

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 1: The 'What' and 'Why' of Jesus' Parables

For many people, the Parables of Jesus are a beloved collection of His teachings. We relate to images and stories such as sowing seed, being a 'good Samaritan', or using our 'talents'. These stories are great as illustrative lessons to teach even the youngest children. However, as well loved and as familiar as we think the Parables of Jesus are, they are often times oversimplified and misunderstood. It's important that we carefully read and interpret each parable in its own unique way as to not misinterpret and misapply what Jesus was trying to teach. So, let's jump in and explore the Parables!

What Are Parables?

Parables are a form of storytelling used to convey moral or spiritual truths. They are often brief, fictional narratives drawn from everyday life, but they may contain elements of exaggeration or surprise. Parables are a type of indirect communication intended to make the listener think and reflect upon the message. They are not meant to be taken literally, but rather as analogies that point to a deeper truth.

Characteristically, parables contain certain unique elements:

- **Conciseness:** Short narratives with minimal details.
- **Realism:** Drawn from ordinary life (agriculture, family, commerce).
- **Surprise:** Often contain unexpected twists to provoke thought or challenge assumptions.
- **Symbolism:** Use common symbols to communicate profound truths.

Parables often serve as a means of calling forth a response from the hearers, to get them to think and then realize the parable is about them. A parable is sometimes like a good joke – a good joke will draw you in with the story and then hit you with the punch line.

Jesus employed several different types of parables:

1. **Similitudes:** These are short, simple comparisons that describe a general truth, often introduced by "The kingdom of heaven is like...".
2. **Allegorical Parables:** Parables that have symbolic meanings, or spiritual/theological truths.
3. **Ethical Parables:** These parables teach moral or ethical behavior, often reflecting kingdom principles, calling listeners to practical obedience and reflection.
4. **Kingdom Parables:** These parables illustrate aspects of the kingdom of God, such as its nature, growth, and value.
5. **Question Parables:** These parables often end with or include a question that forces the audience to evaluate their own understanding or behavior.
6. **Juridical Parables:** Parables that elicit self-condemnation from the hearer by forcing them to judge the circumstances of the story, which ultimately reflect their own actions or attitudes.

When interpreting parables, it's important to understand some hermeneutical principles:

1. **Context Matters:** Understand the immediate context including the historical and cultural background.
2. **Focus on the Main Point:** Parables typically convey one central truth; avoid over-allegorizing.
3. **Audience Perspective:** Identify how the original audience would have understood the parable.
4. **Old Testament Allusions:** Many of Jesus' parables echo back to Old Testament references
5. **Scriptural Consistency:** Interpret parables in harmony with broader biblical teaching.

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

Jesus taught in parables for several interconnected reasons. Each reason reveals His teaching strategy and theological purpose, rooted in His mission to proclaim the kingdom of God. Here's an in-depth exploration:

1. To Fulfill Prophecy: Jesus' use of parables was a direct fulfillment of prophecy. Psalm 78:2 declares, "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter hidden things, things from of old." Similarly, Isaiah 6:9-10 speaks of people hearing but not understanding—a theme Jesus references when explaining His parabolic teaching (Matthew 13:10-17).

2. To Challenge Conventional Thinking: Parables often contained surprising twists that disrupted conventional expectations. For instance, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a despised Samaritan becomes the hero, challenging prejudices and social norms. Parables frequently upend worldly values, emphasizing humility over pride (e.g., the Pharisee and the Tax Collector), grace over merit (e.g., the Workers in the Vineyard), and the marginalized over the powerful (e.g., the Wedding Feast).

3. To Illustrate the Kingdom of God: Jesus' parables often focused on the kingdom of God—its growth (e.g., the Mustard Seed), its value (e.g., the Pearl of Great Price), and its inclusivity (e.g., the Great Banquet). The parables revealed aspects of the kingdom incrementally, enabling listeners to grasp its multifaceted nature over time.

4. To Address Multiple Audiences Simultaneously: Parables entertained and intrigued the **masses**, using vivid and relatable imagery. However, the crowds often missed the deeper spiritual truths. For His **disciples**, Jesus explained the parables in private, offering clarity and deeper teaching (Mark 4:34). Many parables exposed the hypocrisy and rebellion of the **Pharisees and scribes** (e.g., the Parable of the Tenants, Matthew 21:33-46). These stories often carried veiled rebukes that the leaders understood but could not directly confront without implicating themselves.

