

About Teaching in Parables (13:10–17)

(Mark 4:10-11; Luke 8:9-10)

The material in verses 10 through 17, the explanation of why Jesus taught in parables, is parenthetical to the passage. The text naturally flows from verse 9 then to verse 18. This explanation in 10-17 breaks up that flow. In fact, this clarification occurred later, after Jesus had taught all the parables, not at this point in the story.

Matthew stops here to give the reader the explanation of this parable. Why? It would seem he did so for one of two possible reasons. First, either it was so important that he simply did not want to wait till the end to explain what was said here, or perhaps better, the explanation served as a model for all the following parables. Matthew injects it here to give the reader a “heads up” on how parables are to be understood. **Going over the explanation now will allow the reader to apply this insight into understanding all the other parables as they unfold in the story.**

Keep in mind that Matthew writes his book and this explanation of this parable some 25 years after the event. The explanation for this parenthetical insertion is to this later audience, a Christian audience, the one that he wants to give special attention to. He wants to instruct them on what Jesus taught and how his symbols are to be understood by Matthew’s then current readers. With this explanation of the symbols, they can then more easily grasp all his parables. For that reason, this parable is particularly important to the reader. It has within it many of the keys needed to more fully benefit from Jesus’ other teachings.

Matthew 13:10 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

came.... The word “came” suggests that this occurred later, not at the time he spoke this parable.

“And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.” (Mark 4:10, ESV)

Why do you speak to them in parables? This is not the first time that Jesus spoke to them using parables or at least symbolic language very similar to parables (7:24-27; 9:15-17; 11:16-19). The difference between then and now is simply this; then they were used to reveal truth, now they are used to conceal truth. “...the parables seem now perhaps to have ... taken on a character that seemed to make them harder to understand....”¹

So, “...because *parabolē* [parable] includes the sense of “cryptic saying” (see on v. 3a) the question could also imply, “Why do you teach them so cryptically?” Why not spell

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 372.

things out for them?”² A major part of that answer is found in the fact that “Jesus did not speak in parables to outsiders until hostility raised its ugly head.”³ In other words, the activities of chapters 11 and 12 created the hostile environment that now required Jesus to speak cryptically. What was there about this message that did this? His was a message about *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven* which addressed the failure of biological Israel and the concomitant creation of the Church to replace a failed Judaism. To the leaders of Israel, this was treason—for this he should die! And for this reason, he spoke cryptically—in parables.

Matthew 13:11 *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.*

given, not been given⁴.... “The doctrine of election lies behind these words. It is not a merit in the disciples that they understand where others do not; their comprehension is due to the fact that God has chosen them and given them the gift of understanding.”⁵

“Jesus’ answer cannot legitimately be softened: at least one of the functions of parables is to conceal the truth, or at least *to present it in a veiled way.*”⁶

But does not man have a free will? Yes, he does but, “the free will of human beings to accept or to reject is considered in terms of the experience or non-experience of grace.”⁷ Without the generating grace of God, people always chose sin, they never chose God. Being dead in sin, how could they do otherwise?

to know.... What the disciples have been given is knowledge about the kingdom of heaven; this will not be given to the others.

secrets or mysteries⁸.... Secret or mystery “refers to some eschatological secret, some portent of what God has decreed will take place in the future.”⁹ “In the Jewish

² France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 510). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 392.

⁴ *given* δίδωμι “...to grant someone the opportunity or occasion to do something—‘to grant, to allow.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁵ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (p. 339). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 307). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 371.

⁸ *secrets* μυστήριον “...the content of that which has not been known before but which has been revealed to an in-group or restricted constituency—‘secret, mystery.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 307). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

sources *rāz*¹⁰ and its equivalents are often used in connexion with God's purposes for the last days, as in Dan 2:27–8....¹¹

of the kingdom of heaven.... Daniel was asked about mysteries by Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel revealed to him how the kingdom of God would come to pass and develop.

“Daniel answered the king and said, “No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days....” (Daniel 2:27–28, ESV)

And what was that mystery?

“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever....” (Daniel 2:44, ESV)

Jesus reveals to his disciple's additional information about that very kingdom. The “...mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation....”¹² “The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that *the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen by Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men*....”¹³ That is, there would be a church age before the king would come in judgment at the consummation of the ages. The revelation is about the failure of biological Israel but the success of Jesus in an even larger harvest through a new entity, his Church. This is a dangerous message and can only be spoken cryptically.

but to them it has not been given.... “Modern readers are so used to thinking of parables as helpful illustrative stories that they find it hard to grasp the message of this chapter that parables do not explain. To some they may convey enlightenment, but for others they may only deepen confusion.”¹⁴ They were meant to do that.

“At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things

¹⁰ *rāz* The Hebrew word for *secret*. “Something that is secret and cannot be interpreted by merely human wisdom.” Michael Scott Robertson, “Mystery,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (Lexham Bible Reference Series; Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

¹¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 389.

