

Chapter 50: The Secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 13:10–17

When Jesus begins teaching about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 13, he determines to teach his message through parables. Since Jesus first spoke those parables two thousand years ago, these parables have both strengthened the faith of countless believers, and they also have scandalized countless of the faithless, leading them to stumble and fall away from faith of Christ. Why are parables so polarizing? Furthermore, what is Jesus' purpose in using them? In this section where Jesus explains his use of parables, he explains that faith is the prerequisite for understanding what he is teaching. Thus, *faith reveals what God conceals*.

Kingdom Secrets (Matt. 13:10–12)

After Jesus finishes his parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9), Jesus' disciples are puzzled at their teacher's methods. What Jesus here communicated by a story, he might very well have communicated "more plainly and fully, without a figure" of speech.¹ This is Jesus' big opportunity, now that the crowds have gathered to hear him speak! Why, then, would he squander that opportunity by telling a children's story about seeds and soil? So, they ask him a question to clarify his purposes and intentions: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (v. 10). Since these disciples posed this question to Jesus, commentators have subsequently struggled to account for Jesus' methods. For some, the parables make Jesus' teaching simpler to understand, so that they are akin to sermon illustrations. (As a preacher, it is astonishing how often people remember the *illustrations* I use, but very rarely do they remember the point that I was illustrating!) For others, Jesus' parables obscure the point that Jesus is making, since his parables might be interpreted in a variety of directions.

As Leon Morris points out, both explanations have some truth to them, but the latter explanation is especially in view: "It is fallacy that everyone can understand a parable. Did David understand Nathan's parable, even though it referred directly to him?"² Often, Jesus will preach parables that insist upon the necessity of faith in him, and those who listen to him are unmoved by his teaching. Other times, the religious leaders will understand that Jesus had spoken his parable against them (Luke 20:19). Even then, they do not perceive Jesus' parable in a way that their understanding leads them to repentance. Rather, they become angry and seek to "lay hands" on Jesus to stop him from speaking against them through his parables.

Therefore, Jesus is insisting here (as elsewhere) that faith is the essential element for rightly understanding his parables. Jesus explains this in two steps. First, he explains that God has only given

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:101–02.

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 339.

knowledge and understanding of the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven” to some, and not to others (v. 11). This word “secrets” is μυστήρια (*mystēria*), so that many translations use the word “mysteries,” the English derivation of that Greek word. This concept first appears in the Old Testament in the book of Daniel, and it refers to “the revelation of God’s partially hidden wisdom, particularly as it concerns events occurring in the ‘latter days.’”³ Jesus is saying that the secret kingdom of heaven has been partially revealed, but that now he has come to reveal that kingdom in these last days—i.e., in the age that began at Jesus’ first coming, and that will conclude at his second coming. This kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world that are visible and judged by human standards. On the contrary, this kingdom is invisible and can only be apprehended, understood, and entered into by faith.

Therefore, as Hagner explains, faith is what differentiates between those who understand Jesus’ parables and those who do not: “For those who have responded positively to Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, the parables convey further insight and knowledge, while for those who have rejected Jesus and his message, the parables have the effect of only darkening the subject further. Thus belief and commitment lead to further knowledge; unbelief leads to further ignorance.”⁴ There are two problems that prevent human beings from understanding Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven. First, we are blind to see its invisible, spiritual reality: “the word of God, in its own nature, is always bright, but its light is choked by the darkness of men. Though the Law was concealed, as it were, by a kind of veil, yet the truth, of God shone brightly in it, if the eyes of many had not been blinded.”⁵ Second, Jesus purposefully obscures his teaching by these parables to prevent those to whom the secrets of the kingdom have “not been given.”

To be “given” the secrets means to have those secrets made known to us by an act of God’s gracious kindness toward us.⁶ In our individualistic culture, however, we do not understand God’s sovereign gift of electing grace to be kindness. Instead, we wonder why God has withheld the knowledge from anyone.⁷ Jesus, however, reminds us that those who “do not have” are culpable for their ignorance: “For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (v. 12). As Lenski writes, the “having” refers to faith, and the “not having” to unbelief: “But he who ‘has not’ because he declined what the others accepted, because he thought he was rich and sufficient in himself, he shall not merely remain as he is, without all the riches that flow to the others, he shall lose even ‘what he has.’”⁸ Though those who seem to be wise may seem to possess much skill, knowledge, and insight, their unbelief prevents them from the true enjoyment of those gifts. Therefore, even those gifts that they have will ultimately “be taken away.” Ultimately, Jesus gives the mysteries of the kingdom only to those who receive them by faith.

³ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 20.

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 376.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:102.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 510–11.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 508.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 512.

