

November 9, 2003 by Steve Brandon



Why Parables?

Matthew 13:1-17

Why parables?

1. So God can give and not give (verses 11-12).
2. So people can see and not see (verses 13-15).
3. So some can be blessed (verses 16-17).

As many of you know, I have put a focused effort on reading books to my children. This serves several purposes. I never read many of the great classics growing up and this affords a good opportunity for me. Also, it is an opportunity for me to show my love for my children in devoting this regular time with them. We probably read about three times a week. It is often the last fifteen minutes or half-hour before they go to bed. It is a very enjoyable time for them and for me. Well, this past week we finished up reading Robin Hood and have begun to read Aesop's Fables. They have been very entertaining and instructive for us. I have been reminded once again of how stories have a way of capturing our attention. Often we are caught in the grip of a story, wanting to hear what happens next. When I finish reading each evening, I often hear the chant from my children, "Read more! Read more! Read more!"

I thought that it might be appropriate for me to share with you a few of these fables that we have enjoyed, in order that you might be reminded again of the power of a good story.

BELLING THE CAT

The Mice once called a meeting to decide on a plan to free themselves of their enemy, the Cat. At least they wished to find some way of knowing when she was coming, so they might have some time to run away. Indeed, something had to be done, for they lived in such constant fear of her claws that they hardly dared stir from their dens by night or day. Many plans were discussed, but none of them was thought good enough. At last a very young Mouse got up and said, "I have a plan that seems very simple, but I know it will be successful. All we have to do is to hang a bell about the Cat's neck. When we hear the bell ringing we will know immediately that our enemy is coming." All the Mice were much surprised that they had not thought of such a plan before. But in the midst of the rejoicing over their good fortune, an old Mouse arose and said, "I will say that the plan of the young Mouse is very good. But let me ask one question: Who will bell the Cat?"

Moral: It is one thing to say that something should be done, but quite a different manner to do it.

THE GNAT AND THE BULL

A Gnat flew over the meadow with much buzzing for so small a creature and settled on the tip of one of the horns of a Bull. After he had rested a short time, he made ready to fly away. But before he left he begged the Bull's pardon for having used his horn for a resting place. "You must be very glad to have me go now," he said. "It's all the same to me," replied the Bull. "I did not even know you were there."

Moral: We are often of greater importance in our own eyes than in the eyes of our neighbor.

THE SHEEP AND THE PIG

One day a shepherd discovered a fat Pig in the meadow where his Sheep were pastured. He very quickly captured the porker, which squealed at the top of its voice the moment the Shepherd laid his hands on it. You would have thought, to hear the loud squealing, that the Pig was being cruelly hurt. But in spite of its squeals and struggles to escape, the Shepherd tucked his prize under his arm and started off to the butcher's in the market place. The Sheep in the pasture were much astonished and amused at the Pig's behavior, and followed the Shepherd and his charge to the pasture gate. "What makes you squeal like that?" asked one of the Sheep. "The Shepherd often catches and carries off one of us. But we should feel very much ashamed to make such a terrible fuss about it like you do." "That is all very well," replied the Pig, with a squeal and a frantic kick. "When he catches you he is only after your wool. But he wants my bacon! Gree-ee-ee!"

Moral: It is easy to be brave when there is no danger.

A RAVEN AND A SWAN

A Raven, which you know is black as coal, was envious of the Swan, because her feathers were as white as the purest snow. The foolish bird got the idea that if he lived like the Swan, swimming and diving all day long and eating the weeds and plants that grow in the water, his feathers would turn white like the Swan's. So he left his home in the woods and fields and flew down to live on the lakes and in the marshes. But though he washed and washed all day long, almost drowning himself at it, his feathers remained as black as ever. And as the water weeds he ate did not agree with him, he got thinner and thinner, and at last he died.

Moral: A change of habits will not alter nature.

Aren't these stories enjoyable? They have a way of pulling us in and gripping us. Jesus knew this. In His ministry, He told parables, which are like short stories. They captured the attention of many. In Matthew 13, we will encounter some parables that Jesus told. More precisely, we will encounter seven parables, and over the next few weeks we will study them. If you aren't there already, I invite you to turn in your Bibles

to Matthew 13:1. Let's catch the setting in verse 1, ...

