

'He Taught Them Many Things in parables.'-

Mar 4:2

by G. Campbell Morgan

Jesus adopted the parabolic method to lure men toward the things they would not receive in their nakedness, and to win them over.

Scripture: Proverbs 25:2, Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 13:10-17, Mark 4:1-34, John 1:18

Topics: "The Kingdom of God", "Parables"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the parabolic teaching of Jesus in Mark 4:1-34, emphasizing the significance of the parables of the Sower, the Development from the Blade to the Full Corn, and the Mustard Seed. He discusses the reasons behind Jesus' use of parables, particularly in light of the growing opposition He faced, suggesting that parables were a means to engage those who were hardening their hearts against Him. Morgan highlights that the parables serve as an invitation to deeper understanding, allowing those willing to seek the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, he encourages believers to adopt a similar approach in sharing their faith, using relatable illustrations to draw others toward the truth.

Transcript

Mar 4:1-34.

As the text suggests, our theme is that of the parabolic teaching of the Lord. This is the special subject of the first thirty-four verses in the fourth chapter of Mark. The whole paragraph contains three parables of the Kingdom: those of the Sower, the Development from the Blade to the Full Corn, and the Mustard Seed. The paragraph opens and closes with declarations that our Lord employed the parabolic method. "He taught them many things in parables." "With many such parables spake He the word unto them, as they were able to hear it: and without a parable spake He not unto them; but privately to His own disciples He expounded all things."

In the course of the paragraph there are two sections dealing with the reason and purpose of that method (verses 10-12 and 21-25) [Mar 4:10-12 and Mar 4:21-25]. The first of these explanatory passages is somewhat obscure and creates a difficulty. I propose, then, first to state the difficulty; secondly, to consider it with some care; in order that thirdly and finally, we may make some deductions from our study.

The difficulty is caused by the way in which Mark records the fact that our Lord employed this parabolic method. It is quite evident that at this point in His ministry our Lord adopted this method as He had never done before in His dealing, with the multitudes. From this time to the end of His public ministry He followed it almost exclusively. Prior to this time He had upon occasion made use of what may be described as parabolic illustrations. For instance, when speaking to the woman of Samaria, He referred to the water of life springing up unto age-abiding life. Again in the same connection He spoke to His disciples of fields white to harvest. At Nazareth He made use of the parabolic proverb, "Physician, heal thyself." To His disciples He had said, "I will make you to become fishers of men." In the course of the great Manifesto He had employed the parabolic symbolism of salt, light, and house-building.

The first full parable that Jesus ever uttered-all three evangelists agreeing-was that of the Sower. Recognizing the fact, then, that we are now at the parting of the ways in the method of His ministry so far as the outside world was concerned, and that from here to the end, when addressing Himself to the multitudes, He spoke in parables-as Mark specifically declares, "without a parable spake He not unto them"-it is pertinent that we should inquire concerning the reason of this method, in order to the following of our Lord upon the pathway of His public ministry as revealed in Mark.

Let us further prepare for our inquiry by reminding ourselves of the nature of the hour in the ministry of Jesus, and the condition of affairs in which He was now situated.

It was the hour when opposition was becoming far more definite and hostile. We have observed the growth of that opposition. In the Galilean ministry it was first manifested in the house at Capernaum when He forgave sins, and the scribes challenged Him, saying, Who is this that forgiveth sins? None can forgive sins save God. Then in the house of Levi He was criticized for consorting with sinners, and for permitting His disciples to neglect the ceremonial fasts. Later in the cornfields He was criticized for permitting His disciples to pluck the ears of corn for the satisfaction of their hunger. On another Sabbath in the synagogue He healed the man with a withered hand, and the result was that Pharisees and Herodians took counsel together how they might destroy Him. Yet once more, and finally, in the house at Capernaum they had definitely declared that He had Beelzebub, and that by the prince of the demons He cast out the demons; and He had answered them with words among the most solemn that ever fell from His lips.

Our Lord was exercising His ministry in the midst of this atmosphere of growing hostility and opposition, coming from the rulers, but undoubtedly affecting the multitudes that were still gathering about Him. We have seen how He looked at those men in the synagogue, and that He was filled with anger as He looked at them, the reason of His anger being that He was "grieved at the hardening of their heart." That is a most significant declaration in its application to our present study. They were hardening their hearts against Him and at this point He began to use the parable definitely, and of set purpose.

