

## **Our Lord's Use of Parables**

Luke 8:4-10

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At this point in the Gospel narrative, our Lord is nearing the end of his second year of ministry. He has been teaching and doing miracles throughout every city and village in Galilee. He has called the twelve and designated them apostles. Luke also names several women who have experienced the power of the kingdom of God, and who are supporting Jesus out of their own means. Now, this in itself is significant because the rabbinic tradition of that time would have considered it scandalous to teach women. But clearly Jesus accepted these women into his company. But there is murderous opposition is growing from among the Pharisees and experts in the law. And there is a rising tide of unbelief among the crowd. So, we have these contrasting responses to our Lord's ministry: deliverance, healing, and conversion, contrasted by violent opposition and unbelief. And both are occurring simultaneously.

Now, it will be helpful to remember here that the Judaism of the first-century was not the religion of Moses and the prophets. It was an apostate form of religion based in ethnic pride, religious ceremony, dietary laws, and Sabbath-keeping. It was a religion of exploitation, oppression, and hypocrisy. And the most damning effect of this religion was that the word of God had been set aside in favor of the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:1-13). This occurred because religious tradition will accommodate unbelief and hypocrisy, whereas the light of the word of God exposes unbelief. Therefore, within first-century Israel there was what the prophet Amos called a famine "of the hearing of the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). There is no greater evidence of a people's rejection of God, than their rejection of God's word, and there is no greater judgment upon a people than for God to withdraw his word. This was the state of things at the time of Jesus' ministry. Let's consider how our Lord responded.

### **Parables: Judgment and Mercy**

Luke tells us a great multitude had gathered, coming to him from every city. Such large crowds were not uncommon, Jesus had been teaching and healing large crowds for two years. But what *was* new was that Jesus spoke "by a parable." This represents a shift in our Lord's teaching style to the crowds. He had previously used analogies, but not parables.

So, what are parables?

Parables are, of course, stories. Some are long, some are short. There are 40 parables within Matthew, Mark, and Luke (none in John). And parables always have to do with the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Each parable contains one central truth of the kingdom of God. Parables are not intended to be fantasies containing mysterious codes. You will never hear Jesus speak of dragons or strange animals, lost cities, etc. Parables typically reflect the local customs and cultural standards of that day, and nothing wild and magical. Now, the word “para” means “alongside.” A parable then is a story told alongside a spiritual truth. Once again, each parable conveys one central aspect of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> We need look only for one central truth.

But why did our Lord make this shift in teaching style?

Matthew’s Gospel tells us,

<sup>10</sup> And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

<sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup>Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup>And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,  
And seeing you will see and not perceive;  
<sup>15</sup>For the hearts of this people have grown dull.  
*Their ears are hard of hearing,*  
And their eyes they have closed,  
Lest they should see with *their* eyes and hear with *their* ears,  
Lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them.’

<sup>16</sup>But blessed *are* your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; <sup>17</sup>for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous *men* desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it* (Matthew 13:10-17).

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<sup>1</sup> See John MacArthur, “The Purpose of Parables,” online sermon, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWlwPOxUrgg> [retrieved March 12, 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981, 1993), p. 139.

And Mark writes,

And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained [expounded] all things to His disciples (Mark 4:33-34).

So, Jesus is speaking in parables, but then in private, he is explaining the parables to his disciples. Clearly, the parables were not easily understood. The disciples requested explanation, which Jesus gave them, but no such explanation was offered to the crowds. Why was this?

Contrary to popular thinking, parables were not employed by Jesus to make spiritual truth easier to understand, but in order to veil the truth from those who rejected his word. Parables were therefore employed as a form of judgment upon those who continually hardened their hearts to his teaching. Parables are a form of judgment on final unbelief. Unbelief has consequences. And yet, Jesus also used parables as a display of mercy upon those same people. It is judgment in that the people have hardened their hearts against him and his word, and it is a mercy in that for them to continue to receive and reject the light of truth would increase the severity of their judgment. Judgment and mercy, even in judgment.

Remember, people do not hear the gospel from a place of neutrality. Fallen humanity is dead in trespasses and sins, and spiritually dead people cannot freely choose anything. The choice as to whether to reject the word of God was made in Adam, and not in a crusade tent or an altar call thousands of years later. This means the people who came to hear Jesus were inherently bad soil. They were not fertile ground for the word sown. They liked the miracles. They liked being part of the crowd. But they were not receptive to his word. The parables were given, so that, "Seeing they may not see, and hearing they not understand" (v.10).

Not one of us who are now in Christ first came to Christ possessing a good and honest heart. We were bad soil. It is the natural state of fallen mankind. In order to be receptive to the word of God, something must occur that makes us good soil. And we cannot make this happen. No amount of religious activity can make a sinner good soil. *Only God can create good soil.* This means that God sent his Son into a world of bad soil, but has acted in great mercy upon you in creating you to be good soil in order that you might hear and see, and be saved. You who are in Christ are objects of God's mercy. And we should respond in humble adoration and gratitude.

