"In this excellent book, Webster considers numerous parables of Jesus in a most refreshing way. Of particular importance is the convincing way he shows Jesus's indirect communication method of articulating the gospel of the kingdom in contexts of hostility and resistance, and its relevance to today's world. Jesus told the truth slant. The book includes a very helpful appendix spelling out how to preach the parables. This is a book to read with your Bible open."

—Graham A. Cole,
Dean and Senior Vice President of Education
and Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"With the heart of a pastor and the mind of a scholar, Doug Webster explores the parables of Jesus as 'truth slant' — everyday stories that draw hearers in through their familiarity, but then, 'like time bombs that only explode when they have penetrated our hearts,' transform them into true disciples. This engaging volume will inspire and motivate those 'with ears to hear' the subversive values of the kingdom of God."

—Mark L. Strauss,
University Professor of New Testament,
Bethel Seminary of Bethel University

"Jesus did some of his most important teaching in parable form. Two thousand years later, many of us have become so familiar with this pedagogical approach that we no longer fully appreciate its significance—not only for our understanding of the nature of the triune God, but also for the ways we serve in our own ministries.

"In *The Parables: Jesus's Friendly Subversive Speech*, Douglas D. Webster defamiliarizes the familiar to help us read these ancient stories with new eyes. Scholarly insights and honest reflections on his own ministry come together in a thoughtful exploration of the parables' indirect—but powerful—confrontations of the religious status quo, and of how Jesus not only teaches us *what* message to communicate, but *how* to communicate it best."

—Rebecca Poe Hays,
Assistant Professor of Christian Scriptures – Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,
George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University

"We are told in the Gospels that Jesus never taught without using parables, so their importance to his teaching cannot be overemphasized. And yet, Jesus's parables are often overexplained by those who teach them. I'm thankful for this pastoral and practical work from Doug Webster. His keeping the bigger picture in view, and thereby the point of following Jesus intact, is refreshing and needed. The next time I preach on the parables this will be a really great resource."

—Cole Huffman, Senior Pastor,
First Evangelical Church

# The Parables

## Jesus's Friendly Subversive Speech

Douglas D. Webster

*The Parables: Jesus's Friendly Subversive Speech*



Published by Kregel Academic, an imprint of Kregel Publications, 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.



The Greek font, GraecaU, is available from www.linguistsoftware.com/lgku.htm, +1-425-775-1130.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4690-0

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 / 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

# INTRODUCTION

Jesus reached a communicational impasse following the Sermon on the Mount. At every turn, serious opposition confronted Jesus's straightforward message. Whenever he opened his mouth, the cultural and religious elite were there to ridicule him and challenge his message. They made it their mission to bully and intimidate not only Jesus but anyone who showed interest in his teaching. The narrative pace quickens in Matthew's gospel. Miracles are performed, people are healed, and the disciples are sent out on a mission to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near (Matt. 10:7). Jesus's momentum is building, but so is the ugly opposition. The religious leaders have dedicated themselves, allegedly for the good of the nation, to bring down this nonconformist Galilean rabbi. The Pharisees accuse him of working for the devil. They ask him for a sign to prove his authority. Jesus answers, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. 12:39).

Even Jesus's immediate family attempted an intervention. Their actions reflect bewildered embarrassment and a guilty sense of familial responsibility. When his mother and brothers show up to speak to him, Jesus ignores them. He points to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For

whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:46–50; see also Mark 3:21).

In the face of growing opposition, Jesus's communicational strategy hit the wall. Straight-up authoritative teaching was becoming counterproductive. This is why I think Jesus switched to parables. Through the medium of *story* he was able to communicate to the crowds without giving his enemies a clear target. The general audience hung on his captivating stories—stories they could hear superficially, almost as entertainment. Or they could hear Jesus's stories provocatively as world-upending stories. The disciples knew full well that Jesus was doing more than telling simple stories, and he invited their questions. I suspect the scribes and Pharisees also knew that Jesus's parables were operating at a deeper level, but this indirect mode of communication offered little leverage for their campaign against Jesus. Parables provided just the right genre to extend Jesus's teaching ministry. He was able to keep the crowd with him, frustrate his enemies, and invite his disciples to embrace the meaning of the gospel.

Matthew's gospel narrative makes it pretty clear that Jesus switched to parables because of his enemies' intensity and the crowd's naivete. But personally I didn't see Jesus's new pedagogical strategy for a long time. I had to hit the wall myself with my own communicational strategy before it dawned on me why Jesus used parables. I was teaching four consecutive Wednesday nights on the Sermon on the Mount at a church about an hour away from my home. Fighting heavy traffic to get there made me more tense than I wanted to be. The

people were good-natured and friendly, but they seemed unfamiliar with basic Christian truth and they didn't seem all that interested in changing. After a long day they were tired, too. They were fairly quick to write off Jesus's Sermon on the Mount teaching as overly idealistic and impractical. They rated their subjective interpretation of the Sermon as more important than anything I could say. They had no qualms about wrapping the Sermon on the Mount around their sentimental opinions and suburban expectations. Nice people, but we might as well have been discussing an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*.

