

Jesus' Greatest Hits

The Purpose of Parables

Part 13 - September 2, 2007

[VIDEO: BIG LAKE]

Jesus often taught around the Sea of Galilee. When the crowds got too big, and they pressed in too close, He would simply push off in a boat, and His disciples would paddle Him out into the water to speak. It was a natural auditorium. The people gathered along the shore, and the water helped to carry His voice.

But, have you ever wondered why He spoke in so many parables? If God is going to go to all the trouble to come to Earth to speak to mankind, doesn't it seem like He would just come out and tell us what's on His mind?! In *The Purpose of Parables*, we'll see how Jesus responded to this very question, because the disciples wanted to know too.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables ... The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 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. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." - *Matthew 13:1-3; 10-17 NIV*

Jesus didn't speak the way His disciples thought He should. It left a lot of people confused ... including the disciples! When they approached Him, I don't think they were asking out of curiosity, as much as just questioning His wisdom. Like when a wife says to her husband, "Why do you do that?!" She's not so looking for an answer; she's asking in order to say, "Stop doing that. It's not helping."

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" - *Matthew 13:10 NIV*

I could see Peter saying, "Would you like me to speak for you? I kind of have a gift for telling it like it is!"

Q: If you were writing God's script, how would He speak?

"Created beings, behold your God incarnate. I am offering myself as a propitiation to atone for your transgressions!"

You don't expect: "Have you heard the one about the guy who was trying to pick a speck out of his friend's eye ... but he had a hard time because he had this giant log sticking out of his own?!"

The large crowd listened to him with delight. - *Mark 12:37 NIV*

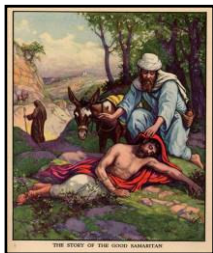
It was great for "ratings", but terrible for religious respect. Storytelling was Jesus' favorite teaching technique:

... He did not say anything to them without using a parable. - *Matthew 13:34b NIV*

There are so many benefits for using stories to communicate:



1. Stories capture attention. Jesus was entertaining; that is, He knew how to capture and hold attention for an extended period of time.
2. Stories stir emotion. His stories prodded and poked and upset and incited. They often raised more questions than they answered. And left people puzzled and perplexed and shocked and surprised. They moved people to decision or action.
3. Stories increase retention. They paint mental pictures that fire up the imagination and stick in our brains long after we've heard them. And this was vital, since many of them couldn't be fully understood or appreciated until *after* the cross.
4. Stories disarm opposition (*especially* humorous ones). They bypass our natural defense mechanisms because of their indirect nature. You find yourself identifying with the characters instead of resisting the exhortation. I could say, "You're a jerk, and you need to stop being so arrogant." But, you'd receive it much better if I said, "Have you heard about the bunny and the naughty squirrel?"



Jesus taught profound truths in simple ways, because, He spoke to inspire, not to impress. Simple doesn't mean simplistic; it means clear and easily understandable. And it requires real insight to communicate profound truths in simple ways.

You don't really understand something unless you can communicate it in a simple way. - *Albert Einstein*

Beware of believers who try to pass themselves off as spiritual intellectuals by purposely speaking above your head. Big words can hide big insecurities! Humility marks the mature disciple. Jesus used simple words, not theological jargon.

He didn't speak in the classical Greek of the scholar; He spoke in Aramaic (the street language of the day). And He talked about birds pecking seeds, and lost coins, and normal, everyday objects that anyone could relate to. We should imitate and celebrate the way Jesus spoke, because it reveals God's desire to come to us and communicate on our level.

However, there's a warning in His answer to His disciples:

He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." – *Matthew 13:11 NIV*

When He says: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom ..." He's referring to the "mysteries" that only God could reveal. And the "mystery" that God was steadily revealing was this:

- God's chosen people believed that the Messiah's kingdom would be literal and physical, and would destroy their enemies.
- But the kingdom was going to exist in the heart of *anyone* who received the Messiah's *sacrifice*, and made Him their Lord.

He told the parable of the blind leading the blind to warn them that their religious leaders were steering them the wrong way. He told the parable of the new wineskins to let them know that the kingdom was coming in a new and unexpected way. He told the parable of the two builders to warn them to compare His rock-solid words against the sinking-sand of the Pharisees. He told the parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son to help them see that God loves all lost sinners. He told the parable of the great banquet to warn them of the danger of rejecting the obvious invitation.

And on and on it goes: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast mixed into bread. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net.

These are the "secrets" that weren't given to "them". But, who is "them"? And why don't *they* get the secrets?

Jesus explains more about who "them" is in the next two lines:

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. – *Matthew 13:12 NIV*

So there's your answer: The disciples are the ones who do have. And "them" are the ones who don't have.

Q: Don't have ... what?!

A: A desire to seek *first* the Kingdom of God; and a readiness to receive it whenever and however He reveals it.

Acting on truth qualifies us for more truth. If we fail to act on truth as we hear it, even what we're currently holding onto will slip through our fingers. Those in the crowd, who came seeking the truth ready and willing to obey the truth, were rewarded with an abundance of truth. But those who only came looking for a miracle, a good story, or an argument, couldn't make heads or tails out of those parables.

Jesus separated the truth-seekers from the curiosity-seekers.

This is why I speak to THEM in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" – *Matthew 13:13-15 NIV*

Hearing God requires a readiness to put His words into practice. Notice that it wasn't God who closed their eyes: "They have closed their eyes". The knowledge of the kingdom is unavailable to those who have no desire to open their eyes, take up their cross, and follow Him.

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. - *Matthew 13:16 NIV*

You've seen the light! You've embraced the truth! When you come across something in the Word that you don't fully understand, you press in and seek the answers, right? After all, you don't want to be like ... "them"!

For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. - *Matthew 13:17 NIV*

You know who Jesus is! (God in flesh). You know what Jesus did! (Died our death; paid our penalty). And you know why He did it! (For God so loved the world). The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you! The question is: What are you going to do with 'em?

Let's see how well you've been listening; answer *true* or *false* when I ask the questions. In this passage, we've learned that:

1. We should find the *simplest* way to explain our faith.
2. Parables can simultaneously reveal and conceal truth.
3. Jesus tried to confuse the slower folks in the crowd.
4. If we don't obey, truth is taken away.