

A WINTER BIBLE STUDY ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Tuesday March 16, 2021: Session 4 - Readings

Galilee: "The Purpose of Parables" Mark 3:7-4:34

A Multitude at the Seaside

Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

Jesus Appoints the Twelve

He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Jesus and Beelzebul

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that

kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin—for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

What Does It Mean: The "Unforgivable" sin.

In Mark 3:22–30 we find one of the more difficult teachings from Jesus—the so-called unforgivable sin. Here, the scribes confront Jesus about his teachings. They've begun to spread the rumor that he is possessed by a demon named "Beelzebul," which was a high-ranking deity worshiped in Canaanite religion. Jesus easily points out the flaw in their logic, however. If Jesus worked for Satan, why would he cast out demons that also work for Satan? He would be fighting against his own cause. But then Jesus utters a frightening statement: "*But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin*" (3:29). Clearly, it's a warning, but what does it mean? And how can we know whether or not we are guilty of such a terrible sin?

Note the verb in Mark 3:30. Most translations say "they were saying" (*erchontai*) and, while that's accurate, the verb's tense in Greek implies an action that occurred on a habitual basis. In other words, this wasn't a one-time event. The scribes regularly and continually attributed the works of the Holy Spirit through Jesus to the power of Satan, which is what Jesus declares unforgivable.

Despite the seriousness of Jesus's accusation, we should not miss the hope in Jesus's words before his warning: Jesus says, "*all sins will be forgiven*" along with "*whatever blasphemies*" when we turn to him. But someone who's made a habit of declaring Jesus a servant of Satan demonstrates his or her refusal to turn to Jesus in repentance.

What Does It Mean: The "Unforgivable" sin. (Continued)

So, if you're worried about whether or not you've committed the unforgivable sin, you can be sure already that you haven't committed it. Your heart is sensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and you're chasing Jesus. All the other sins you may have piled up in your life are forgiven in him.

The True Kindred of Jesus

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

The Parable of the Sower

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

The Purpose of the Parables

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that:

Peek at the Greek: *Parable* –παραβολή (parabolē) – literally "throwing" (bolē) "alongside" (para-), meaning "comparison, illustration, analogy"; it was the term given by Greek rhetoricians to an illustration used in the form of a brief fictional narrative.

In Mark 4, Jesus puts on his Master Teacher hat, assuming the posture of literary expert. Instead of merely telling the people what to do and why they should do it, He begins painting word pictures: "*The kingdom of God is like...*" Listeners were forced to engage with the story on multiple levels in order to understand what He was trying to communicate.

These parables were stories that illustrated a truth, also known as symbolic speech, figure of speech, an allegory, or even a type. Jesus often taught in extended metaphors, appropriating familiar cultural scenes (agriculture, family, weddings, finances) to teach a larger truth about the kingdom of God. He sometimes borrowed language from OT parables (compare Is 28:23–39 with Mk 4:13–20).

But Jesus employed an extra element in his parables: He often included a symbol for himself, inserting Himself into the narrative. For instance, in the Parable of the Sower, He is the sower. We know this because He explained it to the disciples privately. That story gives Mark's readers (us) a clear, implicit affirmation that Jesus understood His divine identity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that he consistently incorporated imagery and symbols from the Old Testament that depicted God:

- the bridegroom of the kingdom (Mark 2:19–20)
- the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14)
- the vineyard owner with authority to do what he wishes with what is his (Matt. 21:40)
- the one with authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5)
- and the lord with authority to reward the faithful. (Matt. 25:14–30)

Jesus purposely taught through parables in order to naturally divide those who followed him around seeking miracles from those who devoted themselves to him. As we read his parables, we are faced with a similar choice.

*'they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'*

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

A Lamp under a Bushel Basket

He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

The Parable of the Growing Seed

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Background: Election and Predestination

Jesus' explanation of why He taught in parables has led to several interesting and controversial theories – namely the Doctrines of 'Election' and 'Predestination.'

