

## Introduction

Before we take up the specific parables in Matthew 13, we should first consider three purposes of the parables. We covered two of them in the last two sermons: 1) to manifest kingdom presence, and 2) to conceal kingdom truth. Now we can discuss the third purpose of parables, which is to *reveal* kingdom truth. The outline for today's message has four points: the revealing purpose of parables is selective, gracious, saving, and edifying.

### 1A. First, the revealing purpose of parables is selective

This fact is evident in the contrast between "to you" and "to them" in 13.11b (**to you it has been given to know...but them it has not been given**). The passage reeks with particularism. God has a select people represented in the disciples of Jesus. Like these disciples, all disciples are sinners who can make no claim on God by anything thing that they do. Nonetheless, disciples are given something others are not given. Jesus says, "**to you it has been given**" in direct and pointed contrast to the concealing of truth from others, "**but to them it has not been given.**" Distinctively, selectively, and particularly, God gives knowledge through the parables to some and not others.

It is a remarkable fact, to say the least, to hear these words right in the middle of the Gospel of Matthew, at the center of the gospel of our Lord Jesus, and woven into the very fabric of our Lord's teaching about the coming of the kingdom. Thus, selection or election is part of the cutting edge of the truth we have from the lips of Christ.

Divine selection that comes to expression through parables does not contradict the Great Commission of Matthew 10 and 28. It fills out that commission. God commands that we preach the gospel universally among men of every nation. At the same time, its impact and influence is knife-like, cutting, and discriminating. The gospel of the parables reaches particular sinners, causing them to know, see, hear, perceive, and understand the things of God, while at the same time that gospel blinds other sinners, preventing them from seeing, hearing, and understanding. The persons to whom the parables give knowledge of God are those "**to whom the Son chooses to reveal him**" (Mat 11.27b) while it is hidden from others (Mat 11.25). This accords with the account in the Gospel of Mark in the "so that" of Jesus, **To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables so that they may indeed see but not perceive and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven** (4.11-12).

In other words, parables, like the gospel as a whole, and like the Savior Himself, have "come" to seek out and save particular lost sinners, while leaving other lost sinners to perish in their sins. Thus, the revealing purpose of parables is in the first place selective; concealing knowledge from some and giving it to others are complementary facts that make the point election clear in an emphatic way.

### 2A. The revealing purpose of parables is also graciously efficacious

For this point, we simply notice the word given (Mat 13.11, **to you it has been given...to them it has not been given**). We should note the passive quality of the word, which indicates a bestowal of kingdom knowledge. Emphasis is on God's giving or granting, not our receiving or accepting. The knowledge in view is not a presentation to the mind as an offer that one must receive in order to possess. The knowledge is a possession given to some and not given to others. Thus, parables reveal kingdom truth as a grace gift.

Let us try to think of this gift in the clearest possible way in terms of the context. This "giving" cannot simply be an offer to people in general that some receive and others reject. In that case, knowledge would be an offer depending for its reception on the people who receive it.

However, if the knowledge of the kingdom were merely an offer to people for some to receive and for others to reject, then all would reject it and no one would receive it.

Why do I make this claim in this context? It is because Jesus states emphatically that the multitudes will never understand or perceive (**you will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive**, Mat 13.14). Hearing and seeing indicate that they have the gospel offer ringing in their ears and shining in their eyes, but they persist in not understanding, not believing, and not obeying the word of God's prophets, both Isaiah and the greater than Isaiah (cf. Isa 6.9; Mat 13.14 w/ Mat 7.24 where hearing involves doing). In this context, grace must overcome persistent refusal of the gospel. *The Lord must powerfully bestow this knowledge of the kingdom upon them by grace*. He does this for some who persist in refusing the gospel and not for others who persist in refusing it. Two things are here: both the power and the undeserved nature of God's grace. Grace is evidently much more than unmerited favor; it is powerfully and effectually bestowed favor to particular, elect, and undeserving sinners.

