



Matthew 13:10–15

10 The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”¹¹ He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 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. 13 This is why I speak to them in par-

ables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”

14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.’

Reflection

They say that all children aged three to

eighty-three love stories. Jesus was a master story teller. His colourful words were always filled with pictures. In part, that must have been how he kept the crowds spellbound, how his words always found their target. Just think about some of his language so far in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus has spoken about salt, light, lamps and cities on a hill; the least stroke of a pen, turning the other cheek, and the Pharisee's announcing their giving with trumpets. He's painted pictures in our minds of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. He's left us with images of big planks of wood sticking out of our eyes, and asked us what Father, when their son asks for bread would give him a stone, or when asking for fish would give him a snake. We've heard about narrow gates, and wide roads, and trees not bearing

fruit; houses divided against themselves, houses with no foundations, built on sand, other houses still built on rock.

Jesus' preaching has been filled with pictures but from Matthew 13 onwards, his preaching *becomes* pictures. Previously his illustrations have punctuated his points, they've drawn his hearers in, helped them to relate to and remember his teaching. But something's changed in Matthew 13. And so his disciples come to him and ask him about it,

“Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

Jesus is no longer illustrating his sermons, his sermons have become illustrations. The term used by his disciples is ‘parables.’

In the gospels, at a rough count, Jesus tells 27 parables. They're often about the kingdom of God, just like the seven parables that we find in Matthew 13. Parables are stories taken from real life situations, out of which moral or spiritual truths can be drawn. But unlike illustrations in a sermon which make points clear; when the entire sermon becomes an illustration, its message often becomes obscure. And so parables are often enigmatic, they cause you to think, make you do the heavy lifting as you consider very carefully what Jesus might be getting at. For instance, is he making one point here or many? But don't miss the brilliance of a parable either. People love stories, we never listen more intently than when someone is telling a story, they draw us in, we can relate to them, and in the case of Jesus' para-

bles, like yesterday's one about a farmer sowing his seed, every next time that farmer would go out to sow his seed, year in year out, what do you think would come to mind as he walked along that path? Jesus' parable. As he worked he'd find himself thinking about the kingdom of God! Parables have a way of sinking deep into our memories, their lessons staying with us for life. But the disciples were right in questioning Jesus about this change.

“Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

In private, Jesus answers them plainly. The Jewish religious leaders have rejected him, as have the major towns of the region, the large crowds also are beginning to turn. So Jesus now turns himself to speaking in

parables, with the deliberate purpose of withholding further truth about himself and the kingdom of God from the crowd and his enemies. He still has much to teach, but only to those who, as yesterday's passage concluded, have 'ears to hear,' those who are still open to his message, and still genuinely seeking the kingdom of God.

Matthew's shown us very clearly the increasing hostility to Jesus and the widespread rejection of his message however the people's rejection of Jesus isn't really the emphasis of the passage in front of us today. Something else is in view. See in verse 11,

11 He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you,

but not to them.

The emphasis in our passage isn't on them rejecting Jesus, but on God having rejected them. The secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to the disciples, but not to them. This is consistent with the bible's wider teaching on election and predestination – two Christian words that refer to God's sovereignty over everything. God is all knowing, all powerful and in control of all things; therefore, it is him who chooses us and not the other way around. Jesus is teaching us this when he quotes from Isaiah, a passage that predicts their response to him, a passage, that in rejecting him, they are fulfilling:

“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or

understand.”

Ultimately it is God who gives the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to some and not others. While on the surface this may seem unfair to some, when we stop to reflect that no-one deserves salvation, that all have fallen short and all have sinned, it is not so much unfair to some as incredibly generous and merciful to others. But this is not the whole story. Verse 15 strikes the counter note, and introduces the important tension of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in matters of salvation. Importantly, Jesus makes this his final word on the matter.

15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed

their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

Yes, God chooses those who are to be saved; but equally, all people everywhere have the opportunity to choose or reject him. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation are two sides of the same coin. It's hard to understand but it is how it is. It may help to consider what Jesus is doing. Jesus is preaching to a crowd, some of whom have been graciously chosen by God and some of whom have been justly rejected by him. Yet Jesus preaches earnestly to all, and our passage says, not that they don't hear him, but that they hardly hear – there's is still hope. They're barely listening, some have deliberately

closed their eyes, but if they do listen, if they open their eyes and turn back to him then God will heal them.

Think

What do you make of this? Take some time now to meditate now over this perceived tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation. Also, consider it in the light of the parable of the sower and the four soils. It is no accident that Matthew records this private conversation with Jesus' disciples in between the giving and the explanation of this parable. You might also like to reflect over the implications of this passage for evangelism. Finally, how do the four soils and today's passage relate to the responses that you've seen towards the gospel? Or with

your own personal response to the gospel?

Pray

Then close this time in prayer. If you're a Christian, praise God that he chose you since before the beginning of time to be part of his family; that his Holy Spirit opened your eyes so that you could see. And in the same breath pray that those you know who are refusing to open their eyes, might open them, and have them opened by the Holy Spirit, so that they might hear and understand and turn and be forgiven. And if you're not a Christian then this is my prayer for you too this morning. In Jesus name. Amen.