

# The Reason for the Parables

Steve Lewis - [www.spiritandtruth.org](http://www.spiritandtruth.org)

(Matthew 13:4-17)

Israel's Messiah and King presented Himself to the nation and authenticated His claims in many ways. Even though Jesus offered the promised kingdom, there was intense opposition to Him from the leaders of Israel which culminated in their committing the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Their rejection of the King was final, and the kingdom would not come until a future time when the nation would meet the prerequisites for establishing that kingdom.

As mentioned in the last session, a parable does not display its meaning on the surface. Far from giving explanations, parables themselves need to be explained. So this is what the multitude would have been expecting as they awaited what Jesus would say.

Recognize the importance of the sequence or order of statements in Matthew 13. First is the Parable of the Sower which Jesus told the multitude. Second, the disciples were then prompted to ask Him why He taught the crowd that way. Third, Jesus answered their question, and it must come before His explanation of the parable because His answer contained the key for understanding His interpretation of the parable.

**Matt 13:3 - And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow;**

**<sup>4</sup> and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.**

**<sup>5</sup> Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.**

**<sup>7</sup> Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.**

**<sup>8</sup> And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.**

**<sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear."**

This simple story was so true to life that Jesus might have been describing the actions of a farmer in a nearby field which He could see from the boat where He was sitting. When a person wanted to plant a large field of grain, he would walk through the plowed area with a bag of seed and fling handfuls of the seed in a broadcast pattern. This was a somewhat imprecise but highly effective method for planting a large field by hand. Depending on the skill of the sower, the majority of the seed would fall in the plowed soil where it was intended to land. Of course, some of the seed would also fall on the walking path, or in the shallow soil at the edge of the field, or outside the field boundary where weeds and other natural plants were already growing. The sower only expected the seed that fell within the plowed ground to grow normally, and even those plants would yield varying results. That is all that Jesus said to the crowds when He began teaching them from the boat.

**Matt 13:10 - And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"**

"The disciples came" uses the Greek word *proserchomai* which means "to draw near or come close." If they were with Him in the boat, we can imagine them leaning close to Him or even whispering their question to Him.

**Matt 13:11 - Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."**

Jesus answered them privately, and His initial response to their question has a simple structure: **"To you it has been granted, but to them it has not been granted."** The word **"granted"** is the Greek word *didōmi* which means "to give or furnish something to someone." Both words are in the perfect tense which indicates an action that occurred at some time in the past but which has results that continue into the present, and both words are in the passive voice which means that the subjects are the recipients of the action.

First, who is doing the "granting?" This verse uses "granted" in the same way as another of Jesus' statements which says, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been **granted** him from the Father" (John 6:65). In that case it was God the Father who was performing the action of granting or giving, and it is the same case in Matthew 13:11. It was a result of God's eternal counsels, decrees, and plans that certain people would be granted the privilege both of believing and of knowing the things of God. The key truth in Matthew 13:11 is that God grants some things only to those He has chosen, which means there are others who are excluded.

Second, what is being "granted?" This is clearly stated in the passage: "To you it has been granted **to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.**" The phrase **"to know"** is the Greek word *ginōskō* which is a broad term for gaining knowledge. It can mean "to learn" or "to possess factual knowledge." So in this case there are some important truths that the disciples of Jesus will learn through His teaching in these parables, and the contrast here is that the unbelieving people who rejected Jesus as their King will not be able to know these truths.

The content of this new knowledge has to do with the **"mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."** The word **mystery** is the Greek word *mustērion* which is used in the New Testament to identify new revelation of truths that were unrevealed in the Old Testament. God kept some of His plans secret until the proper time for them to be revealed. A **mystery** refers to the secret thoughts, plans, and counsels of God which we cannot discover on our own, but which can only be known through divine revelation.

Here in Matthew 13:11 Jesus is saying that in these parables He is going to reveal some of the previously unrevealed parts of God's plan concerning the kingdom of heaven. In light of Israel's rejection of their King and the postponement of the kingdom, some previously unknown or unanticipated things will characterize the period of time between the Jews' rejection of Jesus and their acceptance of Him in the future. There are specific people to whom God has granted this new revelation, but there are others who are not given to understand.