### 3A. The revealing purpose of parables is saving

Let us not forget that this knowledge of the kingdom is saving knowledge because it is the opposite of what happens when we persist in our sin. Thus, if God opens our eyes (that we persist in closing, 13.15a), then we will see with our eyes and hear with our ears and understand with our hearts and turn, and God will heal us (13.15b).

Because of the importance of this point, we should think through some things in 13.15 that pin down the fact that selective and efficacious grace is also saving grace.

#### 1) We must read the list as a unit

In other words, we cannot draw a thick line of division anywhere between knowing, seeing, hearing, understanding, turning, and being healed (being forgiven, Mk 4.12). We must try to keep the entire picture in view, and see it as a unified whole.

#### 2) We must infer to the opposite

When God gives knowledge of the kingdom, He opens the eyes to see, He opens the ears to understand, and He thus causes us to turn away from ourselves to embrace Christ. We arrive at this conclusion by good and necessary consequence, by inferring from one thing to its opposite.

#### 3) We must interpret "knowing" in its fullness

In context, knowing has to involve a complex of things that include seeing, hearing, understanding, and turning from our sins. It is much more than mere intellectual apprehension. As we have seen, hearing involves harkening, heeding, and obeying (Mat 7.24). Even in the very beginning of the Christian life, in the turning of repentance, there is obedience, the obedience of faith that Paul speaks of in Romans (1.16; 16.25). Repentance involves the obedience of turning away from our selves and our sins to Christ. Furthermore, this turning to Christ is for obedience to Him in all things. Christian knowledge is like threads within a fabric. Threads of knowledge are part of a larger fabric of repentance. What we should know about knowing, about knowledge, is that it is part of the fullness that pertains to hearing, seeing, understanding, turning, and healing.

#### 4) We must understand healing as now and not yet

In Matthew's Gospel, the healing miracles define the gospel of the kingdom and put the great hope of resurrection glory in front of our eyes.

Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that knowing God is inseparable from eternal life. In John 17, He speaks to the Father saying, "**And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent**" (v. 3). If having true knowledge of the king and His kingdom means possessing eternal life, then knowing must include healing both now and not yet, sanctification now on the way and then resurrection glory in heaven.

Therefore, those to whom God gives knowledge of the king and kingdom in fact repent and begin a journey that ends in heaven without fail. The selective, efficacious, and gracious giving of knowledge is saving. This is truly marvelous and wonderful.

#### 4A. The revealing purpose of parables is edifying

Edification (building up by teaching or opening the door to truth) may be what we think of first when the topic of parables comes up. We find this aspect of the revealing purpose of the Lord's parables in the goal He sets forth for them, which is "to know": **Why do you speak to them in parables?"** <sup>11</sup> **And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Mat 13.10-11).**

With the fullness of Christian knowledge in mind, we can reflect some on how parables have a revealing, edifying function as windows into the house of truth. We look through the parable into the rooms of the building to see the various truths that are present there. Two things make parables edifying in this way: they are vivid and obscure.

##### 1B. Parables are vivid

By definition, parables are vivid and graphic comparisons. The very word, parable, comes from two words, throw and alongside. A parable is literally a placing alongside. Jesus puts kingdom truth alongside the creation. He makes comparisons between things in the created order and the things of the kingdom. We can easily understand how He can do this when we recall that the history of creation unfolds the way it does because of the purposes of God hidden in it and driving it since the foundation of the world (cf. 13.34-35). Therefore, analogies between God's redemptive purposes and creation history abound.

Here is a door to knowledge. Simple, common, and interesting things are tools for basic biblical knowledge. They catch the imagination, capture our attention and they do so with clarity. Hence, we read of a sower who went forth to sow, mustard seed, wheat and weeds. In Matthew 13, we have seed sowing, plants growing, leaven expanding, buried treasures, pearls, and fishnets. In their vividness, these analogies serve as windows into the house of truth that edify.

##### 2B. Parables are obscure

An obscurity about parables gives them an edifying quality. This works out in different ways. Sometimes Jesus preached in parable clusters with little or no explanation as this entire chapter (Mat 13) shows. The disciples often lacked understanding as to why Jesus spoke in parables and regarding the meaning of specific parables. At one point, Jesus asked the disciples, **"Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"** (Mk 4.13). From Mark, we know that they did not understand the parable of the sower (4.13), and from Matthew, we know that they did not understand the parable of the wheat and weeds (13.36, his disciples came to him saying, **"Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field"**).

