

Title: Got Your Ears On?
Date: April 14, 2024
Subject: parables
Scripture: Matthew 13:10 - 17

I've shared this story previously...but it's worthwhile to hear it again.

A man was asked to recite a Bible story. He chose his favorite parable - the Good Samaritan: *As a man traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho, he fell among thorns. And the thorns sprung up and choked him. And as he was going on, he didn't have any money, so he met the Queen of Sheba. She gave him 1,000 talents of gold and 100 changes of clothing. He got into a chariot and drove furiously. When driving under a big juniper tree, his hair got caught in a tree limb, and he hung there many days. The ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink. He ate 5,000 loaves of bread and 2 fish. One night, while hanging there asleep, his wife Delilah, came along and cut off his hair. He dropped and fell on stony ground, but he got up and continued on. Soon it began to rain. It rained 40 days and 40 nights, and the water rose so high that a great fish swallowed him, but it threw him up 3 days later. He hid himself in a cave and lived on locusts and wild honey. When the rain stopped, he went on until he met a servant who said, 'Come, take supper at my house!' But the man made excuses and said, 'No, I won't. I have married a wife and I can't go.' But the servant went out into the highways and hedges and compelled him to come in. After supper, he went on his way and finally came down into Jericho. When he got there, he looked up and saw old queen Jezebel sitting way up high in a window. She laughed at him! The man became furious and said, 'Throw her down!' So, they threw her down. Then he said, 'Throw her down again!' And they threw her down 70 times 7, and of the pieces that remained, they picked up 12 baskets full, besides the women and children. Then the man said, 'Blessed are the piecemakers.' Now, whose wife will she be on the judgment day?"*

Confused? That's not exactly how the parable goes.

Let's get our bearings. We're halfway through the ministry of Jesus. He's engaged in what's known as the busy day. His family had come to take charge of him because they felt he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Jesus responded by saying that spiritual family takes precedence over blood relatives. He then goes outside the house and gets into a boat to teach the sizable crowd who'd gathered. He tells the parable of the sower which ends with the words "he who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). This brings us to our text.

Read Matthew 13:10-17.

Jesus wants to reveal and communicate spiritual truth, the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. *Secrets* refers to what had previously been hidden but now has been revealed by God. It's like the saying "you don't know what you don't know...until you know it." Someone has clued you in. Jesus came to clue people in. He wanted to awaken the spiritual senses of those who were growing dull. There was still time because the process of hardening hadn't been completed. There were others who were receptive.

Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom is central to the book of Matthew. It's mentioned 50 times, mostly through the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" which is used over 30 times and is only found in Matthew. Mark and Luke use "the kingdom of God."

John the Baptist came as the forerunner to tell people that the kingdom of heaven was near. Jesus continued to teach and preach about the kingdom. He came from heaven to convey to people how they could get to heaven, how they could be part of God's eternal kingdom, how God could rule and reign in their hearts.

Think of what it was like for people before Jesus came to earth. They're at the bottom of a 50 foot pit, at night, wearing solar eclipse glasses, trying to see the light of the stars. They only had brief glimpses into the secrets of the kingdom. Old Testament saints like Noah, Abraham and Daniel lived by faith and not sight as "they did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13).

Another place declares: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and the circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things" (1 Peter 1:10-12). They desperately wanted to know.

Jesus Christ came to fully reveal the work of God. As the consummate teacher He used a variety of methods - extended discourse, interview, dialogue, Q&A with him often being the one asking questions, debate, stories. An offshoot of the stories are the parables.

There are a multitude of questions. What is a parable?

Defining a parable is so easy a Sunday school child can do it. A Sunday school teacher was teaching about parables to her class. She wanted to find out what they knew. She asked, "What is a parable?" A little girl's hand shot up as she instantaneously blurted out, "A parable is a heavenly story with no earthly meaning."

Well, maybe not all kiddos could. Close, but no bananas. She switched parts around and threw a negative in there. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. They weren't given for entertainment.

