

## **Pondering The Parables 1: *Why Parables?***

Good morning/afternoon!

I don't know how you are, but when it comes to having patience I often tend to come up a little short.

I read a story this week about patience, that I want to share with you. It's the story of person who is truly patient, even if the patience came rather reluctantly.

A first grade teacher was having what most of us would consider a difficult day. It rained hard the entire day, so the kids couldn't go out for recess. As you might expect, the kids got more and more restless and hyperactive and hard to control as the day went on. School let out at 3pm and at 2:45pm the teacher decided to start getting the kids ready for dismissal. She sorted out all their boots and raincoats and started helping get them on. Finally, they were ready to go, all except for one little boy whose boots were just too small for his feet. There were no zippers or straps, and it took every last ounce of strength she had to get the boots on this boy. When she finally did manage to get them on, she stood up with a feeling of accomplishment. That's when the little boy looked down at his feet and said, "*Teacher, you know what? These boots aren't mine!*"

The teacher didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but being a good teacher, she smiled and started helping him take them off. Turns out they were harder to get off than they were to put on. She yanked and tugged until finally the boots came off. That's when the little boy smiled at her and said, "*They're not my boots, they're my little sister's, and I just wanted to wear them to school!*"

We've all had days like that.

Days we wanted to hurry up and get something accomplished, so we could work on accomplishing something else. But things, for whatever reason, just weren't going nearly as fast or as quickly as we'd like.

Patience is kind of what I wanted to talk about today.

We're starting a series called ***Pondering the Parables***. It's a series where we'll examine some of the parables of Jesus and their meaning to the people of Jesus' day and to us now.

But before we plunge into the parables and begin examining specific parables, I want us to examine the point of parables. Why parables? Why Jesus chose to speak in parables to the people of first century Judea?

It's a good question, and, fortunately for us, it's one we can look to Scripture for the answer to.

Open your Bibles to the thirteenth chapter of the book of Matthew. Matthew 13.

Jesus had just told the parable of the sower. Matthew says that there were great crowds listening. Afterwards, the disciples were trying to figure out why Jesus spoke in parables, but not wanting to seem like dummies in front of the crowds, they take Jesus aside and ask about the whole parable thing.

We pick up the story in verse ten. **Matthew 13:10**, are you there? This is from the English Standard Version:

*<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup> And 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.*

<sup>12</sup> For 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, 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.”

<sup>15</sup> For 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.’

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

<sup>17</sup> 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.”

At first glance, this can almost seem like we’ve caught Jesus in a very un-Jesus like moment!

In fact, Mark tells the story a little more harshly. Keep your place in Matthew 13, but turn over to **Mark 4:10-12**. Here’s how Mark relays this same encounter:

<sup>10</sup> And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> so that “ ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’ ”

What? Jesus didn’t want the people hearing the parables to be forgiven? Jesus didn’t want them to be saved?

No. That's not what Jesus is saying here! That's not His intent here!

To understand what Jesus is saying, we have to listen to what Jesus is saying!

He's actually pretty clear! Turn back to Matthew and look in verse 14 of our passage. Jesus says, *Indeed, 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.”*

Jesus is referring to Isaiah's prophecy in **Isaiah 6:9-10**. Isaiah had just seen the Lord high and lifted up. God asks who will go for us? And Isaiah jumps up and says, *“Here I am, send me!”* And this is the message Isaiah is sent to deliver to the people of Israel!

God, through Isaiah, is telling the people, *“I've given you the truth. Over and over I've offered you the way to me. But that's not what you want! That's not what you've chosen! And because you've chosen something other than me, I'm going to let you go there. I'm giving you over to your desires. So now, you'll hear what I say, but you won't understand it. You'll look squarely at the truth, but you won't have the slightest idea that's what you're looking at!”*

God is such a gentleman! He never violates your will! He never crosses the threshold of your will, not without your specific invitation!

Make no mistake, God wants you to be saved! He wants everyone to come to know Him! Paul says that in **1 Timothy 2:4**, that God is a God *...who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

And in **2 Peter 3:9** Peter declares that God *...is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

But ultimately, the choice to love God, on God's terms, is up to each one of us! And there is coming a time loved ones, when our decision is going to be final!

Indeed, in **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12**, Paul prophesies almost the exact prophecy of Isaiah that Jesus was quoting in our passage in Matthew... only instead of being aimed at the nation of Israel, it's aimed at the world when Paul says,

*<sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

The King James version translates verses 11 and 12 this way:

*<sup>11</sup> And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: <sup>12</sup> That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

What's that got to do with Jesus and parables?

