

“HE SPAKE MANY THINGS UNTO THEM IN PARABLES”

READING: MATTHEW 13

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: Bruce R. McConkie taught that

Parables are a call to investigate the truth; to learn more; to inquire into the spiritual realities, which, through them, are but dimly viewed. Parables start truth seekers out in the direction of further light and knowledge and understanding; they invite men to ponder such truths as they are able to bear in the hope of learning more. Parables are a call to come unto Christ, to believe his doctrines, to live his laws, and to be saved in his kingdom. They teach arithmetic to those who have the capacity to learn calculus in due course. They are the mild milk of the word that prepares our spiritual digestive processes to feast upon the doctrinal meat of the kingdom. (The Mortal Messiah, Vol.2, p.245)

The Greek word from which our word “parable” is derived means ‘*to throw beside.*’ Thus a parable is really two stories; the one being told and the one being thrown or placed beside it—the one being taught. The challenge in studying parables is to make that connection. We must derive from the elements of the parable the gospel message which it is intended to teach. I have sometimes found it helpful in my own study to list those elements on one side of a paper. For example, in the parable of the pigs (which certainly is a parable and a wonderful one), we find at least the following elements:

1. Parent
2. Three pigs
3. Different kinds of houses

4. Big, bad wolf
5. Huffing and Puffing

Then, having made this list, I can “throw beside” it, the meaning of the diverse elements, and begin to understand, along with the story that is being *told*, the story that is being *taught*.

The second list might look like this:

1. Our Heavenly Father
2. Us
3. The foundations upon which (or the care with which) we build our spiritual lives
4. Satan and his helpers
5. Trials and temptations.

Sometimes we are given the interpretation of the parables in the scriptures, but other times it is left to us to apply our gospel knowledge and the helps in the scriptures to find and absorb the lesson. Our ability to see and understand will always depend on two things: 1) our preparation, and 2) our attitude. There is one other matter of great importance with regard to the parables, but we will defer it to the Conclusion of this lesson.

I. WHO HATH EARS TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR

My relative was involved in an airplane crash not long ago. He is a student pilot, and was landing after an hour of instruction as another plane was taking off on an intersecting runway. The planes collided on the ground and were both destroyed. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, but my relative was transported to the hospital for some x-rays and stitches. His parents were out of town and so I went to the hospital to be with him. We were in the emergency room for about two hours. During that time, friends and strangers came by to visit. We heard several different accounts of what exactly had happened, at least three of them from eye witnesses. But they were not the same account. People seeing the same event saw different things. Surely this is a part of the reason for teaching in parables.

Not everyone sees and learns the same things from the things they experience.

The Savior, when asked “Why speakest thou unto them in parables?” replied,

. . .Because it is given unto you 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 more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. (Matthew 13:11,12)

The JST for verse 12 says: “For whosoever receiveth, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; But whosoever continueth not to receive, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. (Matthew 13:10,11, JST) Christ went on to say,

And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias concerning them, which saith, By hearing, ye shall hear and shall not understand; and seeing, ye shall see and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Matthew 13:13,14, JST)

Remember that the disciples asked Jesus, “Why speakest thou unto **THEM** in parables?” He had been addressing “great multitudes” (Matthew 13:2) and generalizing about the Jewish people, many of them no doubt skeptical and unbelieving. Perhaps some of their attitudes were like the attitude of Amulek who testified, “I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know; therefore I went on rebelling against God, in the wickedness of my heart, . . .” (Alma 10:6).

For the faithful, however, the lessons in parables were a different matter.

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. And blessed are you because these things are come unto you, that you might understand them.” (Matthew 13:15, JST) Our ability to “see” and “hear” the messages of the parables is directly correlated to how much we want to see and hear, and understand. In this connection, consider three other verses:

1) “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.” (Matthew 7:6)

2) “For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation.” (D&C 82:3)

3) “And, again, hear another parable; for unto you that believe not, I speak in parables; that your unrighteousness may be rewarded unto you.” (Matthew 21:34, JST)

II. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (Matthew 13)

3 . . . Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

4 And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

5 Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

6 And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

8 But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an

hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

This parable is not about sowers and seeds, of course. It is about souls. It is about the response of people to the word when it comes to them. It seems clear that every soul that ever heard the word would fit into one of the four categories mentioned in the parable. In which category of the four would those described in Matthew 13:13 fit?

