

How will you understand all parables?

There was once a pastor who lived in the parsonage right beside the small church he pastored. Sunday mornings he would get up early to begin the day in prayer. He would help his children out of bed and down for breakfast. He would then leave his wife to tend to the children as he went to the church to open it up and prepare for the worship service to follow. This he did every week and his congregation gradually grew.

There is no moral to that story. I just made it up. It really has no point and is a rather poor story. Jesus's stories, His parables were actually good stories, but they made as much sense to the people of the day as mine just did now.

Many of us have grown up in church and have heard these parables time after time. They are so familiar to us we could probably reproduce them in large part on the spot. And thankfully we have had many wise teachers rightly teach us the parables so that we understand. Even if we hadn't read the second half of this passage this morning many of you likely could have given the meaning of this parable because we are so familiar with it and its explanation.

I think we take for granted our position. I opened with that story of a pastor to try and bring us to a position the hearers of Jesus parables might have been in. Just listen to the parable again. (3-8) If this is all you had, what would you conclude? If you were a farmer you might have asked yourself how you could avoid losing seed to hard ground, rocky soil, or thorny patches. Perhaps if you were a business man you would have thought about a new marketing campaign specifically aimed at your target audience because clearly the seeds are first century billboards and flyers in the Galilean Times.

Perhaps I overstated that a bit there, but the fact remains that this parable is enigmatic. This is a story the point of which we have no clue apart from the explanation of Jesus. If you doubt this, thinking surely someone would have gotten it in those days, the text continues to show this is not the case.

If there was anyone who would have understood Jesus, surely it would have been one of His 12 or one of the many other followers He had. Verse 10 tells us that even they did not know. For when they were alone, they asked Him what this story meant. Apart from Him they had no understanding. So, we are going to look at the text and see with the disciples the purpose of parables in general and the meaning of this particular parable.

What is the purpose of parables? (11-12)

What would you say if I said the purpose was to be unclear and condemn sinners to death? That doesn't seem right. Parables are taught to children. We heard them at VBS. Surely, they aren't meant to condemn. They are just nice illustrations to teach us about what heaven is like, right??

Jesus tells us quite plainly the purpose of parables. The purpose is so that those outside the kingdom community might not understand what He is teaching so that they might not repent

and be forgiven. Parables teach those inside the kingdom and the harden those outside of its bounds. Their intent is two-fold. Point one of the sermon is this Parables conceal and they reveal. They conceal to some and reveal to others. To do this they must divide.

So, what are the two groups? And how do the parables affect them differently? First, we have those who Jesus refers to as you, they are the citizens of the Kingdom of God and they have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God. Second, we have the outsiders, those who do not hear.

Who are these Kingdom citizens? Mark in his gospel is concerned with defining this new community. In chapter 3 we really see this begin to develop. At this point Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd of followers. In verses 13-20 He appoints 12 “so that they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” Then we see that His biological family do not understand what He is doing. They think He is crazy. Verses 22-28 Jesus teaches about the leader of the Kingdom of God. And 31-35 are key to learning about the Kingdom. (31-34) Jesus defines this community as those who do the will of God, they are His brothers, sisters, and mothers.

Today we often refer to those in the Kingdom of God as believers, but the qualifications still stand. We are those who do the will of God. Jesus will go on to say as recorded in John 15 that you are My friends if you do what I command. Kingdom citizenship brings with it Kingdom responsibility and that is defined by obedience.

So now we know the group, those who do God’s will. We also know this group continues to today and we who believe are part of this group. What Jesus will say here is true of us. Jesus said they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God. They have been given the secret to the community. What is the secret?

We get glimpses of this secret of the kingdom throughout the New Testament. One of the clearer places it is listed is Eph 1 where Paul says God has made known to us the mystery of His will according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things to Him, things in heaven and things on earth. The secret is God’s plan to unite all things to Himself. It is His plan of redemption seen through Jesus, His Son.

Is that not what differentiates us from the world? We know, and not just intellectually, but experientially, the plan of redemption which God has brought to fulfillment in His Son. One day this plan will be plainly manifest to all, but for now that plan is a secret. It is hidden from the world and revealed to those whom He desires to reveal it.

So then having one group, those inside the Kingdom, the other becomes easier to define. Jesus refers to them as those outside. They are the ones who do not do the Father’s will. They have not been given the secret to the Kingdom. They do not know of God’s redemptive plan. And they are the reason Jesus teaches in parables.

You see if the only response expected from Jesus’s teaching were repentance, there would be no need to conceal any truth, no need to condemn any in His teaching. But His teaching, particularly parables have a twofold purpose. And so He teaches in parables. He says

for those outside everything is in parables. Jesus chooses to teach in parables for those outside the Kingdom. Everything is hidden so that those outside will not understand.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah to make His point. V12. Just as Isaiah's teaching in his day hardened the hearts of the people, so Jesus's teaching will harden the hearts of those who do not obey the Father. So we have two groups those inside the Kingdom and those outside. Those inside are given the secret to the Kingdom and those outside do not hear. Thus, they will be kept from repentance. They will not hear.

