

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 65

The Parables: Principles

The Kingdom Series Part 4

by Alex Robertson

In our series on the kingdom of God we are going to study the 7 parables of the kingdom in Matthew chapter 13. These 7 parables are very significant for our understanding of the kingdom. I believe that they are in a deliberate order, and that they are not only parables but also prophecy. Jesus is foretelling what will happen in the time after his first coming and up to his second coming – in other words, this present age.

Before we start our study of each of the parables, I would like to share 4 principles which will help us in our understanding of all these parables of the kingdom.

The first principle is that these parables are about the kingdom, not about eternity.

These are all parables of the kingdom. With the exception of the parable of the sower, the parables in Matthew 13 all begin with the words “the kingdom of heaven is like ...”. And a brief look at the parable of the sower will confirm that it is also about the kingdom – for example, Jesus says that the seed is “the word of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:19). That means these parables all concern the period of the kingdom of heaven, this present time and when Jesus comes again and rules for a thousand years; they don’t concern eternity, the time after the kingdom on this earth is over.

It also means that these parables don’t have to do with grace, forgiveness, or becoming a child of God. They are all to do with the gospel of the kingdom, the challenge of discipleship, the work we do and the life we lead once we have become Christians. Thus, although the parable of the sower has mostly been interpreted as concerning how people respond and react to the gospel of grace, that is not its particular meaning in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus clearly says it is about how people respond to the word of the kingdom – that is, the word of the gospel of the kingdom, the word of the Sermon on the Mount, the word of discipleship, the word that challenges us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. This changes the aspect of the parable entirely and gives us a new perspective on what Jesus was saying. And we must bear this principle in mind for all the parables of Matthew 13; they are all concerned with the issue of the kingdom.

The second principle is that not everyone understands about the kingdom of heaven. That sounds like a rather elitist statement! But it’s not mine, it’s what Jesus himself said. After Jesus had told the parable of the sower to the crowds, the disciples came to him privately and asked him why he talked to the crowds in riddles. Jesus had spoken to the disciples on the mount very plainly, but his words to the crowds were obscure, and clearly the disciples didn’t understand them either, because they kept going back to Jesus and asking him for the interpretation (e.g. verse 36).

Mysteries

Why did he talk in parables? Jesus answered the disciples, "Because it is given to you [disciples] to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [the crowds] it is not given" (Matthew 13:11). Jesus called these truths about the kingdom "mysteries". Not everyone understands them. And if you have studied these parables before and seen the radically different ways that scholars and teachers interpret them, it is clear that there is, still today, a great deal of confusion about them. Only one of the interpretations can be right, and so many are wrong – but which is which? It is important for us to know – but it proves Jesus' words are true not just for the Jews of his day but for Christians today – not everyone understands correctly about the kingdom.

So even though Jesus told the parables to the crowds, he didn't expect them to understand them. In fact he expected that they wouldn't understand them ... which leads us on to our third principle: Jesus taught in parables so that people wouldn't understand.

In Sunday School I was led to believe that the purpose of parables was quite simple. Jesus taught in parables in order to make spiritual things easier to understand. He taught spiritual truths in familiar language, using illustrations from farming, fishing and everyday life, so that people would be able to relate more easily to what he was saying. You have probably been taught the same thing, and it sounds very convincing ... except that it is exactly the opposite of what Jesus said! Jesus said he taught in parables so that people wouldn't understand. "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, 'By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.'" (Matthew 13:13-15).

Jesus was saying, "They hear all my words, but they don't get the message – and the reason is because they have hardened their hearts. They flock to listen to me speak, they say they want to follow me, but in fact they don't really want to see, they don't want to hear, they don't want to be converted and they don't want to be healed. They don't want the sort of freedom that I have come to bring them." And such is the case today in much of the Church. Grace is lovely, forgiveness is wonderful, being a child of God is great and church is fun, but the freedom that Jesus calls them to in discipleship is too scary. The price he demands is too high. So they've hardened their hearts against it, and told themselves that he doesn't really mean what he says, or that his words are not applicable today. They've become content with compromise, and their hearts have become deceitful, as Jeremiah says (Jeremiah 17:9) Because they don't want to confront the radical call of Jesus to discipleship and the kingdom, they have ended up deceiving themselves.

The only ones who truly hear are "those who have ears to hear" (Matthew 13:43) – those whose hearts are not "waxed gross", those who are not kidding themselves, those who have paid the price and taken up the challenge. The crowds wanted to hear Jesus, but they had not given up anything for him. Following Jesus had cost them nothing. But the disciples had paid a price, left all to follow Jesus, and that is why he said to them, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16).

