

# The Parabolic Method

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*Jesus used the parabolic method in His teaching to reveal truth in a way that was both familiar and meaningful to His audience, and to help them understand spiritual principles.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 13:1-8, Matthew 13:10-16, Matthew 13:24-35, Matthew 13:44-50, Matthew 13:52-53

**Topics:** "Kingdom Of Heaven", "Parables"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the significance of Jesus' use of parables in teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, emphasizing that parables serve as a method of revelation rather than concealment. He explains that while the disciples were given insight into the mysteries of the Kingdom, the multitudes were not due to their rejection of Jesus. The parabolic method was intended to awaken understanding and draw people closer to the truth, using familiar earthly experiences to illustrate profound spiritual realities. Morgan highlights the importance of recognizing both the similarities and disparities in parables to avoid misinterpretation. Ultimately, the parables reflect the infinite love of Christ, aiming to engage the hearts of those who are spiritually blind.

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## Transcript

"On that day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And there were gathered unto Him great multitudes, so that He entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach. And He spake to them many things in parables." - Matthew 13:1-3a.

"And the disciples came, and said unto Him, Why speakest Thou unto them in parables? And He answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. 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.  
But blessed are your eyes, for they see;  
and your ears, for they hear."

- Matthew 13:10-16.

"All these things spake Jesus in parables unto the multitudes; and without a parable spake He nothing unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was written by the prophet, saying,

I will open my mouth in parables;

I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world." - Matt.13:34, 35

"And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, He departed thence." - Matt.13:53.

### The Parabolic Method

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew is necessarily full of interest to all students of the teaching of Jesus. In it we have a setting forth of truth concerning the establishment and progress of the Kingdom of Heaven in this age. Any study of it, therefore, which is to be of real value, necessitates a careful consideration of its scope and method. Of the parabolic nature of the latter, the present discourse proposes to treat; the scope and scheme of the chapter will be dealt with later.

There is, however, one matter concerning this scheme, which should at once be stated as guide to the whole method of consideration to be followed. In this series the chapter is to be regarded as constituting a set discourse of Jesus, and not as a collection of truths taken from the Saviour's teaching at different times, and set forth according to Matthew as a consecutive discourse. Dean Alford's words on the subject may be quoted as giving one simple and yet sufficient reason for holding this view.

The seven parables related in this chapter cannot be regarded as a collection made by the evangelist, as related to one subject, the Kingdom of Heaven and its development; they are clearly indicated by verse 53 to have been all spoken on one and the same occasion,\* and form indeed a complete and glorious whole in their inner and deeper sense.

From the chapter we have selected portions which constitute its framework rather than its essential message. The King was approaching the great crisis in His propaganda, when it would be necessary for Him to challenge His disciples as to the result of His mission, and their opinion concerning Him. In view of this, and in all probability in preparation for it, He uttered this parabolic discourse, which is in large measure illuminated by the experiences of His ministry, and which illuminates the future for them in the

matter of their ministry.

Let us first briefly examine this group of Scriptures which forms the foundation of our present study.

Verses 1-3 a. We first see the King as He emerges from the house in which He had been holding communion with His disciples, and taking the seat of a teacher by the sea. Multitudes gathered about Him, and "He spake to them many things in parables."

Verses 10-16. In the midst of this discourse, indeed, after the first of the parables, His disciples approached Him and asked, "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?" Then follows the answer which He gave to them, and which contains for us His own explanation of His method.

Verses 34, 35. At the close of the account of the parables addressed to the multitudes, Matthew carefully declares the fact that here He adopted the method of parable, and announces His reason for doing so.

Verse 53. The last verse (53) read in connection with the first three, reveals the boundaries of the discourse.

The question of the disciples, "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?" is our own question as we commence our study of this discourse. Perhaps we shall best be able to understand the answer as we look at the question in its context of time and circumstance. It seems evident that at this point in His ministry Jesus commenced practically a new method. So far as it is possible for us to trace chronologically the story of that ministry, it becomes evident that He had already made some use in His teaching of the parable-method, but that He now pressed it into the service, and employed it supremely. I think the disciples noticed the change, and therefore asked Him the question. He had usually spoken with perfect plainness and definiteness; now He began to present truth in the garb of the parable.

Perhaps the force of their question is to be discovered by placing the emphasis upon the words "unto them," for in answer, Jesus immediately said, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given." If this contrast between the multitudes and themselves were in their mind, and if it were a real one as the reply of Jesus would lead us to think, it must still be remembered that before the discourse was finished, He addressed Himself to them also in parables. I draw attention to this anew, in order that we may at once understand that whatever was the reason of His adopting the parabolic method with the multitudes, it obtained also in some degree at that time in the case of His own disciples.

We are not left to any speculation as to the meaning of the method. The King answered their question, and His explanation of His own method must be accepted. It is, however, of such a nature as to demand a very careful consideration, or it may be entirely misinterpreted. I utter this word of warning because I am convinced that it often is sadly misinterpreted, and much of its most tender purpose lost thereby.