The word parable means placing something alongside something else for the purpose of comparison. Known ordinary aspects of life or nature like seeds or sheep are used to illustrate unknown spiritual or moral truths like the nature of God's kingdom, lostness, preparedness for Christ to return, forgiveness, or fruitfulness. They're windows through which truth can be seen, not the stones of the foundation. They illustrate truths and doctrines. Parables are object lessons, metaphors, similes, proverbial sayings or analogies. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven "is like" a mustard seed, a man who sowed good seed, treasure hidden in a field. He doesn't say it is those things or that everything used to flesh out the story means something.

Usually there's one main point. The rest serves as background. Not everything in the parables has spiritual meaning. They don't have to walk on all fours. It's the whole puzzle and not the individual pieces. The meaning is usually stated but sometimes it's implied.

There have been Christians who have allegorized or spiritualized parables. A case in point is Augustine and the parable of the Good Samaritan. The man going down to Jericho was Adam. Jerusalem was the city of

heavenly peace. Jericho was the moon which signifies our mortality (a play on Hebrew terms for moon and Jericho). Robbers were the devil and his angels. Stripping him meant taking away his immortality. Beating him was persuading him to sin. Leaving him half dead was due to sin that he was dead spiritually but half alive due to his knowledge of God. The priest represented the priesthood of the Old Testament (Law). The Levite was the ministry of the Old Testament (prophets). The Good Samaritan was Christ. The binding of the wounds represented restraint of sin. Oil equaled comfort of good hope. Wine equaled exhortation to spirited work. The donkey was the body of Christ. Inn was the church. The two denarii equal the two commandments of love. The innkeeper was the apostle Paul. The return of the Good Samaritan was the resurrection of Christ. (Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, P. 46).

Augustine and others took teachings from the Bible and infused them in the parable where they aren't expressly taught. They ignored the context which was the lawyer's question - "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus gave the parable to answer that question. We need to look at the context and the reason a parable was given.

Time for fun fact, at least one for the curious. How many parables are there? Depends on who's counting. Some say about 30, others 55, others as many as 70... if you include the parabolic statements which may be only a sentence long.

Why did Jesus use parables? The disciples wondered that. Why not plainly, clearly and distinctly say what you mean? We're looking for something other than - the brief story format makes them easier to recall.

I repeat what Jesus said at the conclusion of the parable of the sower: "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). The challenge to hear has gone out from God throughout time: "Listen to me. Hear what I'm saying. Pay attention to what I offer."

The Master Teacher used parables to hide truth from those who don't believe or wouldn't believe and to open truth to those who have faith to receive him and what he has to say.

Jesus knows that most people have hard hearts and callous minds. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (6:9-10): "You'll be ever hearing but never understanding; you'll be ever seeing but never perceiving" (Matthew 13:14).

Most people saw the parables as nice stories, but that's about it. They didn't get the meaning. It's true that the same can be said of the other forms of communication used by Jesus. People refuse to accept what he has to say. Most of the time the Lord is met by deaf ears.

This happened over and over throughout history. It took 10 plagues, the devastation of his nation, the needless loss of human lives before Pharaoh let the people of Israel leave Egypt. He exemplified those who don't have a real and vital relationship with God and their dismissal of God.

The people of Israel were marked by inattentiveness to God's voice and outright dismissal of his instructions. They'd seen what God did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They'd heard God say he was going to punish them so the Israelites would be released and go to the Promised Land, but they didn't understand. They refused to understand so God gave them a mind that didn't understand, eyes that didn't see, ears that didn't

hear (Deuteronomy 29:2-4). The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel faced people who would be ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving because their hearts were calloused.

Another occasion Jesus said, "Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (John 8:47). Later, when pressed by people to quit keeping them in suspense, but to tell them plainly if he was the Christ, he responded: "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; No one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:24-28). The last part gives comfort, but the first part?

We need to be clear - the statement about people not seeing nor understanding when they're exposed to truth is a statement of consequence, not purpose. Those who are unwilling to listen to Jesus won't find truth. It proves their spiritual dullness. They are hard-hearted, blind and incapable of grasping the truth. Truth is concealed from non-believers.

It would be like being at a UN General Assembly session with delegates from almost 200 countries. Some speak English, but the vast majority don't. To prevent potential misunderstanding, the UN uses a system of simultaneous translation. Delegates have headphones to hear speakers in their own language.