On that day Jesus went out of the house, and was sitting by the sea. And great multitudes gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole multitude was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables. (Matt.13:1-3)

Jesus was a magnet. However, rather than attracting metal, Jesus attracted people. At the end of chapter 12, we saw Jesus in a house teaching to a crowd of people so large that those seeking to speak with Him could not even enter the house. Chapter 13 picks up the story on the same day. This time, He is "sitting by the sea." The people were once again attracted to Him to such an extent that He had to escape to a boat let out a little ways into the water to get away from the crowds. He probably instructed one or more of His disciples to stand waist deep in the water to stabilize the boat, so it didn't rotate or drift toward the shore or away from the shore. So, we find Jesus, sitting in the boat as He tells this story, ...

"Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matt.13:3-9)

Now, when we hear that story, we can't help but to think of what it means. We have read ahead in our Bibles enough to know what Jesus meant with these words. We know that the word of God is the seed. We know that the different sorts of soils represent the different types of reception to the gospel. And so, as we hear this story, there isn't this great confusion in our minds like would be in the hearts of the disciples who heard these words. But, until you find out what the seed represents and what the soil represents, the story is quite confusing. In an effort to help you feel what the disciples felt when Jesus told this story, I want to tell you another story that you are not quite familiar with. It is a sort of a parable. It is a sort of a puzzle. You might feel like the disciples felt.

"There once was a very wise, gentle, and loving king, who ruled over his land with great skill. The people loved him very much. And as this king grew older, he had to determine who would rule in his place, as an honest and loving king. He had three sons from which to choose. So, he gave each of his sons a pack of flower seeds and told them that the one who grows the most beautiful flowers from these seeds will have his throne. Six months later, the king came and visited his sons to check on the progress of their flowers. Now, the first two sons had beautiful flower beds, while the third son had nothing in his plot but weeds and thistles. Yet, the king chose this child to have the throne."

There is your story. I would bet that your mind is somewhat filled with confusion at this moment. Why would the king give his throne to the son who grew no flowers? When I tell you the key to the story, it will all make sense. I'll tell you the key to understanding the story, but you'll have to wait until next week. You'll have to wait because I want you to feel the tension of hearing a new story, but being confused as to its meaning. That's the feeling the disciples had the first time they heard this story about the farmer sowing the seed on the different types of soil. They had this feeling because there was a gap in the narrative between when Jesus told the parable to the people and when Jesus explained the meaning of the parable. The gap begins in verse 10,

"And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?'" (Matt.13:10)

According to Mark's gospel, this was a private conversation between Jesus and His disciples (Mark 4:10). We also know this because Matthew 13:34 says that Jesus "did not speak to [the multitudes] without a parable." This may have taken place after the crowds had dispersed. This may have taken place during a break in Jesus' teaching. Perhaps it was the disciples who were stabilizing the boat, who asked Him in private about these things.

In verses 10-17, Jesus puts forth three reasons why he taught in parables. My message this morning covers these three reasons, and so I've entitled it "Why Parables?" Listen carefully as I read, because we will read some things that might shock you. This portion of Scripture is one of those that confront our American Evangelical understanding of God and of the message of the gospel.

And He answered and said to them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matt.13:11-17)

Why does Jesus speak in Parables?

1. So God can give and not give (verses 11-12).

This is how God uses parables. God gives understanding. And God does not give understanding. There are certain people in the world to whom God has granted this ability to know "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." And there are certain other people in this world to whom God has not granted this ability to know. Parables were the means through which Jesus could say something that some would understand and that others would not understand. In this way, parables are more than nice little short stories. They are more like riddles or puzzles that have to be figured out to be understood. Parables are like an encrypted code that needs a key to unlock it. And the key is in God's hands. Let me be clear that it is God who holds the key. The key will not be found in some book such as *The Bible Code* or *The Secret to the Bible*. Neither will it be found through intelligence; even a child can understand a parable. The key is in God's hands. To some, God gives the key. To others, God withholds the key. "God gives and God doesn't give." So, when these parables are told, there will be two different responses. To those who know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, these parables are the most wonderful stories ever told, because they tell us so much of what the kingdom of heaven is like. But to those who don't know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, these parables are like confusing poetry. There is a beauty about such stories. But its meaning seems to allude the grasp of the mind.

One message gives two responses. Think about the sun, that bright orange object in the sky that radiates heat. When the sun shines, you get a different response from the snowman than you get from the flower plant. The one melts in the presence of the sun. The other grows, flourishes, prospers and is made beautiful. Think about rain coming from the sky. The Wicked Witch of the West melts under such rain, but the flower grows and grows. If you put a candle and a lump of clay in the oven, you will get two different results. The candle will melt. The lump of clay will harden. If you shine a light in a dark, damp room filled with bugs, they all react differently. The cockroaches will scatter for cover. The moths will be attracted to the light. This is how it is with parables; some understand and some don't. This is how it is with the gospel.

