

Parable Teaching
Lesson 9 in The Life of Christ
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This week we studied how Jesus changed his teaching style from direct instruction to parables. Parables are defined as a story that usually comes from the world of nature or human circumstances which is compared to a spiritual truth. Literally the word means “to throw or lay beside, to compare.” The Hebrew word: “mashal” – is translated both as “parable” or as “proverb.” The Pulpit Commentary describes this double use in this way: “The parable is often an expanded proverb and the proverb is a condensed parable.” These are often presented as a similitude, two statements or allegories that compare one idea.

The use of this technique brought some consternation to the disciples, but also caused deeper thinking in those who followed Jesus. But at the same time, as we will discover, it brought mystery to those who were skeptical of Jesus' teachings. However, before we look into these reactions, we will examine our Lord's reasons for changing his teaching style.

Luke 8:1-3 reveals that after Jesus was anointed by the “sinful woman” as he and his disciples dined in the home of a Pharisee named Simon, he “traveled about from one town and village to another proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.” The people from each village were so excited that this Rabbi would come to their town, that soon huge crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. We were told that several women also followed Jesus. These were women who had been healed, cured of evil spirits, and changed so that they believed Jesus was a good teacher and probably was Messiah. Therefore, they donated

from their own means to help support Jesus as he traveled. People invited Jesus and his disciples into a house, probably for a meal. But the crowd followed him right on into the home and Mark's gospel recorded, "and again a crowd gathered so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat."(Mark 3:20) We can hear the disciples' disappointment.

In Matthew's account, however, we learned that not all of those who followed Jesus believed he was the Promised One. Some Pharisees and teachers of the law also followed him around. They didn't come to hear his words, but to criticize them. They didn't come to rejoice in the many healings of the sick, but to question their appropriateness. They didn't come to decide if Jesus was Messiah, but to see to it that his message would be ineffective and that his following would diminish – by any means necessary.

From the crowd, someone brought a man up to Jesus. This man was both blind and mute. This was not from any accident or birth defect. The people and Jesus understood that this man was overtaken by an evil spirit. Throughout Jesus' ministry he cast out evil spirits from many people. But as this one was cast out, and the man now spoke with understanding and could again see. Matthew tells us that, "all the people were astonished and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?'"

In this day of the sciences such as psychiatric studies, neurological and medical research, we do not hear of physical distress being attributed to demonic possession. However, most doctors who are objective recognize that there are syndromes and addictions that cannot totally be explained by their scientific diagnostic skills. In third world countries, this connection is more easily drawn.

However, it is important we understand that upon belief in Jesus Christ, we were indwelt by His Holy Spirit. Romans 8:1-17 describes the difference in our lives, made by the Holy Spirit living in our hearts. Verse 16 says, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.” However, this demon possession occurred before Jesus died and rose again to give the Holy Spirit to indwell believers. This man up to this point was an unbeliever. He had chosen to dabble and follow the worship of Satan and in doing so had been indwelt by evil spirits. But Jesus set him free. He gave him a clean heart, free to choose to follow the Messiah and true worship of God. In doing so, the people all around recognized that Jesus must be more than an ordinary teacher. He must be the Promised one, the Son of David, the Messiah.

The Pharisees had come to diminish Jesus' authority and following. They had to admit that a miracle had been done – standing there in front of them was a man now free of demon possession and able to see and speak! Now, in order to try to draw away the faith of the people from the only conclusion that was logical, they threw in a wrench of dissent. “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.'” [Matt. 12:24] Luke 11:16 adds, “Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.”

The crowd may have been confused by the religious ruler's dissension, but Jesus not only knew what they said was insincere, and he knew the thought process behind their words contained the malice of disbelief. They attributed Jesus' miracles to the power of Beelzebul rather than the power of God.

Beelzebul was the name used by the Philistines for the god of Ekron, who claimed to be the prince of the air. The Jews had used this name to refer to Satan and his evil demons. But Jesus turned to hold this false accusation up to the light of fact and logic.

Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?” Everyone knew that any kingdom that splits over opposite political leaders will soon fall. Even a household that was divided by bad moral choices, or two strong patriarchs or matriarchs demanding family obedience their way, will destroy a home. Neither can stand when it is torn apart from such forces. Satan is against God's purposes. He wishes all to worship him, rather than God. Therefore he rallies all of his forces, the fallen angels called demons, to work against the Lord's kingdom. He desires to keep mankind enslaved to addictions, fear, pursuit of wealth, and drowning in their own selfishness – anything but freedom from sin in Christ Jesus. Therefore, there is no logical reason in which Satan would empower anyone to cast out his demons who were accomplishing his agenda.