Each evening I left a little more discouraged than the week before. On the last night, I concluded our session on the Sermon on the Mount with the story of the two builders, one who built his house on the sand, and the other who built his house on the rock. I said my goodbyes and walked to my car in the dark. I felt pretty discouraged. After thirty-some years of pastoral ministry, I felt defeated, with nobody to blame but myself. My current calling is to help seminary students preach and teach effectively and faithfully. Had I wasted people's time for four weeks trying to teach the Sermon on the Mount to people who seemed to think it was out of date and irrelevant? It sure felt like it. As I was walking to my car, it suddenly hit me: *This is why Jesus told parables.* I even said it out loud. It was a breakthrough moment for me. The parables were not just an alternative teaching method. They were a communicational necessity. Jesus turned to parables to penetrate people's defenses, circumvent the opposition,

extend his gospel ministry, and creatively train his followers. If I had read my audience better, the way Jesus did, I would have switched to parables—simple, yet provocative, stories that invoke the truth implicitly or indirectly, causing hearers who have ears for meaning to dig deeper.

## Tell It Slant

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightening to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—
>
> —Emily Dickinson

A combination of hard-hearted resistance and popular messianic fervor triggered the need for parables. Jesus chose parables to get around these obstacles of resistance and resentment. He used a communicational strategy that proved effective. He introduced the gospel by means of earthy, secular stories about sowing seed, finding treasure, and casting a net.[1]

1 The study of parables is an interesting case study in biblical scholarship. New Testament experts tend to approach the subject in the abstract. They debate the interpretation, analysis, and classification of parables as a whole. They discuss whether parables may have one, two, or three points and argue

His characters were farmers, merchants, and fishermen. He chose metaphor over syllogism and the poet's terse art over the philosopher's elaborate abstraction.[2] Parable comes from the Greek word *parabolē*: *para* = "beside" + *ballo* = "to throw." Jesus used simple stories to set up a comparison between life as we know it and the life made possible by the gospel. He juxtaposed these stark realities to create a positive tension and reveal the gospel. Jesus's stories, like a good joke, turn on a "sudden perception of incongruity."[3] It is that twist of plot that unsettles the complacent and shakes the soul. Jesus knew that "the soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, and yet shy," and he knew that "when we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding."[4] Jesus knew how to approach the soul. He juxtaposed the invisible truths of the gospel with the everyday images of ordinary life. He drew out the meaning and significance of faithfulness by picturing a wise and faithful steward. He highlighted prayerfulness by picturing a persistent widow. He captured the joy of salvation in the homecoming of a lost son. He compared the worldly strategy of a shrewd manager to the kingdom strategy of a faithful disciple. He used a proud Pharisee to illustrate self-righteousness and a remorseful tax

---

over an allegorical versus analogical interpretation. Lectures on the parables can miss the impact and the meaning of the parables altogether.

2 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 279.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 54.

4 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 151.

collector to show true repentance. Jesus intentionally chose the medium of parables to separate the admiring crowd from his faithful disciples. He accommodated those who only had ears for a moralistic tale, but he penetrated the hearts and minds of those who were open to the gospel. "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matt. 13:43). Parables are time bombs that only explode after they have penetrated our hearts. Their purpose is to turn admirers into followers. Jesus was the master of telling truth slant.

Jesus didn't invent parables. They were used by the prophets to effectively penetrate people's defenses. The prophet Nathan told a parable when he confronted King David. He reported to the king an account of two men; one man was very rich with a very large number of sheep and cattle, and the other man was very poor with nothing except one little ewe lamb. David thought he was hearing the day's news, but Nathan was making up the whole thing. "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him" (2 Sam. 12:4). David was outraged. His verdict against the unjust rich man was decisive: "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die." But then with perfect timing, Nathan jumped from parable to truth. He said in a tone that we can only imagine, "You are the man!"

The story of the little ewe lamb did exactly what a parable should do by casting truth in a new light. Parables use familiar

situations, sayings, or stories to highlight meanings that lie below the surface. The hidden point embedded in the parable is not obvious on the surface of the discourse. The saying or the story remains simple, but the underlying truth is either obscured or revealed depending on the listener. Getting past people's defenses is not easy. This is why Jesus said repeatedly, "Whoever has ears, let them hear."