But consider the poor spectator who doesn't have access to headphones. He'll hear speeches by representatives from Greece, Morocco, Pakistan and Japan. He can see the styles of clothing. He can tell you he was awed by the great experience. He may have been able to pick out a few words, but he has no clue if they were talking about famine relief or where they wanted to go for dinner. He heard but he didn't understand.

Jesus said this is the situation of many people. Many in his time were and today are awed by him. They're amazed by the miracles. They know he's different. They love to listen to him. But that's all. They don't understand what he teaches about the kingdom of heaven.

Truth is concealed from those who aren't looking for it, who aren't seeking it. Truth is revealed to those who are looking for it, are seeking it. The parables are a means of revealing truth to those who follow him, while also concealing the substance of his teaching from those who are superficial and antagonistic.

There are those who will understand truth. Those who have will receive more and more and more.

NIV Study Bible note on Luke 8:4: "Although parables clarified Jesus' teaching, they also included hidden meanings needing further explanation. These hidden meanings challenged the sincerely interested to further inquiry, and taught truths that Jesus wanted to conceal from unbelievers (v. 10). From parables Jesus' enemies could find no direct statements to use against him."

A hotly debated topic is whether God has predetermined everyone's courses of action - whether they'll accept or reject him, what they do second by second. I found a good explanation from Ray Stedman.

"It *is* true that we are chosen of God. In John 6, Jesus said... "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," (John 6:44 RSV). That's putting it plainly, isn't it? You can't come to Christ unless you are drawn by the Father. God has to initiate the activity. Ah, yes, but in Matthew 11 Jesus made his

appeal directly to the will of the individual, saying, "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," (Matthew 11:28 RSV). And that means it's up to you. You can never become a Christian until you choose to come. So both of these facts are true.

“And though we can't reconcile them in our puny intellects, nevertheless we can accept them as facts and realize that it is true that we must choose. The good news is offered to us, but if we don't respond we will never obtain the benefit of it. But if we do respond, if we come to Christ, if we believe in him, then we discover a great fact: God began the process, it was he who chose us, and we have been drawn to him by his Spirit at work in our spirit.” (raystedman.org/new-testament/Ephesians/the-foundations)

We could ask: doesn't God want everyone to know him? The answer is yes, but he doesn't force people to come to him. He allows people to choose. The message is available to all, but some won't accept it.

The disciples and those who place their trust in Christ are given the ability to comprehend spiritual truth. They're seeking and ready to hear. This doesn't mean they're given full spiritual insight or even immediate understanding. Sometimes the disciples struggled with the meaning of a parable. There were times when they requested that Jesus explain the meaning of the parable (Matthew 13:36).

The gospel of Mark closes this section of Christ's life with the words: “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything” (Mark 4:33, 34).

The NIV Study Bible (note on Mark 4:34) comments about this: “Jesus used parables to illustrate truths, stimulate thinking and awaken spiritual perception. The people in general were not ready for the full truth of the gospel. When alone with his disciples Jesus taught more specifically, but even they usually needed to have things explained.”

God through the Paul issues the warning (2 Timothy 3:2-7) that the last times will be marked by false teachers and their followers. Their evil practices and attitudes include lovers of themselves, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, always hearing and learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

It's certainly evident today as many hear God's word and parrot his word, but it's not part of their lives. One of my pet peeves rears its ugly head during election season. Political candidates on both sides trot out Bible verses and then live lives 180° from what the Bible says.

“The basic assumption...the ultimate purpose of a parable is to help and not to hinder the apprehension of the truth. But beyond this we may say that it belongs to the very nature of revelation that the capacity to receive it depends upon the prior surrender and obedience of the will. “Come and see” (John 1:39) is the order of Christian experience; moral conquest must come before intellectual enlightenment. The disciples had so surrendered to the sovereignty of Jesus and could therefore know. If temporarily parables concealed the truths of the kingdom from the outsider on the intellectual plane, it was only in order that moral conviction might first be secured with a view to intellectual enlightenment afterwards” (New Bible Commentary, Mark 4:11, 12).

“He who has ears...let him hear.”