

## Why Does He Speak in Parables?

Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

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10 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. 13 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."

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

34 All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." (Matt 13:10-17; 34-35)

Matthew 13 opens with Jesus sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee with hundreds of people listening on the sloping shoreline. The environment would not have been much different from Matthew 5 where Jesus was on the side of a mountain and began his great Sermon on the Mount, except for one major difference. The Sermon on the Mount was clear, direct, and didactic. This discourse (the third of five in Matthew) is filled with parables, most of which are not easily understood.

In fact, the parables are apparently so opaque that Jesus' disciples are frustrated. Immediately following Jesus' parable of the four soils, they take him aside (v 10) and ask him directly, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Perhaps they preferred the direct, in-your-face teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps they saw the confusion on the faces of the people. We don't know what prompted the question, but one thing is clear: Jesus is puzzling. He and his teaching are an enigma.

The word enigma can refer to a puzzling or confusing situation, people, or a saying. An enigma is something mysterious, complicated, and often has a hidden meaning. It is far more than what it appears, and it is not something that can be solved or discovered casually. For those of you who are World War II aficionados you will know that the Germans developed a complicated encoding machine through which they transmitted messages. The device was called Wehrmacht Enigma.

Jesus and his teaching are an enigma because he is not understood by most of those who hear him. He talks about the kingdom of heaven and many wonder where this kingdom is. And he frequently uses parables as a teaching device which often leaves people either angry or scratching their heads as to what he is saying. But this is all part of Jesus' plan in revealing himself, and Matthew places this teaching here for a reason.

### **Matthew Has a Message: Don't Miss the Messiah Again!**

Remember that the Gospel of Matthew is not just a collection of stories about the life of Jesus. It is not intended to be a biography; it is a theological treatment of who Jesus is through the record of the life and words of Jesus.

This is our fifth section and our thirty-second message on the book of Matthew. Here's where we've been:

- Chapters 1-4 – "He's the One" – identifying Jesus as the Messiah
- Chapters 5-7 – "Get Real" – hearing Jesus' penetrating and demanding ethic
- Chapters 8-10 – "Follow Him" – considering the power of the Jesus
- Chapters 11-12 – "Portraits of Jesus" – observing the response to Jesus

In our last section we observed a growing interest and a growing opposition to Jesus. Chapter 12 included some powerful texts on the unforgivable sin, the overflow of the heart, the indecisive follower, and it showed us that even his own family (12:46-50) were not fans.

Chapters 18-20 will feature more direct teaching, but in the section Matthew assembles a number of very challenging statements and seven of the fourteen parables that he records in his entire Gospel. Chapters 13-17 are filled with parables, confusing statements, increasing opposition, and outright rejection. Jesus is an enigma who is not understood by everyone.

### **Understanding Parables**

Now you will probably notice that I've jumped ahead in our study of Matthew to verses 10-17. Over the next three Sundays we'll be looking at the parables of Matthew 13, but before we jump into their explanation I wanted to be sure that we understood why Jesus talks this way and how we should interpret parables. They are an important part of Jesus' teaching ministry

and Matthew's message, but they are not easily understood. So let me give you some background in how to understand parables.

What exactly is a parable? **It is a method of teaching where one places something alongside something else – usually a common event of natural life – for the purpose of comparison which creates a spiritual lesson.** You could think of a parable as story or illustration with familiar or common elements designed to drive home a spiritual lesson. Jesus always has a point that he wants to make with a parable, and he chooses different examples or illustrations to bring home the lesson. Sometimes it is a story (Good Samaritan). Other times it is an example from nature (Weeds). Sometimes the parable is a simple comparison (Mustard Seed). Other times it is a complicated analogy (Soils).

While the object of comparison might be different, the purposes are always the same. Parables are a double edged sword with two uses. First, they are designed to **reveal truth** to believers by bringing some truth to a better understanding or by confronting some area that is out of step with true obedience. Parables make truth clear. The second reason for parables almost seems to contradict the first. Jesus says that parables are designed to **hide truth** from those who have hardened their hearts against it. Listen to what both Luke and Mark record:

"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' (Luke 8:10-11).

And he said to them, "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." (Mark 4:11-12).

Clearly parables are a double-edged sword, and the purpose is radically different depending on one's position toward Christ and his kingdom. Parables reveal truth to believers; for non-believers parables are a complete mystery.

Another important thing to know about parables is that they are all designed to call for a **personal response**. Often this response is very emotional due to the background or context of what Jesus uses in his parable. So it is important to know that a response is called for, and in order to really know the response the interpreter has to feel the weight of what Jesus is saying in the immediate cultural context. Jesus' parables are not bedtime stories designed to illustrate moral lessons; they are controversial statements about the spiritual nature of Jesus' kingdom, designed to motivate or to offend. The parables were designed to be **self-evident**, and they would serve to reveal what a person really thought about Jesus and his kingdom.