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

In this parable the matter of interpretation is simplified by the fact that Matthew 13 contains the Savior's own explanation of the meaning of this story (see Matthew 13:18-23). He himself will "throw beside" the first story its meaning. Note, however, that he gave the meaning to his disciples, not to the great multitudes that heard the parable (Matthew 13: 10) However, all were invited to hear. (Matthew 13:9)

The First Presidency, commenting on the interpretation of this parable, made the following statement:

But listen to the explanation of the parable of the Sower:
"When any one heareth the word of the Kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away, that which was sown in his heart." Now mark the expression—that which was sown in his heart. This is he which receiveth seed by the way side. Men who have no principle of righteousness in themselves, and whose hearts are full of iniquity, and have no desire for the principles of truth, do not understand the word of truth when they hear it. The devil taketh away the word of truth out of their hearts, because there is no desire for righteousness in them. "But he that receiveth seed in stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon, with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by, he is offended. He also that receiveth seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the word;

and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground, is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty." Thus the Savior Himself explains unto His disciples the parable which He put forth, and left no mystery or darkness upon the minds of those who firmly believe on His words. (James R. Clark, Messages of the First Presidency, Vol.1, p.63)

One point worth noticing is that the responsibility of the sower is to sow. The harvest is in the hands of God. We must not be too anxious to find the perfect soil before we begin to plant seeds. In fact, it may be most difficult to know by appearances just how the soil of a soul will respond to the message of salvation. D&C 29:7 tells us that the only way to know who the elect really are is to let them hear the word. "And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts . . ." We go into the world with our gospel seeds and we plant them wherever we find an opportunity. We must not cast our pearls before swine, but we are free to cast the seeds of the gospel (not the riches nor the mysteries) anywhere. We can never evaluate how someone will respond to the word until he or she has heard the word.

If we spend too much time worrying about the results of our farming efforts, we may run out of time and energy to plant just when the soil is most inviting. Remember the response of Ananias to the soil of Saul in Acts 9. Ananias tried to talk the Lord out of doing missionary work with Saul because the soil appeared utterly unproductive, but was any soil in the history of the world richer than this? And what about Jonah's mission to Ninevah? Nahum 3 reminds us that Ninevah

. . .the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not;
The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels,
and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots.

The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcases; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses:

Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the well-favoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts. (Nahum 3:1-4)

Remember the concerns of Jonah as he visited this city, where he was to preach only destruction, not repentance. But the soil was better than he had ever dreamed. It might not have been hundred-fold soil, but it was productive enough to save the city. (Jonah 3 :10)

The literature and testimony meetings of the church are filled with these kinds of stories—stories of the most unlikely of converts who became great Christians and disciples. I myself have seen it happen, and so have you. But I have also made the mistake of looking at one of God’s children and thinking, “He just isn’t Mormon material. I might drop a few seeds here, but I can see that nothing will ever come of it.” The truth is, however, that I could not see what would come of it. None of us can. The only way to evaluate the quality of the soil is to plant some seeds. Never mind if we are in the way side with birds hovering about; never mind if the ground is stony or if the thorns have conquered the acreage. Plant seeds. In the language of D&C 33:8-10, “Open your mouths . . . open your mouths and spare not. . . Open your mouths and they shall be filled.

The Lord commanded Oliver Cowdery “And at all times, and in all places, he shall open his mouth and declare my gospel as with the voice of a trump, both day and night. . .” (D&C 42:12)

As we place this parable side by side with its interpretation, we probably ought to write next to SOWER, the word ME.

One final note about this parable. It is possible, even useful, to compare

the groups in this parable to those in Lehi's dream.

1. In 1 Nephi 8: 31-33, we read of "numberless concourses of people" who commence in the path. But when they are confounded by the mists of darkness, they lose their way and wander off and are lost. Can you see the similarity between that and this?