Paul wrote, "the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). When the gospel of Christ is preached, there are some who consider the message of the free and gracious forgiveness that is found in the cross of Christ to be utter foolishness. God becoming flesh, by being born in a stinking stable, where it was dirty and unsanitary, is hardly a way for the King of the Universe to walk among us. An omnipotent God that is weak and feeble and dies upon a cross hardly seems right for the One who created us all. Someone actually rising from the dead is too fanciful to believe (the resurrection caused the "wise" Athenians to sneer as recorded in Acts 17). Then, when you see the types of people who believe, it hardly gives attractiveness to the message. The church is filled with many ignoble, weak, shameful, and despised people. For these intelligent people, the word of the cross is considered to be unbelievable and foolish. But there are others who hear the message of the gospel of Christ and find in Christ an all-sufficient Savior. To them, it is no barrier that God would be born in a stinking stable, because it shows the heart of God to humble Himself to save His people. To them, it is no barrier that God would die upon the cross, because it was the only way that sins could be forgiven. To them, the idea that God would rise from the dead isn't difficult to understand, because He's God. He created life in the first place. Certainly He can resurrect life. That God delights in the weak, shameful, and despised only makes His glory all the greater, as it clearly pictures that salvation is all of Him.

And so it is that the same message can create totally different results. The same parable is understood by some and not by others. Why? Because God gives and God doesn't give. When the gospel is proclaimed or a parable told, it isn't like an "I.Q." test to determine who is smart enough to figure it all out. Rather, it is a "G." test. The "G" stands for "God." When a parable is told, it is a test to determine who God has "given to know" (verse 11). When people don't believe, it is not because they have brain damage. When people don't believe, it is because they are morally damaged. They hate the light and will continue to hate the light until God changes their cockroach-type eyes into moth-type eyes, which will attract them a love for the light.

If you sit here today and understand the truth of the gospel and rejoice in it, let me ask you, "Why do you believe?" If you believe, it is only because God has granted for you to know. Don't think that you are so smart that you figured it out on your own. Don't think that it was because of any special abilities within yourself that you have come to faith in God. You believe when God grants for you to know. Perhaps you don't believe. Perhaps you know someone who doesn't believe. Perhaps there is someone that you have been witnessing to for years who doesn't believe. This could be a family member or a long-time friend. You should realize that the reason why people don't believe is because God hasn't granted them faith to believe. Is this not what Jesus said? Read again with me verse 11,

"To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."
(Matt.13:11)

In fact, Jesus goes further than this. It isn't simply a matter of God giving or not. God also takes away. Look at verse 12,

"For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." (Matt.13:12)

Verse 12 isn't too difficult to understand. When God grants knowledge of Himself, He creates desires within us that seek to know Him more and more. Those who know God want to read the Bible. Those who know God want to be with God's people. Those who know God want to share God's kindness and compassion to others. Those who know God want to pray to Him. Those who know God want to hear His word taught. When God gives, you will desire more and more. When you desire more and more, you will be given more and more. To the point where you have an abundance. I know that I have an abundance. Recently, a friend of mine gave to me over 500 tapes from his library. They are good, quality, Bible-teaching tapes from R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Rich Kerns, Marv Rosenthal and others. A wealth of helpful teaching is included on those tapes and I know that that God will use them in my life in the future, which will bless this church. I have an abundance. You have an abundance. The Bible knowledge of people in this room is astonishing. Why? Because God has worked. Any spiritual discernment that you have is because God has given it to you and continued to lavish it upon you.

But, let's think about the one who doesn't know God. Those who don't know God have no desire for the Bible. Those who don't know God have no desire to be with God's people. Those who don't know God have no desire to pray. Those who don't know God have no desire to hear His word taught. When you think about these people, they willfully refuse all avenues of the means of grace. They drift away. God gives