Parables reveal the heart

Because parables force us to interpret the meaning, they draw out of our hearts an interpretation which springs from our true motive. Parables are revealers of the heart. A person's interpretation of a parable may tell you more about the person than it does about the parable. We think we interpret the parables and reveal things about them, whereas in fact the parables interpret us and reveal things about our hearts! The result is that the conclusion you draw from a parable is likely to be what you wanted to believe in the first place. If in your heart you want a prosperous and successful lifestyle in this world, you are liable to draw out an interpretation of the parables that fits in with your ideas. If you believe that the church is going to triumph in this world and Christianity is going to gradually take over the world, you will look at the parables and interpret them according to your ideas – which means according to your heart – and say, "See! Jesus prophesies the triumph of the church in this parable!" But another person may look at that parable and see a very different story – because there is a different story in his heart.

Of course, I am no exception. I will also draw a conclusion from the parables in line with my beliefs. How do I know that my beliefs are right? And how do you know? One obvious answer is that my interpretation of the parables must line up with the rest of scripture. But how do I know that my heart is right? How do I know that I am not deceiving myself?

Protection from deception

I think that there are two answers to that question. If I have confronted all the plain challenges of Jesus and faced them squarely, not avoiding uncomfortable truths and hard sayings, and if I am not aware of any issues that I am dodging or explaining away, then I think I am perhaps half way there. I can say with a pure conscience that as far as I know I am walking in obedience to the commands of Jesus.

The other answer concerns the me I do not know, the things that my heart may be hiding from me. Because I do not fully know my heart, I have to plead with God to reveal it. I have to join with David and say "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23,24). A dangerous prayer! For when God reveals the heart, we often do not like what we see. God will answer such a prayer by exposing us, often by putting us through the furnace of trials which, as with gold, purifies by bringing the dross and the scum to the surface. Which of us wants the scum and the dross in our hearts to be exposed? Worse than that, which of us wants to take the risk that we may be exposed in front of others?! But that way lies truth and freedom, and that is the way to the place where we know we are not deceiving ourselves.

Another answer to the question, "How do I know that my beliefs are right?" is contained in our fourth principle: The gospel of the kingdom will help us to understand the parables of the kingdom. I have said that the true interpretation of the parables will line up with the rest of scripture. More particularly, the parables of the kingdom will line up very closely with the gospel of the kingdom. By 'the gospel of the kingdom' I mean the Sermon on the Mount, which is the proclamation (the meaning of the Greek word for 'gospel') of the kingdom from beginning to end ("Blessed are the

poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Unless your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven ... Not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" – Matthew 5:3,10,20; 7:21). The Sermon on the Mount is, as we saw in the previous study, the manifesto for the revolution of the kingdom of heaven. And though the parables may be unclear, the Sermon on the Mount is absolutely clear – all too painfully clear sometimes! So if I lean to an interpretation of a parable which doesn't square up with what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, then I'd better think again.

The clear teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount may be uncomfortable, confrontational and radical, but it is a safeguard to our interpretation of the parables. As we shall see in future studies, the Sermon on the Mount will indeed help us as we study the parables. Matthew 13 has already helped us by revealing the principles behind the parables. We will need to bear these principles in mind and recall them to mind as we begin our study of the seven parables of the kingdom.

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

Selective Deafness

Three old ladies who were hard of hearing were sitting on the promenade chatting to each other. The first old dear said, "It's windy today", the second said, "No it isn't, it's Thursday." "So am I", said the third, "Let's all have a cup of tea!"

You usually have to be hard of hearing, or just plain awkward to get the 'wrong end of the stick'. If friends find it difficult to follow a conversation, as in the above illustration, then how hard is it when you are trying to communicate with those who are opposed to you, as in the case of Jesus with the people who followed him around? It is certain that not everyone will receive the same message. The old ladies in the paragraph above all had different things on their minds which flavoured what they heard. We are all guilty of being selective with how we hear what we hear.

Not so long ago someone told me of a late night television programme she had wanted to watch over the Christmas period. It was a Royal Variety Show intended to entertain public figures - indeed, the Queen of England was in attendance. Apparently a smutty transvestite was one of the entertainers listed and this woman's husband had refused to watch. She complained that he was so offended by the 'artiste' that he walked out of the room, up to his bedroom and stayed there for the remainder of the evening, leaving her to watch it alone.

