

Matthew 13:10-17

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The disciples ask Jesus why He speaks to the people in parables rather than teaching them through literal statements. Jesus gives them a full response by explaining that only those whose hearts are open to Jesus can understand the mysteries of the kingdom. He adds that this is a fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah.

The parallel gospel accounts event and teachings are found in Mark 4:10-13, Mark 4:25, Luke 8:9-10, Luke 8:18, and Luke 10:23-24.

After *Jesus* shared this parable, His *disciples* approached *Him* and asked, *Why do You speak to them in parables?* At first blush, *parables* appear to be an indirect way of teaching truth, and their meaning is not always obvious. *Parables'* teachings are not immediately digestible. Their truths are not presented in propositional statements. They require an attentive ear to *hear* the meaning. The meaning of *parables* can often be misunderstood. His *disciples* perceived that *parables* were not always effective in communicating the truths they contained and were questioning why *Jesus* spoke to the people in this way.

The *disciples'* question seems to come from a place of humble curiosity. They do not appear to be challenging *Jesus* about how He teaches or instructing Him about how He ought to teach. Instead, the *disciples* appear to be asking why would a great teacher bother using *parables* when He could more simply teach about *the kingdom of heaven* through literal statements?

Jesus gave the *disciples* a full response. He begins with the main idea. *To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.*

There are two categories of people and two important terms in the overview of *Jesus's* response. The two categories are *you*, referring to the followers of *Jesus* (*the disciples*); and *them*, referring to everyone else (those who do *not* follow *Jesus*). The two terms are: *granted to know* and *mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*. The category of disciples are *granted to know*, and the category of others are *not granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom*.

In the first term, *granted to know*, the Greek word for *know* is “ginosko.” “Ginosko” in this context, means being “familiar with” or “personally knowing” *the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*.

The word, *granted*, in the phrase *granted to know*, occurs in what is known as the ‘passive’ voice. This means that *the disciples* received the action of being *granted*. Moreover, in the Greek, the verb translated *granted* is in what is called its ‘perfect’ aspect. The perfect aspect describes a completed action (past tense) while stressing the ongoing consequences or effects of that action. Someone or something previously *granted the disciples* the capacity to *know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*, and they were presently reaping the benefit of that granting

by understanding *Jesus's parables*. Those who did not follow *Jesus* had *not been granted* this capability.

Who or what *granted the disciples* this “ginosko”-insight?

The most obvious possibility is that it was God who *granted to the disciples* the capability of knowing the kingdom's *mysteries*. God very well may have personally opened *the disciples' eyes* to *see*, their *ears to hear*, the parables' truths. God may have granted them this when He sovereignly chose and elected them in eternity past before the foundations of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Or He may have specifically *granted the disciples* this ability when *Jesus* called and chose them to follow Him. If so, this implies that God did *not* open the minds of *them* who did *not* follow *Jesus*.

Another possibility is that *the disciples' hearts*, which were open to *Jesus's* teachings and sought to follow Him, *granted* their minds the capacity to *know*. *The disciples' disposition* toward *Jesus* and His *parables granted* them understanding that they would not be able to *hear* if they were closed minded or against *Him*. Those who did *not* follow *Jesus* or believe Him had hearts that were closed to what He taught. The people's closed hearts did *not grant them* the capacity to fully comprehend what *Jesus* taught through His *parables*. *The disciples were granted* (made able) to *hear* and *know the mysteries* of His *parables* because they had an open heart. They would have an open heart by virtue of having decided that they wanted to *see* what was true, and real. They would have chosen a perspective that truth comes from God, and they had decided to seek what was true.

This interpretation that the granting to *see* was a matter of choosing to seek what is true fits within the context of *Jesus's* “Parable of the Sower” which *Jesus* just told (Matthew 13:3-9) and is about to explain (Matthew 13:18-23). This interpretation also matches the explanation *Jesus* offers in these verses and the *prophecy of Isaiah* that He quotes. This interpretation could be true, in addition to the first interpretation. This is because the Bible presents God as clearly being sovereign over all things, while also asserting that people have real choices that create real consequences.