Secondly, Jesus argues, if the power to cast out demons was only through the power of Satan, “by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.” [Matthew 12:27] The Jews also had religious rulers and priests who worked to cast out evil spirits who would rightly swear they worked in God's power. Jesus stressed that, “it might as well be applied to them as to him.....You must therefore either give up this argument, or admit that the

working of miracles is proof of the assistance of God.” [Barnes Notes]

Finally, Jesus drew the logical conclusion to these proofs. In Luke 11:20 he said, “But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Ellicott reasoned, “If Jesus gave proof that He was thus filled with the Power of the Spirit to heal and save, then He was what he claimed to be, the Head of the divine kingdom. That kingdom had burst upon men unawares.”

Then came the turning point of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom among men. Mark noted the change: “So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak in parables.” [Mark:3:23, 30] Why did He choose this instance to change from direct preaching to parables? Verse 30 informs us, “He said this because they were saying, 'He has an impure spirit'”.. So, Jesus began to use a similitude to present his arguments against the ridiculous accusation of the Pharisees.

The parable of the strong man was simple and effective. The crowd understood the formidable strength of Satan's influence on their lives. One would never try to rob such a man's house while he was known to be inside. He could not be overtaken without some additional help, such as knowing that somehow, he had been restrained. By this parable Jesus emphasized his logical conclusion. If Satan was the strong man, and Jesus could free slaves from his household by casting out the evil spirits, then Jesus must have more power than that “strong man”- first binding him. Jesus must be the Son of David!

To make his conclusion perfectly clear, Jesus clearly instructs, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so

I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” [Matthew 12:31,32] No one is neutral. No one can stand on the fence. Either one believes Jesus is the Christ, or does not believe. The Holy Spirit was moving among the hearts of the people crowded around him. No matter what they thought of Jesus, or even had discussed about him in their own homes. It came down to this: either he is the Son of God, or he is not.

The Pharisees as a group had rejected Jesus as being from God, and by doing so, rejected that he was the One sent from God. John later wrote the mandatory point of decision clearly for us in 1 John 5:11,12. “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” God sent Jesus, His only Son, to die for our sins. By paying the punishment we each owed for our sins - death, he erased our debt. Then He rose again. He offers eternal life to all who believe and “have the Son” in their hearts. More than that, he offers us freedom from the habits of our old way of life through forgiveness. John also informed believers, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” [1 John 1:9]

What, then, is this “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” which will not be forgiven? When the Pharisees claimed that the miracle Jesus performed was done by Satan's power, they rejected that he was from God. So, they rejected

Jesus as their Messiah and ultimately as their Savior. The only alternative to accepting Jesus is staying condemned for all eternity. They have rejected their salvation and chose condemnation. Their hardened hearts were unforgiven, forever.

The people were frightened at such harsh words and may have wondered how one would know which choice their own hearts were choosing. How could they know? Jesus' next parable explained his reassurance to them. "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good; or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." At creation, God made every kind of tree. Some were good for producing wonderful fruit and some were for lumber or ornamentation. People could cultivate and fertilize and even transplant or graft variations onto fruit trees. But if a tree gets diseased, or corrupted at its core, it will never give good fruit again. In this agrarian society the crowd had seen both: good producing fruit trees and bad trees.

Jesus was stating a heart message. No matter what a religious show these Pharisees and teachers of the law made, their core beliefs were evident for all to see. Jesus explained it to them, just in case they didn't understand this parable. "You brood of vipers! How can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings forth good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." [Matt. 12:34-36]

How can we make ourselves good trees with good fruit? Paul put such a dilemma this way, in Romans 7:18-19: “For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do- this I keep on doing.” Don't we all experience this? We can call out with Paul in verse 24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” This was the very point of our salvation – the recognition that our hearts are desperately wicked and we are powerless to do anything about it.

But even Paul does not leave us in this powerless dilemma. Chapter 8, verse 1 states: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is nothing we can do to make God love us more – and nothing we can do to make God love us less – His love is go great. He will forgive our doubts and evil deeds and words. That is what he died for. But if a man rejects that gift of grace, there is no forgiveness, no salvation, no hope for eternity. God provides forgiveness to us as believers and when we stand before him after this life, our position as his child is sure. He will test our words and deeds, burning up any done without his blessing. But as we enter eternity with Him, if our name is written in His book of life, He will actually give us rewards for deeds and words done in His Name.