The fact that parables illustrate kingdom truths may be easy for us to see, while the truths they teach may still elude us. Nonetheless, even this obscure aspect of parables is edifying. The puzzling proverb-like quality of the parables (in themselves and in how the Lord used them) arouses active thought. You have to think, concentrate, weigh, and compare to learn from the parables. This engages the mind, fills it with puzzling elements, and in time takes the thinker to a higher level of understanding, a level that is fuller and richer than what went before. Through parables, we experience a wealth of biblical teaching in pieces from here and there throughout the Scriptures. At first, they are dark and disconnected, but eventually they come together into a delightful whole. This experience is like putting a picture puzzle together, eventually, we see the beautiful landscape with many nuances and details.

Thus, obscurity serves richness, edifying richness.

In summary, I can say that the revealing and edifying function of parables puts the gospel of the kingdom before you with great promise. The promise is saving knowledge, restoration knowledge, and image bearing restoration knowledge. That is the promise of being truly human and returning to true humanness, self-identity, and true self-worth. It means you have restoration to your true place in the order of things on this earth. By this saving grace, you have personal dignity, purpose in living, and ultimate meaning to your life. These things have definition by God's creative design for men and women, the design from which all have fallen and to which we have restoration by grace in Christ Jesus. In His kingdom, you have value, greatness, inheritance, reason to be, will to live, love of life, joy in learning, and delight in living because of the awesome privilege of walking with God every waking hour of your life on earth.

### Applications

These promises are yours in a now and not yet growing fashion. Therefore, to experience them in their fullness, you must come to grips with some basic duties that our Lord teaches in the Sermon on the Mount and in the parables. Consider how the parables focus the duties that pertain to us on our spiritual journey (giving to know is a beginning and a continuing).

1) First, you must place a premium value on learning as a Christian

You must give a priority to learning the gospel, to learning the mysteries of the kingdom of God. With all the other things you do in life and that pull at your time (and necessarily so, since you pray for and work for daily bread), you must recognize the value of knowledge of the kingdom of God and give it maximal importance. This means that in the pull and tug of things, you cannot neglect these things. You know that the parables underscore this fact and call you to study them to go forward in knowing the mysteries now manifest in the parables of Jesus. You must seek knowledge, truth, and understanding of the parables as a primary goal of your life as a Christian.

2) Second, you know from the parables that you must inquire of the Lord

Your seeking translates into praying. Like the disciples, you should ask the Lord about this parable and that parable saying, "Lord, what does it mean?" Again, learning is not mere intellectualism because it is borne along by prayer. When you seek Him by asking, you please Him. Asking for understanding is good, right, proper, and necessary!

3) Third, you must study, meditate, reflect, and think about the parables. Not only do you ask the Lord for explanation, but also the Lord asks questions of you. He says to you, "What do people think of me? What do you think of me? Who do you think I am? Do you understand the parables?"

In other words, you must have, and exercise, a determined seeking faith. Things are obscure, so you try all the harder to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. You study, then you pray; you pray, then you study. You examine and re-examine. When you cannot make heads or tails of something, you cling to the Lord Jesus waiting for another day. You cannot merely look back (resting on your laurels or on accomplishments in the past). In order to learn the wisdom of God through the parables, you must go forward, turning over every stone in prayerful study. Thus, you must exercise critical thinking that includes making logical inferences, open-minded humility, self-criticism, and submission to God.

4) Finally, you must seek to know the Lord better and better through His parables with the goal of living more fully under His authority as your king. His salvation involves a saving rule because He is Sabbath Lord. This is the bottom line. Repentance goes hand in hand with faithful learning because true knowledge is inseparable from obedience.

The summary prayer in this regard is something to this effect: "**O Lord Jesus, teach me the mysteries of your kingdom that I may see with my eyes, hear with my ears, understand with my heart, and live my life for you, in reverence before you, and for your honor and glory. Amen.**"