

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #70: WHY DID JESUS SPEAK IN PARABLES?

By John Temples

Read the first nine verses of Matthew 13:

“On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: ‘Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

Now stop right there. Imagine you are present. You’ve walked half a day to hear Jesus. He speaks for two or three minutes and sits down. Can’t you just hear a Jewish man in the audience muttering to his wife, “Is that it? Is that all there is?”

“Is this the great orator/miracle worker/rabbi who supposedly enthralls people with His words? Is this the one of whom it is said, ‘Never did anyone speak like this man’?” All this fellow heard was a childish story about a farmer and some seed. He goes home mad at his wife for dragging him down to the lake to hear Jesus.

I imagine most of the crowd went home early. They didn’t wait around for the explanation of the parable which Jesus gave later. Jesus’s disciples must have sensed the disappointment in the crowd, because verse 10 says they asked Him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Translation: “Why don’t you just dazzle them with your deep insight and divine theology?” Listen carefully to the Lord’s

answer in verse 11: “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

At first glance, verse 11 sounds like Jesus is favoring some people over others. It sounds as if He is deliberately withholding comprehension from the masses, but giving understanding to the privileged few. But in verse 12, Jesus begins to explain: “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.”
Whoever has what? *A real desire to know the truth.* Read verse 12 again substituting this definition and it will become clear: “For whoever has a burning desire to know the truth, to him more truth will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have (a desire for truth), even the truth he has will be taken away from him.”

Jesus went on to elaborate on this in verses 13-17: “Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 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; 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.’ But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; 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.”

Did I read that correctly? Did Jesus really say (in so many words), “I speak in parables so some people WON’T understand”? Yes, He did. Why was it the disciples waited around to hear Jesus explain the parable and most didn’t? Why were the disciples called “blessed” and the masses were not? Because the disciples wanted to learn, and the others didn’t. And Jesus gave both classes of people what they wanted.

To those who really wanted to learn the ways of God, Jesus gave a simple story that, with help, they understood--they got the spiritual explanation and application

of the lesson. And to those who were shallow, or skeptical, or just there for a bit of diversion, He gave them what they wanted: a childish story that did not challenge or impress them. They got their skepticism validated.

We usually view the parables as gracious gifts from God that help us understand difficult spiritual concepts. But here's another reason for the parables you might not have thought about: *They were designed, in part, to conceal the truth from those who were not sincerely seeking it.* The ever-present "spies" sent by the Jewish leaders to shadow Jesus would have nothing to report--they could only say, "He told some harmless story about farming."

You know how preachers always talk about God giving people freedom of choice? Well, He does. And He goes to great lengths to preserve that freedom. In my studies over the years, I have been impressed with something amazing: God has so constructed the Bible that if you want to learn the truth, you can. And if you want to deny and find fault, you can.

You can see this principle in the teachings and statements of Jesus. He always gave His enemies a means to disbelieve if that was what they wanted. We might call this "the principle of plausible denial."

SOME EXAMPLES OF "PLAUSIBLE DENIAL" IN OPERATION

There's an example right in our text, Matthew 13. Verse 9 says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The Lord was alerting His hearers that His message contained a deeper spiritual meaning, but only those who had "ears to hear" would get it. Brother Burton Coffman says, "This was Christ's invitation to study that innocent story for hidden meaning. Even yet, the true and full implications of this rich narrative come only to those with perceptive minds and hearts, attuned to the detection of spiritual truth." So the Lord was saying, if you want to hear, you will hear (get the real meaning); if you don't want to hear, you won't.

Plausible denial in Luke 8:41-56. A ruler named Jairus came and asked Jesus to heal his dying daughter. As they went toward the house, a messenger met them and told them it was too late; the girl was already dead. Verse 52 says, "Now all

wept and mourned for her; but He said, 'Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping.'"

Why did Jesus say the girl was sleeping when it was plain that she was dead? So that even after He raised her from the dead, those who wished to disbelieve had grounds for doing so. They could say, "See? Jesus Himself said she was only asleep."

Another example: John 6:53,54. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.'" No doubt, everybody who heard this was aghast, including Jesus's own disciples. The reaction was entirely predictable: "Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can understand it?'" And, "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more" (verses 60 and 66). Of course, we know He was speaking symbolically; but why did He phrase things the way He did? He had just said, "I am the bread of life" (verse 48). If He had left it at that--a nice platitude--there would have been no violent reaction.

So why did the Lord say, "Eat My flesh and drink My blood," knowing how the Jews felt (and what the Law of Moses taught) about the eating of blood? Because it absolutely separated the true disciples from the wanna-bes and those hostile to Him. The Lord knew exactly what He was doing. In fact, He told us why He spoke like that in verse 64: "There are some of you who do not believe." So He was giving those folks a severe test. If they were true disciples, they would persevere and wrestle with the Lord's teachings and make correct applications of His words. But if they were shallow skeptics, they could go away and tell people, "This guy is crazy...he advocates cannibalism."

Why is it that Jesus never appeared to any of His enemies after His resurrection? For one thing, they did not deserve an "audience" with the risen Lord. For another thing, Jesus was preserving their right to disbelieve. Remember when Thomas doubted and demanded to see and feel the wounds of Jesus before he would believe--a request which Jesus granted? He told Thomas, "Because you have

seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). Once again we see the Lord respecting our right to believe or not based on the eye-witness evidence of Scripture.

This explains a lot of the seeming contradictions and difficult teachings in the Scriptures, including the parables. They are tests--challenges to separate the real truth-seekers from the shallow, the worldly, and the insincere. John 7:17 says, “If anyone wants to do [God’s] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God.” What would the reverse of that be? “If anyone does NOT want to do His will, HE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO KNOW concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God.”

CONCLUSION

It is indeed maddening to Christians that the Bible is so plain to us, yet to others it is gobbledygook or garbage. Now we know why: God is giving us a choice. In fact, He is giving both kinds of people what they want. Those who love the truth will find it; those who hate the truth will find a reason to reject it. The Bible is so constructed that if you wish to find truth and are willing to dig for it, you will find it. But if you do not want to believe, many of the Bible’s teachings (including the parables) will be enigmatic, bizarre, or meaningless. The parables of Jesus were designed to reveal truth to sincere seekers, but also to conceal truth from those with unreceptive hearts. --John Temples