Jesus made his point quite forcefully. But just as his words reverberated in the ears of the religious rulers, someone made their way up to Jesus, interrupted

his discourse and said, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” Luke 8:19 commented that when Jesus' earthly family arrived and wanted to see him, they couldn't get in because of the crowd. Mark 6:3 lists Jesus' brothers as being “James, Joseph, Judas and Simon” and that he had sisters also. Obviously, Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus' birth. It is not clear why his family came at this time to see him. We know he had been living in Capernaum and the busy pace of life for Jesus had made him more and more occupied with his ministry, and less involved in Mary's family matters in Nazareth.

But Jesus took this opportunity to draw another simile for the crowd. “He replied, 'My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.'” [Luke 8:21] Why did Jesus say such a thing? Barnes explained in his commentary, “There was no want of affection or respect in Jesus toward his mother as is proved by his whole life.....How great was his love for his disciples, when as it was more than even that for his mother!” Jesus was confirming that those whose life showed their heart change were as loved as if they were brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers to him.

Jesus got up and then exited the crowded house. Matthew 13:1,2 informed us, “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.” I believe that during the walk from the house to the shore, Jesus talked with and reassured his mom and brothers. Then he stepped into the boat and began to teach in more parables.

Luke 8:4 explains that not only the people who had crowded around the house Jesus just left, but even more people came to him. “While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable.” Matthew and Mark record that this crowd became so huge, Jesus got into a boat anchored along shore, so that he could sit there and preach while the people were standing right along the lake edge to listen. As this crowd traveled that day to get to hear Jesus, they probably passed many fishing boats pulled up along the shore of the lake as well as merchants, soldiers and even farmers still finishing up their day's work.

And Jesus may have referred their attention to a certain farmer, as he was planting seed in his fields that stretched down the hillside, toward the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus shared this next parable. “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.” [Mark 4:3] Now most of the people listening were very familiar with the cycle of planting, sprouting, growing and harvesting grain. Most had their own land and at least planted a vegetable garden, or fruit trees and vines. Because husbandry was so basic, and tools were all manual, they worked the earth, removed stones and hoed down weeds as best they could. Preparing the soil was very labor intensive. So, you usually just re-tilled the same patch as last year. One would know the areas of land which were rich and fertile, and those which never seemed to yield very much at harvest.

So, as Jesus shared the parable of the sower, the people would be right there with him. Even the problem with the birds swiping seed on hard ground was familiar. They well knew the problem of shallow soil over rocks and those

thorns which strangled out the grain as it grew too close to where they had tried to weed them out, but they always came back. The crowd was with him through the part about good harvests and the hope for a bumper crop, if everything went well. And then, abruptly, Jesus ended the story, saying, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” Then, just like that, the lesson was over. The crowd realized that the Teacher was done for the day.

Just as puzzled as the crowd had been, the disciples waited until they were alone with Jesus, to ask him why he had shifted to teaching in parables. “He replied, 'Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing they do not hear or understand.'” [Matthew 13:11-12] Jesus was quoting Jeremiah 5:21.

It seems that as the disciples saw the logistics of a huge crowd, Jesus saw the shallow disbelief. MacLaren described the scene from the boat in this way, “Sadly he looked at the eager multitudes, because he looked through them, and saw how few of them were bringing 'an honest and good heart.' Therefore, Jesus uses the double purpose of the parable: 1) obscuring the truth from those not willing to accept it. 2) revealing the truth to those prepared to receive it.” The disciples were blessed because they believed Jesus was the Son of God. They heard his words and pondered the parables until they understood the depth of his meaning. They received the word and let it change them. However many in the

crowd heard the same words but closed their understanding and chose not to believe. Jesus described their hearts as being calloused in verse 15.

This two-fold purpose is clearly seen in Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower. The various soils represented are various hearts, and their readiness to accept the “seed” which is the word of God, determined their fruitfulness. When the fringe group, the ones just passing by hear the word of God, it makes no impact at all on their hearts. It simply bounces off and is “snatched away” from their thinking by Satan.. They hear and see, but have already decided this is not true- much the same way the Pharisees responded.

