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# INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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PART ONE: TENSION

Have you ever been caught off guard by one of the parables of Jesus?

I used to think I understood them, or at least that I understood why Jesus used them but today I realized that there is a tension that the parable creates.

It is a tension that I am, of course, not comfortable with.

In Mark 4 we read about Jesus' reasons behind the parables he used:

Once again Jesus began teaching by the lakeshore. A very large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat in the boat while all the people remained on the shore. He taught them by telling many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:

“Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn’t have deep roots, it died. Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!” Then he said, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”

Later, when Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples and with the others who were gathered around, they asked him what the parables meant.

He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secret of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables for everything I say to outsiders, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

‘When they see what I do,  
they will learn nothing.

When they hear what I say,  
they will not understand.  
Otherwise, they will turn to me  
and be forgiven.”

Then Jesus said to them, “If you can’t understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables? (Mk 4:1-13 NLT)

So is Jesus speaking in parables and the result is just that they wouldn't understand?

Or is it that the parables were MEANT to confuse?

Mark is tricky, because there is an element of secrecy about the identity of Jesus and the ushering in of the Kingdom.

There is an edge to the parables. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, for whatever reason the language Mark uses is more pointed. But within these parables we see Jesus inviting people into the world of the story, where you have to find yourself in them... And you may not like what you find. They are meant to make us uncomfortable.

Most of the time when Old Testament passages are quoted, as is the one above from Isaiah 6 we can decipher the meaning by looking at the context of it (ie: the entire chapter of Isaiah 6).

But even when we do that, at least with this specific passage and question, we are left with the same confusing feeling: What was the point of the parable? Was it meant to confuse or is that just a prediction of the result?

What I think Mark (and Jesus) wants us to feel and see is the tension that revolves around the answer to another question:

Are you inside or outside?

Are you in the know or are you outside of the know?

Are you part of the Kingdom or are you outside of the Kingdom?

Because when the Kingdom of God confronts our kingdoms of self, we find our assumptions challenged and our security in jeopardy.

Eugene Boring states in his commentary on Mark,

In the preaching of Jesus, parables were not pleasant stories to decorate a moralistic point, but were disturbing stories that threatened the hearer's secure mythological world. This mythological world is the world of assumptions by which we habitually live, the unnoticed framework of our thinking within which we interpret other data. Parables surreptitiously attack this framework of our thought-world itself. "'You have built a lovely home,' myth assures us; 'but,' whispers parable, 'you are right above an earthquake fault'" (Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 57)

Have you ever stopped to let the tension of the parables of Jesus shake your world?

Have they made you think about your relationship with Christ?

Because the people who first heard them were shocked and amazed.

But they were also forced to wrestle with that tension.

How about you?

It is certainly something to think about, something we all need to consider. The Good News is that we can have answers to these question. The mystery and tension can actually be resolved in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians this truth,

“God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.” (Eph. 1:9-11 NLT)

We can have hope and we can have assurance of our salvation, of our participation within the Kingdom of God. Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that the mysterious plan has been revealed, we are in the know. There’s not some secret that God is hiding from us. Everything in heaven and on earth will be brought together under the authority of King Jesus. If everything is under a King’s authority, that makes everything a part of His kingdom. Paul continues to tell them that because of this unity in being brought underneath Christ’s reign, we have an inheritance, our own salvation.

The Apostle John would go on to write another firm statement on how we can be sure of our part to play in the Kingdom of God when he wrote his letter that we call First John:

And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life. I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. (1 Jn 5:11-13 NLT)