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

Jesus begins by addressing those from the last verse to whom "it **has** been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom." These are the ones identified here by the phrase "**whoever has.**" The Greek word for "**has**" (*echō*) means "to have and to hold or possess; to keep something which has value." In this verse "to whoever has more will be given," and the word "**given**" is the same word that was translated "granted" in the previous verse. How much will they then have? The Greek word used here is *perisseuō* which means "to overflow with excess; to be in affluence." We might assume that more will be given in proportion to what he already has, but God's giving is not proportional. It is lavished upon them well beyond what they deserve and to such an extent that they could never imagine such an abundance.

In the next part of this verse, these favored people are contrasted with "**whoever does not have,**" and we might assume that Jesus would say, "To whoever does not have, more will *not* be given." That would correspond to the logic in the previous verse. But Jesus goes well beyond this when He says that not only will no more be given to those people, but even what they have will be taken away. What they "hold onto as being valuable" will be shown to be of no value.

The majority of the people who should have repented and accepted their King had rejected Him. They did not **have** Him in the sense of possessing something of value. Early in the teaching ministry of Jesus He had said, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). But how does a person obtain righteousness? It certainly does not come by obeying a strict set of external rules and regulations, which was what the scribes and Pharisees were doing and teaching. They should have known from their Scriptures that God's righteousness can only be obtained through faith. They considered themselves to be children of Abraham, the Father of their nation. He was the primary example of someone who was righteous before God. But Abraham did not obtain righteousness by following a strict set of rules and regulations. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham "believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Throughout the Old Testament we see others who followed the example of Abraham in obtaining righteousness in the only way possible – by believing God. Righteousness can only be gained by having it reckoned or credited to your account by God. There is nothing that a sinful human being can do to earn it. It is granted only through trusting in God.

When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and said, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20), there were many individuals who believed in Him and accepted Him as their Messiah. Because they desired to **have** (*echō*) and to hold onto Jesus as being of great value – believing Him to be God's chosen Messiah – their faith was reckoned to them as righteousness. Because of their faith and trust in Him, righteousness was credited to their account. Their acceptance of God's chosen Messiah opened the way for them to participate in the coming kingdom of heaven, and it also granted them more knowledge of the new revelation of God's plan concerning the kingdom of heaven. This chart shows some of the differences between these two groups of people.

Whoever has ( <i>Haves</i> )	Whoever does not have ( <i>Have Nots</i> )
Recognized Jesus as God's chosen King	Rejected Jesus as God's chosen King
Repented when the kingdom was proclaimed	No repentance when the kingdom proclaimed
Believed and trusted in Jesus as Messiah	Did not believe in Jesus as their Messiah
God granted new revelation of His plan	God did not grant understanding of His plan

**Matt 13:13 - "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."**

"Therefore" connects this verse to what had just been said. It is because of the characteristics particularly of the "have nots" that Jesus will use parables to teach them. The majority of the Jewish people to whom Jesus ministered exhibited the same traits as their forefathers to whom the Old Testament prophets ministered. For example, Jeremiah said to the Jews of his day, "Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, Who have eyes but do not see; Who have ears but do not hear" (Jer 5:21). And God told Ezekiel, "You live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious house" (Ezek 12:2). The Israelites were no different in Jesus' day than they had been in the days of the prophets.

The fact that Jesus began teaching in parables demonstrated His desire to show mercy to those who refused to see and hear. The biblical principle is that greater knowledge always results in greater accountability. Jesus presented God's message in a way that the spiritually sensitive could understand, but the hard-hearted would merely hear a story without incurring more condemnation.

At the end of this verse Jesus says, "nor do they **understand**" (*suniēmi*) which means "to put together mentally or to comprehend." It involves assembling the facts into an organized whole, like collecting all of the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and putting them together. In the New Testament it is often found in quotations of Old Testament texts, and that seems to be the sense which is intended here in Matthew 13. The Israelites' lack of understanding is the result of their own hardness of heart and the rejection of their King. In the next two verses Jesus will cite Old Testament support for this conclusion.

**Matt 13:14 - "In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;'**

This verse introduces Jesus' quote from Isaiah 6:9-10. The passage originally appeared in the context of God's calling of Isaiah to his ministry as a prophet. From the very beginning Isaiah was told that he would preach to a nation whose people would not receive his message. Yet Isaiah dutifully proclaimed God's Word, knowing in advance that the people would not listen.

