

[parsing parables]

:: matthew 13 & others ::

We're going to spend most of our evening in Matthew 13, so you can get situated there.

So there I was sitting in the lowest level, GE sociology class in college and I wasn't too happy about it. It wasn't my kind of class. I had essentially no interest in in whatsoever. But, I did the work nonetheless. Oftentimes we would have essays to read and then write a response to. I remember one particular essay that was written as a look at some ancient culture and their practices of hygiene and other sundry discussions. I hated it. It was ridiculous. I wrote this scathing response for how ludicrous it was and how unbelievable it was, only to be met with a sentence in red ink from my professor: "It's a satire of American culture." Not so bad you might think, except that upon further inspection the essay was titled 'Nacirema Culture.' Nacirema...American spelled backwards. I had missed the metaphor.

The last few weeks I've been reading slowly through the Gospel of Luke and I find myself on a bit of a parable kick. I'm fascinated by these short little stories for a number of reasons.

First, they're so useful in helping us visualize profound truths about God and about our relationship with Him. I mean, Jesus can take something simple like a coin or a lamb or a vineyard and use it to demonstrate a huge doctrine or commandment or truth. They're short, but they pack a wallop.

But parables aren't just about finding the meaning of the different elements. It's not just saying, 'ok, the coin stands for this and the vineyard stands for that and the mustard seed stands for mustard.' There's more to it. As you look at the parables you often times see a connectivity between them. In fact, in Matthew and Mark you see this very clearly as you come across the large, concentrated sections of parables; where all of a sudden the flow of narrative changes and becomes a string of parables, connected to each other, demonstrating important issues and ideas and essentials of our faith.

In fact, Mark says:

Mark 4:33-34 - And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did **not** speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

In each parable there was much to explain, much to elaborate upon, much to understand. Jesus Himself explained that parables aren't just about figuring out the roles in the metaphor. He said in Mark 4:

Mark 4:10-12 - But when He [Jesus] was alone, those around Him *with* the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, "To you it **has been given** to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that 'seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them.'

We read that and at first are shocked, quite honestly. But we need to remember what we know about the character of God and we need to understand that there is more to parables than first meets the eye.

We know that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. We know that Jesus allowed *anyone* who was willing to follow Him or learn from Him or speak to Him. We know that the Gospel is a gracious gift that is available to all people. So, when we read those strong words that Jesus spoke in Mark 4, is there a disconnect? Is there contradiction? Or is it that we don't really understand the depth and purpose of the parables that Jesus shared?

I think we find our answer in the very *first* parable that we find in the Bible. Three of the Gospels record some of Jesus' parables; Matthew, Mark and Luke. John contains no parables at all. Luke has the most, edging out Matthew by 1, and Mark has the fewest. But, for all three, the first parable that we get to in each book is the Parable of the Sower.

It's there that Jesus examples the structure and the purpose of this teaching style. We know the story. A sower goes out to sow. The seed lands on one of four different places, 3 of them were bad destinations, 1 of them was good. At the end, Jesus says the famous words, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'¹

Ok, is Jesus saying in verse 9 that He wants people to hear, then saying in verse 12 that He *doesn't* want them to hear? No. We know He's not for a couple of reasons. First, He's not an American politician, so that rules that out. But second, we know that Jesus cannot contradict Himself. Thus, there must be a deeper meaning to His words and a deeper meaning to why He used this teaching style.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each spend a few verses discussing the purpose of parables. The most helpful for us tonight is in Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:10-16 - And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 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. 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;

And now we start to understand. Parables weren't just fun stories. They weren't just metaphors. They weren't even just sermon illustrations, but in fact they were invitations to those listening to come before God and ask for understanding, to ask for wisdom, to ask for clarity. It was an invitation for

¹ Mark 4.9

people to humble themselves and come before Christ and say, 'I need You to tell me what this is about.'

When you look into the original language you find a better understanding of some of these phrases. For example, the prophecy is that "hearing [they] will hear and not understand." That word 'understand' can be translated as 'consider' or 'put together'.² Thus we understand that the prophecy is of people who hear yet refuse to act upon what they have heard.

God is love, and just as He did in the Garden of Eden, He desires to present those listening with a choice. A choice to follow after or to listen and leave.

There is a sense that this was a necessary part of Jesus' teaching style. I mean, think about what we know about Jesus' words. We know that even as a young boy, when He spoke in the Temple, the religious leaders were astonished. They were speechless at His authority and wisdom.³ We think of Jesus speaking over the wind and the waves and at His word nature relented and bowed before Him. We think of that powerful scene when the soldiers came for Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and they asked Him if He was the one called Jesus. He said three words, 'I Am He,' and the whole host of men fell backward at the sheer power of what was coming out of His mouth.⁴

And then we think about God's character and His nature. We think about how He has centered His work in our world on love. We think about His desire that we **love** Him as a bride loves her bridegroom. And we start to understand why Jesus Christ would speak in a parable, an invitation for people to come and hear more. Come and see more. To consider their lives. To follow after. Follow God and see truth revealed in the loving Person of Jesus Christ.

We know that with a word Christ could've consumed the nations. With a word He could have judged every person on the earth. But He chose to forego that option for the plan of love. A plan that was absolutely centered on the idea that God loves men and He desires that we freely love Him back. And so, Christ spoke to people in parables so that they would have an active choice to either abandon Him as a story-teller, or to consider eternity and follow Him.

Remember what Christ said in Matthew 13. The disciples said, 'hey, why are You speaking in parables?' And Christ said:

Matthew 13:11 - Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

What was the difference between the disciples and the people who left the lakeside and went home? Between those who had received the mysteries and those who had not? The choice to come and ask. That was the difference. The size of Jesus' group of followers would fluctuate. Sometimes it was larger, sometimes it was smaller. It wasn't an exclusive club, anyone could become a disciple, not an apostle, but a disciple. And the difference was that when they heard the Lord speak *they* followed after. They followed with questions, but they followed in faith.