them over to their sin. Any benefit that they may have derived from years of church attendance, massive understanding of the Bible, a godly example in the home, or a friend who was a faithful gospel witness to them, any benefit that they may have derived is gone. It is taken away. It is like a muscle that atrophies. If you stop using it, it will go away. Perhaps you know people like this. They have had every benefit in the world, but now they are as far from Christ as anybody you know. They grew up in a good church. You have been salt to them. You have been light to them. Yet, they still don't believe. In fact, in some ways, they have become worse. It's because God has taken away from them what they had. How do you reach someone like this with the gospel? Do you always bring up the subject with them and remind them of their wrath-deserving state before God? Do you always call them to repentance every time you see them? Do you try to prove on an intellectual level why they are wrong and need to repent? Do you send them tapes for them to listen to and books to read? Do you drag them to church, hoping that the pastor might say something to open their eyes? All of these things are good. But, you need to realize that the reason why these people don't believe is because God has not granted for them to "know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11). So, the way to change them is to pray to the One who can give them this understanding. This is where prayer and evangelism come together. You spread the seed and share the gospel and pray desperately that God would open hearts and minds to understand the gospel of grace in the cross of Christ. Yet, you realize that in the plan of God, it may not be the case that their eyes will be opened. In either case, we need to pray to God and trust that His plan is the best in all things.

Do you want to be serious about evangelism? You need to be serious about prayer. One of the things that encourages me the most about Rock Valley Bible Church is our prayer time at the beginning of the service. It is packed with evangelistic requests. We are continually praying for God to open eyes and soften hearts. You all are invited to come. I would love to see the whole church at that time. I would love to see Rock Valley Bible Church so passionate about God, that our service really begins at 8:45am with prayer.

"Why did Jesus speak in parables?"

2. So people can see and not see (verses 13-15).

"Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." (Matt. 13:13)

When Jesus spoke in parables, He spoke so that those who saw it wouldn't see it. He spoke so that those who heard it wouldn't understand it. Jesus said that he used parables so that people wouldn't grasp what He was saying. As I have thought about my ministry, I have thought about how I labor to make things simple and clear for people. I'm a straight-forward sort of guy. Whenever I use an illustration or a story, it is always for the purpose of making truth clear. Yet, Jesus spoke in such a manner that the truth would be veiled. When I have spoken with other people about Jesus, I have always been very straight-forward. I have said, "Faith in Jesus is the only way to God. Believe on Him!" But, Jesus' message was more like those 3D pictures that came out about 10 years ago. On the surface, they look like dots, but when you work at it a little bit, a marvelous image comes in, that you love to look at. These are parables.

You need to realize that there are times when you will have opportunities to speak with people for years about the gospel of Christ, but they will continue to reject your message. They very well may continue on to reject your message right up to the time they die, and they may remain hardened in their sin the whole way. If they do, realize that this is in the plan of God for them. They are those who saw, but never saw. They are those who heard, but never heard. As you continue to salt them with the message of the gospel, their hearts are rendered hard and dull. In the day of judgment, God will be glorified and vindicated. Those who are in such a state fulfill the words of the prophecy of Isaiah.

"You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them." (Matt.13:14-15)

These words are taken straight from Isaiah. Isaiah 6 describes Isaiah's call to ministry. It tells us of how Isaiah came to see God in all of His glory and all of His majesty, and was commissioned to go and preach to the nation of Israel.

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. (Isaiah 6:1-4)

Think about what Isaiah saw and heard and felt. Isaiah saw God in all of His beauty and His majesty. Isaiah heard "Holy, Holy, Holy" cried from the Seraphim. Isaiah felt the earth shake when the LORD spoke. Isaiah understood that God was in total control of everything around Him. Isaiah was overwhelmed with God's holiness. This led Isaiah to a confession of His sinfulness.

Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

This is always how people feel in the presence of God. They are awe struck. Their bodies tremble. They are fearful. They realize that they are sinful. Isaiah was the holiest man in the land. He spoke the words of God. Yet, Isaiah came face to face with God. And when you come face to face with God, you see your sin. "For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

This past week I was talking with my daughter, Carissa, about the Proverbs. We were discussing Prov. 11:1, "A false balance is an

abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight." I was talking with her about what this meant. This means that if you sell 9½ ounces of grain, for the price of 10 ounces, God hates it. In fact, it is an abomination to Him. In effect, you are stealing and lying at the same time. One might say, "Oh, but it is only a half an ounce!" But that half an ounce is an abomination to the LORD! We have this tendency to think in terms of "big sins" and "little sins." We think of things like murder, espionage, giant fraud, homosexuality and adultery as those things that are an abomination to the LORD. But, Prov. 11:1 tells us that any little dishonesty is a terrible sin in the sight of the LORD! But, when you behold "the LORD of hosts" in all of His glory, you will quickly realize that all of your "little sins" are really "big sins." When you see God in His holiness, you will confess your sinfulness (as Isaiah did). And when you confess your sinfulness, you will find forgiveness (as Isaiah did).