This brings us immediately to the difficult passage. "When He was alone"-separated from the multitudes "they that were about Him with the twelve asked of Him the parables. And He said unto them, Unto you is given the mystery of the Kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them."

No careful student of that passage has read it without at some time feeling the difficulty of it. This difficulty lies in its apparent meaning, which is that the Lord adopted the parabolic method in order that these people might see and not see, might hear and not hear, lest they should turn, and should be forgiven.

There have been two methods of dealing with that difficulty. Devout, earnest, sincere, and loyal expositors of the passage have declared that this is true; that even though we cannot understand it, and may find ourselves in revolt against it; not upon the basis of our own reason, but because it is out of harmony with the whole revelation of God in Christ, we must nevertheless accept it as true, that at this point for some reason, He did adopt in His teaching a method which He intended should result in hindering these people finding forgiveness.

The other method of dealing with the difficulty has been that of declaring that it is not true, that it is a mistake; therefore the passage is untrustworthy, and is to be eliminated.

The second method of reasoning is impossible to me. As to the first, I would ask, Is the difficulty due to what the passage actually says, or is it due to long-continued misunderstanding and misinterpretation of it?

There are some preliminary things to be considered as we look carefully at this matter. First, the narrative of Mark is condensed. This particular passage is evidently very much condensed. The parallel passage in Luke is even more condensed than that of Mark, so that there the same difficulty seems to be suggested, if not stated in such obtrusive form. But the account of the beginning of the parabolic method, and our Lord's interpretation of its meaning as recorded in Matthew is very much fuller.

Secondly and therefore, the three narratives are needed for an interpretation of what our Lord said. Carefully putting their testimony together, we shall necessarily be nearer a full understanding of our Lord's teaching.

The last preliminary word is that the subject as presented by Mark is not exhausted in this one paragraph (verses 10-12) [Mar 4:10-12]. The second paragraph (verses 21-25) [Mar 4:21-25] is needed, for that also deals with the reason for our Lord's parabolic method.

To turn to the paragraph itself, the disciples' inquiry first arrests us, showing that they were face to face, not with the difficulty presented to us by these paragraphs, but with the fact that our Lord did here and now adopt a new method of teaching. He had asked for the little boat, and His disciples, at His request pulling a short distance out from the shore, He sat in the boat, and to the multitudes gathered on the beach, He spoke the first full, and formulated parable, that of the Sower. When He had finished, Mark says that "when He was alone, they that were about Him with the twelve, asked of Him the parables." That is a perfectly accurate statement, but somewhat ambiguous. Matthew simply says that they asked Him why He spoke in parables. That statement illuminates this, and reveals the fact that these men noticed He spoke in a parable and when they were alone, that is, while still in the boat, but privately, they asked Him why He did so. This inquiry He answered immediately in the words that follow.

We turn then to the answer. The first part of the answer is contained in these words, "Unto you is given the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables." This was a revelation of His intention at that moment to confine Himself to the parabolic method. It is interesting, as well as valuable and important, that we should remember, what we have already noted, that the record of His discourse, as Mark gives it, is not as full as that of Matthew, but is fuller than that of Luke. There are differences in all, but the fundamental affirmation is given by each of the evangelists in almost the same words: "Unto you is given the mystery (or mysteries) of the Kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables." Unto you is 'given the mysteries, the hidden things, the secret things, the profound things, the ultimate meaning of things; but to those that are without, is given the

parable, the picture. Thus when they asked Him the reason of the parabolic method, He first said that the difference in method was due to the difference in relationship between Him and men. To His disciples He could tell secrets, and make known mysteries. To the people without, who lacked the capacity to understand, He could no longer tell the mystery, reveal the secret, or utter the profound thing in definite speech. For them, therefore, the parable, the picture was necessary.

Our Lord then proceeded to explain His reason for adopting the parabolic method. If we only had the passage in Matthew, I venture to suggest that the difficulty would not be present to our minds.

Let us read it:

"Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith:

"By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand;

And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

For this people's heart is waxed gross,

And their ears are dull of hearing,

And their eyes they have closed;

Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes,

And hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart,

And should turn again,

And I should heal them."

