

Why Parables?

Matthew 13:10-17

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May 8, 2016

Friederich Mohs was a German scientist who lived during the late 1700's and early 1800's. He studied chemistry, math and physics. But he also studied at the Mining Academy in Freiberg, Saxony. He became foreman at a mine and gained a lot of experience with minerals. Then in 1802, he moved to Austria where a banker had a special task for him. He didn't want Moh to work in the bank. He didn't want Moh to run a mine. He employed Moh to try to identify various minerals in his private collection.

How would you like that for a job? A banker agrees to pay your moving expenses and provide you with a salary just so you can spend time with his rock collection! Apparently, this took 10 years. So Friedrich's resume from 1802 to 1812 would say something like "Identified rocks of Banker Joe." Banker Joe must have had a pretty big mineral collection or Friedrich was a slow worker.

But apparently Friedrich learned something. For in 1812, he moved to Graz, Austria to a new job at the Museum and Science Academy. As part of his responsibilities, he started classifying minerals by their physical characteristics. This approach went against the more common study of the chemical composition of minerals. But the museum let him do his studies. It involved something pretty basic. He scratched one mineral against another. He came up with a scale that measured the ability of one mineral to leave a visible scratch on another mineral. So at social gatherings, when people asked Friedrich what he did for a living, he could say "I scratch rocks."

What did he discover? If mineral A left a visible scratch on mineral B, it was harder than mineral B. Some minerals would not leave visible scratches on other minerals. So he classified them as softer. He came up with what is now known as Moh's Scale of Mineral Hardness. Which mineral do you think he classified as the hardest? Diamonds. So Diamonds were given the number 10. Diamonds could leave scratches on quartz. So quartz was given a 7. A quartz could scratch a fluorite. So fluorite became a 4. Fluorite could scratch Talc. Talc couldn't scratch anything. So it became a 1. So Moh's Scale of Hardness goes from 10 – diamond to 1 – Talc. Some of you know this to be true. You would never sprinkle diamonds on your baby to comfort them. That's too hard and risky. But you would sprinkle talcum powder. Now today, Moh's scale is not really used in the lab because chemical composition is a much more precise study. But it still can be helpful in the field when they're trying to identify a mineral discovered in a mine or in the ground.

Now we know that Moh's scale of hardness applies to minerals. But what if we could apply it to our hearts?

Specifically, what number of hardness, using Moh's scale of 1-10, would be found on our hearts if Jesus came along and scratched them gently with His Word? When it comes to God and His truth, is the hardness in our hearts closer to diamonds or to talc?

You might think "what does this really matter? If my heart is hard or soft towards God, that's my choice. I choose to live my life my way." But if you call yourself a Christian, a hard heart towards God should be of great concern to you. A hard heart and love for God are the opposite ends of the scale. Throughout the Bible hard hearts lead to troubled relationship with God. God grieves over the hardness of people's hearts. God's anger flare up at hard hearted people. God judges those with diamond like hearts towards His love. Proverbs 28:14 states "Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity." In a call to worship in Psalm 95, the Psalmist writes "Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts." Hard heartedness is of great concern to God.

We will see this today in our continuing study of Matthew. We started last week into Jesus' teaching by parables. Today, we get to look at the question "why does Jesus teach in parables?" The answer to that question raises the issue of hard hearts. My prayer is God will use our time together to reveal the state of our hearts towards Him and then empower us to respond to what He reveals.

Matthew 13:10-17 (ESV) (P. 688 – Near the bottom of the right hand column where you see the little number 10).

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

""You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."

¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Last week, we went through the parable of the sower and Jesus' interpretation of it in this chapter. We learned that Jesus spoke the parable to the crowds on the beach but only gave the explanation to the disciples. The disciples ask in verse 10 – "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Maybe they asked this because they didn't understand the parables themselves or they noticed the crowd didn't get it. If they still have in their minds that Jesus needs to grab power like other kings then He get his message out clearly. Parables don't help. So they ask.