Let us first inquire into the meaning of the word parable. Literally, it is a throwing or placing of things side by side, with the suggestion of comparison. Something is placed by the side of something else, with the intention of explaining the one by the other. Such a method is that of the parable. The old and simple definition which many of us remember from the days of our childhood, comes back to us--"A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning;" that is to say, some familiar thing of earth is placed alongside of some mysterious thing of Heaven that our understanding of the one may help us to an understanding of the other. The method is that of taking some one set of facts, familiar and material, and making them

explanatory of others, strange and spiritual. Invariably in the teaching of Jesus a parable was a picture of things seen, intended to reveal and explain things unseen, and a rapid glance over this chapter will show how the King made use of the things that were most common in the experience of those amongst whom He was teaching for this purpose. I do not suppose that if Jesus were teaching in London to-day He would use any of the comparisons He used then; He would rather draw attention to the commonest sights of the city life, and use them as illustrations. All the parables of this chapter were events under the actual observation or within the immediate experience of the men He was teaching. Perhaps even then in the distance a sower may have been seen scattering his seed. The field sown with wheat and intermixed with darnel was one of the most familiar things to them from boyhood. The mustard tree, about which we know so little, they knew full well. The woman hiding the leaven in the meal was an everyday home picture. Treasure found in the field was not so common, but still not unknown, and so with the merchant seeking pearls. The fisherman with his net, with the householder of the final parable were perhaps the most familiar of all.

We are a little shocked in the present day if ministers preach on subjects such as "wireless telegraphy," "road-making," or even "Baxter's Second Innings;" and yet, is not this method of the parable Christ's own method? I freely confess my own inability to such form of teaching. I dare not attempt a method so delicate and beautiful. I have no hesitation, however, in saying that if Jesus were in London, He would take as His illustrations the common things of the streets and the newspaper, and use them as the mirrors of eternal truth.

In the use of the parable it is always necessary to emphasize the teaching of similarity and disparity. The similarity of principle is emphasized by the recognition of disparity. I say this in order to warn the youngest Bible student. To forget the teaching of disparity is to fall into the terrible blunder of fanciful interpretation. Perhaps an illustration of what I mean at this point will be helpful. I distinctly remember in my boyhood's days hearing an excellent man preach from the parable of the Good Samaritan, and to me, though a lad, the whole thing was so grotesque that for many years I was afraid to try and talk about the parables at all. He informed us that Jesus was represented by the Good Samaritan, and the man fallen among thieves was the sinner. I am not sure that even these applications are warranted, but now the folly of attempting to carry out all the facts of the picture will be seen when I tell you that he proceeded to declare that the inn was the Church, the inn-keeper the Holy Spirit, and the two pence represented food and raiment, wherewith we are to be content during "the little while." This is a conspicuous example of how not to deal with parables. We must watch for similarity of principle and disparity of detail.

The question now naturally arises as to why Jesus adopted this parabolic method of teaching. What was His intention? Let me answer first by a simple statement based upon what we have already seen. The purpose of the parable is that of revelation by illustration, and the method is always intended to aid and never to hinder understanding. I have made this statement thus of set purpose in order to arrest the attention. I know of nothing more curious, and at the same time more pernicious, than a certain interpretation of the motive which the King had in His use of parables, and I feel that it is of the greatest importance that we should avoid it. I refer to the view that our Lord adopted the parabolic method with His hearers because He had abandoned them in anger, and that His purpose was to hide His truth so that they should not see it. This I most strenuously deny to be true. Christ never adopted any method characterized by such subtlety and cruelty. He never professed to be teaching men while at the same time He was resolutely attempting to hide truth from them. To charge Him with doing so would be to charge Him with dishonesty. The parable is an aid, not a hindrance. It veils truth, not that men may not grasp it,

but that it shall not escape them. There is a sense in which the sun is hidden by the piece of smoked glass which the boy holds before his eyes, and yet without such an instrument he could not look upon the sun at all. Essential light unveiled, blinds. Its veiling is the opportunity of vision.

It is not, however, for us to speculate, but to hear what the King Himself said in answer to the disciples' inquiry. Let us, however, hear all He says, not contenting ourselves with His first sentence, but giving attention to His whole explanation. In answer to the inquiry, "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables? He said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given." That is the first part of His answer, and though I am not going to make the mistake of treating the warning uttered as the whole of His answer, it is yet well to pause over the first sentences. If Jesus had said no more than this, I should have made the deduction which I maintain has often been falsely made. I should have understood Him to mean that He was compelled to use the method of the parable in speaking to these people because it was intended that they should not know the truths concealed. Having made such a deduction, I should have been sorely perplexed. The whole meaning of His mission was that of giving men "to know the mysteries of the Kingdom," and why at any time should He use a method ordinarily employed for illumination, in order to obviate His first intention of revelation, and produce exactly opposite effects in His hearers?