## Typology and Parables

Parables appear deceptively simple on the surface, as if Jesus was making it up as he went along, pulling the strategy out of thin air. But their "spontaneity" is an artistic feature concealing the fact that parables belong to a genre deeply embedded in salvation history. Parables prove that "no content comes into our lives free-floating: it is always embedded in a form of some kind."[5] Jesus's "stories with intent" are not new inventions but Spirit-inspired elaborations, rooted in prophetic ministry, reverberating throughout salvation history.

Jesus does in the parables what the Spirit has been doing throughout salvation history, using story and images to teach the invisible truths of the gospel. Hughes Oliphant Old explains: "The typologist takes the concrete and amplifies the abstract, harnesses the visible so as to vivify the invisible, makes use of the earthly to mirror the heavenly, and engages the here and now in an effort to elucidate the then and there."[6] The

5 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 33.

6 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 7:359.

typological correspondence between promise and fulfillment serves as a precedent for Jesus's use of parables. A type and a parable are poetic techniques, the former rooted in salvation history, the latter created out of ordinary human affairs, but both designed to reveal the meaning of the gospel.

There is a parabolic dimension throughout biblical revelation that is evident in recognizable biblical types (lamb, altar, circumcision, Passover, exodus, tabernacle, temple, etc.). This is also true of biblical images, "visual aids" that instruct us in what it means to fear God and follow the Lord (a shepherd's staff, an easy yoke, jars of clay, a thorn in the flesh, etc.). Wherever we turn, the ultimate referent is the Incarnate One. T. S. Eliot called this connection in the Psalms the *objective correlative*—that is to say, the person and work of Jesus is the ultimate focus of the Psalms.[7] The longer we live in the Word of God, the more we experience that the revelatory purpose of every type, figure, image, and parable is Christ. Jesus is essentially who and what the Bible is all about. Jesus said as much

7 James W. Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 31. T. S. Eliot's phrase "objective correlative" comes from his essay "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919); see https://www.bartleby.com/200/sw9.html. Eliot writes, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." Eliot related the phrase to psychology and the artistic build up to an inevitable emotional reaction. I'm relating it to theology: "The only way of expressing *truth* in the form of *theology* is by finding *the* 'objective correlative.'" All the biblical types, images, and parables lead to the crucified and risen Messiah.

to his disciples, when he said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Jesus is the true connection and correlation between petition and prophecy, promise and fulfillment.

The typographical significance of parables lies in the fact that their surface meaning organically serves the deeper gospel meaning. Truth's significance is hidden from those who reduce the metaphor to a moralistic fable or a clever tale, but for those who receive the truth, it resonates with the whole counsel of God. We hear echoes of the Father's love in the parable of the lost sons, otherwise known as the parable of the prodigal son, and celebrate the promise of the wedding feast of the Lamb in the parable of the wedding banquet. There is an organic connection between promise and fulfillment in biblical prophecy, biblical types, and biblical parables. Jesus wasn't just making things up as he went along.

## The Four Gospels and Parables

I trust the Gospel writers. They framed Jesus's parables correctly. Their placement in the narrative context provides the key to their interpretation. Our focus will be on the parables found in Matthew and Luke. Matthew collected Jesus's parables around certain broad themes: the advance of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:1–52), the true nature of salvation and discipleship (Matt. 18:10–14, 21–35; 20:1–16), the rejection of the good news of the kingdom by the very people who should have eagerly embraced the gospel (Matt.

21:18–22, 28–32, 33–46; 22:1–14), and faithfulness to the end (Matt. 25:1–13, 14–30, 31–46). Matthew used Jesus's stories to graphically show the difference between faithfulness and faithlessness. His editing of Jesus's extended analogies not only drew a picture of the Christian life, but they prepared the followers of Jesus for the world's resistance and rejection.

Mark included key parables like the sower and the soils (Mark 4:3–8, 14–20), the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–11), and the fig tree (Mark 13:28–29), but not to the same extent as Luke. Mark's fast-paced action narrative used parables sparingly. Matthew grouped Jesus's parables around significant themes, and Luke leaned into Jesus's parables on numerous occasions to illustrate the meaning of the Master's teaching. Key themes such as social justice, gospel-rich hospitality, and the inclusion of women, the poor, and the disabled are reflected in Luke's use of parables.