² Strong's G4920

³ Luke 2.41-50

⁴ John 18.6

Jesus' parables are full of depth and meaning and profound revelation. They contain the mysterious truths of the universe. Never think of the parables as fables. Never think of them as simple stories. The stories may be simple in structure, but hidden within is a wealth of heavenly wisdom that draws us closer to a God, Who's greatest desire is that we come looking for Him.

In the few minutes we have left I want to take a look at two parables and hopefully illustrate how full and rich they can be.

Turn to Matthew 13:31. There we see two parables that are simple enough:

Matthew 13:31-32 - Another parable He put forth to them, [see that choice? see that idea of how Christ set before them a decision to make about the words He spoke?] **saying, 'the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'**

Matthew 13:33 - Another parable He spoke to them: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.'

These parables have a clear connection. We might quickly recognize what some of these elements stand for, but there is a lot here to find as we ask God to reveal more to us.

First let's look at the similarities. Both parables are about a human being taking something small and burying it within a greater substance. Both parables demonstrate a sort of cause-and-effect situation. The seed and the leaven goes in and something greater comes out. Greater in size, greater in purpose and a dramatic transformation has taken place.

So in one sense this is just the same parable told twice with different characters. But there's more here to discover.

Let's take the mustard seed. We are conditioned to think of the mustard seed as a symbol of faith, but faith isn't mentioned in these parables. It doesn't mean that it *can't* mean faith, but it means that we should look for additional meaning.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Just a few verses ago Jesus spoke of a sower going out and sowing seed. The seed was God's word and the soil was our hearts. Now we see this mustard seed. A specific seed that yields a specific crop. To us it may seem like the smallest thing in the world. A tiny calling. A brief opportunity. A little encouragement. But God can take a tiny seed and plant it in our heart and bring forth something grand. Something bountiful. Something that bears fruit that is useful and fragrant.

Think about it in terms of a single Bible verse. Maybe God has put some verse on your heart. Maybe even a phrase from Scripture that you have in your mind. And then you get that call from a friend or family member who is presented with a big, life-changing decision, or is in the midst of a tragedy, and from your lips you share that verse or that phrase that God planted for that very moment when you could bear fruit of encouragement or wisdom or compassion to that person.

Or think of it this way. We see the mustard seed and think, 'your purpose is to produce mustard.' There's nothing wrong with that. I love mustard. Mustard is a wonderful part of the abundant life God

has given us. But we see this parable and discover something about God and how He uses things. Because God doesn't *just* see the mustard seed as being a producer of mustard. It also becomes a tree that provides shelter and rest for the birds of the air. Because God is looking at more than *just* the end result, He's also focused on how He might use the tree *while* it is growing and bearing fruit.

Gifts and ministry and opportunities are not limited to what we think they can accomplish. They are limited only by what God desires them to be.

So what about the leaven? A one-verse parable that seems to be a copy of the one we just read. But there's more here.

First of all, the first parable spoke of a man. This one speaks of a woman. Every one of God's people is useful to Him. Never assume yourself to be un-useful because of your status or stature. Man or woman, baker or farmer, we are all useful to the Lord.

Secondly, when we hear the word 'leaven,' as Bible students we immediately think of how leaven usually stands for sin and is to be avoided. So, initially we're confused by this remark that the Kingdom of heaven is like leaven. Right away we need to recognize that there must be a different meaning beyond the classic meaning of sinfulness. Leaven needs a new definition in this story.

Leaven is a rising agent. It lays dormant until heated and then creates a reaction which causes dough or batter to rise, to expand and to soften.⁵

We know that leaven in this parable can't be a negative thing, it can't be representing sin. So let's start connecting the two. A seed is planted in the ground. That seed dies and then becomes a mighty tree with vast potential. Leaven is a simple powder that is planted, as it were, into the dough. When cooked, when heat is applied the leaven causes the dough to rise and bread to be produced.

On their own the seed and the leaven can do nothing. On their own the soil and the dough yield nothing. But when combined together something miraculous happens. The transition may be traumatic, but, in each parable, the result is worth the transformation. What good is leaven without heat? What good is seed without soil?

What does this mean for us tonight? There are a lot of things here.

First, remember that your life is of great potential. God does desire to use you to fill the world with His glory and His gospel and His grace. God can take a life that seems inconsequential, like a mustard seed, and can turn it into a fruitful tree that serves many different purposes. Likewise, God can take a life that was previously defined by sin, like leaven, and transform it to spread the Gospel, like leaven causing dough to rise.

Second, recognize that the kind of transformation and fruitfulness that God wants for us only begins when we die to ourselves, like a seed in the ground. We die to self and a new growth begins. As we continue in our relationship with God we find that the transformation and fruitfulness is most often furthered by heat: By trial and struggle, which God uses to change us, to purify our lives, and to demonstrate to the world that He is present and powerful in the midst of that suffering.

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leaven>

Third, remember that we serve a God who wants to reveal mysteries to us. But He isn't going to do so if we don't ask Him to. He won't reveal His plan for our lives if we fail to follow Him. If we are like the multitudes who heard the parables and then walked away, then we don't have ears to hear. And if we can't hear what God wants for our lives then we can't experience the power and the plan and the peace that He has for us.

We're going to talk more about parables on Sunday night at our Ignite Lemoore service. If you are interested in looking more in depth into the parables then we'd love to have you come out.

But tonight the encouragement is this: dig deep into your love with God. See your life with Him as a continual relationship. Pour into His word and follow after Him as He speaks to you line upon line and precept upon precept.