So Jesus answers them. But it was likely not the answer they or we expect. He didn't speak in parables because He sensed He was losing His audience. He didn't change his teaching method parables just to try something new. There was a specific purpose for them. In Jesus' answer, we are going to discover something very significant that happens through the parables.

Why does Jesus speak in parables?

Jesus' answer at first seems to bring more puzzles than answers. Verse 11 – "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." There are secrets in the kingdom of heaven? Why wouldn't the information be open to everyone? Aren't secrets usually bad because there is something to hide? Secrets exclude those who don't know them. This muddies the waters more it seems.

So maybe we can get somewhere if we understand what Jesus' meant by "the secrets of the kingdom." The problem with that is no one agrees with what Jesus specifically means by these secrets. 5 commentators have 5 different answers. The secrets could be 1. how to interpret the parables, 2. the nature of the kingdom, 3. the mysteries of the how the kingdom operates, 4. the mysteries of God's truth or 5. end times secrets that are only passed on in veiled speech to God's people. But I think we can at least conclude that these secrets have something to do with the reality and nature of the kingdom of heaven. In the parable of the sower we saw Jesus reveal that just because a person at one time shows interest in Christ it does not necessarily mean they're Christians. Jesus has been trying to get across again and again that the kingdom of heaven is unlike any earthly kingdom. Yes, it refers to the reign of God. But at this time in history, it was not going to be a visible kingdom with a visible king who conquered other kingdoms thru force. This kingdom will conquer not through a change in government but through changes in people's hearts.

Only the disciples and those who respond to Jesus message receive this knowledge about the kingdom. Notice Jesus calls the secrets a gift. Verse 11 – To you disciples it has been given. To the crowds it has not been given. So if we're talking about the kingdom of heaven, the giver of the secrets must be the king of heaven, God Himself. God gives the secrets to some and does not give the secrets to others.

Well that's not fair. But God is perfectly just. There is not even a drop or millimeter of injustice in God. So what would God accomplish by giving to some and not giving to others? Well He's emphasizing a difference between the disciples and the crowds. Somehow, the parables would make clearer this difference.

We get encouraged that we're on the right track with Jesus' words in verse 12. "For the one who has, more will be given and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." So the disciples (and those who respond to Jesus' message) who have some secrets of the kingdom will be given more secrets. They will have more mysteries explained to them. But the ones who do not have the secrets will have less and even what they think they have in understanding the kingdom will be taken away. All this can be accomplished through the parables? That's what Jesus seems to be saying here.

So we could summarize the first reason why Jesus spoke in parables like this – **The parables test the heart of the listener.** They act as a spiritual examination, prompting a response that will indicate whether the person's heart is open to Jesus or closed. The parables check the hardness of our hearts. They reveal where we currently rank on the scale of hardness. We can discover this by paying attention to how we respond to them. There are really only 2 responses. One is whole hearted life commitment and the other is less than whole hearted response. We saw in the parable of the sower, that the first 3 soils described less than saving faith responses to the message of the kingdom. Only full commitment response results in fruit bearing.

So when we hear Jesus' parables, do we just think they're interesting riddles or are we cut to the heart about our need to respond wholly and completely to Him as Lord? When we read the parables, do we get offended or are we drawn towards obedience?

Any response less than whole hearted devotion reveals a serious heart condition. Look at Jesus' words in verse 13. "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they

understand.” Those phrases should have raised a red flag for Jewish readers. They refer to the beginning of a tragic era in Israel’s history. Things were going to get really bad.

It’s found in Isaiah 6 in the Old Testament. Isaiah prophetically ministered at the end of the reign of a good king named Uzziah. He followed the Lord obediently. But then pride got the best of Uzziah. He thought he could be not only king but high priest. So he proudly went into the temple thinking he had earned the right to meet with God just like the High Priest. God struck him with leprosy. So he actually lived the last 10 years of his rule in isolation. Then he died. So it was a mournful time for the people. Yet Isaiah is given this great and mighty vision of a Holy God. He realizes his uncleanness. Yet God atones for him so he can remain in God’s presence. Then God has a mission. Who will go and spread His word to the people? Isaiah speaks up and says “Here am I. Send me!”