5. To Prompt a Response: Parables were not merely informational but transformational, calling listeners to respond in faith and obedience. Parables often forced listeners to confront their spiritual condition, demanding a choice. For example:

- The Parable of the Sower challenges individuals to examine the condition of their hearts.
- The Parable of the Prodigal Son invites reflection on repentance and God's grace.

6. To Reveal Truth to the Receptive: Parables use familiar imagery and stories from everyday life (e.g., farming, family relationships, commerce) to make profound spiritual truths relatable and memorable.

Those who were spiritually receptive, such as the disciples and the humble in heart, could discern the deeper meaning of parables. Jesus said, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear" (Matthew 13:16).

7. To Conceal Truth from the Hard-Hearted: Parables acted as a form of spiritual discernment. They revealed truth to those open to God but concealed it from those who were resistant or hostile. Jesus explained, "The secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you, but not to them" (Matthew 13:11).

Let's look deeper into why Jesus would choose to conceal truth from certain people:

Scriptures on Concealing the Truth of Parables

Matthew 13:1-17 *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ **Whoever has ears, let them hear.**"*

¹⁰ *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" ¹¹ He replied, "**Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.***

¹³ *This is why I speak to them in parables: "**Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. ¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah**:** "**You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.***

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

Mark 4:10-12 *When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!*

Luke 8:9-10 *His disciples asked him what this parable meant. ¹⁰ He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, "though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'*

****Isaiah 6:8-13** *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" ⁹ He said, "Go and tell this people: "**Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.**"*

¹¹ *Then I said, "For how long, Lord?" And he answered: "**Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, ¹² until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. ¹³ And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.**"*

Why Was This Concealing Needed?

Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the context of His parabolic teaching is central to understanding His purpose in concealing truth from those who were resistant to His message. By quoting this passage, Jesus aligned His mission with that of Isaiah, demonstrating that the rejection of God's message by a hard-hearted audience was not only anticipated but also served a specific divine purpose.

Isaiah's task was to proclaim God's word to a rebellious Israel that had repeatedly rejected God's covenant. His message functioned as a **judicial hardening**—a divine act of judgment that exposed and solidified the people's spiritual blindness and deafness. The hardening was a divine response to persistent rebellion and unbelief, ultimately resulting in judgment while simultaneously paving the way for God's redemptive purposes to unfold.

In Jesus' This concealing of truth was needed to harden the heart of Israel so they would reject Jesus as Messiah. Israel's rejection of Jesus, predicted in Old Testament prophecies, was necessary for his crucifixion and subsequent fulfillment of God's plan in bringing the Gentiles into God's salvation purpose, fulfilling the Abrahamic Covenant. This hardening of Israel's heart was a necessary step in God's plan for both Israel and the Gentiles. Simply put, Israel had to be hardened in order for Jesus to die, and Israel had to be hardened in order for you and me to be saved.

Paul in Romans 11, deals with the issue of Israel's hardening being the entry way to Gentiles being included in God's redemptive plan: **Romans 11:7-8, 11** *What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, ⁸ as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day"... Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.*

<u>Hardening of Israel in Isaiah's Day</u>	<u>Hardening of Israel in Jesus' Day</u>
Persistent Idolatry	Religious Hypocrisy
Rejection of God's Prophets	Rejection of the Jesus' Authority
Covenant Unfaithfulness	Unbelief toward Christ
Resulted in Destruction of Jerusalem (586BC)	Resulted in Destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70)
Led to Exile in Babylon	Led by Kingdom Being Taken from Them
A Faithful Remnant Would Be Saved	Remnant Would Come to Christ
Redemptive Purpose – Lead to Messiah	Redemptive Purpose – Gentile Inclusion

Israel's **hardening was for four reasons**: **1.** To show forth the Jew/Gentile Church mystery; **2.** To reveal the faithful remnant; **3.** For the purpose of judgement for covenant unbelief; and **4.** For the inclusion of the Gentiles by faith.

Thus, the hardening of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles are central to the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. It was also central to defining the nature of the Kingdom of God, that it would not be a physical, nationalistic Jewish Kingdom, but a spiritual and inclusive kingdom made up of all nations.

We will see all this play out as we journey through the parables, but our point is that parables played a significant role in not just Jesus' moral teaching, but the overall plan of redemption.