¹² Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 307). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 307). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁴ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 500). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matthew 11:25–27, ESV)

Matthew 13:12 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.

the one who has.... Our most recent use of “has” was in verse 9 “He who has ears, let him hear.” Now we are told “the one who has, more will be given.” Verse 9 illuminates verse 12. Has ears means has listening ears. “So we should fill in the missing object in our verse like this: “Whoever has listening will be given still more.” The interpretation of this difficult text is a model case of the rule: *context teaches meaning.*”¹⁵

And what are these listening ears hearing? “The one who ‘has’ will be the one to whom the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven have been revealed. The one who ‘does not have’ will be the one who has experienced the ministry of Jesus without becoming aware in any significant sense of what is happening in relation to the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁶

even what he has will be taken away.... Jesus “is referring to spiritual truth; he has just drawn attention to the importance of God’s gifts of grace, and he now emphasizes the importance of human responsibility. When anyone uses the spiritual truth he has, that truth grows. More is added to it. By contrast, if he does not use it, he finds that it vanishes away little by little.”¹⁷ “...the purpose is educational to disciples, and disciplinary to those who refuse to become disciples....”¹⁸

“Once you have started on the road of spiritual enlightenment, the blessings multiply, but those who do not accept the “message of the kingdom” will lose everything (v. 19).”¹⁹

Matthew 13:13 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.

hearing they do not hear.... “The root problem is the unwillingness of the people to receive the message of Jesus....”²⁰

¹⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 11.

¹⁶ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 534). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁷ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (p. 340). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. Plummer A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* (London, 1910)

¹⁸ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 512). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁹ Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W., Jr. (1996). *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 373.

understand²¹.... We have phrases in our culture “he needs to get his head together.” Or, as a compliment, “he’s got it together.” This is the idea; a person who mentally evaluates the elements of life and gets it all together—understands. Otherwise, “he needs to get his head together” because “he doesn’t ‘get it’.”

Matthew 13:14 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.”

This response by Israel was prophetically foretold by Isaiah.

“And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “ ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.””
(Isaiah 6:9–10, ESV)

This Isaiah passage is alluded to three more times in the NT: John 12:39-40; Acts 28:26–27; and Romans 11:8.

“What else does this mean,” Luther pointedly asks, “but that free choice or the human heart is so held down by the power of Satan that unless it is miraculously raised up by the Spirit of God it cannot of itself either see or hear things that strike the eyes and ears themselves so plainly as to be palpable?”²²

Matthew 13:15 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.’

heart has grown dull.... In modern idiom, we might say “they have become hardheaded.”

they can...they have...they should.... The force of the rejection is in what “**they**” do.

²¹ *understand συνίημι* “To comprehend, understand, perceive. The comprehending activity of the mind denoted by *suníēmi* entails the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, as collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together. The mind grasps concepts and sees the proper relationship between them.” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

²² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 13.

lest²³.... "...they have closed their eyes as the result of divine judicial action, otherwise they might see and turn...."²⁴ Paul says something rather similar in 2 Thessalonians:

"Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false," (2 Thessalonians 2:11, ESV)

heal them.... Mark clarifies Jesus' metaphoric use of "heal them."

"so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." (Mark 4:12, ESV)

The parables restrict the knowledge of salvation to the disciples that they might "turn and be forgiven," but not to others. God takes responsibility for who are saved and who are lost. To some he "gives" knowledge of salvation, to others he does not so give. It is he who does the choosing, *"We love because he first loved us."* (1 John 4:19, ESV), not the other way around.

Matthew 13:16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

"One aspect of Mt 13:10ff. should not be missed. In their preoccupation with wondering how God can justly give knowledge to only a select group, some commentators have failed to see that the emphasis of the text lies not on privation but on God's gift."²⁵ **The fact that he has not revealed to all is not the point—none deserve God's redemptive love. That he has condescended to reveal himself to any is the point.**

In contrast to the crowds "the disciples have eyes which *really* see (as opposed to seeing without seeing) and ears which *really* hear (as opposed to hearing without understanding)."²⁶

Matthew 13:17 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.

prophets and righteous.... "The prophets were those who spoke the Word, and the righteous were those who obeyed it...."²⁷

²³ *lest μήποτε* "...markers of negative purpose, often with the implication of apprehension—'in order that ... not, so that ... not, lest.'" Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁴ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 311). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 389.

²⁶ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 515). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 14.

“But there is a further contrast in v. 17, with people in the past who were in no way hardened against the truth (“prophets” and “righteous people” are by definition on the side of God and his truth rather than of human resistance to his word), but who lived too soon to see and hear what is now available to Jesus’ disciples.”²⁸

“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” (Hebrews 11:13, ESV)

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.” (1 Peter 1:10–12, ESV)

“Matthew’s church cannot have failed to see both itself and the unbelieving Israel of its day in the division reflected in this passage.”²⁹

²⁸ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 515). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 376.