Dulled Senses (Matt. 13:13–15)

In v. 13, when Jesus says “This is why” (διὰ τί; *dia ti*), he is directly answering the original question of the disciples: “Why...?” (διὰ τοῦτο; *dia touto*). For those with faith, Jesus’ parables communicate profound truth in the simplest possible terms. For those without faith, however, Jesus hides the secrets of the kingdom of heaven in plain sight: “This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (v. 13). The language speaks to sensory perception that does not work correctly: unseeing eyes, unhearing ears, and unbelieving hearts. Importantly, though, the same message instructs some and confuses others. As Morris writes, “The word of God is always effective: it brings enlightenment or judgment—enlightenment to the disciples, judgment to those who rejected Jesus. It was in this sense that it was the divine purpose that they should not understand.”⁹ As elsewhere throughout the Scripture, however, the Lord hardens hearts against his truth because of the sinful culpability of unbelief. For example, in the book of Exodus the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, but Pharaoh also hardened his own heart.¹⁰

The Lord’s divine judgment of further hardening hearts of those who refuse to believe his word is nothing new. In v. 14–15, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9–10: “Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’” The context of this quotation is significant, coming as Isaiah sees the holiness of the Lord and volunteers himself to go to God to minister to the Lord’s unclean people. The Lord agrees to send Isaiah, but then the Lord explains that Isaiah’s mission will not be to lead people to repentance. Rather, Isaiah will preach in such a way that will increasingly harden the hearts of his people against the Lord’s word. Ultimately, this unbelief will lead to the further judgment of God’s punishment by sending his people into captivity: “all whom God does not enlighten with the Spirit of adoption are men of unsound mind; and that, while they are more and more blinded by the word of God, the blame rests wholly on themselves, because this blindness is voluntary.”¹¹ Or, as Hagner writes, “It is the unbelieving people who have shut their own eyes.”¹²

Blessed Sight (Matt. 13:16–17)

Yet, Jesus speaks about judgment only as the dark backdrop against which the glory of the gospel shines more brightly. While many do not believe, and while their judgment will be to harden them further in their senseless unbelief, others will have a gloriously different experience: “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (v. 16). In part, Jesus is saying that

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 341.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 554.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:107–08.

¹² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 374.

they are blessed to see *him*—that is, blessed because they saw Jesus in the flesh. Nevertheless, this cannot be all that he means, because he is drawing a contrast against other people who *also* saw him in the flesh.

Rather, the sight Jesus describes here is a spiritual perception, as Calvin rightly notes: “Christ does not mean any kind of hearing, or the mere beholding of the flesh, but pronounces their eyes to be blessed, because they perceive in him a glory which is worthy of the only-begotten Son of God, so as to acknowledge him as the Redeemer; because they perceive shining in him the lively image of God, by which they obtain salvation and perfect happiness.”¹³ When they speak to Jesus, their hearts are not hardened against him. Rather, God has given them the perception to understand that they are speaking to the incarnate Son of God.

Then, Jesus adds that they are indeed blessed because of their position in history: “For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (v. 17). While some within God’s people had always hardened their hearts against God’s Word, there was also always a remnant of people who, like Jesus’ disciples, believed. The great difference between old covenant believers and Jesus’ disciples, though, is that Jesus’ disciples were greatly privileged to see what those who lived during the Old Testament “longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and [longed] to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” As glorious as it may have been for a prophet such as Isaiah to see God high and lifted up on his throne, Jesus’ disciples were given a clearer vision of God’s glory in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

We should recognize, however, that for as many unprecedented privileged as the disciples enjoyed, they had not yet received understanding to perceive everything Jesus was saying. Many things were still blinded from their eyes—albeit from temporary ignorance rather than permanent unbelief. So, as wonderful as it was for them to see what they see, we have far better privileges to see Jesus clearly because of our privileges of a completed Bible and the outpouring of Christ’s Holy Spirit. Through these privileges, we see the glory of Christ by faith as we await the day when we will see him with our glorified eyes forever.

Discussion Questions

1. Why were Jesus’ disciples puzzled about Jesus’ parables (v. 10)? How have the parables affected you, whether while you were an unbeliever or during the time that you have been a believer? What is the kingdom of heaven? What does Jesus mean when he speaks about the “secrets” of the kingdom of heaven (v. 11)? Who can understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven? On what basis do they come to that understanding?
2. How are the secrets of the kingdom of heaven hidden in plain sight by parables (v. 13)? Why do parables dull the senses of some? Why and how does Jesus use parables for the purpose of dulling the senses of those people? How do the effects of Jesus’ parables fulfill the prophecy spoken by Isaiah (vv. 14–15)? How should we understand the balance between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in this passage?

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:110.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 516.

3. Why are Jesus' disciples blessed because they see Jesus and hear what Jesus is saying? How are the disciples blessed beyond the other people living during those days who also saw Jesus and heard him teach (e.g., the crowds or the religious leaders)? What is the difference? How are the disciples blessed beyond Old Testament believers? How are we even further blessed with our Bibles and the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has sent to us?

4. How does this passage relate to what the Apostle Paul writes, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7)? What else does the Apostle Paul say about the "secrets/mysteries" of God's wisdom (1 Cor. 2:7)? What role does faith play in revealing what God conceals? What role does the Holy Spirit play in giving us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to believe? How do you pray for God to reveal more of the wisdom of his kingdom to you?