In that answer is emphasized our Lord's revelation of the reason for the adoption of the parabolic method. He adopted it because He was surrounded by people who had eyes, but could not see; and ears but could not hear; neither could they understand; and they were blind and deaf and dull because they had become gross of heart, and had willfully and resolutely shut their ears, and closed their eyes, lest they should turn and be healed. Lest the light should lead them back to God, lest the truth proclaimed should produce conviction, they had resolutely shut their own eyes. Therefore Jesus used the parabolic method, not in order to blind them, but in order to make them look again; not in order to prevent them coming to forgiveness, but in order to lure them toward a new attention.

"Now while this is perfectly plain in Matthew's record, at the first, it does not seem to be so evident in the passage in Mark. Therefore we return to it. In the twelfth verse we read:

"That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand."

Is that the same statement as in Matthew? That question must be faced. Matthew reads: "Because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." Mark reads, and the translation is quite to be trusted here-"that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not

understand." These being two reports of the words of Jesus on the same occasion, one must interpret the other. Shall we then adopt the statement as found in Matthew, that He employed the parable because these people seeing, could not see; and hearing, could not hear; or shall we adopt the apparent meaning of Mark, that He used the parable here in order that seeing they might see, and yet not perceive; and hearing they might hear, and yet not understand? It is impossible to say that on the surface, they convey the same idea. Which then interprets which?

I believe here that Matthew must interpret Mark, because Matthew's treatment is in consonance with the whole fact of the mission of Christ in the world. He did not come for judgment, or to make it impossible for men to see and live; but for mercy, and so to make it possible for men to see and live. I do not, however, personally think that we are driven to the alternative of supposing that there is disagreement. I believe rather that Mark's is a very much condensed report of what Jesus said, and that our difficulty is created entirely by that condensation.

Let us look at the particular declaration of Mark again. "That seeing they may see, and not perceive." Our Lord was presenting a truth concerning the Kingdom of God in parabolic form to these men that they may see it, but not perceive it. He was hiding the mystery of the Kingdom from these men, not the fact of the Kingdom. He was presenting the truth concerning the Kingdom to these men in parabolic form that they might hear, and yet not understand the deep, hidden mystery of the Kingdom of God. In other words, our Lord was now adapting His method to the strange and appalling attitude of mind which had filled Him with anger, which anger was the outcome of grief. He saw them hardening their heart, and refusing to listen to His teaching, and consequently He now adopted a method by which He would show them as much as may be seen, in order to attract them, by hiding from them those deeper, mysterious things which were giving them offence and driving them away from Him.

Then the question naturally arises, What about the remainder of the verse, "Lest haply they should turn again"? This is a partial quotation. We have therefore no right to link the "lest haply" with the statement of the reason of our Lord's parabolic method. It must be linked with that whole quotation from which it is taken, which Matthew records fully, and Mark does not. The "lest haply" does not refer to any action of Christ or of God, but to the action of the men themselves. Not that He adopted the parabolic method, lest haply they might be forgiven; but that He adopted the parabolic method because they had shut their own eyes, lest haply they should be forgiven. The "lest haply" does not indicate the purpose of Jesus in the parabolic method, but the attitude of soul that made the parabolic method necessary.

To ask one other question. Why then did He hide from these men the mystery? After He had finished His parabolic teaching in the presence of the crowd, He expounded all things to His disciples, but why not to the crowds? Why did He hide the mystery from them?

At this point the second paragraph in our chapter becomes valuable (verses 21-25) [Mar 4:21-25]. Here again we have the two thoughts of the first paragraph, seeing and hearing. The lamp is for seeing; the truth is for hearing. Our Lord deliberately declared that the reason for the hiding of the mystery from the crowd was in order to its ultimate revelation. The man who hardens his heart against the great things Christ has been saying, and closes his eyes, Christ will now lure by a picture which conveys to him no revelation of the secret and profound things, but which is in itself true to those secret and profound things. He put the limit, not to bewilder men, but to enlighten men; and if they will but be lured by the parable to inquire concerning the thing hidden from them, there may be ultimate revelation. Nothing is hidden save that it might be manifested; nothing made secret save that it should come to the light.