This is a striking parallel to the situation Jesus faced as described in the Gospel of Matthew. The prophecy of Isaiah 6 was literally fulfilled by the people in Isaiah's day, but in Jesus' day the Israelites exhibited exactly the same character. Like their forefathers, they closed their eyes to the truth and rejected God's message. Isaiah's words were as fitting to describe the character of the Jews at the time of Christ as in that of the prophet. In this sense they were fulfilled or filled up, and they provided the perfect biblical precedent for Jesus' response to people who exhibited these characteristics.

Jesus spoke in a way that the hardened multitudes could hear but not understand, and see but not perceive. This passage could be translated literally as, "hearing you will hear, and you will not understand" followed by "seeing you will see, and you will not perceive." Receiving important information through the five senses should trigger thought processes that result in personal understanding and insight, but in their case it did not. In the case of the "have nots" whom Jesus was speaking about, their receptivity ended when the story was finished.

**Matt 13:15 - FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'**

The quote from Isaiah goes on to describe the condition of "**the heart of this people**," which has "**become dull**." The Greek word translated "**dull**" is *pachunō* which means "to thicken or become calloused to the point of insensitivity." Next we see that their ears "**scarcely hear**" which uses the Greek word *bareōs* meaning "heavily or with difficulty." Finally we see the state of their eyes, which "**they have closed**." The Hebrew verb (*hasha*) in the original passage can mean "to smear over with wax so that the eyes cannot be opened."

The first part of this verse accurately described the condition of the Israelites' ears and eyes. But the last part of the verse describes what might happen if this sad situation were not true. Working backward from **seeing with their eyes**, to **hearing with their ears**, and **understanding with their heart** – if they were to truly understand then they would **return** and God would **heal them**. The Greek word translated "**return**" is *epistrephō* which can mean "to turn around, to turn back, to return, or even to be converted." To **heal** can mean to heal physically or to restore spiritually from a state of sin. Unfortunately for the Israelites the first part of the verse was true of them, rather than the last part.

**Matt 13:16 - "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.**

**But**, by contrast, Jesus then described the status of His faithful followers. They are the "haves" who have put their trust in Jesus as their Messiah. They are truly blessed because they can understand what He is teaching them. The Greek word for **blessed** (*makarios*) is the same word recorded in the *Beatitudes* from the Sermon on the Mount. It is the same word with the same meaning as when Jesus said, "**Blessed** are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt 5:6). In contrast to those who had hardened their hearts, plugged

their ears, and closed their eyes, everyone who eagerly opened their eyes to see and their ears to hear and their hearts to understand will receive immense blessings.

**Matt 13:17 - "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."**

Here Jesus clearly pictures the privileged status of His disciples, comparing them to all of the righteous ones who had gone before them. The **many prophets and righteous men** who had been used by God to accomplish amazing things throughout the Old Testament would have given anything to be in the disciples' place – to actually be in the presence of their Messiah, the One who's coming had been predicted from Genesis 3:15 up to the last verse of Malachi's prophecy. They **desired** (*epithumeō*) to see what Jesus' followers saw, and this is an intensified form of the word for *passion*. It is not a simple desire but a passionate longing for something, which is sometimes translated "to covet." The righteous ones of past ages looked forward in hope to the time when the events would occur that Jesus' disciples were privileged to experience in person.

What Jesus said here was later expressed by the writer of the Book of Hebrews when he said, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb 11:13). The apostle Peter also wrote about this when he said, "The prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look" (1 Peter 1:10-12).

The prophets of the Old Testament were shown many important things. They had clues about the sufferings of the Messiah, and of course they were given a wealth of information about the glorious kingdom that would be established by Messiah on earth where He would sit on David's throne in Jerusalem to rule over the nations. But there were still some secrets of God's plan for the ages which remained unrevealed to the Old Testament prophets. These are the *mysteries* which Jesus and the later writers of the New Testament would reveal. We also should recognize how blessed we are in our time because we have even more revelation than Jesus' disciples did at that time. When Jesus told His disciples, "Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear," think about what Jesus would say to us, considering all of the benefits and privileges we have been given. We need to remember that "from everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (Luke 12:48).