

INTRODUCING THE PARABLES

Matthew 13:13-16

[Jesus said:] This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 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.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

I have chosen *The Parables of Christ* for my Lenten theme this year. I think there are couple of reasons for my choice. First, I myself want to revisit these rather unique stories, and increase my own knowledge of Christ’s hidden meaning within them. Second, I believe most Christians today don’t spend nearly enough time thinking about the parables of Christ. I think the reason is obvious: we assume we already know what they mean, and so we prematurely conclude they have little to offer us. I want to challenge this assumption. And the best way I know to do that is to consider Christ’s own words about why He told parables in the first place. Starting next week, we will begin to unpack individual parables in turn, but tonight let’s begin with an introduction.

If I were to ask the average person what a parable is, I believe I would probably get an answer something like this: “a simple story meant to convey a moral or practical lesson.” We tell stories like this all the time, especially to our children. And though they go by different names like fairy tales, fables, folktales, myths—we usually mean the same thing. So, for example, if I were to tell you the fable about the “Tortoise and the Hare” you would know without much effort that the moral of the story is, “slow and steady wins the race.” We take this kind of worldly knowledge we have about popular stories and we impose it on the Bible. We conclude Jesus must have been doing something similar to what we find in say, *Aesop’s Fables* or *Grimms Fairy Tales*. Christ told parables so that complicated truths might be explained in the simplest and clearest way possible. This line of thought has the benefit of being logical, but not the benefit of being true. For when we look at our text from Matthew this evening, we hear that

Jesus told parables for an entirely different reason than to simplify the complicated. Jesus' intention in speaking parabolically was not so much to make truth accessible, but to protect it. The question then becomes, why? Why would Jesus not want His truth to be easily understood by everyone? What possible reason could there be for Jesus to speak in such a way that many would hear but few would understand, many would see but few would perceive?

In order to answer these types of questions, I want to reach back to a story in the Old Testament, which I believe will help us. Shortly after receiving the 10 Commandments, Moses made a rather bold demand of our Lord. He insisted that God show Him His glory. God responded not by granting Him His wish, but by placing Moses within a cleft of a rock and allowing him to see only His back. Moses wanted to see God's glory in all its splendor. He wanted to know God in His fullness. Instead, he saw only God's back. In truth, Moses only saw what God was not. Moses wanted to understand God as He is, but God reminded Him that such knowledge is beyond the limits of human comprehension. As fallen creatures, we are incapable of fully grasping God. Every human description eventually falls short. In the end, complete knowledge of God is impossible. The best we can do is gesture at what no one can fully explain. For example, God is not ignorant, but neither is God wise in any sense of wisdom conceivable to us. God is not powerless, but neither is God powerful, in any sense of power accessible to our limited minds. God is not evil, but neither is God good, in any merely human sense of goodness. God is not non-existent, but neither does God exist in any sense shared with our existence. All thought about God vanishes into silence and we know that we know nothing. God showed Moses His back to communicate this profound truth; for just when you think you know you do not. God is beyond human capability and to think we can understand God is as ridiculous a claim as saying a person can be stronger than the color blue.

We can only *know* what God is not, but that doesn't mean we can only *say* what God is not. We have to speak, but our human language is imperfect. Parables are Christ's way of using the imperfection

of our language to convey the perfection of God. Parables employ metaphors, allegory, and symbols to express the inexpressible and overcome the illusion of human knowledge. But not everyone receives this instruction gladly or willingly. Only those who have been spiritually prepared are able to see and hear. Christ took His own advice by not “casting pearls before swine”. Instead, He hid the deep truths of eternity in parables. They are hidden, this is true, but that doesn’t mean they are inaccessible. Seek and ye shall find. And so together, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we shall seek God where He is to be found; we shall know Him as He wants to be known. For there is a difference between forming a notion of God in our minds and directing our minds to God. The true purpose of the parables, then, is to direct our minds to God, so that we realize we are more than our appetites, more than our physicality. We are spiritual beings in the grips of the Divine. The parables liberate us from the tyranny of our earthly existence and connect us to something beyond. In a strange way, Christ’s parables make us feel at home with the Divine. They remind us that we have more than practical needs. We are not just governed by animal appetites; we have spiritual needs and if those go unsatisfied, so do we. Christ parables transport us from this ordinary world to the illuminated sphere of God’s heavenly glory. They call us to the Divine where we find our rest, our meaning, our purpose for existence in Him alone. Amen.

In Christ,

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