

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

Matthew 13:10-17

Placed between the parable of the sower and its explanation, there is a section of great importance in which we see the disciples asking Jesus why He taught in parables. This is an excellent question indeed. Why did the Lord Jesus teach in parables rather than using plain statements? We will explore Jesus' answer to that question in this lesson. First, let's take a look at this passage. Matthew 13:10-17.

Mat 13:10. And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

11 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.

12 "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.

13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

14 "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;

15 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.'

16 "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;

17 "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.

To reveal or to conceal?

I would like to draw your attention to v. 11. Jesus says, *Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.* The 'you' refers to the twelve disciples and the larger group of believers, and the pronoun 'them' refers to those who were not part of the disciples' circle. There is a question that we need to ask when we read a verse like this. Is this phrase a statement of intention or a statement of fact? It is important to distinguish these two kinds of statements. 'To you it has been granted to know, but to them it has not been granted.' Is this a statement of intention or a statement of fact? In other words, is it God's intention to give the kingdom to some and not to others? Or is it a statement of fact, that in fact, the kingdom of God has been given to you because you have received it and not to them because they have not received it. What do you think?

Two verses later, Jesus says, *Therefore I speak to them in parables.* ‘This is the reason why I speak to them in parables.’ And what is the reason? *Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.* That seems to be a very harsh and judgmental reason for speaking in parables. Mark’s version is even more explicit. *To those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that (in order that) ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand (Mark 4:11-12)...’* It seems that Jesus is saying, ‘I speak in parables to them in order that they might not be able to comprehend the significance of my words.’

Here we can ask the same question. When Jesus taught in parables, did He want to conceal the truth or did he want to reveal the message of salvation to man? What was His purpose? To hide salvation from the people or to reveal the message of salvation? Logically we would think that the purpose of the parables is to reveal important spiritual truths concerning the kingdom of God. If Jesus wanted to hide the truth from ‘those who are outside’ (term used in Mark 4:11), why did He bother to speak to them in the first place? And yet, this passage seems to indicate that Jesus spoke forth the word of God to some in such a way that it was a word not of salvation but in fact of judgment so that they could not see nor understand. Salvation was there but they could not perceive it. Only those who have been given the eyes to perceive and the ears to hear, i.e. only those to whom God gave the capacity to understand, would understand. All the rest are deliberately blinded through the judgment of God.

And there seems to be biblical evidence for this. Let me read to you John 12:39-40, which is also a quotation from Isaiah.

*John 12:39. Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again:
40 "He (God) has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."*

Notice this. In this passage, it is God who has blinded their eyes so that they shall not see. It is God who has hardened their heart so that they shall not perceive. It was the design of God that they should not be healed.

Quoting from different sources

Can this be what the word of God mean? Is that a correct interpretation of the Bible? Before we accept such conclusions, let’s take a closer look at this passage. Both John 12:40 and Matthew 13:14-15 are quotations from the same passage in Isaiah 6:9-10.

John 12:40 (from the Hebrew OT)	Matthew 13:14-15 (from the Greek OT)	Isaiah 6:9-10 (Hebrew OT)
"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."	"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."	"Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

When we compare them, even superficially, we can see a significant difference. It is hard to believe that they refer to the same OT passage. Strange, isn't it? If both are supposed to be quotations from Isaiah 6:9-10, why are they so different? The explanation is quite simple. In Matthew 13, the quotation follows word for word the Greek OT, not the Hebrew OT. It is the exact quotation of the Septuagint. In John 12, on the other hand, the quotation comes directly from the Hebrew OT. In that sense, John's passage is closer to the original text. With this explanation in mind, you can now see that the Greek OT does not correspond exactly to the Hebrew text.

I think it is fair to say that the Greek OT translators have softened the words of the Hebrew passage. Here is what I mean. The Greek OT does not say that God hardened the heart of people and blinded their eyes. It simply says, 'You will hear but you will not understand. You will see but you will not perceive. And the reason for this is because your hearts have become dull.' These are all statements of facts. Remember the question that I asked at the beginning of our lesson. Is this a statement of fact or a statement of intention? Well, here it is clearly a statement of fact. God didn't do any of these things. They have closed their eyes. The responsibility is put entirely upon the people of Israel. They are the ones who closed their eyes to God's truth.

