

Matthew 13:1-17

Introduction

(Read Matthew 13:1-8)

Okay. So what? Here we have a story about a farmer planting seeds. As he scatters the seeds, he can't control where each and every seed falls. Depending on where the seeds fall, they *may* or *may not* sprout, and grow, and produce grain. And of those that do produce grain, they will not all produce equal amounts – some will produce more, and some will produce less. All of this was obvious enough to everyone who was listening to Jesus. So tell me something I *don't* know. What's the *point*? What are you driving at?

I. Verse 9 – He who has ears, let him hear.

As we'll see next week, Jesus never explained this parable to the crowds. He just told the story, and that was it. And when He was finished, He said: Whoever has the ability to understand this parable, let him understand it. So what about those who don't have the ability to understand the parable? Where does that leave them? Later on, when the crowds had all left and Jesus was alone (cf. Mark 4:10):

II. Verse 10 – Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

Why don't you either explain yourself, or speak more clearly? Why do you speak in code, and then exhort everyone who can decipher the code to start deciphering? This just doesn't seem to make sense! It seems counterproductive. Why do you speak to them in parables?

III. Verse 11 – And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

So this is why Jesus is talking to the crowds in parables! He “*intentionally* spoke obscurely, *in order* that his discourse might be a riddle to many, and might only strike their ears with a confused and doubtful sound” (Calvin). **Because** (Greek: *hoti*) it has not been given to them to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, **therefore** I speak to them in parables – *so that* they will not understand.

But what are the “secrets” of the kingdom of heaven? The Jews *knew* about the kingdom. They were expecting the kingdom and looking for the kingdom! But what it had not been given them to see and understand was the fact that the kingdom was coming into the world long before its final consummation at the end of the age (cf. Ladd; quoted by Carson). Mark sums up all of the many secrets of the kingdom into just one main secret (Mark 4:10-13). “The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that *the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen by Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men*” (Ladd; quoted by Carson). The promised kingdom was already present. It was now! It was here! God's salvation had

arrived. But *because* in God's sovereign purpose, it had *not* been given to the Jews to understand this truth, *therefore* Jesus spoke to them in parables – *so that* they might not understand. On the other hand, to His disciples Jesus said: “*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*”. You are the ones who have been given spiritual ears to hear and to understand the truth about the kingdom's arrival – truth that otherwise you would never have been able to see or comprehend. When I think of Jesus saying this to me (“to you it has been given”), I can only ask: Why me? Why has it been given to me to understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven? Is it because of my moral excellencies? Is it because I'm such a “good” person? Far from it! – For I am a sinner through and through. So I ask again... why me? Why has it been given to me to see so clearly the *presence* of God's rule through Jesus Christ? Is it because I had faith? Is it because I chose to believe the good news about the arrival of the kingdom? Far from it! I could never have believed this good news unless it had *first* been given to me to see the good news – unless God had *first* given me the spiritual eyes to see, and ears to hear and understand. So here in these words of Jesus, we have very simply the glories of pure, sovereign grace. “*To you... it has been given... but to them... it has not been given...*” Why me? Because it was the gracious and incomprehensible will of God to love me and choose me before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). I know from God's word, and I feel it in my own heart that no other reason could ever be given. But what about those to whom it has *not* been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven? *Why not* them? Before this question is answered, Jesus goes on to say in verse twelve:

IV. Verse 12 – “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”

In light of verse eleven, we know that the one who “has” is the one to whom it has been *given*, while the one who “has not” is the one to whom it has not been *given*. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive?” So Jesus teaches us that the one who truly “has” will always be having more and more. Those to whom it has been *given* to know the secrets of the kingdom can look forward to a lifetime of knowing *always* more deeply, and more fully, and more truly, and more wonderfully. When God begins to give, we can know that He will never cease to give. When God saves, we know that He will keep on saving to the uttermost. Jesus says that we will have “an *abundance*”. Jesus wants us to *see* how inexhaustible and unfathomable are the riches of God's sovereign grace. They don't start and then run out. Instead, our experience of His grace can *only grow*, and *grow*, and *grow*, as we are *given* to know *more*, and *more*, and *more* of the wonderful reality of His kingdom and rule. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! What wondrous love is this, O my soul!”