The second heart Jesus noticed, was the heart with shallow soil and bedrock below it. This person hears the word with curiosity. They may even think about it again, now and then. But their preconceived ideas bring doubt and so they never allow the Word of God to really take root. They do not study to understand it, or talk to others who do believe. So, in the harsh light of “trouble or persecution” from their peers or family, they allow the growth they had, to wither away.

The third heart described in this parable represented the person who heard the Word of God and responded to it in faith, allowing a heart change toward basic belief. However, “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” crowded out their growth in spiritual matters. This is a person who perhaps went to the Harvest Crusade and their hearts were stirred to go forward. Although they attended church a few times afterward, they soon realized that the time schedule was too tight to get to their son's soccer practice

Sunday afternoons. And the only way to be on top of their weekly responsibilities at work was to spend Sundays and evenings getting that paperwork done. And the boss only considers employees who put in extra hours at the job for promotions. So, soon the cares and responsibilities of their world choke out the seedling of faith in their hearts.

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” [Luke 8:15] Notice that this final heart is one that Jesus called “noble and good” which persevered in its growth. A noble heart looked above everyday circumstances and realized that God wanted to be involved in their life. A good heart seeks to change from their old way of doing things to begin to do things that the Bible says we ought to do. This is not easy. Perseverance is vital - to not give up. We must keep on working to understand more of the Word, and to let it change and motivate our lives and apply its truths to put the world's concerns in their proper perspective.

Is this struggle worth it? Jesus challenged his disciples to consider their unique place in his kingdom. In Matthew 13:16-17 Jesus said, “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell 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.” Prophets like Abraham, Jacob, David, Ezekiel and Daniel heard God's promises that Messiah would come. People long ago were touched by God's Word to see his salvation would come, and they believed. But these disciples were actually seeing, hearing and living

with Jesus Christ, Himself!

Even the disciples did not understand, at this time, the entire scope Jesus was to accomplish as Messiah. We are blessed too because we can see through the record of the Bible that Jesus came to be more than our Teacher but also our Savior. Our challenge is the same as He gave to them. Jesus was not satisfied that his followers had a heart to hear, understand and let God's word change their lives. They must also do it. He challenged them that they would soon reverse places. They too would step out to be the teachers. They too would see the Word of God planted in various hearts and persevere to bring in a harvest.

Jesus' challenge also took the form of another parable. "No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open." [Luke 8:16,17] The disciples had heard and understood that Jesus was the Son of God. The Light of Life was changing their lives. Now, they would share that Light with the world around them. Because of persecution that would come, some may be tempted to hide that light. Some may be tempted to plunge the light into a corner under their bed, to avoid the criticism of unbelieving family and friends. But that is not the purpose of the light.

Jesus summed up these parables, by saying, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them." [Luke 8:18] Consider His challenge carefully. Those who had preconceived ideas which hardened their

hearts, allowed all they heard to be taken away. Even those who had accepted what they heard at first, but allowed temptations, persecutions, the cares and worries of everyday life to become greater in their hearts than the Word, were in danger of loosing that precious light.

Jesus did not desire to be stingy with His message. He was facing the reality of the receptivity of the hearts which reacted to the Word. In the Cambridge Commentary of the Bible, it is stressed, “In the New Testament, it (a hidden mystery) always means something once hidden, now revealed.” Although three out of four hearts described were missing the relevance of Jesus' teachings, it would not always be hidden. The light of Jesus' completed redemption would spread from 120 followers in one upper room, into the hearts of thousands throughout the world. The dormant seed that was dwarfed in frightened, worried hearts would bloom in the light of salvation.

Our challenge today, is the same as that of the people who heard it from Jesus' lips. If we have received the Word of God with a good and noble heart, we too must persevere in the work before us. There is darkness all around us. The daily news emphasizes just how dark it is. But the very light which gives us so much hope and comfort in this darkness, cannot be hidden in our hearts or under our fears. Rather we must share the light we have.

Pray for victims of the darkness we know or hear about. Talk freely with those you know about the hope you have. Comfort those you can, with the Word of God and knowledge of God's love. Share what you know, your testimony, with those who doubt. Don't be stingy with what you have learned here at People

of the Word! "Consider carefully what you hear,' he continued, 'With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more. '" [Mark 4:24] The more we plant the seeds of God's Word, the more believing hearts will be harvested. Let's work toward an overflowing harvest!

The summery of what we learned this week is the following:

Our Lord is greater than Satan and his demons.

God welcomes believing hearts.

God desires that believers would share their faith.