

Parables about preaching

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Most of the parables are about the gospel message itself, but a few are about preaching. The parable of the Candle and Bushel shows we should shine not only by the things that we say but also by our way of life. The parable of the Sower teaches us that the seed we sow must be good seed; the power to grow lies in the seed and not with us; and we must sow everywhere as we cannot tell what is good and bad ground. The parables of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great price show the great value we should place on the gospel message.

“ I WILL OPEN my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old”, said the psalmist (Ps. 78:2); and his psalm is about revealing the wonderful works of God to coming generations, so that they should not be stubborn and rebellious as their fathers were: “that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments: and might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God” (vv. 6-8).

“That they might set their hope in God”; this is the purpose of preaching. To further his aim the psalmist used stories—in this case, stories from Israel’s history that had perhaps been forgotten by others—to convey his message, calling it “a parable” and “dark sayings”. Jesus’ own use of parables in his preaching is given by Matthew as a fulfilment of these words: “All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world” (13:34,35). The Apostle Paul also seems to make reference to this passage when writing of the preaching of Christ: “Now to Him That is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and *the preaching of Jesus Christ*, according to the revelation of the *mystery, which was kept secret since the world began*, but now is made manifest, and . . . made known

to all nations for the obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:25,26). The aim of the psalmist to bring hope and trust in God through parables was taken up by the Lord Jesus in his preaching, and then continued by the apostles so that “obedience of faith” might be brought to all nations.

Thus Jesus, when asked by his disciples why he spoke to the people in parables, said, “it is given unto you to know the *mysteries* [RSV, *secrets*] 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. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Mt. 13:11-13).

For the disciples, the hidden mysteries, the secrets of the Kingdom, were opened out in the parables of the Lord. Truths that are hidden to the natural man because he has no eyes to see them can be understood more clearly by careful consideration of the parables and their interpretations. So the “wise man . . . will be yet wiser” and the “just man . . . will increase in learning” (Prov. 9:9). But for the rebellious, without eyes to see and ears to hear (*cf.* Ezek. 12:2), whom “the god of this world hath blinded”, the gospel is hidden (2 Cor. 4:3,4) by those very same parables. And so the message becomes like “a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he said, I am not learned” (Isa. 29:11,12).

Let your light so shine before men

Considering that the Lord’s use of parables was to preach the gospel, it is not surprising to find that there are only a few parables about the preaching itself. Of these, perhaps the most obvious is the parable of the Sower, which we will come to later. However, a short section in the Sermon on the Mount has a bearing on the subject:

“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men

light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Which is in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16).

Light is a well-known Scriptural symbol for the message of salvation that God sends out into the world in order to illuminate men and women and save them from the darkness of sin and death. The Lord Jesus applies the same expression, "light of the world" to himself in John 8:12, and later in his ministry he said, "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness" (12:46). In this he was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, that God would give him for a light not just to Israel, but also to the Gentiles, bringing His salvation to "the end of the earth". And so Simeon, when he held in his arms the newborn Son of God, was inspired to say, "mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Lk. 2:30-32).

The work of bringing the light of salvation to the end of the earth was begun by the Lord Jesus during his ministry, but was carried forward by his apostles acting on their Lord's behalf; and so the Apostle Paul applies the words of Isaiah 49:6 to himself and his fellow apostles: "For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldst be for salvation unto the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). It was a command of their Lord to take the light into all the world, and the parable in Matthew 5 can be seen as part of that command.

But Jesus said, "Let *your* light so shine before men". The light of the gospel must be so absorbed by those who follow Christ that it becomes *their* light. We must become "children of light" (Jno. 12:36) so that the light radiates out from us almost unconsciously, a light that cannot be hidden. It must be evident to those around in all that we do, not just in what we say. Those around must see our "good works", and thereby give glory to God. This dual concept, of the light shining forth both in our preaching and in our actions, is evident in a number of New Testament passages. For example:

"For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (for the fruit of the Spirit [light, RSV] is in all *goodness and righteousness and truth*;) . . . And have no fellowship with the unfruitful

works of darkness, but rather *reprove them*" (Eph. 5:8-11);

"that ye may be *blameless and harmless*, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; *holding forth the word of life . . .*" (Phil. 2:15,16).

Our way of life as followers of the Lord Jesus ought to be sufficiently different from that of people around us that it causes them to take notice and perhaps be attracted to the Truth. We must each ask ourselves, Is this true of me? Has the Word of God had such an effect on me that my life in itself is a witness? If not, am I truly walking as a child of the light?

The sower soweth the Word

The parable of the Sower is so well known that it seems superfluous to add much here. It is perhaps *the* parable we would all turn to when considering the topic of preaching. The sowing of the Word of God, first by the Lord Jesus and then by his followers; the different soils representing the different types of people to whom the call of the gospel comes; the exhortation to cultivate a good and honest heart capable of bringing forth fruit—these are all aspects that are often brought out from this parable.