In John 12, which is quoting from the Hebrew OT, the hardening of people's hearts is spoken of as God's own act. It is God who, through Isaiah, is doing the action of blinding the eyes and hardening the hearts. Here it is likely a statement of intention. It was God's intention to prevent people from hearing and seeing.

How should we make sense of all this?

The effect of the truth of God

Let's put Isaiah 6 in its context. Isaiah, this great prophet of God, had a vision of God's majesty, holiness and glory. He responded to this vision with great humility, saying, *Woe is me ... a man of unclean lips* (Isaiah 6:5). It was after this incident that God appointed Isaiah to preach to the inhabitants of Judah. The Lord said to him, 'Go, and speak to these people. Make their heart fat (i.e., slow of spiritual understanding). Close their eyes. Make their ears heavy so that they do not hear.' Why did God say that? When you look at the first five chapters of Isaiah, you understand why. Because the people of Judah had already shut their eyes. They have already hardened their hearts.

Most members of the nation had become insensitive to their need of cleansing from sin. Isaiah was told to take God's message to an obstinate nation that is facing judgment and exile for refusing to respond properly to God. That is the background to the Greek translation.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of Isaiah. Let's suppose that God gave you that command. 'Go and make the heart of these people dull. Shut their eyes. Close their ears.' What would you do? How are you going to obey God's instruction? Is it really possible to blind people's eyes?

Look at Isaiah's response in Isaiah 6:11. *Lord, how long?* Three little words. *Lord, how long?* Isaiah wondered how long he would have to go on delivering a message of judgment to which the people would be callous. His question implies that he was going to preach to the nation and that he was ready to speak whatever God wanted him to say. So how do you shut people's ears and blind their eyes? It's quite simple. Isaiah went and proclaimed the truth. That's all that he needed to do.

You see, the truth will do one of these two things in every person's life. The truth will either open your eyes or it will blind your eyes. The truth of God will either open your ears or it will shut your ears. The truth of God will either make you alive or it will kill you. When the word of God is preached, some are going to shut their ears and some are going to open their hearts. Some people are going to live and some people are going to die. When Isaiah preached to the stiff-necked and rebellious people of Judah, he didn't have to do anything special to shut their eyes. He just had to preach the truth and they will resist it. The people had not listened before and they would not listen to Isaiah now. In fact, on hearing Isaiah's message, the people would become even more hardened against the Lord.

Once we understand this, we understand by what means God can blind the people. You just speak the truth. That's all that you have to do. Do you now see how John 12:40 sounds quite different from when we first read it? Sometimes verses in the Scriptures seem to mean one thing at first sight, but when you examine them, it turns out that they mean something quite different.

The expression 'Go, make the heart of this people fat, and shut their ears' does not refer to a direct act of God in blinding the mind. Isaiah was to go and proclaim the truth and the result will be, owing to the hardness of their heart, that their eyes will be blinded and their hearts hardened. The effect of the truth on such people will be to irritate and harden their minds. As time progresses, their minds will become more and more impenetrable, gradually making belief impossible. It is in that sense that God's commanding Isaiah to preach the message was the same in effect as if He had commanded the prophet to blind their eyes and harden their hearts.

Isaiah 6:9-10 describes Israel's failure to respond to the prophet's message. Jesus regarded Himself as parallel to the rejection of Isaiah and his message. He says in Matthew 13:14, ***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.'*** In quoting this passage, Jesus wanted to explain that Israel in His day could not believe because they would not believe.

The patience of God

God evidently knew that Isaiah's mission would not be successful. Why, then, did He ask Isaiah to speak to the people? Here we see the wonderful love of God. Even though the Lord knew that Judah would not receive the message of judgment, He still sent forth Isaiah because He was not willing that anyone should perish. That was the reason. And so, to the question 'How long, Lord?' God answered that Isaiah was to proclaim the message until the judgment came.

At the end of the book of Isaiah, we find these beautiful words which speak of God's patience. 'I have stretched out my hands all day long. All day long I have spread out my hands to a stiff-necked

and rebellious nation (Isaiah 65:2).’ Why bother caring for people who don’t want to listen? Because God desires their salvation, not their condemnation.