But... from the one who has not (because it has not been given to him) even what he has will be taken away. When God gives, it means that He's about to give more. When God chooses not to give, it means that He's about to take away even what a person (“thinks” – Lk. 8:18) he has. Those to whom it has not been given to see and to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven will find in the end that the knowledge and privileges they thought they had were utterly worthless, counting for nothing. They will all be stripped away. So what's the point of verse twelve? Well, let's not take for granted the *continuing* grace of God in our lives. We should be filled everyday with thanksgiving to God, who *keeps on giving, and giving, and giving to us* to know more deeply, and fully, and wonderfully that *hidden* reality of God's rule in Jesus Christ. It

is God's gracious and sovereign will not simply that we should have, but that we should have always more and more, and always "an *abundance*".

So why does Jesus speak to the people in parables? His first answer is rooted in the secret mysteries of God's sovereign grace. To some it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to others it has not been given. Those who have will find that God gives them even more, while those who have not will find that God takes away even what they thought they had. *Because* in the sovereign purpose and will of God it had not been given to some to understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, *therefore* Jesus spoke to them in parables – *so that* they might not understand (so that even what they had might be taken away).

- ✓ Isaiah 40:13-14 – Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?
- ✓ Romans 11:33-34 – Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

Why does Jesus speak to the people in parables? If the first answer was rooted in the secret mysteries of God's sovereign grace, then the second answer gives us the human reason, in order that God might be just and man might be held fully responsible.

V. Verses 13-15 – "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. 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.'"

Now the first thing we need to know is that Matthew has made a pretty significant change here from what Mark and Luke record.

Mark 4:11-12

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but For those outside everything is in parables...

so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."

Luke 8:10

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables...

so that "seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."

Matthew 13:13

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.

Mark and Luke continue to emphasize the sovereign will and purpose of God, while Matthew shifts now to emphasize the *responsibility* of *man*. How can Matthew do this? Does Jesus speak

to the people in parables *so that* the people may be deaf and blind, or does He speak to the people in parables *because* they are deaf and blind? Who is right? Mark and Luke, or Matthew? Well let's see how Matthew compares with Isaiah:

Isaiah 6:9-10

Go, and say to 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 blind their eyes;

lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Matthew 13:14-15

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.”

God tells Isaiah to preach to the people in order that he might *make* their hearts dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes. But Matthew has somewhat unusually decided to follow not the original Hebrew of Isaiah, but the Greek translation, where the preaching of Isaiah is said to be God's *response* to the fact that the people's hearts were *already* dull, with their ears they could *already* barely hear, and their eyes were *already* closed. So once again, which is true, and who is right? Does Isaiah's preaching *cause* the people's blindness or is it in *response* to the people's blindness? And the answer, of course, is that *both* are true! But how can this be?

Well, when God told Isaiah that his preaching of the Word of God would *make* the heart of that people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their hearts, we should know that the fault was *not* in the Word of God! The fault was not in Isaiah's preaching! We are *meant* to *assume* that the fault was in the *already* stubborn, obstinate, rebellious, and hardened hearts of the people. Calvin writes:

“As dim-sighted people cannot blame the sun for *dazzling* [or disorienting] their eyes with its brightness... so ungodly men have no right to blame the word for making them worse after having heard it. The whole blame lies on themselves in altogether refusing it admission; and we need not wonder if that which ought to have led them to salvation becomes the *cause* of their destruction. It is right that the treachery and unbelief of men should be punished by meeting death where they might have received life, darkness where they might have had light; and, in short, evils as numerous as the blessings of salvation which they might have obtained.”

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 – For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one [our message is] a fragrance from death to death, to the other [our message is] a fragrance from life to life.

It was *not* the fault of God's Word that it *caused* the final hardening of the people's hearts so that they were cut off from any possibility of healing. And yet this final hardening of the people's hearts *was* ultimately according to the sovereign purpose and will of God. So Matthew remains *true* to what Jesus said even though he changes "so that they cannot see" (which emphasizes the purpose of God's sovereign will) into "because they cannot see" (emphasizing the result of man's free choice). And Matthew remains *true* to what God said to Isaiah even though he changes "make the heart of this people dull" (which emphasizes the purpose of God's sovereign will) into "for this people's heart has grown dull" (which emphasizes the result of man's free choice). In harmony with Isaiah, Mark, and Luke, Matthew has already emphasized the secret mysteries of God's sovereign grace in verses 11-12, but now he reminds us, still in total harmony with the spirit of Isaiah, Mark, and Luke, that God's sovereign choice does not in any way contradict the responsibility of man.

