

“THE SUBVERSIVE STORIES OF JESUS” MATTHEW 13:1-3; 10-17

When Jesus taught people were often astonished at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not like their teachers of the Law (Matt. 7:28-29). I assure you, teaching with authority has nothing to do with a style of teaching, an eloquent delivery, a scholarly tone, or a booming voice. Nor does it have reference to using big words or deftly dissecting complex theological concepts. The fact is, Jesus taught so that most children could understand Him, and He often used simple, down-to-earth stories from everyday life called parables. Indeed, more than one-third of His teachings recorded in the Gospels are stories.

Jesus did this for a reason, though probably not the reason you think. Today, a teacher might tell stories to entertain his audience or to hold their attention or to endear them to himself. He might tell stories to clarify or illustrate a point he was making, or he might tell stories as a means of providing comic relief from what would otherwise be a dull lecture.

Not so with Jesus. Yes, His stories did help to illustrate or explain spiritual realities, but the primary reason Jesus told stories was so that those who were receptive to Him could learn even more about the kingdom, and those who were unreceptive would know nothing at all. In other words, He told stories in order to reveal truth *and* to conceal truth, and the same story would have one of those two effects on everyone in His audience.

In our exposition of Matthew, we are moving into a section that scholars commonly refer to as the Parabolic Discourse. This discourse contains one story after another, all of which are about the kingdom of heaven. Before we look at those stories, though, I want to set the context concerning what was happening at this stage in Jesus' life and ministry.

We just finished studying chapters 11-12, which consist of several conversations and confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders, who thought He was a fraud. But there was opposition from others as well—even from his biological half-brothers, who showed up while He was teaching in Peter's house. The section fittingly culminates with Jesus pointing at His disciples and declaring *them* to be His real family, saying, *“Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (12:50).*

Jesus has now drawn a sharp line in the sand. His disciples are part of God's family and belong to the kingdom; the religious leaders are *not* part of God's family and do *not* belong to the kingdom.

But what about the crowds? They have followed Jesus around, heard His teaching, seen His miracles, and witnessed the growing tension between Him and their leaders. Will they follow Jesus' disciples and obey the Father's will by believing in Him and becoming part of His kingdom? Or will they follow the Pharisees and reject Him, therefore forfeiting the opportunity to be part of the kingdom?

They have had ample opportunity to decide, so Jesus is now going to test their responsiveness. And he does so by telling them a series of stories. We will find out from this passage that their response to these stories will be evidence of whether or not they believe Him and belong to Him.

But there is something else we need to know. Jesus has been talking about the arrival of His kingdom, and He has stated plainly that, contrary to the expectations that the kingdom would be established in a sudden, dramatic way, the kingdom begins in their hearts. Entrance into the kingdom occurs with the establishment of God's righteousness in the heart

of one who believes in Jesus, which results in being His disciple.

Jesus is going to use stories to describe these different manifestations of the kingdom. That is why I have called His parables *subversive* stories. Subversive means to undermine or overthrow an established or existing system. In using these stories, Jesus was undermining the existing theological system about the kingdom that was championed by the Pharisees and adopted by most of the Jews.

Let's begin reading in **verses 1-3**. *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And He told them many things in parables...*

Jesus had been in Capernaum and was teaching in a house that most likely belonged to Peter. But He left "the house" and went to the lake, a reference to the Sea of Galilee. Sitting was the typical posture for teachers in those days, and so after the crowds followed him from the home to the lakeshore and Jesus sat down, they would have understood that He was ready to continue His teaching.

The reason Jesus got into a boat is presumably because the crowd was so large that He had to keep them from pressing in on Him, something He did at least one other time (Luke 5:1f.). The traditional site for this discourse is a distinctive cove or inlet that is now called, "The Cove of the Parables." The land surrounding the cove slopes down like a natural horseshoe shaped amphitheater. Modern Israeli scientists have tested the acoustics in this place and found that Jesus' voice could have been clearly heard one hundred meters from the boat to a crowd of hundreds gathered on the shore and slopes.