This is also very sobering. For, once again, in our text, Jesus clearly states that he spoke in parables in order that, "Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand" (v.

10). The principle here is that *apart from grace*, the hearing of the gospel will only further harden sinners in their unbelief. We know “the fleshly mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). The words quoted by Jesus in verse 10 of our text are from Isaiah 6:9. There the prophet was commissioned to preach to a people who had already demonstrated their unwillingness to hear and obey (Isaiah 1-5). Time and time again, Isaiah appealed to the people who responded in unbelief. The prophet’s preaching ministry exposed the unbelief of the people and harden them therein. In short, Isaiah’s ministry was an instrument of God’s righteous judgment upon unbelief. Unbelief has consequences.

Matthew tells us this prophecy of Isaiah, while certainly applicable in Isaiah’s day, was however fulfilled during Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 13:14). Like Isaiah, the preaching ministry of Jesus exposed unbelief. Light reveals that which is otherwise hidden in the dark. In John’s Gospel, we learn that although light had come into the world, men loved darkness; and why did they love darkness? Because their deeds were evil (John 3:19). John also records that Jesus said the world hated him “because I testify of it that its deeds are evil” (John 7:7). The point is this: in quoting Isaiah, Jesus acknowledged the unbelief which reigned in the hearts of those who heard him. Jesus was not naïve. He understood what was in men, and he wouldn’t entrust himself to them (John 2:23-25).

Such was the unbelief within Galilee, that having sent out seventy emissaries, Jesus then pronounced divine curses upon three of the major cities, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because of their unprecedented unbelief (Luke 10:13-15).

In the book of Acts, this same unbelief was later confronted by Stephen when, from the temple steps, he told the leaders of Israel,

You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it (Acts 7:51-53).

After saying these things, Stephen was stoned to death by very religious people; people who were nonetheless hardened in unbelief. Indeed, it was out of zeal for their religion that they killed Stephen. Unbelief is never more insidious than when cloaked under religious respectability. The preaching of the gospel is the means whereby God saves and the means also whereby God judges unbelief.

The apostles also confronted this unbelief. In the final chapter of Acts, we read of Paul's ministry to the Jews in Rome. To them, Paul "explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening" (Acts 28:23). In other words, Paul was constantly preaching the kingdom of God as he expounded upon the Scriptures which pointed to Jesus as the Christ. Verse 24 tells us some who heard him were persuaded, and others disbelieved, and so they could not come to agreement. Therefore, Paul responded by also quoting from the same text in Isaiah,

The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them"' (Acts 28:25-27; Isaiah 6:9-10; see also Jeremiah 5:21; Ezekiel 12:2).

Once again, let me say it, and clearly: apart from sovereign grace, the hearing of the word of God only hardens the sinner in unbelief. Unbelief is how the *unaided*, unregenerate mind and heart responds to the hearing of the gospel. This brings an ominous note to the preaching of the gospel, does it not? Whenever and wherever the gospel is actually preached, one of two things happens: people are saved or people are hardened. No one ever walks away from the hearing of the gospel in the same state in which they came. We should therefore take special care to preach God's word with the upmost integrity and clarity, for it is the instrument of the Spirit in imparting life. And for those who harden their hearts, it should be crystal clear that they are rejecting not the words of men, but of God.

And this brings me to another important point: *To reject the gospel is to lose the gospel.* Wherever the gospel is actually heard, and rejected, the subsequent absence of the word of God represents a form of judgment. For instance, it is not uncommon for churches to reject preachers of the gospel. And what then happens to those pulpits? They are then filled with entertainers and motivation speakers instead of expository preachers, and this represents a judgment upon those churches. When good men are abused and mistreated for preaching the word of God, the judgement that follows is the absence of such good men. What then fills those pulpits are charlatans and hirelings who care nothing for the word of God or the souls of the people to whom they speak. Unbelief has consequences.

Where are our churches today? Even a casual observer would note that the gospel is not being preached within most churches. Many large, popular churches are nothing much more than concert venues with inspirational speakers. Is this absence of the word of God a form of judgment? Absolutely. God is not mocked. And only God can revive the situation. The question to you today then is this: How is your hearing? Later in our study, we will hearing Jesus exhort: “Therefore take heed how you hear.” And why should we take heed? “For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him” (Luke 8:18). Our modern churches are filled with people who “seem” to have something they do not. John MacArthur is correct when he says we have seldom seen such at a time in which the church is participating in creating more false conversions than are occurring today. False conversions have always occurred. But never before has the church itself been more complicit in *producing* them.<sup>3</sup> What Jesus describes as bad soils defines most of modern Christianity: rock hard, shallow, and/or laden down with worldly cares.

We must pray for revival. And we must renew our appetite for biblical preaching and application. For continued apathy only ensures a continued famine of the word of God, and further judgment. And that judgment, writes Peter, begins with the house of God (I Peter 4:17).  
**AMEN.**

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, “A Survey of the Soils,” a two-part on-line sermon, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zChBUwHnv6I> [retrieved March 13, 2020].