John's gospel has only a few parables, yet his work unites type and gospel in a way that harmonizes well with how the other gospel accounts use parables. To Nicodemus, Jesus says, "You must be born again," adding, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14–15). Instead of identifying Jesus with great figures of Israel's past, like Jacob and Moses, John highlights Jesus's implicit connection to objects that have parabolic significance. In dialogue with Nathaniel, Jesus recalls Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–17). He says, "You will see heaven open,

and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Jesus compares himself, not to Jacob, but to the ladder that connects heaven and earth. Once again, in dialogue with the woman at the well, Jesus does not compare himself to Jacob but to Jacob's well flowing with living water (John 4:14). Similarly, Jesus does not compare himself to Moses, even though he is the one greater than Moses, but to the bronze serpent (John 3:14) and to the manna, the bread from heaven (John 6:32–35).[8]

Like the parables, these indirect comparisons require reflection. Their Old Testament typological rootedness bears New Testament fulfillment in Jesus. These references call us to go deeper and pick up on the meaning of the analogy and the purpose of the type. They show John to be a pastor-poet, artistically and strategically using metaphors that are deeply embedded in salvation history. Jesus is the living water (John 4:10–13), the bread of life (John 6:35), and the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies (John 12:24). John's parables of the good shepherd and the vine and the branches climaxes with Jesus being the explicit objective correlative: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5).

John saved the full force of his parabolic technique for the book of Revelation. Like his Lord, John used indirect discourse built on metaphor and symbol to keep his hearers' attention and

8 Robert A. J. Gagnon, "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Theology, Analogy, and Genes," *Theology Matters* 7, no. 6, (Nov/Dec 2001): 1–13, specifically 2–3.

reveal the meaning of the kingdom of God. Jesus drew from ordinary daily life to shatter his hearers' preexisting understanding. His stories about farmers and seeds, servants and masters, sons and fathers turned everything upside down to reveal a radical new counterculture: the kingdom of God. On the surface, parables may appear to be quaint moral stories designed to make people nicer, but Jesus worked their obvious hiddenness to open up the secrets of the gospel. He used the common stuff of daily life to teach the extraordinary truths and subversive message of the gospel. He challenged his hearers to interpret the metaphors, to look beyond the surface meaning. This is why Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matt. 13:43).

The apostle John was tutored in the power of metaphor from the Master, but instead of drawing on ordinary everyday things, John shaped his parables from the extraordinary complexity of the cosmic realm. He drew his metaphors from the stars instead of seeds and monsters instead of masters. He exchanged an agrarian world of wicked tenant farmers for the cosmic war between God and the devil. He transposed Jesus's everyday world into the end of the world. He merged the parabolic style of Jesus with an in-depth understanding of the prophets and brought the message home, not with stories drawn from everyday experience, but with horrific scenarios of global war and ecstatic scenes of rhapsodic worship.

## Messianic Consciousness

Jesus did not invent parables, but he used them in powerful new ways to reflect his own self-understanding. He

was naturally drawn to Old Testament symbols for God as a means of communicating his own messianic self-understanding. Philip Payne concludes, "Here in the parables, the most assuredly authentic of all the traditions about Jesus, is a clear, implicit affirmation of Jesus's self-understanding as deity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that to depict himself he consistently gravitated to imagery and symbols which the Old Testament typically depict God."[9]

Jesus is the embodiment of God-in-person. He took on our humanity to show us God, and he took on the stuff of our humanity to give concrete expression to the gospel. The metaphor and the message are rooted in salvation history, and the messenger is none other than the Incarnate One. Jesus freely used an incarnational technique to convey his message—a strategy embedded in his very being. He refused to engage in the pedantic style of the rabbis, who were in the habit of supporting their teaching with a ponderous recital of sources. Instead, he proclaimed the truth with such authority and wisdom that people questioned how he could be so learned without having received formal education (John 7:15). It is critically important to remember who is creating and delivering the parables.

First-century rabbis used parables as well, but the dramatic twist in Jesus's parables was how he used them to reveal his identity. He implicitly designated himself as the sower, the director of the harvest, the rock, the shepherd, the bridegroom,

9 Philip B. Payne, "Jesus's Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *Trinity Journal* 2 (Spring 1981): 3, 9.

the father, the giver of forgiveness, the vineyard owner, the lord, and the king. Each of these images represents a significant association with God and his work, which is clearly evident in the Old Testament and in all likelihood familiar to many of Jesus's listeners. For example, when Jesus drew an analogy between obedience to his words and building on the rock in the parable of the two houses, he used one of the most common pictures of God in the Old Testament. The parable implies that "response to Jesus and his words is tantamount to response to God."[10] Other biblical allusions are also obvious (Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42), leaving the distinct impression that Jesus is purposefully selecting an image that reflects his messianic consciousness.

