

The Purpose of Parables: to Conceal Kingdom Truth (Mat. 13.10-17)

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Introduction

Before we study each parable of Matthew 13, we should first think through the purpose of parables. The chapter reveals three purposes:

To manifest kingdom presence

To conceal kingdom truth

To reveal kingdom truth

Last week, we dealt with the first purpose, to manifest kingdom presence that Matthew bases on Psalm 78.2. In a word, Matthew tells us that according to the Psalm, God's Israelite prophet, Asaph, will gush forth in parables, but this he does not do. Psalm 78 is a promise of what the coming prophet, true Israelite, and the greater Asaph will do. Jesus fulfilled the promise that Asaph gave, anticipating the pouring out of parables in the great future. This OT Israelite prophet began a prophetic work that he could not complete; it only Messiah can complete it when He comes and opens His mouth in parables. Therefore, Jesus is the Messiah who shines the light of the sun on the dark paths of Israel's past. He will explain the parable of ancient Israel in a gush of parables. The parables as a method, and in their content, reveal the presence of the kingdom and the king, promised in Israel's history, and hidden from realization in the purposes of God since the beginning of the world. Thus, we have great motivation to put forth strenuous effort to learn the wisdom of God from Jesus in His parables.

Let us now turn our attention to another purpose of the parables of Jesus: to conceal kingdom truth. At first, it seems counter-intuitive to say that a teaching method has the purpose of concealment. We usually think that teaching opens the door to truth rather than closing it.

With the point of counter-intuitiveness in mind, we can outline this study of Matthew 13.10-17 with two hooks on which to hang our thoughts: the fact of this concealing function, and its cause. After that, we can make some fitting applications.

1A. The fact of this concealing function (vs. 10-12)

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"¹¹ And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

This unusual function of parables makes up a direct answer to the question, **Why do you speak to them in parables?** We have the answer Jesus gave at the end of verse 11 (cf. **why...to them...to them it has not been given**). From the first half of the verse, we can fill out the Lord's meaning: I speak to them (to the people of Israel in general, the multitudes on the beach, 13.1-2) in parables because it has not been given to them to know, grasp, perceive, and understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

The concealing function of parables is a fact that is intentional in the Lord's use of parable clusters (13.34, **indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable**). This purpose to conceal is a bold fact and a number of things in the text nail it down.

1) First, Jesus nails the bold fact from a subjective angle.

That is, He takes us inside the mind to how people see and understand the mysteries or secrets of the kingdom. Mysteries refer to the objective fact that the kingdom is not simply ideas

that are puzzling and difficult to understand. Instead, they are realities that are present, once hidden in promise but now present in fulfillment. Thus, the secrets are things hidden in OT anticipation but now revealed in NT realization. As we learned from the first purpose of parables, in both form (in clusters) and in content (kingdom teaching), they manifest kingdom presence; they do so despite the fact that they also have this concealing function. Kingdom realities are present before the eyes of the people of God. What God promised to them is now come to fruition. These realities are now in the clear light of the day that is dawning. They are objective facts, objective realities and their manifestation is powerfully present as the kingdom powerfully advances itself (Mat 11.11-12). However, the multitudes do not see the realities that shine brightly before their very eyes. They do not understand the truths about these realities.

Why do they not see and understand? The answer here is a very radical bottom line. It is because God did not give them the subjective capacity of mind to look at the things of God and know them for what they are. The use of clusters of parables fits hand in glove with the negative of not giving knowledge: parables are a means that God uses to pass people by and leave them in their ignorance of the truth. Looking inside at the capacity to know nails down this purpose of parables. Jesus spoke in parables to conceal kingdom truth.

2) Second, He nails the bold point by a proverb.

He says, **For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away (v. 12).** There is obviously a “play on words” here in that “**the one who has not...has.**” He does not have and he does have at the same time, so, there must be different senses to having and not having.

Thus, verse 12 is a proverb or puzzle, and it sounds like the statement, “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” The verse is proverbial in that it records something that happens often in human experience like having much and getting more in contrast to having little and ending up with even less. Here the proverb illustrates the concealing function of parables. Accordingly, God will give more truth to those who have truth, that is, who believe in Christ and seek diligently to obey Him. Whereas, those who do not have truth will lose what they seem to have or think they have (cf. Lk 8.18, **Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away**). There is a sobering warning in this word that tells us that people may think that they have God’s truth, and actually not have it.