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. (Matthew 13:5,6)

2. Others came and "... caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree. And after they had partaken of the fruit of the tree they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed. And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth. And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit. And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost." (1 Nephi 8:24-28)

This group seems to correspond to Matthew 13:7: "And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: " The Savior said that he that received the seed among the thorns

"... is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." (Matthew 13:22)

Again the comparison is clear, for the great and spacious building and those within represent “the pride of the world.” (1 Nephi 11:36) An angel showed Nephi this building and said, “Behold the world and the wisdom thereof.” (1 Nephi 11:35)

3. A third group, described in 1 Nephi 8:30-33 , holds to the rod, comes to the tree, partakes of the fruit, and ignores the mockers in the building. In Matthew 13, these are those represented by the good ground: “But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.” (Matthew 13: 8)
4. The fourth group is mentioned in 1 Nephi 8:31. “And he also saw other multitudes feeling their way towards that great and spacious building.” These are those who make not attempt to get to the path or to the tree. Of them the Savior said, “And when he sowed, some [seeds] fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up . . .” (Matthew 13:4) He explained the meaning in Matthew 13:19. “When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.”

This is the seed that never takes root, never has a chance to germinate. Joseph Smith explained:

the condemnation which rested upon the multitude that received not His saying, was because they were not willing to see with their eyes, and hear with their ears; not because they could not, and were not privileged to see and hear but because their hearts were full of iniquity and abominations; “as your fathers did, so do ye.” The prophet, foreseeing that they would thus harden their hearts, plainly declared it; and herein is the condemnation of the world; that light hath come into the world, and men choose darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. This is so plainly taught by the Savior, that a

wayfaring man need not mistake it. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Section Two 1834–37, p.95)

II. THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Matthew 13:24-30:

24. Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field:

25. But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

26. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.

27. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares?

28. He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?

29. But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.

30. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Why did the sower refuse to allow his servants to gather the tares, which had been sown by an enemy, immediately? (Matthew 13:25-29) Have you ever weeded a garden and pulled out a useful plant by mistake? How long are the wheat and tares to be allowed to grow together? (Matthew 13:30)

I learned the lesson of this parable during my first seminary experience. I was a brand new teacher in a one-man seminary in Arizona. A young lady came to class occasionally (in fact, I thought, far too often), and made my job nearly impossible. She challenged me on many points of doctrine and interpretation. She contradicted my conclusions and laughed at my testimony. How grateful I am that I was too inexperienced to have the courage to kick her out. And I had her in my class for three years! I cannot express the relief I felt when she graduated from High School and seminary.

Years passed. I moved to Utah and enrolled in BYU to work on an advanced degree. One day in the Bookstore, I saw her. She was dressed in a lovely outfit with a black, plastic identification badge pinned to blouse, and was with another young lady dressed the same manner. She was at the MTC preparing to serve a mission. Our eyes met and she walked to me without hesitation and took my hand. I was surprised by the firmness of her grip and by the sudden tears. She held my hand and my eyes and whispered "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for the way I behaved. Thank you for your patience and kindness in letting me stay. I do not know what would have happened if you had terminated my opportunity to study the scriptures with those great young people who were my friends."

A favorite quote on this matter comes from Hugh Nibley.

The gospel of repentance is a constant reminder that the most righteous are still being tested and may yet fall, and that the most wicked are not yet beyond redemption and may still be saved. And that is what God wants: "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" (Ezekiel 18:23). There are poles for all to see, but in this life no one has reached and few have ever approached either pole, and no one has any idea at what point between his neighbor stands. Only God knows that (*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol.8, Ch.20, p.461 - p.462).

We must not be too hasty to uproot and destroy those plants that do not appear to be wheat. Without revelation, it is impossible to be sure. And,

as we discussed above, it is a most serious matter to refuse to sow when the opportunity presents itself.

The Savior gave an explanation of this parable in D&C 86:1-7:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servants, concerning the parable of the wheat and of the tares:

Behold, verily I say, the field was the world, and the apostles were the sowers of the seed;

And after they have fallen asleep the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, even Babylon, that maketh all nations to drink of her cup, in whose hearts the enemy, even Satan, sitteth to reign--behold he soweth the tares; wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness.