We are told in verse 3 that Jesus began to teach them many things in *parables*. The Greek word "parabole" is a compound word: *para*, "alongside" and *bole*, "to throw." It literally means "to throw alongside." Like a hand grenade, Jesus lobbed these simple earthly stories that were packed with dynamic spiritual truth alongside His audience so they would explode in their imaginations.

Parables were not unique to Jesus. Other rabbis in His day used parables to illustrate or arouse interest in the listener and hold their attention. But Jesus uniquely used parables to intentionally disarm His audience and compel them to come to terms with the particular subject he was addressing. As I said, they were subversive stories, and as such they often took unexpected twists and turns which frequently raised red flags in listeners' minds, and sometimes caused offense.

In verses 4-9, Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, which we will look at next week, Lord willing. But I want to continue our introduction to parables by looking ahead at **verse 10**. *¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"*

Please notice the word "them," a reference to the crowd that had followed Jesus to the shore. Usually when Jesus taught publicly, He addressed *both* His disciples *and* the crowds—those who were already believers and those who were seekers. During this discourse, however, He was directing His attention to the crowd only. We are going to find out that this distinction between the crowd and the disciples is crucial in understanding why Jesus spoke in parables.

Look at **verse 11**. *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."*

Jesus is stating something very important in this verse about how spiritual understanding is received. Please note it is not merely received by hearing Jesus' words, or

by listening to His instruction, or even by trying hard to comprehend His teaching. The verb “give” is in the passive voice, which signifies that the comprehension of spiritual truth comes from an outside Source. The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom have been given to the disciples from God himself. Their comprehension of spiritual truth that has enabled them to be Jesus’ brother and sister and mother, that has enabled them to participate in the kingdom, is due to the fact that God has given them the gift of understanding.

On another occasion, when Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter said, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* And Jesus said, *“Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven”* (Matt. 16:16-18). Spiritual understanding about Jesus comes from God.

What is more, the verb “give” is not only in the passive voice, it is in the *perfect* tense, which signifies that this gift of understanding remains with those to whom it has been given. Once it is acquired, it cannot be relinquished, it cannot be taken away.

On the other hand, this gift of understanding has *not* been given by God to the crowd, at least not yet. It is not merely that they do not comprehend the “secrets of the kingdom;” they *cannot* comprehend them. Not because they are unintelligent, or because they are not trying hard enough to understand them, but simply and solely because God has withheld the gift of understanding from them.

And I believe that there is only one conclusion that we can make from this statement: God is sovereign. He chooses who can believe and who cannot. This is a truth that is revealed throughout the New Testament in relationship to believing in Jesus and becoming part of His family. In John 6, after Jesus said some things about believing in Him that turned many people against him, He said, *“⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.”* (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray Him.) ⁶⁵ And He said, *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father”* (6:64-65).

Someone may say, “That’s not fair!” The Apostle Paul anticipated that complaint in Romans 9 as he discusses this matter of God’s sovereignty. He said, ¹⁴ *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!* ¹⁵ *For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”* ¹⁶ *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* ¹⁷ *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”* ¹⁸ *So then He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills* (Roman 9:14-18).

That same emphasis on the sovereignty of God is in Matthew 13:11, and it is even reinforced when Jesus said, “To you (Jesus’ disciples) it has been given to know the *secrets* of the kingdom of heaven.” “Secrets” is the Greek word, “*mysteria*” (mysteries), a word commonly used in Jewish literature to refer to a secret about God’s plans and purposes that was communicated in *veiled speech* so that only God’s chosen could understand (Wilkins, 476).

Now, Jesus says, these secrets are presented in the form of parables. Parables are the “veiled speech.” Jesus is speaking in parables to reveal some secrets about the kingdom, but they are secrets that the crowd will not be able to understand, at least not yet. For example, one of these secrets is that the kingdom has arrived in a completely different form than what was anticipated. It is now present in the hearts of Jesus’ disciples, not in a visible, political government.