We need pictures. Have you ever bought bookshelves or a cabinet from IKEA? Your purchase comes in a heavy box that doesn't look like anything resembling the floor model. You get it home and pull out a stack of panels and a bag of nuts and bolts. You'd be foolish to begin without looking at the step-by-step sheet of instructions. We need the picture to put it together. Again, I don't know anyone who tries to make a jigsaw puzzle without looking at the picture on the box. We need pictures. Jesus told parables to help us visualize the gospel. He gave us a mental picture of what it means to receive the gospel.

To highlight the importance of mental models, Charles Duhigg compares pilot reaction on two international flights,

10 Payne, "Jesus's Implicit Claim," 3, 9.

Air France Flight 447 and Qantas Airways Flight 32. On a flight from Rio de Janeiro to Paris, the Air France pilots became disoriented when ice crystals froze the airspeed indicators and automatically turned off the auto-flight system. If they had done nothing, the plane would have continued to fly safely, but they panicked. Instead of taking a step back, assessing the overall picture and gaining perspective, the pilots became fixated on an emergency procedure that is used to abort a landing. The pilot at the controls maximized the plane's thrust and raised the nose of the plane. At thirty-eight thousand feet, the air is so thin that it only increased the severity of the stall. Psychologists call this cognitive tunneling. It led to reactive thinking dooming Flight 447. They were unable to picture what was happening.[11]

One year after the crash of Air France Flight 447, Qantas Airways Flight 32, flying from Singapore to Sydney, sustained massive damages when an oil fire led to an explosion that ripped apart an engine turbine. The plane's computers responded to the ensuing catastrophic systems failure by giving step-by-step instructions, but there was no way to keep up with the cascading data. Duhigg reports that the captain shouted, "We need to stop focusing on what's wrong and start paying attention to what's still working." As another pilot began ticking off what was still operational, the pilot imagined that he was flying a little single-engine Cessna. He took control of his mental model.

11 Charles Duhigg, *Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2016), 71–88.

Instead of being inundated with information overload, he was able to focus on flying the plane instead of reacting to the stream of data. Duhigg writes, "To become genuinely productive, we must take control of our attention."[12]

The parables do that for us. They show us what it means to follow Jesus. Like the Air France pilots, it is easy to be inundated by all the data streaming at us from a myriad of sources. Jesus's parables cut through the forest of theological concerns, ethical controversies, religious debates and the cacophony of worldviews. Parables rescue us from the chaos of social media by providing a simple and compelling picture of Christian discipleship. The Australian pilot rescued a dire situation by imagining that he was flying a little Cessna. Parables are an antidote to cognitive tunneling. That is why Jesus told them and that is why we study them. We need Jesus's parables because they give us a picture of Christian discipleship.

## The Layout

We begin with Matthew's Sermon of Parables. Matthew groups seven parables into a collection to show how Jesus navigated between enemy hostility and popular hype. In the parable of the sower, Jesus offers an analysis of people's responses to the word of God, negative and positive, and concludes with a theology of hope. The parable of the wheat and weeds follows. Jesus pictures a kingdom-growth strategy free of coercion and judgmental worry. In the parables of

12 Duhigg, *Smarter, Faster, Better*, 102.

the mustard seed and yeast, Jesus prepares the disciples for the gospel's surprising high-impact growth from minuscule beginnings. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl celebrate the incomparable joy of the kingdom of heaven. Finally, in the seventh parable, the parable of the net, Jesus describes the climatic eschatological judgment, separating the wicked from the righteous. In Matthew's Sermon of Parables the crowds get their entertaining stories, and the disciples get their gospel truth. Everybody hears Jesus, but only those with ears to hear *really* hear.

Instead of grouping parables into a body of work as Matthew did, Luke scattered Jesus's parables as illustrative material throughout the course of Jesus's teaching and preaching. Both methods—grouping the parables together in a series, or strategically placing them in the narrative flow of Jesus's teaching ministry—demonstrate their useful flexibility. They can be studied and preached as a group or individually. We will explore Luke's fourteen major parables to show how Jesus leveraged his context to give us a clear picture of the gospel. This is followed by Matthew's version of Jesus's Passion week parables and the climax of his teaching ministry. Finally, in an appendix I reflect on the importance of preaching the parables. This could also be a good place to begin.

# 1

# The Sower

**Matthew 13:1–23**

On the same day that the Pharisees accused Jesus of possessing demonic power and his family sought to carry out an intervention, Jesus went out of the house and "sat by the lake" (Matt. 13:1). A large crowd gathered around him and "he told them many things in parables" (Matt. 13:3). In the midst of a cultural storm he sat down in a boat. There is a cove near Capernaum that provided a natural acoustical setting. His voice amplified off the surface of the water. His body language was a picture of composure and calm engagement—an example to believers today of how to engage the world in the midst of resistance and rejection. When speakers sit, they naturally limit their voice volume and animation. The focus narrows to what is being said rather than how it is being said. Jesus's simple style corresponds to his simple parables. But the simple content of the story is a fiction, a calculated cover for profound truths and a not-so-subtle invitation to the listener to go deeper. The preacher of the Sermon on the Mount has shifted genres. The Sermon of Parables was designed to stymie the

opposition, keep the crowd listening, and draw the disciples deeper into gospel truth. Jesus diverted an early end to his public ministry by his friendly, subversive speech.