By speaking in parables, Jesus is eliminating any perception of a gray area of faith. That is, Jesus is making the line, the distinction very clear between someone who is truly committed to being His disciple, and someone isn't committed to that relationship. By speaking His truth in parables, Jesus is exposing the concept of a nominal believer. Because the truth is there is no such thing! You either believe or you don't! You either have a relationship with Jesus, or you don't!

Understand... the people of Jesus' time were not looking for God. The vast majority of people gathered to hear Jesus speak, were more looking for what they could get from God. Much like today, people seek God not primarily for the sake of a relationship with God, but to see how God can make their lives better.

Jesus is saying, of those people and of us, you've got it backwards. Your cart is before your horse! Jesus wanted the people of His day and the people of Isaiah's day and the people of our day to seek Him first!

Jesus says exactly that in **Matthew 6:33**, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."*

Jesus doesn't want to just be the garnish on side of the plate of a good meal, He wants to be the food that sustains us! *"I am the bread of life"* Jesus declares in **John 6:35**.

And then, just a few verses later in **John 6:51**, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

The people of Jesus' day, listening to the parables, are a lot like people who come to church today listening to pastor's preach sermons. They want to hear the gospel in an hour. They want to figure out how to fit the gospel into their lives, then move on with their day, rather than having God fix their broken lives through a relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ, and through the transforming power of His Holy Spirit. People then, and people now have no patience for that process!

The situation facing Jesus then, is the same situation facing Jesus and His church today; it's not atheism, it's superficiality!

Superficiality! People! That's the bane of our culture! We want our knowledge of God, His ways, the things He wants from us, we want that like we want our pizza from Dominos, delivered in 30 minutes or less!

There was a pastor who was flying home from a speaking engagement across the country. On the plane, he was working on his sermon for the next Sunday. The man next to him kept eying this pastor and what he was writing. Finally, curiosity got the best of the man and he said, *"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but you've been working on something very intently for a while now, do you mind if I ask what it is?"*

The pastor answered, *"I'm a pastor, and I'm working on my next sermon."*

*"Oh, religion! The man replied, "I don't get all caught up in the complexities of religion. I like to keep it simple. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's my religion!"*

*The pastor smiled and asked the man, "What is it that you do for a living?" The man said, "Actually, I'm an astronomer, I teach astronomy at a university."*

*The pastor said, "Ah astronomy! I don't get all caught up in the complexities of astronomy! Twinkle, twinkle little star, that's my astronomy!"*

*Jesus is saying, "I speak in parables because I don't want people to hear and think, 'Oh yeah, I got it!' I want people to hear my words and think about what they heard and then say, 'Wait, what did you say, what was that?' When it comes to following me, I want' people to take their time, to understand what they're committing to! I want them to know a relationship with me takes patience. That's why I speak in parables!"*

Jesus wants us to know the truth! Jesus wants us to choose to have a genuine relationship with Him! But he wants that relationship built on a solid foundation, not on the highlights from a Ted Talk.

Jesus wants us to know that really getting to know Him takes time, takes patience. And not a passive patience! Jesus doesn't want you sitting at home waiting for Him to smack you on the head with His discipling wand! Jesus wants you to be a participant in your relationship with Him. Jesus is saying His followers will be active in their patience! And producing fruit will be the sign of that participatory patience!

In fact, that's really what the parable of the sower is all about. Let's read that, it's back in Matthew 13 starting in verse 1:

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.*

*<sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, <sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.*

*<sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear."*

Now, listen to Jesus' explanation of that parable, that's in verses 18 through 23.

<sup>18</sup> “Hear then the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

When the word of the kingdom is preached in this world, there are lots of people in lots of different places in their lives who will hear that word.

There are those who are busy chasing things in this life. Things that aren't really life, things that actually lead to death! Those people are on the path. That path is what Jesus is talking about in **Matthew 7:13** when He says, *For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.* They hear the word, but for whatever reason, the word doesn't resonate with them, and they ignore it, they discount it as having no value.

Then there are those who hear the word, they're excited about the word, but when things get rough, they're quick to abandon the word and run back to the things they leaned on before. There's no depth to the soil of their heart and the word dies in their hearts.