A classic example of this would be the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus wanted to drive home the point about loving one's neighbor after hearing the arrogant response from a self-justifying lawyer. However, we lose the punch of the story because we are so far removed

from the cultural dynamics. Perhaps a contemporary example will help us to feel what Jesus' listeners felt:

A family of disheveled, unkempt individuals was stranded by the side of a major road on a Sunday morning. They were in obvious distress. The mother was sitting on a tattered suitcase, hair uncombed, clothes in disarray, with a glazed look to her eyes, holding a smelly, poorly clad, crying baby. The father was unshaved, dressed in coveralls, the look of despair as he tried to corral two other youngsters. Beside them was a run-down old car that had obviously just given up the ghost.

Down the road came a car driven by the local bishop; he was on his way to church. And though the father of the family waved frantically, the bishop could not hold up his parishioners, so he acted as if he didn't see them.

Soon came another car, and again the father waved furiously. But the car was driven by the president of the local Kiwanis Club, and he was late for a statewide meeting of Kiwanis presidents in a nearby city. He too acted as if he did not see them, and kept his eyes straight on the road ahead of him.

The next car than came was driven by an outspoken local atheist, who had never been to church in his life. When he saw the family's distress, he took them into his own car. After inquiring as to their need, he took them to a local motel, where he paid for a week's lodging while the father found work. He also paid for the father to rent a car so that he could look for work and gave the mother cash for food and new clothes.<sup>1</sup>

So when we are studying parables, it is important to know something about the immediate situation in the text, the surrounding cultural issues, and the various kinds of comparisons. But the two most important things to remember are 1) parables call for an emotional response and 2) parables are received differently depending on your view of Jesus.

## **Why Parables?**

With that as a general background regarding the nature and interpretation of parables, let's see how Jesus answers the disciples' question regarding why he would use cryptic parables. In other words, why not just speak plainly, clearly, and directly? There must be some purpose beyond his choice of parables. I think Jesus gives us four reasons why he speaks this way:

### **1. To highlight the mystery of the kingdom (v 11)**

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1982), 133.

When Jesus' disciples asked him about the reason for this kind of teaching, Jesus identifies that there is something related to the kingdom that involves mysteries or secrets. What is Jesus talking about?

First of all he is trying to explain what the "kingdom of heaven" is like. He needs to explain this because the kingdom of heaven is not easily visible. Notice how often in chapter 13 Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." He does this in 13:24, 31, 33, 44, and 45. So he is trying to explain to them the nature of true obedience or the ultimate values of what God's reign should look like. What kind of kingdom is he describing? My view is that Jesus is talking in part about what should be happening now, and he is also looking forward to an ultimate moment in the future when the kingdom of God will fully dwell with men. So I view his talk of the kingdom as an "already / not yet" kind of statement.<sup>2</sup> A kingdom is surely coming, but even now Jesus is showing how to live out "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 5:10). Jesus uses parables to show people what the unseen kingdom is really all about.

Secondly, he uses parables to emphasize the mysterious nature of this kingdom. In other words, what the kingdom is like, where it is, and what it entails is **not** obvious. The word that ESV renders as "secrets" is the Greek word *musterion*. This word is a favorite for the Apostle Paul who uses it over 20 times in his writings to capture the supernatural nature of God's grace and revelation.

25 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom 16:25-27)

The mystery belongs to God, and it is only because of his work that the secrets are being disclosed. No one is figuring this out. God is revealing secret thing about the kingdom that no one would know unless God intervened. The kingdom is mysterious; parables fit that very well.

## **2. To exalt the sovereignty of God (vv 11-12, 34-35)**

The second reason that Jesus gives for the parables is probably the most important point of all of them. He indicates that the only reason why the disciples understand the parables is because they understand what others do not about the kingdom. In other words, their understanding the parables about the kingdom is a gift from God. That is exactly what Jesus says in verse 11 – "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."

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<sup>2</sup> For a full explanation of this way of handling the subject of the kingdom see George Ladd's book, *A Theology of the New Testament*.

So the passage makes clear that the part of the purpose of the parables is to reveal again that the mystery of who Jesus is and what the kingdom is all about is not some generally understood idea. The natural and sinful orientation of the human heart will miss the mystery of all it unless God graciously intervenes. Let me give you two texts that say the same thing but a bit differently:

First, when Peter says that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, Jesus says to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17). Second, when Paul reflects on how the gospel is received he says:

7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory....10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:7, 10-14).

Jesus is making the point here that the disciples ought not take pride in themselves that they can understand any of the parables. Rather, they should know that it is only by the mercy of God that they can understand. To understand the mystery of the kingdom is a gift from God. Or to put it like Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

He is telling them that no one would know the truths about the kingdom unless God revealed it to them. The spiritual kingdom of Jesus is "a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Jesus is showing them that while they certainly believed in him and while they certainly understood with their minds, they did not do this on their own. God was behind it. And according to verse 12, parables become a dividing line – creating great blessing for some and judgment for others. In other words, God uses parables for his sovereign purposes.