There are, however, one or two points to be considered that have a bearing on our preaching. The first is the simple point that the sower is sowing the Word. He is sowing *good seed* in his field, as the following parable makes clear (Mt. 13:24). In order to be able to sow that good seed he must first of all obtain it himself. The Lord Jesus was the Word made flesh. He always spoke his Father's words (Jno. 1:14; 8:28,40; 12:49). But he must have spent many hours in his youth absorbing that Word so that it became part of his very being. We too, if we wish to be sowers of the Word, must spend time absorbing it, thinking and talking about it, meditating on it. Otherwise it could be that what we are sowing is not good seed at all, but weeds.

Secondly, the power to grow is in the seed itself. All that the sower does is sow it; he cannot make it grow. The Word of God itself is powerful to change people's lives. Yes, it requires the good soil of an honest and good heart rather than the hardheartedness of the downtrodden path or the stony ground; and the weeds of covetousness and cares of the world must be diligently removed; but the Word of God is itself living and powerful (Heb. 4:12), growing within the heart and enabling

people to be “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:23). We can help with nurture and care, but any input from us is secondary to the power of the Word itself. “I have planted”, writes the Apostle Paul, “Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6).

A similar point comes out of another short parable, which in Mark 4 follows the parable of the Sower:

“So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come” (vv. 26-29).

One way of interpreting this parable is to see the man sowing seed as the Lord Jesus, as in the parable of the Sower, through whose sleep in death and rising again a great harvest is made possible. “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it *bringeth forth much fruit*” (Jno. 12:24), said the Lord later on in his ministry, referring to his own death; and he uses the terms ‘day’ and ‘night’ to refer to the period of his ministry and his coming death: “I must work the works of Him That sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (9:4); “Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you” (12:35).

We can also, however, take the general point from the parable that the sown seed grows by itself, hidden in the earth. The Word preached by us can work in the hearts of those who hear it, all unknown to us. We can be disappointed when there is little apparent immediate response to a billing effort or campaign. We must be as the husbandman in James 5:7, who “waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain”. It may be that we shall not know until the Kingdom what fruit our efforts have borne.

A third point to come out of the parable of the Sower is connected with this. We do not know the hearts of men, we have no idea where the good soil is. It is surely therefore up to us to scatter the seed as widely as possible in every possible place, not worrying whether some falls onto stony ground. We must take every opportunity we can to sow the good news of the gospel whenever and

wherever people might listen. Only by allowing some seed to fall in the weedy and stony places could the sower ensure that all the good ground was covered.

The same lesson can be drawn from the parable of the Good and Bad Fishes in Matthew 13:47,48: “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away”. The parable of the Marriage Feast in Matthew 22:1-14 is also relevant here: “Go ye . . . into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good” (vv. 9,10). In Luke’s version of the parable the servants are commanded to “*compel them to come in*” (14:23). The need is urgent; as many as possible must be given the chance to hear the gospel message. This can be difficult for those of us living in relatively prosperous Western middle-class societies. What about the homeless, the drug addicts, the alcoholics, the street musicians playing for a few pennies in the marketplace? Our distribution of leaflets might never reach these people. How easy do we find it to talk to them about the message of salvation? Yet the seed must fall in these places too.

Hidden treasure and the pearl of great price

Finally, a couple of short parables towards the end of Matthew 13 give a further perspective on how the gospel reaches people:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (vv. 44-46).

So far we have been considering how the message of the gospel can be sown by us in our preaching and our way of life. But there are times when people find that treasure for themselves without any effort on our part. In the first of these two word pictures the man stumbles across the treasure completely unexpectedly. Perhaps he is working in his neighbour’s field, ploughing to prepare the ground for sowing, and the plough turns up a hoard of gold coins. Realising what it is, quickly he covers up all evidence of his find, before going

to sell everything he possibly can to buy that field. He knows he has found something of incredible worth apparently just by chance, and is prepared to give everything he owns in exchange. We might wonder whether we ourselves value the gospel that highly.

In the second parable the pearl merchant is searching, on the lookout for good pearls. No doubt he is always watching out for the one that is just that bit better than all the rest. What he finds is something far, far better, and, like the other man, gives everything to get his hands on it. He has been looking for such a thing, and eventually he has found it. Many of us will know of someone who has found the Truth like this. It might even apply to us personally, that we have been searching for truth, maybe looking at other sects and religions before coming across a reality that leaves the rest looking worthless in comparison.

Summary

The main lesson for ourselves we can glean from all the parables we have considered is this. We must work hard to fill our lives with the light of God's Word so that it shines out from us in our words and our deeds. We must ensure that the seed we possess is good seed, the true gospel, and not full of weeds. That gospel message of salvation that has come to us so freely must then be freely scattered, whenever and wherever we can. But we must acknowledge that the power to change men is in the seed of the Word itself, a living and active force in men's hearts that can grow to produce a plenteous harvest. The work is of God, and He it is Who brings men to eternal salvation in Christ. In our work of service to Him we take our place with countless others who have laboured to bring about a harvest that gives glory to Him.