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." (Isaiah 6:6-7)

What great words these are to the ear! "Your sin is forgiven!" "All of those abominations that you did and said are all wiped away. They are gone! Never will I remember them any longer." "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). The one who knows forgiveness expresses a willingness to serve the LORD.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

When you know that your sins are forgiven and that you stand right with God, your life is filled with great joy and eagerness to serve the King! It is never a drudgery to serve the LORD. Oh, sometimes it may be hard, but it is always done with willingness.

I have heard many sermons where the preacher stops at verse 8 and then says something like this: "OK, who is willing to serve the LORD? Can you say, 'Here am I. Send me!' If you but sign up for God's program of missions, we will send you off into the world. You will conquer foreign lands. Many will come to the knowledge of Christ. Come, God needs you to accomplish His purposes. People are dying without Christ. You need to go and save them! Be like Isaiah and say, 'Here am I. Send me!'" These preachers rarely bother to continue on past verse 8. Look at Isaiah's commission:

And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 'Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Lest they see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed.'" (Isaiah 6:9-10)

These verses were quoted in Matthew 13:14,15. Isaiah was sent out from the beginning with the idea that his ministry was going to be fruitless. Isaiah was sent out with the purpose of God behind him to harden the people in their sins, rather than soften them. He was to make hearts insensitive, ears dull, and eyes dim. He was to do this so that their hearts, ears, and eyes no longer work, so that they won't repent and be saved from God's wrath. Do you realize that there are times in which God's purpose in you sharing the gospel is for others to be hardened and not converted? We tend to think that the purpose in sharing the gospel is always to lead people to conversion. But God often has a different plan.

We don't think of missions this way. We think of missions as success story after success story after success story. We have some friends who spent 5 years in England seeking to plant a church. They are a very godly couple. He is an extraordinary evangelist. I have longed to be as bold with the gospel as he is. During his entire time there, he went door to door speaking with people about the gospel three times a week. In the end, the church he sought to plant never came to fruition. Let me ask you, "was he successful?" From a worldly standpoint, his ministry was a failure and not a success. His converts were few (if any). His church was never planted. Perhaps, however, from God's standpoint, he had more success than many missionaries are today. In his faithful proclamation of the gospel, many hearts were hardened in their sin through exposure to light.

We ought to learn to measure success by faithfulness, rather than the fruitfulness of others coming to Christ. After all, God called Isaiah to a fruitless ministry. Yet, as Isaiah was faithful to God's call on his life, we certainly must believe that Isaiah was "successful" in God's eyes. Isaiah understood clearly what God was calling him to do:

Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered, "Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, Houses are without people, And the land is utterly desolate, The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be subject to burning, Like a terebinth or an oak Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:11-13)

Isaiah's success in the ministry wasn't to be measured in number of converts, but in his faithfulness to God's call upon his life. As he went throughout Israel, His message was, "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." "If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land; "But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword" (Is. 1:18-20). And Isaiah faced resistance and hardness of heart to his message. The people refused and rebelled. They were devoured. Isaiah called out to Israel:

Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah. 55:6-7)

But, the people refused. The message was clear. It was not difficult to understand. But, God had not given them to know the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." The people of Israel continued to listen, but not understand. The people of Israel saw, but didn't perceive. The people of Israel became hard in their hearts and faced the consequences of their rebellion.

Jesus' ministry wasn't the most successful in terms of converts. You would think that the Son of God would have great success. Perhaps we have a wrong idea of success. We think that success in evangelism is equivalent to conversion. But success is really related to faithfulness. We share the message and trust that God will accomplish His purpose. God's purpose is to give and not give. So people see and not see.

Why did Jesus speak in parables? It was so that God can give and not give. It was so that people can see and not see. **Parables are not given to make the truth more understandable or more believable. Parables are given to harden some and soften others.**

Now, there are many who balk at this truth. They don't like these words of Jesus. But listen, they are the words of Jesus. I ask you, do you believe these words? Those who find difficulty with these words usually do so because of a faulty view of God. They think that God has created this world, but that it has spun out of His control. They think that God is desperately trying to rescue the world back. He has done about all that He could possibly do. He sent His Son to die for the world. He gave His word to tell of His love. He has given this message for us to proclaim. He is in heaven hoping and hoping that people might be persuaded of His love for them. He is hoping that His plan would be successful. So, to those who think that God is like this, it is inconceivable that God would give knowledge to some and not give to others. After all, His entire plan now is to get the gospel out that people would believe it. Why would He not give it? Why would He even take away from them? (e.g. verse 12).