God does not delight in judging the sinner. He does not want anyone to perish (2Peter 3:9). Many times in the history of Israel, God sent prophets to His people even though they did not want to hear His word. That is the main message of the Lord Jesus in the parable of the tenants. The landlord sent a servant to collect the fruits on his vineyard. But the tenants, instead of welcoming him, beat him. Then the landlord sent another servant. The tenants killed him. As a last resort, the owner sent his son. And he was killed too. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together ... and you were unwilling* (Matthew 23:37). ‘I was not willing that you should perish. I wanted to gather you under my wing, to care for you, but you did not want to.’ There is one thing that can stop God from exercising His saving grace: when the sinner does not want the love of God.

We are now in a better position to deal with our initial question. When the Lord Jesus spoke in parables, was His intention to conceal the truth or was it to reveal it? Can you imagine a situation in which Jesus preached to the crowd with the deliberate intention that they should not understand? If He didn’t want people to know something, it would have been more sensible if He didn’t say anything to them. But that was not what Jesus had in mind. He used parables precisely with the intention that the hearers should understand.

We can say that a parable is more or less an illustration. It is a special kind of illustration which puts a divine truth into the picture of that illustration. Now, when we use an illustration, what do we want to achieve? Do we use an illustration in order to conceal what we want to say or do we use it in order to clarify what we want to communicate? Put in this way, the answer is of course very plain. We use an illustration to help a person to understand, and not the reverse.

When the Lord Jesus uses a parable, He is simply teaching with an illustration. And the illustration is there to help us to understand. Or, to use the words of Jesus in John 3:12, ‘If I speak to you earthly things, things that are obvious to the senses, and you don’t believe, how are you going to understand if I speak to you spiritual things, things which are removed from human view?’ These words addressed to Nicodemus illustrate the point of a parable. Jesus knows that our ability to understand spiritual things is very limited. Therefore He speaks to us using earthly pictures. ‘If I speak to you spiritual things, you wouldn’t be able to understand. So what do I do? I speak to you in earthly pictures. If you can understand the earthly picture, you will understand by extension what I am saying to you at the spiritual level. But if you cannot even understand the earthly picture, how are you going to understand the spiritual things that I am trying to explain to you in plain language? You wouldn’t grasp what I am saying.’

Jesus wants us to understand. He brings the truth to us in terms of birds, of flowers, of sunshine, of things with which we are familiar so that we can understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. That’s what He was doing when he told the parable of the sower. He came to this multitude of people, most of them farmers, and He spoke to them at their level. He told them a story about a farmer who was sowing his plot of ground. As they thought about the story, they gradually got the message. They began to see some aspects of the kingdom of heaven. That is the whole purpose of a parable.

They hear without understanding

But some people don’t get the message. ‘Though hearing the word of God, they do not hear, nor do they understand.’ They have shut their eyes and therefore their spiritual response to the truth of God is dull. As we mentioned when we examined the passage in Isaiah 6, it is the people who make themselves insensitive to the word of God. Paul says the same thing in 2Corinthians 4:3. *But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.* The gospel is not hidden. When Paul went out to preach the

gospel, it was not with the intention to conceal the truth. He did everything that he could to set forth the truth plainly. It is true that some do not perceive the beauty of the gospel and regard it as foolishness. If they do not understand, if the truth is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. The veiling, where it exists, comes from the unbelief of those who are perishing, whose minds have been blinded by Satan.

The devil blinds a person's mind by appealing to his flesh. When Satan gets a person to focus his life upon himself and the world, that person becomes enslaved to his flesh and to the things of this world. In this way, Satan can prevent the message of the gospel from taking root in the heart of a person. Isn't that what Jesus says in the parable of the sower? ... *The evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road ... And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful* (Matthew 13:19, 22).

Notice also that in the parable of the sower, how well the seed grows depends upon the ground, not on the seed. If the seed does not grow well or does not grow at all, it is because of the soil, i.e., the heart of the hearer. God does not purposely conceal the meaning of His message to anyone. God wants us to understand it. He tells us the truth as clearly as possible, if necessary by illustrations, which is what the Lord Jesus does when He speaks in parables. If the message is not understood, the fault is not in the word of God. It is a result of the hardness of man's heart. Man does not understand because he has shut his eyes and chosen not to see.

In Matthew 13:16, Jesus says, *But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.* 'Blessed are your eyes.' Who is the Lord speaking to? He is speaking to His disciples, those who have believed and yielded their lives to Him. If today you have committed yourself fully to Christ as the disciples did, then indeed, blessed are you, because now your eyes can see. You can rejoice in the fact that God has poured out His love in your heart and caused the Holy Spirit to renew your soul.