(Source: Frederick Buechner : "*Wishful Thinking: A seeker's abc.*")

Election: (Latin: eligere/electio "pick out")

As soon as God decided to take a hand in history, He ... elected to start with was Israel. The account of the first few millennia of their stormy affair is contained in the Old Testament. When Israel asked why God elected them, of all people, they arrived at two answers. One answer was that God elected them for special privilege, ... the other answer was that He elected them for terrible responsibility. When Israel asked what the responsibility was that God had in mind: (again) they arrived at two answers. One was that their responsibility was to (tell the world about) the One True God – ... the other was that their responsibility was to suffer and die for the world. None of them wanted to suffer and die very much, including Jesus, but Jesus did it anyway. It was only afterward that people began to understand why this was necessary, ... When Jesus died, something happened in the lives of certain people that made explanations as unnecessary as they were inevitable....

Websites: <https://www.gotquestions.org/doctrine-of-election.html>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconditional_election

Predestination: (Latin: praedestinare/ "make firm beforehand")

It is the theory that since God knows everything else, He must also know whether each one of us is going to end up in Heaven or in Hell, and therefore the die is cast before we even cast it. Theorizing about God this way is like an isosceles triangle trying to theorize the Great Pyramid of Cheops into the two dimensions of the printed page. The fact that I know you so well that I know what you're going to do before you do it does not mean that you are not free to do what you damn well please. "Logic" is only "cigol" spelled backward.

Websites: <https://www.gotquestions.org/predestination.html>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predestination>
http://www.voiceofjesus.org/Q-A_Files/q32appointedtohell.html

BACKGROUND ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The Use of Parables

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Jesus Stills a Storm

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

How the Parables of Jesus were Different

(Source: <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/purpose-parables/>)

The first thing to know about the parables of Jesus is that, while parables aren't unique to Jesus, they were a key part of his ministry. They were short stories that Jesus told to explain what the kingdom of God was like – and, despite being sometimes confusing, they are well beloved by many and useful for meditation on Jesus' teaching.

The definition of a parable from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is; *“A usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.”* According to this definition, the point of a parable is to take something unclear or unpersuasive and make them clear and persuasive toward a moral or religious point.

However, the parables of Jesus have a few key differences from this common understanding. Instead of making points clearer, people were often puzzled and surprised by Jesus' parables. The parables are one of the many ways that Jesus taught and announced His mission to bring into reality the reign and rule of God among a new kind of people.

Parables to an Ancient Israelite

One main reason why they might be confusing to us is that they were not initially told to us: they were told by Jesus to an audience of ancient Israelite farmers. For these farmers, the story of Israel's history is deeply immersed in their imaginations. They hope for God's deliverance from Roman occupation and have seen many proto-messianic movements that promise Israel's restoration.

Jesus announced that God's Kingdom had come, accompanied by incredible stories you hear of miracles and deliverance. Then one day, Jesus comes to town and tells a story:

“The Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Mark 4:26-29

The imagery used by Jesus was universally understood by his hearers. Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God in the language of their daily lives.

“How shall we picture the Kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.” **Mark 4:30-32**

These simple stories stuck in the minds of their ancient readers, and also allowed them to begin puzzling about the nature of God’s Kingdom.

The Parables as Explanation

But the disciples started to talk about the puzzling nature of parables. Used by Jesus, these parables often created more questions than answers and caused their readers to think in new ways about God’s Kingdom. This, combined with Jesus’ notable activity of healing and welcoming outsiders, challenged ancient understandings of God’s Kingdom. N. T. Wright has said that the parables were prompted by Jesus’ need to explain what he was saying and doing with the rest of his mission.

Jesus uses parables in a way that requires listeners to work for them. This is often contradictory with how many people today interact with the parables of Jesus, expecting their message to be immediately applicable to us.

In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus uses a story to expose a deep contradiction in the listener’s perspective. Instead of

answering a question, Jesus uses parables as a subversive tool to correct unspoken assumptions in his day.