The *understanding* of the disciple is due to the *grace of God*; [the hardening] of the non-disciple is due to *that person's rejection of the message*. ([But this] still leaves the deep mystery concerning why God does not by his grace make known the truth to all... [Matthew's] immediate concern is the [willful] unbelief of Israel, but as a good Jew he can do nothing other than at the same time accept the sovereign action of God behind that unbelief. (Hagner)

Now concerning this deep mystery of God's sovereign action, Calvin wisely cautions us:

"As that purpose is hidden from us, we must not too eagerly search into it; for the everlasting scheme of the divine purpose is beyond our reach, but we ought to consider the cause which lies plainly before our eyes, namely, the rebellion by which they rendered themselves unworthy of blessings so numerous and so great" (Comm. on Isaiah 6).

Why does Jesus speak to the people in parables? So that the presence of the kingdom might continue to be hidden from those who have stubbornly resisted God's advances and hardened their hearts in unbelief. But also so that the presence of the kingdom might be revealed to all those whom God has graciously chosen to give ears to hear and eyes to see – otherwise, why speak the parables at all? On the one hand, we must never doubt the absolute freedom of the sovereignty of God's grace – that God "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" (Rom. 9:18). In this way, all boasting is excluded, and we are enabled to give God all of the glory for a love that chose us when there was nothing in us to love – not even the beginnings of faith! "O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free, Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me. Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love... 'Tis an ocean vast of blessing, 'tis a haven sweet of rest." (Samuel Trevor Francis) And we can also be comforted here to know that even the hardening of sinners does not fall outside of God's sovereign purpose and plan. On the one hand, we must never doubt the absolute freedom of the sovereignty of God's grace... On the other hand, we must never doubt the *justice* of God's judgment – which is always in perfect accordance with the *real* freedom and responsibility of man. In this way, we'll always be more careful to flee from sin and strive for holy obedience, as well as to earnestly call others to true faith and obedience.

In verses 13-15, we have seen that the free will of sinful man naturally and rightly results in the divine hardening and blinding of His heart. But in verses 11-12, we saw that God's sovereign grace gives to some a new will, that they might see and understand the secrets of the kingdom. Jesus returns to this wonderful truth now in verses 16-17.

VI. Verse 16 – “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

In the Greek, “your” is the very first word in the sentence, so that we should read it like this: “But blessed are *your* eyes, for *they* see, and *your* ears, for *they* hear.” And what can we say in response to this except “Yes! Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for Your sovereign grace and mercy *to me! To me! To ME!*” What a privileged and happy estate is ours – to be able to see and understand and live joyfully in light of the truth and word of God – especially when so many of those around us have closed eyes, plugged ears, and hardened hearts! But there is more.

VII. Verse 17 – “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.”

We are blessed not only because we see and hear, in contrast with the unbelievers around us, but also because of *what* we see and hear, in contrast with all of the prophets and righteous people of the Old Testament. Abraham longed to be able to see and hear what we have seen and heard. Moses longed to see and hear what we have seen and heard. Isaiah longed to see and hear what we have seen and heard. King David longed to see and hear what we have seen and heard. They all had eyes to see and ears to hear, and yet their eyes and ears never got to see and hear what *we* have been privileged to see and hear – the arrival of the Messiah and His kingdom... the rule of God in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:10)! It seems clear to me that Jesus' purpose in these verses is to *inflame* and to *excite* our hearts with the knowledge of our incomparable *privilege* (“Truly, I say to you”). *Since* we have been given eyes to see and ears to hear, and *since* it has been given to us to see and hear what so many others longed to see and hear but never did... let's not idly take our privileges for granted. Instead, let us joyfully and diligently apply ourselves to grow in our understanding of the secrets of the kingdom, believing that it is always God's will to give us more and more, that we might have an abundance – and that we might bear much fruit for His glory. *Since* we have been given ears to hear, let us be faithful to hear! *Since* we have been given eyes to see, let us be faithful to see! “O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be!” (Robert Robinson)