

It was also the difference between the crowds and the disciples, and the reason why Jesus taught in parables. Those in whom God was already at work would hear the parables and see that they spoke of the Kingdom. Everyone else would see them as 'interesting teaching', probably about life.

Application

I have often heard it said that you don't find much in the Gospels about 'faith'. I disagree, for I find it everywhere, and especially in this passage in which Jesus clearly had decided to focus His teaching on those to whom God was revealing His purposes, the disciples. Further, the reason why this group of disciples enjoyed this privilege was because they had responded to God's call by faith. This is not said here in so many words, but it is a reasonable explanation of what happened, given everything we know.

It is evident that the same applies to this day. Millions hear the stories of Jesus, yet the only people who see in them the 'secrets of the Kingdom' are those in whom two things are at work; God's calling and their response by faith. Even in church, people listen to preachers and remark on their wonderful sermons, yet do not respond to the call of the Gospel with faith; it is a sickness of our times, fuelled by the negative and dismissive nature of so much we find in the world today. We need to stand above this and whenever the Gospel is preached, be ready to respond to the Word; for within it, there may be something extremely important for us to hear, and if our first reaction is not of faith, then we are like the Old Testament people of God to whom the words of Isaiah in our passage were originally spoken. We can only guess at how many people hear the Word of God today and yet fail to respond; we only know of those who do and either become disciples or take up a special calling from the Lord according to His purposes. Thank God for them, and be one such yourself.

The lesson of this passage is indeed not dissimilar to that of the parable of 'the Sower' itself; the Word of God is sent out, but it is only fruitful where it is received. But we will hear more about the parable tomorrow, when Jesus explains it more fully.

Space for notes

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are there any parables of Jesus you do not understand? Which ones? Do we really need to know the full Kingdom interpretation of every parable?
2. Faith and the touch of God on one's life are often regarded as inseparable elements of discipleship. Did one come before the other in your experience?
3. Is anyone condemned by this passage, or is its interpretation a matter of accepting reality?

Discipleship

From time to time it is worth revisiting these fundamentals to Christian faith, the touch of God on one's life, and our response by faith. Our discipleship follows on from these. If possible, try to recall specific events in your Christian life which illustrate or reflect these two elements. If you feel that it is difficult to be specific about one area, pray about it, and wait on the Lord for what He would say to you about this to bring you to a place of peace.

Final Prayer

The sun that glistens on the freshly cut grass reminds us of Your eternal provision for us, Lord God. We never know when the rains will fall, but it does, and brings with it the very sustenance of life. Be ever faithful to us, we pray, while rain falls upon the earth, until we live with You in Glory. AMEN

Prayer

Take time to reflect on what you plan to do this coming day. Pray in silence:

..... *then conclude:*

Jesus, Your strength is sufficient for this day, and Your love is bright enough to show the way. Lead me on, I pray. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Sports in Schools

Please pray today for the financing of sport. Many governments struggle to provide for the teaching of sports in schools, yet millions of pounds are invested in sport's high performers. Pray that government find the right balance of financing sports so that all may have the opportunities they deserve.

Meditation

What can we do except praise You, Lord God?

Praise in church, in everyday life, in work and leisure;

Praise in every part of the fascinating life

You have given to each and every one of us.

The world says 'praise' may not be right,

When faced with the darkest troubles of life,

Keep a respectful distance, they say,

When sickness, trouble or bereavement calls.

How sad, how desperate, isolating and sad

To thus dismiss the One who made us, cares for us

And by His presence, gives us faith and hope and love again,

When we, His fallen creatures, are most in need.

For He restores the human heart to where it is at peace;

In praise, Yes, endless, purest praise

Of His precious, Holy Name.

Bible Study - Matthew 13:10-17

¹⁰ Then the disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' ¹¹

He replied, 'It has been given to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but not to them. ¹² Those who have will be given more, and will have more than enough.