The Shocking Purpose of Parables

But there’s more to parables than just being interesting stories. Often, modern Christian readers assume a moralistic lesson in the parables. However, this can create more problems than it solves, partly because it ignores narrative context. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem as the returning master to hold the servants (the leading priests) accountable.

Jesus’ parables are often thought about as moral stories—how do you live in a right way? But Jesus wasn’t telling these so that you could have the right moral ideals. His primary focus was so that you understood what he was doing. Tim shares more insight on this from N. T. Wright.

“As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories.... They were, for the most part, not simply ‘illustrations,’ that is, preachers’ tricks to decorate an abstract thought or complicated teaching. If anything, they were the opposite. Jesus’ stories are designed to tease, to clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God’s Kingdom in garb that would leave the listeners wondering, trying to think it out. They were stories that eventually caused Israel’s leaders to decode his rich message in such a way as to frame a charge against him, either of blasphemy, sedition, or ‘leading the people astray.’ Whatever the parables are, they are not, as children are sometimes taught in Sunday school, ‘earthly stories with heavenly meaning.’ Rather, they are expressions of Jesus’ shocking announcement that God’s Kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven.”

(N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*, 87-88.)

Instead of reading a parable and asking, “How is this parable about me and my relationship to God?” We should reverse it and ask, “How is this about Jesus and his inauguration of God’s Kingdom?” When we start there, then we begin to see the new way of living that Jesus began with his announcement of the Kingdom arriving through him.

Does Jesus, in Mark 4:10-12, appoint certain people to hell?

(Source: http://www.voiceofjesus.org/Q-A_Files/q32appointedtohell.html)

No, Jesus does not appoint anyone to hell; free will is inviolate such that there is no predestination. But a cursory reading of this text seems to suggest otherwise:

“And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, 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 again, and be forgiven.”

(Mark 4:10-12)

Yes, it seems that Jesus is deliberately speaking in parables to prevent certain parties from understanding, believing, repenting and being forgiven. This is not the case, and the truth comes to light only when we see the more complete record of this utterance as Matthew has preserved it. This is a prime example that demonstrates the need of having more than one gospel. It takes all of them to make the story complete because any one of them is incomplete. The Truth should quickly come to light when we compare the parallel texts of both Matthew and Mark.

We need to go to Matthew 13:10-15 to get the full story. There, we discover that Jesus is working from Isaiah 6:9-10, and that the subjects are “this people,” the people of Israel who refuse to see the Light or to hear the Word. Reading Matthew 19:10-15 should settle this. Verse 15 tells us that it is directed specifically to “this people.” Further, we see that “their eyes *they* have closed.” The Father has not closed their eyes. It is the people who have closed their eyes of their own free will. Accepting this characterization of “this people” Jesus spoke to them in parables knowing that they would not hear. The parables served as a sort of filter, for some of the people did hear -- his disciples -- of whom he continued to say:

Although there *were* times when his disciples challenged the Lord's confidence in them: (Matt.15:16) You will observe that these words were spoken in a similar context, where he has quoted Isaiah 29:13,14. Yes, if one reads only Mark's version, predestination is suggested. But when one goes to Matthew and Isaiah, things come to Light.

The word “lest” in Mark 4:12 is rendered from the Greek *mapote*, which is difficult to put in our language. As shown here, “lest” indicates motive, something that Jesus was doing to keep them from hearing and seeing so that they would turn and be forgiven. Matthew and Isaiah clarify this point and explain that Jesus spoke to them in parables because “this people” having closed their eyes, would not be able to understand. It was his way of not casting his pearls before swine. Matthew 13:12 combined with the Parable of the Pounds – or the talents (Luke 19:11- 27) provides even more light. It is all about Israel, about a collection of people who had, of their own free will, closed their minds to Truth. It was for reasons of their own doing that the kingdom was not given to them.