If you have difficulty in accepting these words, I would encourage you to think again of your view of God. God has not lost control in this world. When the gospel is not received, it isn't because God has done all that He *could possibly* do to convince someone to believe. It is because God has done all that He *desired* to do. A few months ago we came to the end of Matthew 11 and found Jesus rejoicing when the gospel was rejected. He rejoiced because God was to be praised for exercising His sovereignty to give truth and hide truth. When Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum rejected Jesus, Jesus prayed, "I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You hid these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was *well-pleasing* in Your sight" (Matt. 11:25-26). We looked into Jesus' perspective that God was pleased to hide the truth of the miraculous power of His miracles to some and to reveal it to others. Jesus continued to express His great sovereign control over those who come to Him. He said, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt. 11:27). You don't know the Son, unless the Son *wills* to reveal Himself to you. This is the same as God's purpose in the parables.

Let's look at the last reason why Jesus spoke in parables:

3. So some can be blessed (verses 16-17).

Church family, these things spoken by Jesus haven't been some obscure, trivial, theological truth for theologians to enjoy in their ivory towers. This is at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You might say, "I believe in God!" But the message of the Bible is that your faith, "is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). You might say, "I received Jesus" and thus became a child of God (John 1:12). But the message of the Bible is that you were born, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). You might say, "I am a new creature in Christ!" But the message of the Bible is that you were "dead in your transgression, [God] made you alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). You might say, "Oh, how I love God!" But the message of the Bible is that "we love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). You might say, "I see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). But the message of the Bible is that "God ... is the One who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The message of the Bible is that God does it all.

About a month ago, several of us went to the Jonathan Edwards conference in Minneapolis. When John Piper preached on Sunday morning, he described how God initiates salvation and shines into the heart of a believer "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ," (2 Cor. 4:6). He told of how our eyes were blinded to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). But, then, God breaks through the darkness, taking the blindness away, so that now we see! It is a sovereign work of grace that initiates our salvation, removes our blindness, and draws us to love the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. After explaining this, John Piper said, "That's how you became a Christian. You didn't have to know that. I hope now that you know that you will give Christ more glory; you'll give your Father more honor; you'll give the Spirit His due." (John Piper, "A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God" delivered on 10/12/2003).

Charles Spurgeon warns those who would reject this notion. Spurgeon said, "If thou has chosen Christ, depend upon it he has chosen thee. ... I believe the man who is not willing to submit to the electing love and sovereign grace of God, has great reason to question whether he is a Christian at all, for the spirit that kicks against that is the spirit of the unhumbled, unrenewed heart" (Spurgeon's sermons, Vol. 7, p. 226, "The Blood of the Covenant.").

What do you think the source of your salvation is? Do you think it is that you chose God? Or, do you think that God initiated everything? Do you recognize that God grants you repentance, that God grants you faith, that God made you alive, that God loved you first, and that God was responsible for unblinding your eyes? God does it all. From salvation through sanctification, our lives are a work of God. I remember overhearing a conversation that one man had with another very zealous Christian. He said, "I just want to tell you that I appreciate your zeal for Jesus Christ. It is an encouragement to me and I know that it is an encouragement to others." This man replied, "Well then, give praise to God, because He gave me and continues to give me any zeal that I have." This is how we ought to respond to God's working in our lives: God has done it all!

Why did Jesus speak in parables? So that people can be blessed. Look at verses 16 and 17, ...

"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Matt.13:16-17)

If you see, it is because God has chose to bless you! You have seen what many longed to see. Last night there was a lunar eclipse. Several of our kids were at Rockford Christian High School helping to setup the facility for Sunday. But Hanna was at home. She was inside enjoying a Disney video, when I said, "Hanna, you need to come outside and look at the moon. You don't get to see this too often." She didn't want to because she was in shorts and it was near freezing last night. But I forced her to, because I wanted her eyes to see the eclipse. I carried her outside and said, "Look. Isn't that neat?" She was completely unimpressed by the sight.

I fear that many in the church are unimpressed with the privilege that they have been able to experience. If you are here today and have come to understand the message of the gospel of grace, your ears and eyes are blessed. Many righteous people down through the centuries desired to know what you know. I am speaking of men like Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Since they lived before Jesus, they didn't fully see the life of Messiah. They didn't fully grasp Jesus and his atoning death, but you have. Your heart ought to be filled with joy. Your heart ought to overflow. The message of grace is one of great joy. Over the next month as we have a chance to dig into these parables together, my prayer for all of you is that your heart would overflow in the things that you hear.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 9, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