### **3. To expose hardness of heart (vv 13-15)**

The next three verses (13-15) are all about God's judgment on the sinful, dead, and hard hearts of many who were listening to Jesus' words. Parables and cryptic statements by Jesus are a

form of judgment as God simply allows the human heart to remain darkened and to follow its self-deceived course.

Verse 13 clearly makes this connection: "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." So the lack of understanding about the parables is connected to the bigger problem of not understanding who Jesus really is. There is no understanding the things of God without coming through an understanding and submission to Jesus.

Jesus then quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 which is a historical reference point to a dark time period in Israel's past. Isaiah 6 is a passage filled with the contrast of God's immense holiness ("holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts the whole earth is full of his glory" – Is 6:3) and the sinfulness of God's people ("Woe is me! I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" – Is 6:5). Isaiah is commissioned to preach but no one will listen. The hardness of their hearts is allowed to run its full course. God judges the nation by no longer opening their hearts to hear.

Mark 4:11-12 makes it even stronger than Matthew's rendering: "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."

I think, once again, God wants us to tremble at two things: 1) the reality and power of sinful depravity, and 2) the frightening condition of a hard heart. We've heard this before when we talked about the unforgivable sin. But it is important to remember that the effects of sin on creation are immense and total. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom 3:10-11). Without God's intervention no one would ever understand, no one would ever come to him, and if God never intervened for anyone, sin would be justly punished. You cannot appreciate the sovereignty / human responsibility paradox unless you have a biblical understanding of the depth and scope of the effects of sin. Secondly, we should tremble over not responding to truth that is revealed to us.

We must remember that conviction of sin and spiritual understanding is not a human birth-right. They are gifts from God. And the Bible seems very clear that a hardness of heart can set in.

#### **4. To marvel at the beauty of God's grace (vv 16-17)**

This is a hard word, isn't it? Does it create tension for you? Does it create unanswered questions? Does it create some internal problems? I hope so because parables and the teaching of Jesus are designed to do that! Let the tension exist. Don't try and solve what you

perceive to be problems in this text too quickly or you will miss the real point that Jesus is making here.

Let me end where I believe Matthew wants us to end: marveling at the beauty of God's grace. If you are hung-up on the problems, challenges, or tension you'll miss the real point! I believe this is always how you should end when looking at biblically designed tension – on your knees and basking the beauty of God's grace.

Verses 16-17 capture two thoughts for the disciples. First, in the midst of all the confusion and all the questions, one thing is very clear: God is being gracious to the disciples. "Blessed are you eyes, for they see..." Secondly, God is being gracious now. There is an urgency and a responsibility here. "Many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it..." Jesus is not referring here to the hardness of heart. Rather, he is identifying for his disciples that God has graciously chosen this season, this generation, and this moment to reveal the Son. They are a part of that moment, and they better not miss the significance of what is happening.

Jesus wants them to take a step back and look at what God is doing right in front of them. And if they do so, they will be amazed at what they see.

Do you see now why I've chosen "Engima" as the title for this series? Jesus says some things that he designs to be a bit confusing and cryptic. So what do we do with that?

Let me suggest that this text is a bit of a wake-up call. It reminds us that there is great danger in waiting to respond to truth that is right in front of you. It reminds us that spiritual eyesight and understanding is not a birthright; it is a gift from God. It reminds us that any spiritual progress we've ever made was first an invasion of God's mercy. It reminds us that hardness of heart is real. It reminds us that while the Bible is the disclosure of God to man, there will always be mystery because God will not be mastered by anyone. Finally, it reminds us that accepting who Jesus as Lord, Master, and Savior is the first and most important step to understanding what God is saying through his word.

Jesus is the key that unlocks the mystery of God.

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### The Parables in the Gospels

<b>Parable</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>
The Purpose of the Parables	13:10-17	4:10-12	8:9-10
The Sower	13:1-9, 18-23	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15
The Weeds	13:24-30, 36-43	4:26-29	
The Mustard Seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
The Leaven	13:33		13:20-21
The Hidden Treasure	13:44		
The Pearl of Great Value	13:45-46		
The Net	13:47-50		
The Lost Sheep	18:10-14		15:3-7
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35		
The Two Sons	21:28-32		
The Tenants	21:33-44	12:1-11	20:9-18
The Wedding Feast	22:1-14		14:16-24
The Ten Virgins	25:1-13		
The Talents	25:14-30		19:11-27
The Good Samaritan			10:29-37
The Rich Fool			12:16-21
The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9
The Wedding Feast			14:7-11
The Lost Coin			15:8-10
The Prodigal Son			15:11-32
The Dishonest Manager			16:1-9
The Rich Man & Lazarus			16:19-31
The Persistent Widow			18:1-8
The Pharisee & the Tax Collector			18:9-14

From ESV Study Bible