This is not the first time hearing has been discussed in this passage. Verse 3 Jesus calls the people to listen, to hear. In verse 9, He concludes His teaching saying "He who has ears to hear let them hear." Then when He explains the parable, Jesus will use the word hear a lot. This text uses the word hear a lot, 10 times in these 20 verses.

If I wanted I could have summed up all the preceding point about the two groups of people like this. There are those who hear and those who do not hear. The Kingdom is made up of those who actually hear God's Word. Those outside do not hear the Word. Sure, their ear drums vibrate and their brain receives the signal. Their minds can even comprehend the message given, but they do not actually hear it, for hearing requires a response. James says be doers of the Word and not hearers only. What is the reason for the focus on hearing? This passage is a call to hear the Word. These are not mere facts, but it is a call.

So, people of God today let me ask, do you hear the Word? When you hear the Word preached or when you sit at home and read it yourself and meditate on it, do you do what it says or does it go in one ear and out the other, as they say?

Now we cannot mistake hearing the Word as something we do of ourselves. We would all be incapable of truly hearing the Word of God without His work in us. The secret of the Kingdom has been given, it has not been earned or discovered, but given. He is the source of our salvation and all our knowledge of Him. Let this keep us humble as we approach the Word, recognizing that it is He not us, who understands this Word.

With that in mind, with ears attentive to hear, let us hear Jesus's explanation of His own parable. This makes my job easy. I don't need to explain the text because Jesus does it for me.

13-20

13 Jesus says if you do not understand this parable how will you understand all of them? This parable is the first of many. They are all about the Kingdom of God. If you miss the point of the first, you will miss the point of all the rest. With that said let us look at Jesus's explanation. He explains this is not about agricultural strategies, but the Kingdom. He is imparting wisdom to the humble and understanding to those who would hear.

The sower sows the Word. Notice it is the same Word. The Word is never changing and it is not deficient. It will accomplish its purpose. It never returns void as Isa 55 teaches. We are familiar with what follows. There are 4 soils. The hard soil on the path, the rocky soil, the thorny ground, and the good soil.

The first hear the Word and immediately Satan takes it away. They are completely hardened. The Word seemingly has no effect on them, but actually it does. They have heard the Word and immediately rejected it. Their hearts are callous and hard. The Word shows them to be this way.

The second are the rocky ground. They spring up with joy, but when difficulty arises, like the sun to a shallow plant, they dry up and die. They have not actually received the Word. They appreciate the benefits of the Word, the good feeling it brings. And so they continue while things are pleasant. But then when difficulty arises because of this Word whose benefits they enjoy, the Word loses its appeal. It is easier and happier to live without it and so they flee. Leaving the Word behind, pursuing death, and revealing they were never truly affected by the Word initially.

The third are sown on thorny ground and they get choked out as worldly desires arise. This group lasts a while longer. The seeds sprout among thorns and grow for a while, but never produce fruit. They gradually get choked out and lose interest. Perhaps these individuals are like some children raised up in the church. They are here every week, learning and growing. Then they go off to college and it becomes easier to sleep in or study. They begin to attend irregularly, then never. They show the Word is of no value to them. You can fill in whatever situations might fit in these categories and preach this sermon to yourself. The excuses given are plentiful, but the heart behind them is the same, dead.

Last are those on good soil. They hear, accept, and bear fruit.

If we look at those verbs we might infer that the only difference is that the last group bore fruit. And in one sense this is true, the second and third heard and responded cognitively, however if we search the heart we will find that the differences begin right from the start.

Remember what was said earlier in James 1:22-25. If we hear the word and do not respond we are like a person sitting in a building, hearing others scream fire and running out while we sit there and do not leave. Clearly though the information was presented to us we do not perceive it, we do not hear it. Hearing in this context is true hearing. It is understanding and appropriately responding.

So, how do we properly understand this text? How should we hear and respond to its teaching?

If we could sum up the teaching of this section into one sentence it would be this; Kingdom citizens hear the Word and fruitfully obey.

We have discussed hearing the Word throughout this sermon thus far so I am going to pass over that and say a Word on fruitful obedience.

You probably know this, but it cannot be overstated that we must never think or act as though our fruit saves us. Recognize He has already given us the secret to the Kingdom. We have not earned, nor are we inherently worthy of it. But He has given it so we can then respond properly and obey.

Our obedience to the Word, our fruit, then serves as fruit to validate the Word in us. When we act more like Christ, as He has laid out in His Word, we can look at that change in our lives and see that He has saved us. We are growing.

Having walked through this text we see that Parables conceal and reveal and that Kingdom citizens hear and faithfully obey. Now I want to take some time and address some other issues that arise because of this text.