What does it mean to take away what people they have but do not actually have? How can you take something people do not possess away from them? You cannot take away what is not there to begin with. This makes us think about what their actual condition is. They are in darkness; they stand at a distance from the truth, even though they think they have God’s truth. In this context, “taking away” means that God sends them farther away, taking away means that their darkness deteriorates. The people of Israel are in view again, and like the cleansing of a house of demons that in the end becomes even more unclean than before, they cleaned up their acts when John and Jesus first appeared on the scene. Then they called the one a demon and the other a glutton. They do not manifest the right response to the coming of the kingdom, which is to seize the kingdom as a prize (Mat. 11.11-16).

Therefore, parables have a concealing function. They fit with the hard truth that God purposes to leave the multitudes of Israel in their ignorance. The parables serve the purpose of concealment by which God chooses not to grant knowledge of kingdom truth to them. Parable clusters hide the truth from the crowds, they send people farther away from the truth, and they send the multitudes into deeper darkness (cf. Mat 11.25; Rom 9.18, 21-23; Jn 12.39).

Thus, the puzzling, non-explicit, thought provoking, and thought demanding character of parables conceal kingdom truth; the Lord accentuates this fact even more when He speaks only in parabolic clusters.

The text specifies the people to whom the concealing function of parables applies and how it works. It applies to people that think they have spiritual knowledge (the crowds are following a religious teacher as religious people with a long heritage as the covenant people of God). How the concealing function works depends on the meaning of “not having,” (**the one who has not**) that is, not possessing knowledge of the kingdom now manifestly present. This is the equivalent of not hearing, and thus of not keeping, of saying but not doing (cf. Mat 7.21-24). The idea here is about people who think they hear and understand the things of God, but they do not have, hold, or possess them in the way of right use by obedient understanding. What they actually have is a mere intellectual possession. The law of experience at work is that in matters of kingdom truth there can be no fence sitting (you must be for or you are against; you cannot serve God and money); if there is no forward progress there is retrogression. Thus, “the only method of securing what we have is by improving it” (Alexander 357); if we do not improve it then in effect we lose it.

Now we can see how parables work in this negative way of exposing superficial knowledge and preventing actual knowledge. Parables demand things of the hearer; they demand determined pursuit of the truth in submission to Christ. They demand the work of asking, seeking, and knocking with strong persevering trust in Christ. In short, they demand a seeking faith that obeys in seeking with the goal of obeying the Lord. Parables call for obedient seeking that involves seeking for obedient living. Thus, parable clusters *in fact* conceal the knowledge of the truth from those who do not strenuously seek kingdom righteousness first, from a heart of love for God above all earthly things. This overlaps with and leads into the next point.

2A. The cause of this concealing function of parables

Expanding on His answer, Jesus adds the notion of cause to the discussion. The “why” question involves two things, purpose and cause. The question itself grows. “Why speak in parables” has the purpose of concealment. Then, with purpose in view, the question becomes “Why is concealment the purpose of parables?” He answers the fuller question in 13.13-15:

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. ¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.

Remarkably, Jesus speaks in parables because the multitudes see but do not see, hear but do not hear, and see and hear but do not understand (13.13). This is remarkable, almost startling. He uses parables to conceal kingdom truth because of man's spiritual condition as blind, deaf, and ignorant. In a fundamental sense, we have to say that people are hardened, blinded, and have truth concealed from them by parable clusters because they are sinners and do not have the ability to see and hear kingdom truth that shines clearly in their eyes and rings loudly in their ears. They are blind and the purpose of parables is a means that God uses to keep them in the dark; it is a means that goes with not giving them knowledge.

To confirm this point and deepen it, Jesus refers to the prophecy of Isaiah (6.9-10) where the Lord commissions Isaiah to preach to the people of Israel until judgment takes its toll, “**until cities lie waste without inhabitant and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste**” (Isa 6.11). Three comments are in order regarding how Matthew and Jesus look back to Isaiah.

1) Matthew interprets the prophet to be announcing the fact that the covenant people will *persist* in hearing but not understanding and they will *persist* in seeing but not perceiving (Isa 6.9) by citing these words of Jesus, “**You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive**” (Mat 13.14).