There are those who hear the word, and think, “*Yeah, this is a good thing. I can definitely use this!*” But the word doesn’t have the primacy it needs to change these people’s hearts. There are a lot of other things, other distractions, other cares, other worries, other desires, other thorns that eventually choke the word out.

But for those who hear the word and understand it; those whose hearts are good soil, they receive the word. They actively cultivate the word in their lives; they patiently care for the seed as it sprouts into a crop that they tend to, a crop that eventually bears fruit. And raising a crop from seed to fruit always takes time, it always takes patience!

Jesus is saying those who will genuinely come to Him must know they are coming into a relationship. And every successful relationship requires time and patience to develop into what it was designed to be! That’s why Jesus speaks in parables!

Jesus is saying it takes more than just saying “*the sinner’s prayer*” to really know Him! That’s why Jesus speaks in parables!

Jesus understands we live in a microwave society. You know what a microwave society is, right? A microwave society is a society that is so impatient that it stands in front of the microwave oven heating up its dinner in 30 seconds and screams, “*Hurry up!*”

We belong to a microwave society! But, loved ones, we also know the difference between a potato baked in the oven for an hour and one microwaved on high for three or four minutes!

We know the difference, but are we willing to be patient enough to put in the time to reap the benefit from that difference?

That's what Jesus is asking for from us! He wants us to be actively patient in our relationship with Him. And when we have questions, when we don't understand, Jesus wants us to ask Him! He doesn't want us splashing around in a wading pool thinking we're plumbing the depths of the ocean!

He knows that if we come to Him too quickly, our faith has the tendency to be like the seeds that fall on the path, or on the rocky ground, or among the thorns. Jesus knows that kind of faith is ultimately no faith at all! That's why Jesus speaks in parables!

Jesus knows it takes time to move toward Him with integrity. That's why Jesus speaks in parables!

In his book ***Lyrics***, Oscar Hammerstein talks about the need for integrity. Speaking about a picture he saw once on the cover of a magazine. Hammerstein says, *"I saw a picture of the Statue of Liberty... taken from a helicopter and it showed the top of the statue's head. I was amazed at the detail there. The sculptor had done a painstaking job with the lady's coiffure, and yet he must have been pretty sure that the only eyes that would ever see this detail would be the uncritical eyes of sea gulls. He could not have dreamt that any man would ever fly over this head.*

*He was artist enough, however, to finish off this part of the statue with as much care as he had devoted to her face and her arms, and the torch and everything that people can see as they sail up the bay..."*

Hammerstein said that picture reinforced in him, the determination and need as an artist, to finish off his art, or any work he did, to the absolute best of his ability!

Loved ones, that's how Jesus feels! That's the integrity Jesus wants to see in those who would truly follow Him!

That's why Jesus speaks in parables!

It takes time to move toward Jesus with integrity. Jesus wants us to have the patience to develop that integrity. It takes us listening to Him and asking questions of Him. Allowing Him the time to build in us a genuine faith. That's why Jesus speaks in parables!

So as we go through this series, examining some of the parables of Jesus, take the time to think through them... again. Sure, most of you have heard or read these parables time and time again. But if you'll look again, examine them with an open heart, a heart of good soil, you'll learn something new! Something that will draw you closer to Jesus! That's what Jesus wants! That's why Jesus speaks in parables!

You know, some of the earliest manuscripts of the book of Mark end in chapter 16 at verse 8.

If you look there, your Bible probably notes that in some fashion or another.

That's where, on the first Easter, an angel appears to the women in the empty tomb, announcing Christ's resurrection. Then the women go running out of the tomb, fearful and stunned by what they saw.

But before they do, the angel tells them in verse 7, *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”*

Think about it. Where's Galilee? It's back in chapter one! Chapter 1 of the book of Mark, verse 14; *Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,<sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

It's almost as if Jesus is telling us, *"Go back and read it again! You didn't understand it fully the first time, go back and read it again and again! And if you have questions, ask me! That's what a relationship is all about!"*

It takes time to move toward Jesus with integrity! It takes an active patience to develop the kind of relationship with Jesus that will produce true disciples!

It takes time and integrity for the Holy Spirit of God to produce in us the bumper crops He wants from His people, from His church! It takes time, but God is patient, and He wants you to want to understand this relationship thing. He wants a real relationship with you! He doesn't want you to be some nominal, superficial acquaintance; He wants a genuine relationship with you! And that's why Jesus speaks in parables!