In fact, almost all the parables in Matthew 13 reveal how the kingdom of God will operate in the world *before* its final, powerful, visible manifestation (which Jesus will reveal in chapters 24-25). But this truth is hidden from the crowd, at least for now. And the gap between those who comprehend these truths and those who don't will only get wider and wider.

Look at what Jesus says in **verse 12**. 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.* What a person "has" or "has not" is insight or understanding about the identity of Jesus and the kingdom. Verse 11 told us that God sovereignly enables some to understand so they are compelled to embrace Jesus and become part of the kingdom, while He withholds that gift of understanding from others. The result is a growing polarization of the population, divided by whether they are for or against Jesus.

But verse 12 tells us something else about the nature of spiritual truth. Jesus says, *"For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance."* It's as though Jesus is likening spiritual truth to a dynamic substance that spontaneously combusts to become more robust, more potent, more expansive. And I believe Jesus meant this to encourage those who have committed themselves to following Jesus. They have made a good beginning and have received blessing and understanding. But that blessing and understanding is not static; it's dynamic. It will expand and multiply.

On the other hand, **verse 12b**, *but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.* Again, there is a dynamic component to spiritual truth. When those who do not possess understanding about Jesus and kingdom come into contact with the truth, the truth acts as a solvent that dissolves whatever understanding they had, so that they are left with nothing. So, concerning the parables Jesus is now teaching, not only will those parables not reveal truth to those who haven't been given the gift of understanding, they will actually dissolve what little understanding they possessed. Which, I think, is another way of saying many would give up on Jesus after this.

Look at **verses 13-15**. 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.* ¹⁴ *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."*

¹⁵ *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.'*

These verses introduce us to a second reason why Jesus speaks in parables. The first reason, verses 11-12, has to do with God's sovereignty. This reason has to do with man's responsibility, or more precisely, man's irresponsibility. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, a prophecy in which God indicted the people of Israel for their hard-heartedness which made them unreceptive to the truth. Jesus declares that the words of Isaiah are now being fulfilled in this generation.

The Jews of Jesus' day mirror the people to whom the prophet Isaiah ministered. They

rejected Jesus' message because they were spiritually blind, spiritually deaf, and spiritually dead. Mark's record of this same incident has even stronger language; *"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹² so that*

"they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven" (4:11-12)

The crowd's response to the parables is determined by the nature of their heart. If a person has no spiritual ears, his or her heart will be increasingly hardened and will turn away from Jesus and forfeit the healing that comes with the kingdom of heaven. They are like the Pharisees who have committed the unpardonable sin. Jesus preaching in parables, in part at least, is a kind of judgment from God upon unbelieving Israel (Blomberg). His parables produce a hardening in those who have rejected him which prohibits them from turning to God for healing.

But Jesus' parables have just the opposite effect on the disciples. **Verses 16-17.** *¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 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.*

In contrast to the crowd who has not been given the gift of comprehension and is hard-hearted, Jesus disciples are soft-hearted and spiritually receptive. They have ears to hear and eyes to see the realities of Jesus' identity and the truth about His kingdom. And that is the greatest blessing any person can possibly have. In fact, Jesus says that the greatest people who ever lived prior to this—the heroes and VIP's of the Old Testament, longed to see and hear and experience what the disciples have been privileged to see and hear and experience. They eagerly awaited the arrival of the kingdom and would have loved to trade places with the disciples.

So, what can we learn from this passage? First, if you comprehend the gospel to the degree that you have been compelled to embrace Jesus as your Savior and Lord and King, you ought to praise God that he has opened your eyes and given you that gift. You didn't earn it, you don't deserve it, you don't have it because you grew up in a Christian home or you went to a church that preached the gospel. The only reason you have faith is because God, in His sovereignty, had mercy on you. And that is reason to rejoice! *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).* What is the gift? Grace? Salvation? Faith? All of the above.