2) In 13.15, Matthew stresses the fact that the spiritual condition of the multitudes in Israel is the reason that explains why Jesus uses parables to conceal kingdom truth from them. If we compare Isaiah 6.10, Matthew 13.15, Mark 4.12, and Luke 8.10.b, we discover two strands of teaching. On one hand, the OT prophet of God who anticipates the coming prophet, Jesus, makes hearts dull, ears heavy, and eyes blind lest they see, hear, understand, and turn (Isa 6.10). Mark and Luke stress this side of the Lord’s prophetic gushing forth in parables. The point in Mark and Luke is that parables blind the eyes of those who see the kingdom manifesting itself with power (Matthew makes this point in 13.14). On the other hand, in 13.15, Matthew stresses the fact that the prophet speaks to a people who persist in hearing but not understanding, in seeing but not perceiving (Isa 9.10). Thus, His point is that because of Israel’s blindness (though they think they see) and deafness (though they think they hear) that Jesus conceals kingdom truth from them by His use of parables. In other words, Matthew emphasizes human sin, blindness, and irresponsibility as the reason for the blinding purpose of parables.

Therefore, Matthew records our Lord’s interpretation of Israel’s persistence in not understanding and not perceiving (based on Isa 6.9). Jesus informs us that this persistence in ignorance is because they have closed their eyes, **For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed** (Mat 13.a). His parables have the purpose of concealing the truth from people who close their eyes to it. Our Lord emphasizes human responsibility and the darkening consequences of irresponsibility.

3) In Matthew’s account, Jesus emphasizes the consequences of the sin of turning away from the truth by closing their eyes to it. Persistence on this evil pathway prevents them from seeing with their eyes, hearing with their ears, and understanding with their hearts (Mat 13.15b). Furthermore, their sinful condition prevents them from turning to the Lord and thus from being healed by the Lord who promises to heal them if they turn to Him (Mat 13.15b w/ Isa 6.10b).

Applications

It seems that we can make at least three applications from the concealing purpose of parables. We can phrase each as a question.

1) Does Jesus teach the doctrines of election and reprobation in this text?

Although many commentators seek to whitewash or water down the teaching of Jesus here in Matthew 13.14, it is unmistakable that the only way that people know the truth is by God’s giving it to some and *not giving it to others*. This is election and *reprobation*. The parables serve God’s purpose of reprobation, which is the passing by of some leaving them in their sin.

2) How can this concealing function and the discrimination it involves be just?

There is no way to violate justice here because all people are fallen sinners and can make no claim on God for mercy. Justice demands that He leave them in their sin to face the consequences of final judgment. Like Israel, we all close our eyes to the truth. Consider the words of the hymn, “how sweet and awful [awesome] is the place”: “Twas the same word that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in, else we had still refused to taste and perished in our sin.” If God grants mercy to some, while passing by others, this is a matter of His sovereign. This mercy arises within Himself with no dependence on what sinners do. The knowledge of God is something God must give them. Finally, if we insist on exact justice, then we will all perish!

Christ executes justice and mercy comes to undeserving sinners by the sovereign will of the Lord Jesus.

3) What vital positive lessons arise from this teaching for us who know kingdom truth? This teaching gives us a solid basis for hope, prayer, and praise.

We have hope for those who do not know God, whose eyes glaze over when we speak to them about the claims of Christ. Our hope is in God; if we depended on people, we would have no hope because “seeing they see not” and “hearing they hear not”; they persist in the closing of their eyes to all the evidences of kingdom truth that shine on them and warm them like the sun. Nevertheless, if God grants them knowledge of kingdom truth, then they will know Him in truth. If God blesses their eyes, then when they look out at the world, they will know that every fact is an indirect word from God; then they will hear His voice in creation and in Scripture; then they will possess knowledge in the right way of submission to the authority of God and commitment to do His holy will.

Knowing that the only way that people come to know God is by the action of God introducing Himself to them causes us to pray for family and friends; we pray that He will open their eyes and we rest all our hopes for them in Him. Prayer is the ultimate expression of that hope.

Finally, we have a lesson in worship. In the end, we praise the Lord because we remember that this is how we came to know Him. We acknowledge our sinfulness; we admit that we deserve nothing from His hand. Still, lo and behold, He came to us in our darkness, alienation, death, and bondage and introduced Himself to us. By His gracious call, He made Himself known to us. He caused us to know Him. He gave us the subjective, inner, capacity to know Him in truth. When all the dust settles, we must bend our knees in worship. This is “sweet and awesome.” When we see clearly, we must pour out our souls in praise and thanksgiving to our matchless Lord Jesus who did all the work that was necessary for God to bless our eyes and ears.

Let us therefore fall down before the majesty of our God who promised from the beginning to bring His image bearers through history to eternal Sabbath rest, and who keeps His covenant despite the fall of man into sin. He keeps covenant through the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of Adam, Son of Abraham, Son of God, and Sovereign Lord. To Him be all glory both now and forevermore. Amen.