## "Holy Seed"

Those with ears to hear will understand even before Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus's simple story of the sower invokes the deep meaning of salvation history. When he begins with "A farmer went out to sow his seed" (Matt. 13:3), he telegraphs to his audience that this story should be understood on a deeper level than a carpenter's son's commentary on farming. Isaiah spoke of "the holy seed" sprouting from the "stump in the land." The seed signified the early growth of the kingdom of heaven (Isa. 6:13). The Isaiah reference linked the sower's seed to the word of God in Jesus's audience. The promise of a fruitful harvest suggests the fruitful productivity of the word of the Lord: "It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you" (Isa. 55:11–12). If someone listened to Jesus closely, they would have anticipated the positive conclusion of the parable of the sower: "the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:23).

There is little mystery as to who the sower is in Jesus's parable. The word "sower" is unusual. The normal word to use back then was "farmer." But Jesus chose "sower" to give the hearer another clue. The parable wasn't about farming. It

was about the proclamation of the word of the Lord. Jesus himself is the sower. The refrain "Whoever has ears, let them hear" implies that there is something more to be understood than the surface meaning. The deep meaning of the parable of the sower is related to the prophecy of Isaiah.

The liberally sown seed fell in four places, on a hard-packed footpath, on rocky ground with a thin layer of soil, on a thorny patch of earth, and on fertile soil producing a fruitful crop. The sower scatters seed everywhere. He is unconcerned about wasting seed. Later, when the disciples get Jesus away from the crowd, they ask him, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" They are aware that Jesus changed his communication strategy, and they want to know why. In other words, they ask, "Why do you teach them so cryptically? Why not spell things out for them?"[1] The question implies a change in Jesus's teaching method, a change that must have impressed them as unusual.

Jesus answered their question indirectly. His response did not focus on method (why are you choosing to speak in parables?), but on meaning (explaining what God was up to). His strategy is in response to what God was doing, rather than in how he could change his method to reach people. Reception, Jesus insists, is in the hands of God, not humans. Instead of changing methods because of consumer demand, Jesus insists on a deeper reason. Understanding, like grace,

1 R. T. France, *Matthew: New International Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 510.

is a gift of God, lest anyone should boast. The disciples are privileged by God to be given "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven"—the crowd is not; the religious leaders are not. The synergy between a human response ("Whoever has ears, listen!") and God's sovereignty ("The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, not to them," Matt. 13:11) cannot be explained in an equation or measured in percentages. Jesus lifts the preaching of the gospel above competing ideologies and the eloquence of human wisdom (see 1 Cor. 2:1–4).

## Isaiah's Open Secret

Jesus described the gospel as "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." The Greek word for "secret" is "mystery," a word we tend to associate with what we find vague, inscrutable, and puzzling. The apostles used the word "mystery" for the truth of God *revealed*. Truth is not unknowable and beyond our grasp, but neither does it originate with us. We are not the clever creators of truth. The source of universal truth is in God alone. Redemptive truth, absolute truth, is received, not achieved. This truth can only be known by the revelation of God (1 Cor. 4:1). The secret of the kingdom of heaven is that Jesus is God's revelation in person. This is the open secret that the disciples are privileged to hear and understand. This is the truth that the crowd fails to comprehend. *Mystery* is the revelation of God, previously hidden, now made known. The privilege of reception is not a problem but a blessing, and the gift received increases in

abundance.[2] Both reception and rejection of "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" are orchestrated by the sovereign will of God. Theologian Carl Henry offers a line worth remembering: "Human reason is a divinely fashioned instrument for recognizing truth; it is not a creative source of truth."[3]

Jesus attributes his reason for using parables to the hardness of people's hearts. The crowd's willful refusal to receive the truth undoubtedly has many reasons and excuses, but ultimately reception belongs to God. Jesus is neither surprised by the rejection nor filled with sorrow. His courage and conviction is reflected in the words of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet was called to preach the word of God to his own people who heard it clearly enough, but refused to accept it. They hardened their hearts, closed their ears, and shut their eyes.