Those who have not will be denied the little they have. ¹³ I speak to them in parables

because: "Though looking, they do not see; though hearing, they do not listen or

understand." ¹⁴ Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them: "You are always listening, but

never understanding; you are always looking but never perceiving. ¹⁵ For this people's

heart has become insensitive; their ears are deaf, and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their

hearts and turn, and I would heal them." ¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see,

and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous

people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.'

Review

Immediately after the first parable in Matthew 13, 'the Sower', the disciples questioned Jesus privately, uncertain as to why He has chosen to teach using this method. The conversation recorded in our passage today broke the flow of teaching to the crowds, as Jesus turned from

speaking the parable to the crowds and spoke directly to the disciples, and the conversation He had with them set the scene for the full explanation of the parable of the sower which is tomorrow's reading (13:18-23). This separation of the disciples and the crowd is important for all that happens next in the Gospel of Matthew.

Up to this point in the story of Jesus' ministry, the disciples had been chosen (4:18-22, 10:1-4) and had been sent on a mission that reflected Jesus' own ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom of God in word and deed (10:5-42). Nevertheless, apart from the distinctive work of the mission, the disciples had done little more than the rest of the crowd in following Jesus around, listening to him and observing what He did. Even in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) began with Jesus teaching the disciples, but by the time the teaching ended, there were clearly far more people around than just the chosen few (7:28,29). From this point on, though, Jesus taught the crowd only in parables (13:34), and He took care to explain things in more detail to the disciples.

At the heart of our passage is a quote from Isaiah 6:9,10; used in verses 14 and 15. We should not be surprised to find that Matthew picks up a quote from Isaiah as he does this frequently in his Gospel; Isaiah is probably the most quoted of the prophets in Matthew. This text is introduced by the formula 'Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled ...' (v14) which is not quite the same as Matthew's other stock phrases for introducing the prophets (see Matt 1:22; 2:5; 2:17 etc.) but it is near enough for us to number it as a major quotation from the Old Testament, used to illustrate the fact that Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophetic Word of Scripture. This is a very significant feature of Jesus' life and the Gospel as a whole, so it is important for us to understand it in more depth..

This particular quote is interesting because it is used in a number of places in the New Testament, each of them explaining why the Jewish people failed to accept Jesus as Messiah; Acts 28:26-27; John 12:39-40; Mark 4:12; and Luke 8:10. Although Matthew does not report Jesus as making this point directly in this passage, what He does say draws us towards a very similar conclusion. There is a fundamental division in Jesus' teaching between those who accept Him and those who do not, and later in his Gospel Matthew makes it clear that the religiously unified nation of the Jews did indeed reject Jesus; though naturally, individual Jews clearly did accept Him and formed the first 'church' under the leadership of the disciples.

The Old Testament passage quoted in verses 14 and 15 was originally part of the prophetic vision given to Isaiah that guided the whole of his ministry (see Isaiah chapter 6), and was a direct message of God to the people of Israel, declaring that because they would not listen to His Word, they therefore not be healed, except through the terrible experience of national exile in Babylon. It was a tough message for Isaiah to give in his own day, and it was also a difficult things for Jesus to explain to the disciples.

Going Deeper

We must therefore look carefully both at the quote from Isaiah in order to understand what Jesus was trying to say to the disciples. We will start, however, by examining Jesus' answer to the first direct question the disciples asked Jesus about the meaning of 'parables'.

The meaning of the parables

At the beginning of our passage, the disciples asked Jesus why he was speaking in parables. We think of 'parables' now as a particular form of speech, but for the first disciples, the word they used simply meant 'comparisons', 'mysteries' or 'secrets'. A parable could be a 'wise saying', or a 'riddle' for example. The disciples wanted to know why Jesus had chosen a method of teaching that was somewhat opaque and open to interpretation (as we found yesterday when trying to examine the passage). When He taught during His great Sermon (chapters 5-7), for example, He had spoken simply and directly, and mostly without figures of speech (the few exceptions where he did use figures of speech are 7:24-27, the foolish man who built his house on sand; 9:15-17, 'old wine in new wineskins'; 11:16-19, Jesus likens this generation to children playing games in a market-place).