But behold, in the last days, even now while the Lord is beginning to bring forth the word, and the blade is springing up and is yet tender--

Behold, verily I say unto you, the angels are crying unto the Lord day and night, who are ready and waiting to be sent forth to reap down the fields;

But the Lord saith unto them, pluck not up the tares while the blade is yet tender (for verily your faith is weak), lest you destroy the wheat also.

Therefore, let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe; then ye shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares, and after the gathering of the wheat, behold and lo, the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned.

Notice that in both accounts, Matthew and the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord has had to restrain the servants and angels from immediately removing the tares from the field. Neal Maxwell said of this:

Years ago, I wondered over the scriptural imagery of angels waiting "day and night" for "the great command" to come down and reap the tares in a wicked and suffering world; it seemed rather eager to me (see D&C 38:12; 86:5). Given such massive, needless human suffering, I don't wonder anymore!

Even so, the final reaping will occur only when the Father determines that the world is "fully ripe." Meanwhile, brothers and sisters, the challenge is surviving spiritually in a deteriorating "wheat and tares" world (D&C 86:7).

Even though the "final reaping" must wait for the world to become fully ripe, the preliminary reaping has begun. Wilford Woodruff testified of this fact in 1894:

We have fourteen million people on this earth, and over them all there hangs a cloud of darkness almost entirely upon their shoulders. Can you tell me where the people are who will be shielded and protected from these great calamities and judgments which are even now at our doors? I'll tell you. The priesthood of God who honor their priesthood, and who are worthy of their blessings are the only ones who shall have this safety and protection. They are the only mortal beings. No other people have a right to be shielded from these judgments. They are at our very doors; not even this people will escape them entirely. They will come down like the judgments of Sodom and Gomorrah. And none but the priesthood will be safe from their fury. God has held the angels of destruction for many years, lest they should reap down the wheat with the tares. But I want to tell you now, that those angels have left the portals of heaven, and they stand over this people and this nation now, and are hovering over the earth waiting to pour out

the judgments. And from this very day they shall be poured out. Calamities and troubles are increasing in the earth, and there is a meaning to these things. Remember this, and reflect upon these matters. If you do your duty, and I do my duty, we'll have protection, and shall pass through the afflictions in peace and in safety. Read the scriptures and the revelations. They will tell you about all these things. Great changes are at our doors. The next twenty years will see mighty changes among the nations of the earth. You will live to see these things, whether I do or not. I have felt oppressed with the weight of these matters, and I felt I must speak of them here. It's by the power of the Gospel that we shall escape (Wilford Woodruff: *Collected Discourses*, vol 4, June 24, 1894).

Twenty years later, and one month World War I broke out.

In the rest of this chapter, Christ compares the Kingdom of Heaven (the Church—see Bible Dictionary under Kingdom of Heaven) to a mustard seed, to leaven, to a treasure hid in a field, a merchant man seeking pearls, and a fisherman's net. Each of these parables teaches great lessons, lessons to be learned by true disciples. But learning them reaches deeper than the intellectual exercise of study and interpretation.

CONCLUSION

A group of religion instructors [were] taking a summer course of the life of the Savior and focusing particularly on the parables. The following story related by President James E. Faust may be useful at this point in helping you understand the difference between studying the parables and applying them.

When the final exam came, . . . the students arrived at the classroom to find a note that the exam would be given in another building across campus. Moreover, the note said, it must be finished within the two-hour time period that was starting almost at that moment.

The students hurried across campus. On the way, they passed a little girl crying over a flat tire on her new bike. And old man hobbled painfully toward the library with a cane in one hand, spilling books from a stack he was trying to manage with the other. On a bench by the union building sat a shabbily dressed, bearded man [in obvious distress].

Rushing into the other classroom, the students were met by the professor, who announced that they had all flunked the final exam.

The only test of whether they understood the Savior's life and teaching, he said, was how they treated people in need.

Their weeks of study at the feet of a capable professor had taught them a great deal of what Christ had said and done. In their haste to finish the technicalities of the course, however, they failed to recognize the application represented by the three scenes that had been deliberately staged. They had learned the letter but not the spirit. (Cited by President James E. Faust, Ensign, May 1998, p.18, from Church News, 1 October 1988, p. 16)

As with all the teachings of the Savior, the really worthwhile results come not from hearing, but from doing.

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