Ironically, Isaiah's calling reinforced the people's failure to comprehend the truth. The better the prophet preached, the more resistant the people became. The Lord commissioned the prophet to make the truth plain and the people's rejection complete: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise

2 Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2, *The Churchbook*, Matthew 13–28 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 10. Bruner writes, "This is hard. But the sentence cannot be explained away. And we will accept it as it stands only if we are prepared to let God be God. The God of Jesus of the biblical writers is not a God caught by surprise by the response of people."

3 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 225.

they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isa. 6:9–10).

How did the prophet do this? He did this by presenting the truth with such clarity, simplicity, and sincerity that each successive refusal to respond to the grace of God made it that much more difficult for the people to receive the message. Isaiah was a straight-talking prophet who did everything he could to convince the people of the truth of God, yet because of his effectiveness, he only drove them further from the truth. Isaiah "faced the preacher's dilemma: if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart. It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery."[4]

Isaiah was actually criticized for making the truth simple and straightforward. His critics asked, "Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?" In today's theological circles, Isaiah sounded like the simple believer who embraces the reality of the incarnation and the necessity of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. Isaiah believed and proclaimed the word of God plainly, yet boldly, and critics mocked him for it. They ridiculed his message: "Do and

4 J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 79.

do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there" (Isa. 28:10 NIV1984). Can you imagine dismissing the prophet Isaiah with "yada, yada"? Given such an unbelievably hard challenge, Isaiah naturally asked, "For how long, O Lord?" The answer he received was not easy! "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken" (Isa. 6:11–12). Not only did Isaiah present the truth clearly and compellingly but he did it for more than fifty years with the same discouraging result. The substance and style of his ministry of the word was matched only by his endurance.[5]

Understanding is a gift.[6] God opens eyes and ears to the truth otherwise concealed by our depravity and hardness of heart. Jesus frames the rejection of the crowd and the understanding of the disciples in the big picture of salvation history. The disciples were privileged by God's amazing grace not only in their reception of the truth but in their timing. In Jesus, the

5 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 140. Peterson writes, "Isaiah is the greatest preacher to be represented in our Scriptures. He is also our most conspicuous failure. . . . He preached powerful, eloquent, bold sermons. Nobody listened. He preached repentance and the salvation of Jerusalem and Judah. The people did not repent and were taken into exile."

6 Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 59. Capon writes, "Jesus thinks about the obtuseness he sees all around him—about the unlikelihood of anybody's getting even a glimmer of the mystery, let alone a grip on it—and the passage from Scripture pops into his head as the perfect summary: 'Isaiah really had it right,' he thinks, and then he simply recites the verses out loud." Thankfully it wasn't all obtuseness. Jesus believes the Father is revealing the secrets of the kingdom to the disciples.

revelation of God had reached its critical, redemptive climax (1 Peter 1:10–12; Heb. 11:13–16).

## Jesus's Interpretation

We are used to expositions coming before illustrations. But here we have the reverse: an illustration first that anticipates exposition. The parable functions as a riddle, designed to provoke thought. For the crowd, the parable conceals; for the disciples, it clarifies. Jesus himself entitled the parable: "Listen then to what the *parable of the sower* means" (Matt. 13:18, emphasis added). We may be inclined to change the title to the parable of the soils, because much of our preaching focuses on the various ways we reject the word of God. But it is best to follow Jesus's lead. He keeps the focus on the sower and the sower's assessment of the four soil types.

The sower's analysis of rejection does not discourage as much as warn. The ratio of rejection to reception is three to one. The fate of the seed (the gospel) is negative 75 percent of the time. Although, as we will see, the abundant yield of the good soil makes up for the rejection (Isa. 55:11). But Jesus's description of these three forms of rejection serves as a warning to his followers. Jesus doesn't want the disciples to be surprised by the rejection rate. One of the big secrets of the kingdom of heaven given to the disciples involves a radically new understanding of the Messiah. Instead of the political triumph of a popular messiah who defeats Rome and ushers in a new Davidic kingdom, Jesus calls for a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The

kingdom ethic outlined in the Sermon on the Mount promises persecution, not power.

The three forms of rejection all have to do with people who hear the good news of the kingdom. So even when the seed falls on the beaten path, the gospel has been heard. They may even be part of the church, but when it comes to the word of God, it goes in one ear and out the other. "The first-soil hearer *lets* the devil steal the Word of God from his heart because he does not want to know or do the will of God."[7] Like seed on a hard-worn footpath, there is no soil in which the gospel can germinate. The secular and religious idols and ideologies of the world have hardened the soul and enthroned the self.