Second, if you have loved ones (and most all of us do) who have not yet put their faith in Jesus and you are concerned for their eternal welfare, pray that God would open their eyes and ears to see and hear the truth so that can comprehend the gospel and be compelled to put their trust in Jesus.

You might be thinking, "But I thought you said that no one comes to Jesus unless it has been granted him by the Father (I actually didn't say it, Jesus did, John 6:65)? I thought you said that God withholds the gift of understanding from some people? So what is the purpose of praying when He has chosen some and not others?"

Let me just say that none of us knows whom God has chosen, or whom the Father has granted to come to Jesus. But I do know that He invites us to pray. And how do we know if He hasn't ordained that through our persistent prayers for our loved ones, He will

give them spiritual understanding so that they will believe?

A very bright, articulate young woman came to my office and talked to me about being baptized. She was in her early twenties; she was pregnant with her first child and she wanted to get serious about her faith. I knew she had grown up in a wonderful Christian family, that she had been exposed to sound teaching from wonderful Sunday School teachers, that she had heard countless clear presentations of the gospel. So I asked her to share her testimony with me.

She confessed to me that in all those years in Sunday School and church she felt like she could never comprehend the truth. She said she could see her friends and classmates "get it," but she felt, somehow, handicapped as though there was some kind of blockage that prevented the truth from getting through to her.

So, when she was telling me her testimony there was nothing in her story about what Jesus had done for her on the cross, or that she had trusted Jesus to be her Savior and Lord. I asked a few questions, but she could not articulate why Jesus came to this earth and died on the cross, let alone what He had done for her. So, as she sat across the table from me, I began to explain the gospel. And as she was listening, I could practically see the light go on. When I told her about Jesus bearing her sin in his body, and being punished in her place, she got wide-eyed and tears began to trickle down her cheeks and she blurted out, "Oh my, I just got chills!"

What happened? I would submit to you that *this* was her time to be spiritually awakened. God, in His sovereignty, opened her eyes to see Jesus for who He is and what He did for her. He opened her ears and gave her ears to hear, and He softened her heart and enabled her to comprehend the truth that would set her free. Why didn't it happen earlier? Was there a deficiency in her parents' instruction? Did her Sunday School teachers not do an adequate job? Was the gospel not presented clearly enough by the pastor of the church? No. God, in his sovereignty, chose to awaken her in his time.

I want to remind you parents or grandparents or teachers or evangelists who are naturally concerned about the salvation of your loved ones. You cannot save them yourself. It's not a matter of you using the right method or technique or words that will trigger a response in them. Yes, it is important that we share the gospel accurately. But their spiritual eyes and ears need to be opened first so they can comprehend it. So that ought to be the focus of your earnest prayer- "Lord, open their eyes and ears! Soften their hearts! Give them understanding! Let them comprehend!"

And don't stop sharing the gospel. Just because they didn't "hear" it the first time or the second or third time, doesn't mean they won't hear it the twentieth or thirtieth time. Ill. of Chuck Stadel.

“The Subversive Stories of Jesus” Matthew 13:1-3; 10-17

Main Idea: Jesus taught in parables so that those who were receptive could learn more about the kingdom, and those who were unreceptive would know nothing at all

Introduction to the Parabolic Discourse

To test the responsiveness of the crowd

To teach the disciples about kingdom advancement

The Setting for the Parabolic Discourse (1-3)

The shift from Peter’s house to the edge of the lake

The inlet with a horseshoe shaped amphitheater

The Purpose for Speaking in Parables (10-15)

To reveal and conceal the secrets of the kingdom (11)

To test the spiritual condition of hearts (12-15)

Those who have been receptive will be given
more truth (12a)

Those who have been unreceptive will be void of any truth (12b-15)

They are those about whose hard hearts God prophesied

Their hearts will be irreparably hardened

The Blessing of those who are Spiritually Receptive (16-17)

They have eyes to see and ears to hear (16)

They are a privileged generation (17)