Why do this now? The reason is largely to do with Jesus' desire to concentrate on the disciples because of His coming persecution and death at the hands of the authorities, but within this general framework are other treasures of Christian truth.

Jesus' reply in verse 11 is a clear statement of the division that he now saw between the disciples and the crowd. The disciples were not simply 'the crowd' who had followed Jesus for their own interest; they had been called and chosen (4:18-22, 10:1-4), and they had responded to this by accepting the call to mission (10:5ff). Because of their response to God they were therefore in a position to know the 'secrets of the Kingdom of heaven' (v11). Jesus said 'to you it has been given ...'; in other words, God would reveal to them His secret thoughts, plans and aspirations for the Kingdom through the direct teaching of Jesus Himself.

Those to have, more will be given!

This verse (v11) reads like a wonderful promise to the disciples, but the next one is astonishing (v12). Jesus declared that those who 'have will be given more' and those who 'have not will be denied ...'. This sounds to us more like Thatcherite capitalism than the generosity of God! It gives rise to a host of questions. Why did Jesus choose the disciples rather than anyone else? Is this a form of predestination in which some know the secrets and others do not? Was God unfair to reject the Jews because they did not respond to Jesus' person and message? Is it fair that those who have little are denied what they have?

Jesus was probably aware of these questions when he went on to quote the famous passage from Isaiah about people who 'though looking but do not see; though hearing do not understand' (v13, and repeated in full in verse 14). What He was saying was that the people of Israel, like the crowds around Jesus on the seashore, heard the parables and received them as stories as from a teacher. Because of deep rooted insensitivity to the Word of God, they did not perceive that within these stories were the very secrets of God. This was the same problem that Isaiah had; he prophesied again and again to God's people but they listened to him merely as to a ranting preacher, without understanding that his words contained the prophetic truth about their coming destiny (exile in Babylon).

The blessing of 'those who have', and 'faith'

In verse 16 Jesus pronounces a beatitude (blessed are ...); one of only three times in the Gospel where Matthew records a beatitude outside of the famous 'Beatitudes' in the Sermon on the Mount' (5:1-12), the other two times referring to John the Baptist (11:6) and to Simon Peter (16:17). Jesus pronounced a blessing on the disciples because they were the ones who heard and saw and understood; they were the ones to whom God was in the process of revealing His secrets! He went on to explain to them (v17) that what they were hearing from Him, even if they were struggling to come to terms with all of it, were the very secrets of the Kingdom that their forefathers had longed to hear. They were privileged indeed.

All this was very reassuring and satisfying for the disciples. Even though they were the ones who were concerned about Jesus teaching method (v10), and sometimes did not quickly understand Jesus (see 13:36ff), they were privileged to hear the truths of the Gospel, God's secrets revealed to humanity for the first time in the teaching of Jesus. However, we are still left with the question about fairness. Why should the disciples hear and understand God's secrets by revelation, and the crowds not do so or even have the chance to access them? The key to the answer of this question is implied throughout the text, but never clearly stated, and it is that the disciples had been chosen by God and responded to the Gospel by faith.

The Israelites were chosen, the disciples were chosen, and many were chosen by God; even the foreign King Cyrus was chosen by God for His purposes in Isaiah 45:1, for example. But the disciples had responded to the teaching, instruction and guidance of Jesus with elementary faith, believing Him to be special and pursuing the consequences of that faith by following Him even though they did not know what lay ahead. This is what Jesus was looking for; direct faithful response to the fact that God had chosen them. It was the possession of this faith that God would multiply (see verse 12), the lack of which could never be rectified. It was the difference between looking and seeing, between hearing and understanding.