The people represented by this type move along the path of life with such speed and distraction that the loss of meaning and significance is not even noticed. They are sufficiently thoughtless that even nihilistic despair can be laughed off as a joke. Sex, fame, power, and adventure are sufficient goals in the secular age to inspire those who race along the well-worn path. The sexualized, secularized self does not realize that the good news of salvation has been snatched from their hearts by the evil one. They are oblivious to the power of evil and the seduction of the soul. The tragedy of the first-soil hearer is no respecter of persons. It is shared by the corner-office master of the universe and the homeless street person whose night shelter is made of cardboard.

7 Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:18.

The second-soil hearer accepts the gospel enthusiastically, but the seed has fallen on rocky ground. It springs to life in the warmth of community, in the inspiration of worship, in the joy of being a part of something bigger than themselves. But no sooner does it sprout up than the pressures and persecution of the world choke the life out of it. The church received them warmly but may have failed to prepare them for suffering. Their optimistic faith was no match for the world's resistance. The gospel never had a chance to take root and bear fruit. Like flowers in the desert, they sprang to life only to shrivel in the noonday heat. There are biblical examples that fit this type, such as the disciples who were shocked when Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), or the high-achiever disciples who enthusiastically said, "Lord, Lord," only to be told by the Lord, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:21–23).

The third-soil hearer accepts the gospel. It takes root and grows. But the thorny competition of the world chokes the life out of it. The third soil-type represents the hearer who believes the gospel is true. In a philosophical argument, they agree on behalf of the word of God, but in their day-to-day living, "the anxiety of the age," and the pressures of money put a stranglehold on the word of God. Dale Bruner writes, "These neutralized believers are about as unbelieving as complete pagans, even though they stay right in the church."[8]

8 Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:22.

Two of the three soil-hearers who end up rejecting the gospel often stay in the church. Bruner continues, "Only one of the four who hears the Word stands under it, yields to its authority, obeys it. Armed with this 'three-out-of-four' truth, the scandal of un-Christian Christians can be overcome, for we know that this scandal is not proof against Jesus—he *predicted it*."[9]

## Good-Soil Understanding

The fourth-soil hearer *understands* the word. The key word for the reception of the gospel is grace-induced *understanding* (Matt. 13:13, 14, 15, 18, 23).[10] Derived from the Old English, it means to take our stand at the center of the gospel. The person who *understands* makes the gospel message his or her own. It means "standing under Jesus's teaching in obedience."[11] This is not a purely intellectual grasp of the truth. It is a life commitment framed by the Sermon on the Mount. It involves taking up our cross and following Jesus.

The parable calls for our response—not the accomplishing of a work, but the bearing of fruit.[12] The good-soil hearer is productive. Being a fruitful hearer of the word of God shows itself in the fruit of the Spirit and a transformed life (Gal.

9 Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:22.

10 The etymology of the verb "to understand" is derived from Old English *understandan*, meaning to "comprehend, grasp the idea of," probably literally to "stand in the midst of." The prefix "under" in Old English conveyed the idea of "between, among."

11 Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:18.

12 Cappon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 74.

5:22–26; Rom. 12:1–2). This soil is beatitude enriched; it is the state of grace that makes the greater righteousness possible.

Good-soil understanding takes its "stand against the devil's schemes" and "puts on the full armor of God" so you may be able "to stand your ground," having done everything to stand (Eph. 6:11, 13). This is the *understanding* of freedom in Christ that says, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). The parable of the sower challenges all believers to understand the gospel and to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18).[13]

Jesus concludes the parable of the sower on a high note. Those who hear and understand the gospel are productive. They have a salt-and-light impact in a world that desperately needs preservation and illumination. They let their light shine before others, that others may see their good works and glorify their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:13–16). This grace-inspired, beatitude-based understanding of God's redemptive provision bears abundant impact *organically*. Jesus's organic models of growth counter modern church-growth experts with their

13 Thielicke, *Waiting Father*, 59. In his sermon on the parable of the sower, Helmut Thielicke, the German pastor-theologian who resisted Hitler and went on to teach and preach in postwar Germany, observed: "There are certain times in our life and there are certain levels in the self in which we are hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground, and fertile soil all in one." Thielicke continues, "We dare not leave this grim hour of admonition without resolving to enter into judgment with ourselves and sternly asking ourselves: to what birds, what thorns, what superficiality am I exposing the Word of God in my life; what are the threatening forces and the roots of peacelessness in my life?"

marketing strategies and target audiences. Jesus seems to relish the miracle of growth resting in God's hands rather than ours. However, Jesus's growth strategy is no excuse for sloth. As planters and harvesters, we are part of the process, but the real growth remains a divine mystery rather than a human endeavor. The advance of the kingdom does not lie in our initiatives, methodologies, and budgets but in God's blessing. We pray for the seed of the gospel to take root and produce a crop, "yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what is sown" (Matt. 13:23).