Then God gives Isaiah the message he must deliver to the Israelites. Jesus quotes this in verses 14 and 15. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. Why? For this people’s heart has grown dull and with their ears they can barely hear and with their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”

Isaiah was commissioned to go out and proclaim a message to a people whose hearts had grown dull or hard towards God. Their hearts hardened; their ears plugged; their eyes closed to living God’s way. So God commissioned Isaiah to preach. This preaching would reveal and confirm the people’s widespread rejection of God. How would you like that for a ministry assignment? So Isaiah asks for how long he has to do this. One month. Two months. 6 months? No. Until the nation lies devastated and the cities are uninhabited. It was a fearful and foreboding prophecy about God’s coming judgment upon a hard hearted people. It ultimately happened with the resounding defeat and destruction of Israel as a nation.

Now Jesus reveals the same kind of hard heartedness with these crowds. The parables will only further reveal the hardness of their hearts. So as we travel through the parables in the weeks to come, we must pay attention to our heart response. **The parables give instruction to those who are responsive.** They teach Jesus’ disciples about the nature of the kingdom of heaven and clarify its mysteries. They show us how the kingdom operates in a very different way than the expectations of the religious leaders and crowds. Jesus did not come like Donald Trump proclaiming that

He would make Israel great again if we only change the government. He called for hearts to soften and turn to God's kingdom growing in us.

And this can be a great comfort to us when we look at the state of our world. We may look around and conclude "God certainly can't be in control of this. People reject Him everywhere. His plans are getting hammered. The church is losing ground. We're losing." No. God already predicted this. God is at work in ways not visible to the world. God has already pronounced appropriate sentences.

Yet, if we know Christ, we have received the incredible gift of the secrets of the kingdom. The New Testament interprets and reveals more of the mysteries. So out of all the generations of God's people, we have the most revelation. We are incredibly blessed according to Jesus in the last verses of this passage. "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears for they hear. David; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Abraham; Moses; Adam and Eve; desired to see what we see or hear what we hear. None of them had the New Testament. Just think about how much comfort, instruction, revelation and hope the New Testament brings to us. If only we will take it in, soak in it and respond to God and His Word.

So how might we respond?

To the hard-hearted - Maybe God has revealed to you today that your heart has been hard towards Him for a long time. You've resisted His call upon your life. You've resisted softening. You think it's a sign of weakness to admit you're need for God. Yet the events of this past week in Fort McMurray or maybe in your life reveal how vulnerable we are. I've said this before and I will say it again. In life, increasing independence from parents is generally a sign of maturity. But in our spiritual lives, increasing dependence on the Lord is a sign of maturity. Will you stop shutting Him out and **open your heart to that crack of light He's shone in today.**

To the complacent - Maybe you're pretty bored with Christ. Maybe your heart once burned bright for Him but lately you feel like you're just going through the motions. Maybe today, you need to **remember the grace God has shown to you.** Sometimes we lose passion or desire because we forget how much we've been forgiven. We forget how much we've been given.

To the resentful – Maybe you find you're pretty irritated by certain people or resent their presence in your life. I'm not saying that we sweep issues under the carpet or fail to deal with some conflict. But maybe to help you deal with

that **remember the mercy God has shown you.** Mercy is giving someone something they don't deserve or didn't earn. None of us deserved God's mercy. But we feel justified in withholding mercy from others? So maybe we need to explore that with God.

To every Christian – those who are keeping on the way and aiming to live by the power of the Spirit each day. **Keep your heart soft to God and progressing toward His next steps for you.** The Christian life is either progressing or regressing. There's no standing still.

The Christian life is like a train going uphill without brakes. As long as it's moving forward, everything is fine. You move forward by that continual fuel from God. But if we don't get the fuel from God we come to a stop and start rolling backwards. That happens when we let our hearts harden towards Him.

What's your heart like today towards god – hard like a diamond, or soft like talc? Will you come to the Lord and respond to His Spirit now as we meet Him at His table?