The first is a question. Can I lose my salvation? If I am a Christian, can I be like a plant on rocky or thorny ground? Can I be a believer and then fall away? No, if the Lord has saved you He has saved you. This text does not teach that we can lose our salvation. We know that those made alive by God will be preserved by God until the end. But this text does act as a warning for us. True believers produce good fruit. Do you see fruit in your life? Do you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control budding in you? Are you growing in conformity to the image of Christ? That is what we should seek. How do we seek it? By the Word.

Now, while those saved are forever saved this text is still a warning. You might find yourself in a period of life acting like one of these not saved. You might find yourself in a period of life where Satan is trying to snatch you away. Pray for protection.

You might find yourself facing extreme temptation to leave what you know to be true because of the persecution that comes because you are a Christian and you live according to the Word. Do not abandon the Word, do not turn from God. I work at a nursery and can tell you the solution to a plant planted in shallow soil is extra water. If you are facing persecution and feel you can no longer stand, run to the Word for its nourishment. Seek to be continually filled by the Holy Spirit. Be daily, or even hourly in the Word and in prayer. Be weekly here in Church and in your small group. Being nourished you will find He gives the strength to stand and you will grow.

If you find yourself tempted to pursue other things, worldly passions and desires. Or to walk with others not living after God, then flee from them and turn to the Word. Seek Christian fellowship and plant yourself in a church so that you will find encouragement and strength to stand. It is much harder to get choked out in your Christian life if you are standing among other likeminded believers.

And if you are leaning on God, growing daily in Christlikeness, then let us produce fruit in abundance because He has redeemed us and we are His. Hear the Word and by faith obey it to the glory of our Great God. Then praise Him as we will do for all eternity.

Second, I want to consider this text in the light of evangelism. Imagine what it must have felt like to have Jesus name you an apostle. This great teacher and healer hand-picked you to represent Him, preaching about Him in His name. You are becoming more and more convinced that the rumors might just be true, that this is the Messiah come to triumph over the Jewish enemies. Finally, the world will be made right because all the prophecies will come true. But then you see more and more people reject His message. Some deny Him out right and others

hang around for a little while, only to leave when the Pharisees and other leaders pressure them. Then as you are sent out to preach you find that many reject you and are, in fact hostile, cursing His name not blessing it.

You would probably be tempted to ask yourself if this was worth it. Is He even the One? This parable prepares them for the ministry they will face. They, like their Master, would be despised and rejected. Perhaps those close to them in ministry would eventually turn away and prove unfaithful.

Here Jesus is preparing them. He is telling them in advance what to expect from the world as they proclaim the good news. Do not lose heart when the message is rejected. Do not give up when converts prove weak and turn. Good soil is out there, keep sowing. Jesus commissioned them to sow, not reap, and so faithfully they were to sow.

I am reminded of a great Baptist Missionary to India named William Carey. He was a particular Baptist from England and is considered the father of the modern missions movement. He moved his family to India in 1793. In the next 6 years he witnessed his ministry partner abandon him, his family become riddled with illness, his son died, and his wife went insane, even trying to kill him. And he saw no converts. Carey said of this time, "I am in a strange land, no Christian friend, a large family, and nothing to supply their wants." But he said, "well I have God and His word is sure."

His word is sure indeed. In 1800 Carey baptized the first convert with many, many more to come. Carey obeyed God, trusting Him knowing that His Word was sure. Carey's efforts though met by hard hearts were not in vain. They accomplished their purpose and, in the end, even if none converted would have been successful. But the Lord was kind to bless him to see the fruit of his labor. He sowed seed on good ground and just imagine the rejoicing in heaven and on earth that day.

Let this text and that story encourage you to persevere in evangelism. Why does the church plant in Utah still exist though only one convert has stuck? Because God is sovereign and has called us to sow. And Christopher Ortiz is out there in New York sowing, praying the Lord places seed on good soil and another lost brother or sister is brought home.

God is the God of the harvest. He can and He will bring all the lost children home. How will He do this? He will use us to sow the seed, which He will use to stir hearts and bring them back to Himself. Do not for one second doubt His sovereign control over all things. The only reason we have confidence in our prayers and evangelism is because He is sovereign. The seed sown on good soil will grow and produce fruit. He will bring it. If you see no fruit in your labor in evangelism, know that the Word is not deficient. Know that you are deficient, but rest in the sufficient Lord. He who turned a bunch of sun-bleached bones into a living army and who raised Lazarus from the dead is our God. Jesus, the Son of God, died satisfying the wrath of God and then rose from the dead conquering death. God has done this and He can certainly take what appears to us to be hard ground and cultivate it into fertile soil.

Persevere as you witness to and pray for lost family members and friends. Know that he can change hearts. And sow the seed, even if none repent, because we do not know the will of the Lord, but we know what He has commanded and as Kingdom citizens, we will hear and obey His word.