Compliment or criticism?

I was quite amazed at the display of growth in this man as he wasn't someone who opened up often. He had had quite a problem in his past with women, so it was wonderful to see he had set himself not to walk down that path again, even in the privacy of his own home in front of his 'harmless' television set. Intending to really compliment him on his Godly convictions, I said, "Wow, he really does have some integrity, doesn't he?" But his wife heard something completely different and retorted ... "You mean I don't have any?"

Have you ever watched an illusionist doing tricks? To the uninitiated it really looks like magic. Maurice and I recently took our children to Arthur Burt's house in Wales for a weekend visit. Arthur is great with children, and didn't waste time in showing my 3 offspring some of the tricks he has perfected over the years. Try as they might, Nathan and Izaak (my 2 boys) could not figure out how Arthur placed a penny on a piece of paper, folded it over many times, but then produced a £1 coin when the paper was unfolded. Arthur must have done this same trick, very slowly, about 6 times, but still it was a mystery.

Over dinner, the children got a bit boisterous so Arthur calmed them down by asking them to guess the number between 1 and 50 which he was thinking of in his mind. He produced a £5 note and told them the person who guessed could have it as a prize. This was incentive enough and the kids spoke out as many numbers as they could think of. Eventually Izaak said, "17", which was the right one and Arthur handed him the £5 note. His eyes lit up with delight, but then, with mischief written all over his face, he passed the £5 back to Arthur and asked him if he could put this one in the paper and do that trick to change it to a £10 note!

The secret revealed

Arthur explained the penny and pound trick to them and now they are mystifying everyone else with their apparent magic, but it is something very simple to them now because the secret has been revealed.

Many people have read "Chasing The Dragon" by Jackie Pullinger. Jackie gave her life to Jesus and 2 weeks after becoming a Christian God told her to go to China as a missionary. Her pastor was convinced that she had not heard God as she had only been a Christian for such a very short period of time, so he forbade her. Fortunately she obeyed the voice she believed to be God and went out to China without any missionary college training, and God has done amazing things through her as she has ministered to Chinese drug addicts and prostitutes.

Sceptical

God knows how to speak to us. I am one of those people who are very sceptical of others who 'prophesy' over me as often I feel that they are speaking out of their own imaginations. I certainly don't take on board a lot of what people would like to speak over me. But I remember one occasion when God spoke through someone, even though I had firmly closed my ears to what people had to

say. I was sitting in the congregation with Maurice when the Speaker pointed us out and said he had a 'word from the Lord' for us. Inside I cringed and put up barriers even before the man spoke. But the first words he spoke absolutely shook me ... "I see a house and the wind is blowing through it ...". Immediately my ears pricked up, because just a few days prior to coming to this particular meeting God had also shown me this house and had said some pretty profound things about it. The Speaker gave what God had shown me, word for word, and then he added something further which God had not spoken when giving me my vision. I knew without a shadow of doubt that God was speaking to me right there in that meeting because it witnessed to what I had already seen. God knew just how to get my attention.

I think we are all very selective concerning what we listen to. You can be as bored as anything whilst listening to the news until a sex scandal is mentioned, then your ears prick up and you tune in. Or you can be cooking the dinner whilst the children are making a racket next door, but when you hear a certain cry you run from the room because you know this type of cry is because someone is really hurt. I remember an incident when I was in hospital after the birth of Nathan, my first child. I had been placed in a room on my own because I was recovering from a Caesarean Section delivery and Nathan was put into another room to give me some peace. At one point during the night I rushed into the adjoining room to answer the cry of what I thought was my baby only to be scolded by the night nurse, "Don't tell me you haven't learned to recognise the sound of your own baby yet!" It was amazing how quickly I learned to recognise Nathan's voice after that!

We need revelation

So, why did Jesus speak to the people in parables then? Purely and simply for the reason that the conclusions they came to proved what was in their hearts. If they were covetous and greedy for money, then the parable of the talents was all about how they could accumulate wealth unto themselves, the parable of the sower was all about how they could gather in a fantastic harvest. They couldn't see any further than the literal because ... "this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them" (Matthew 13:15). Jesus didn't want them to understand what he was saying unless the Holy Spirit of God had revealed it to them. God knows what is in the heart of all who listen and can discern all our hidden motives. There is one thing certain, and that is that God will not share His glory with flesh. Brains will not get us into the Kingdom of Heaven. The only way in is acting upon God-given revelation.