Immediately at the close of His first parable, He said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." That was the word to the multitudes. Now, in talking to His disciples, He repeated it. "If any man hath ears to hear, let him hear." The parable hides the mystery, does not declare the underlying principle of truth and life. But let these men hear the parable, and with what measure they mete it shall be measured to them. Their attitude of hearing shall create the ultimate result. It shall be measured to them again according to the way they measure. If they will hear honestly, even though for the moment the parable has hidden the mystery, through the door of the parable they will find their way to the mystery. Our Lord was now adopting a method, not of preventing these men coming back to Himself and God; but was employing the last and only method possible in public teaching for luring them toward the things which they would not receive in their nakedness, and in the unveiling of their essential glories. Therefore He adopted the parabolic method.

The last word of explanation here is an important one. "He that hath, to him shall be given; and he that hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath,

Thus our Lord is seen at the parting of the ways, adopting the new method of the parable, not to prevent men coming to Himself, but to lure them and win them. So the beneficence of the parabolic method is revealed.

Can one believe otherwise? When later on these men, still in hostility, bitterly criticized Him for eating and drinking with publicans and sinners, and in answer thereto our Lord spoke to them the matchless parable of lost things; the lost sheep, the lost silver, and the lost son, it is unthinkable that Jesus was adopting that method to prevent men reaching the Father. He was luring men who would not listen to the essential truth, with pictures. To men who would not believe in the meaning of His Shepherd ministry, nor in the declaration concerning the Father's interest in men, nor in His declaration concerning His Father; to them He gave pictures to explain His mission, not to prevent their coming, but to hasten their steps, and lure them toward the heart of God.

In conclusion, let us make some deductions. The method of Christ with rebellious souls who have become gross of heart, dull of hearing, willfully blind, is the hiding of the mysteries which would affright and offend them and the presenting of pictures which invite and suggest. If they will answer the invitation of the picture, and follow its suggestion, lo! they will find themselves face to face with the mystery.

Therefore the parable is ever an open door to the mystery. The mystery is not stated within it, the profound and underlying secrets are not therein declared, but they are involved. If men will but consider the picture, they will be compelled to inquiry, and if they will inquire, He will answer, and will lead them beyond the picture to the fact behind, through the parable to the mystery of life.

Now let me remark in this connection that that method is vaster and more perpetual in the Divine economy than that of the actual parables of our Lord. When He adopted the parabolic method at this dividing of the ways in His ministry, and followed it to the end, it was not something new, but something perpetual and persistent. Whatever the writer of the proverb may have meant, there is remarkable significance in the first proverb in the collection made by the men of Hezekiah's days. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Pro 25:2). There is the whole principle in a flash. There is a crystallized statement of God's perpetual method. It is the glory of God to conceal. He does so first, because things concealed are things that men at the moment cannot look at, understand, or accept. He conceals them in the vesture of the material, the passing, the parabolic. But the glory of kings is to search

out the matter, and a man demonstrates his true kingship as obeying the suggestion of the picture and the parable, he presses to the heart of it. Whenever he does that, God Who has concealed the matter, answers him in revelation.

That is God's method in all creation. It is the glory of God to conceal a thing. Imagine how much God concealed from man in this earth, when He made it. We live in an age of discovery. What is discovery? Revelation, always! The glory of kings is to search out a matter. But God has hidden all they are searching out. Why did He conceal it? Why does He still conceal it? Because men are not prepared for revelation at the moment, and they must find their way to the secret and hidden things, through the processes of suggestion that are made.

There is another illustration, more supreme, more tremendous; absolutely final and inclusive most familiar, and yet most mysterious and wonderful. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." Jesus was the final parable. Let John, who wrote these words ultimately, tell us what happened. We looked at Him, our hands handled Him, and then we found the mystery, the Word of life, the Logos of God.

When Jesus looked around, and saw the grossness and hardness of men's hearts, He turned to parables, Himself being the supreme parable. He uttered parables, as He had come, "God contracted to a span," to woo rebellious hearts back to the heart of God, Whom they could not, or would not know. He gave them parables to woo their rebellious hearts back to Himself, Whom they were about to refuse. It is the perpetual method of God.

Then let us dare to use His method, never forcing the mysteries of our faith upon unwilling souls, as necessary to salvation; never demanding in the first place from gross, deaf, blind men and women that they accept doctrines of Deity, of Resurrection, and of Atonement, which men cannot understand. Let us rather lure them back by pictures which are true to the mysteries, and which must inevitably lead on to those mysteries.

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