their hearts became hardened. Jesus was actually doing them more harm than good by sharing the truth directly. But, rather than giving up on them, He decided to use an indirect method of sharing truth.

In MARK 4:21, Jesus makes the point that a lamp is made in order to be seen. The lamp is for seeing. Then, in verse 23 He says, "*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*" Seeing and hearing are the two senses that Jesus is emphasizes as being very important in the process of believing in truth. They are also the two senses just emphasized in the passage from Isaiah. There is a need for people to see and to hear. The light of the lamp is meant to be seen and truth is meant to be heard.

In MARK 4:22, Jesus said, "*For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.*" Here, Jesus is saying that the reason for hiding the light and the reason for concealing the truth is so that, in the end, the light and the truth can be revealed. The parables hide and conceal truth so that, in the end, the truth can be revealed.

God's method of dealing with people who have willfully begun to lose their sight is to hide the light that would blind them altogether. And, God's method of dealing with people who have willfully begin to lose their hearing is to hide the truth that would make them totally deaf. He hides the truth in parables that the people will not reject. And, when the people hear the parables, they will think about the meaning. And, perhaps in their thinking, their hearts will soften and their attitudes will change. If a parable can change someone's attitude, then it has done a great deal of good. Because, only when attitudes change are people able to receive truth directly.

In MARK 4:24, Jesus said, "*Consider carefully what you hear.*" It is our attitude of hearing that will determine how much truth we will be able to hear. Jesus said, "*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.*" Here, Jesus is not talking about material wealth; rather, He is talking about our ability to perceive and understand truth. This ability will either increase or decrease. It all depends on how we respond to whatever truth is being revealed to us.

Jesus wanted people to increase their ability to understand truth. That's why He spoke to them in parables.

And so, the parable is used to help people change their attitude toward hearing. Perhaps for most people it will be a parable, and nothing else, that will make the biggest difference as to whether or not they are finally able to

understand the truth, repent, and be saved from their sins.

Parables are stories that attract people and cause people to think about the mysteries of life. Throughout the ages, God has used parables to hide truth and, at the same time, attract people in such a way to cause them to think and question and search. PROVERBS 25:2 says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings." God's method is to conceal truth so that we will search it out. For most of us, it is only after we have searched that we will appreciate what we will find.

Jesus, Himself, was the greatest parable of all. In 1 JOHN 1:1 the apostle John said, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this, we proclaim concerning the Word of Life." Jesus came, and they looked at Him and heard Him and touched Him and found the Word of Life. Through their contact with Jesus, their attitudes were changed and they were able to find the truth that would lead to eternal life.

So let us consider using Christ's method. Let us never force the mysteries of our faith upon people who are unwilling to hear. Let our own lives become a parable that will cause people to ask us why we are so different from everyone else or what is the reason for the joy we have in the midst of difficult circumstances? Maybe we think that we lack the training to explain the truth in a way that will convince others to believe. But, even though that kind of training is important, maybe it is not the most important thing. Everyday, you have the opportunity to become a parable to many people who would reject the truth even if you could explain it clearly to them.

In one church I served, I taught an adult Sunday school class. I only had one student, and I often felt frustrated because the truth I was teaching him seemed to make little or no difference in his life. He was a wealthy man and seemed to have everything he needed. He was also the treasurer of the church, and for that reason, he knew how much everyone gave. One day a financial need was presented to the church, and one family in the church decided to withdraw their entire life's savings to donate to that need. When my student found out what that family had done, a change happened in his life. He became more receptive to hearing the truth. One single act had done more than a thousand words to help that man become receptive to truth.

Giving a direct, verbal witness to the truth is important. But, there is a great deal more to witnessing than explaining to people the mysteries of our faith. Although the final goal is for people to understand these mysteries so they can repent and be saved from sin, there is usually much work to be done before a person will even hear what we have to say.

So, I leave you with a challenge to broaden your thinking about witnessing. Make it a goal to communicate truths about God to people. Learn how to share the gospel message. But, also learn how to use parables when it becomes evident that people are not receptive to receiving truth directly. This is also a form of witnessing. Become a living parable to those around you. And, learn how to share stories and testimonies that will cause people to search out the truth. David Teng is looking for people to start a drama team. That is an excellent way for some to use parables to communicate truth. Parables are important, because they are doorways to understanding truth.