But let us follow Him further, and the meaning of the first statement becomes apparent. "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath." Note most carefully the contrast of which this is an explanation. "Unto you it is given ... to them it is not given." Now the explanation. "Whosoever hath, to him shall be given." He declared that it was given to His disciples to know the mysteries. Why was this knowledge given to them? According to the Teacher's explanation it was because of something they already possessed. Bearing that in mind, turn to the contrasted position. "But whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath." He declared it was not given to these men to know the mysteries. Why was that knowledge denied? According to His own explanation it was because of something they lacked. These men lacked that which the disciples possessed, the possession of which created in them a capacity for receiving the mysteries of the Kingdom. It was not therefore possible for them to grasp these mysteries, and even what understanding they did possess, they were in danger of losing.

What, then, did the disciples of Jesus possess which these men lacked? In order to answer that question let us take it in another form. What was the essential difference between the disciples and the rulers and multitudes standing around? Did it not lie here, that the disciples had received Jesus as King, and by reason of that action and their attitude towards Him had become able to receive the mysteries of His Kingdom?

The people, notwithstanding His ministry, had rejected Him up to this time, and therefore He could not give to them, nor could they have received, the mysteries of the Kingdom. To the men who had crowned Him, He belonged; and all the principles and privileges of the Kingdom they were able to appreciate and possess. The others had so far refused their allegiance and were therefore unable to see, or enter into, the Kingdom.

If we go further back for a moment, we may state the case thus. All these men among whom the ministry of Jesus had been exercised had preliminary knowledge of the ways of God as a result of the religion in which they had been born and trained. In fulfilment of the messages of their own Scriptures He had come. Certain of them had received Him, others of them had rejected Him. To those receiving Him were given

the mysteries of the Kingdom. To those rejecting Him these messages could not be given, and they were in danger of losing the real value of all that they had gained through their early religious training. Now with these men to whom are denied the secrets of the Kingdom, because of their disloyalty to the King, Jesus adopts a new method. He will give them pictures to lure them toward the truth.

Follow Him still further, "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."

That was the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, and Christ declares that it was fulfilled in the case of the people to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom were "not given." They were the people that hearing, did not understand; seeing, could not see, nor perceive. Upon whom is the blame of their blindness and deafness to be laid? In answer to this inquiry, let us continue the quotation as Christ continued it.

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.

Now in this passage the heart of the whole subject is laid bare. Christ declares in effect that these people did not see the things that His disciples saw. They saw without seeing, they heard without hearing. And why? They had shut their eyes lest they should see, and they had stopped their ears lest they should hear. They had rejected the King at the commencement of His ministry, and without the King they had no key to the mysteries of the Kingdom.

Because of this dulness consequent upon disobedience He now proceeded to address them in parables. Nowhere is the infinite pity of the heart of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, more beautifully seen than in these parables. The people were half intoxicated and slumbering in grossness consequent upon wilful shutting of their eyes; and He by the parabolic method attempted to arouse them. We should be perfectly justified if in all reverence we described this method of the Master as that of the kindergarten. The people did not understand the principle. Their eyes were heavy, and their ears were shut because they did not want to understand. They were afraid of what they might see and hear, if they were obedient to the first things He had said to them. Therefore had they closed their eyes and ears and hearts against Him, and so were missing the infinite music of His teaching. To such people He turns once more as though He would say, If you will not hear the essential things of which I come to speak, let Me talk to you of the things with which you are familiar, the earthly things. In His heart was the purpose of revealing the heavenly meaning

through the earthly symbol.

We have all seen a skilful teacher arrest a class with a story. Here, then, is the vision of the great Teacher, talking in parables, not in order that these men might not see, nor hear, nor feel, but in order to constrain them to a willingness to see and hear and feel. So far as we are concerned, herein lies the vindication of every method which in itself is upright and pure--that it will make men listen. A flag, a brass band, a picture, a story, anything to awaken the wilfully blind and godless age. Men are as much asleep to-day as they ever were. Seeing, they still see not; and hearing, they hear not; and we still need the parable, the picture, to awaken them, and make them think. Presently we shall see that Jesus had to use the same method with His disciples, and for the self-same reason. Their vision was not yet perfectly clear, for they had not yet absolutely surrendered everything to His Kingship. There are things, therefore, which He could only interpret to them in this way, but I think we shall feel, as we study the parables He made use of in the case of His disciples, that they were more delicate, more beautiful, finer in texture than those He used in addressing the multitudes.

This preliminary study has as its intention a strong desire to redeem the method of the Master from very grievous misinterpretation. The parable is always the method of Infinite Love. It is the method adopted in grace to meet the need of near-sightedness. All that it suggests to us is ultimately interpreted and enlarged by more direct teaching. We are then to look in the series of pictures presented in this chapter, for figurative illustration of essential truth concerning His Kingdom, and in doing so we must be careful to remember His purpose, and to watch constantly for the teaching of similarity and disparity.

#### The Scheme of the Discourse

"Behold, the sower went forth to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up, and choked them: and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." - Matthew 13:3-8.

"Another parable set He before them, saying, The Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he saith, Nay; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

"Another parable set He forth before them, saying, The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.

"Another parable spake He unto them: The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." - Matthew 13:24-33.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

"Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls: and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

"Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. So shall it be in the end of the world: the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth." - Matthew 13:44-50.

"Therefore every scribe who hath been a disciple to the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man who is a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." - Matthew 13:3-8.52

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