The idea is paradoxical to us that both are true, that God sovereignly *granted*; and *the disciples* chose. We can't reconcile these two things from a human perspective. This is, however, consistent with how the Bible presents God, who is Himself also paradoxical from a human perspective. For example, God is presented as being One, and also Three. *Jesus* is presented as being fully God, while also being fully human. As the “I AM,” God is the essence of existence, while also being the creator of all that exists. Taken together the ‘passive’ voice and ‘perfect’ aspect of *granted* touches upon the Biblical paradox that God is sovereign and that individuals are free and responsible for their choices.

The second term that deserves delving into is *mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*. *The kingdom of heaven* is a central theme in *Jesus's* ministry. As the Messiah in the line of David, *Jesus* was the King. His message often concerned *the kingdom of heaven*, whether in the form of preaching (Matthew 4:17), teaching (Matthew 5-7), or telling *parables* (Matthew 13).

The Greek word for “mystery” is “mysterion.” It refers to something hidden or secret, often of divine nature. To whoever did not follow Jesus, *the kingdom of heaven* was mysterious and its ways were secret and unknown. But *to you (disciples who follow Jesus)* the ways of *the kingdom of heaven* have been made known. When *the disciples* heard *the parables*, they were granted understanding about *the kingdom*. But when others who did not follow Jesus heard *the parables*, they were *not granted* the same level of understanding. To *them*, His *parables* like His *kingdom* were unknown *mysteries*.

It is important to keep in mind that *the kingdom of heaven* has multiple dimensions to it. Because it is eternal, it is both present and future. It is both not-of-this-world and it will be on this world. It is always something that Jesus’s followers can enter into in this life. And it is something that those who are faithful will reign in when it is fully established. *The mysteries of the kingdom* are also eternally present and eternally future. Its secrets and ways are both spiritual and literal in nature.

Jesus continued answering the disciples’ question by offering a twin principle. The first side of the principle is *whoever has, to him more shall be given*. In other words, *whoever has a heart* that is open to understanding *shall be given* understanding. And as *he* gains understanding *he will* be able to *understand more and more* until *he has an abundance* of understanding.

But the reverse side of the principle also applies. *Whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him*. In other words, *whoever does not have a heart* that is open to understanding *shall not only not given* understanding, but he will also lose and misconstrue even that little understanding that he started with.

Everything begins with the *heart*. God has arranged the universe in such a way where human hearts tend to find what they seek (Jeremiah 29:13, Matthew 6:19-21, Matthew 6:32, Titus 1:15). That is why it is imperative that we guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23). It is not mere understanding alone that leads to wisdom and life. It is a *heart* that fears the LORD and seeks to please Him that and allows us to enter *the kingdom*:

“Make your ear attentive to wisdom;
Incline your heart to understanding.
For if you cry out for insight,
And raise your voice for understanding;
If you seek her as silver
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
Then you will understand the fear of the Lord,
And discover the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”
(Proverbs 2:2-6)

Jesus explained to His *disciples* that the reason “*I speak to them in parables*” is *because they do not fear the Lord or have a heart that is open to what He teaches*. Even *while seeing* the miracles, which clearly testify that *Jesus* is the Messiah, *they do not see*. Even *while hearing* the *parables*

demonstrating *the kingdom of heaven*, they do not hear the core truths. Nor do they understand its mysteries.

Then *Jesus* told His *disciples* that in the case of those whose hearts were against *Jesus* from the outset, that *their* confusion was in accordance with a *prophecy from Isaiah*.

This is the thirteenth time Matthew has explicitly pointed out how *Jesus* fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. (The previous twelve are found in Matthew 1:22-23, 2:5-6, 2:15, 2:16-18, 2:23, 3:1-3, 4:4-6, 4:13-16, 8:17, 10:35-36, 11:10, and 12:17-21. This list does not include the three additional Messianic prophecies that *Jesus* alluded to in Matthew 11:5-6).

Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 for *the disciples*.

*You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;
You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;
For the heart of this people has become dull,
With their ears they scarcely hear,
And they have closed their eyes,
Otherwise they would see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart and return,
And I would heal them.*

This passage from *Isaiah* is the first thing that the voice of the LORD commanded the prophet to speak to the people immediately following the prophet's famous and terrifying vision seeing the LORD in His throne room (Isaiah 6:1-8). It establishes and repeats a poetic pattern of ears—eyes—heart. In this passage God assigns the responsibility for the moral blindness and deafness unto those who *have closed their eyes*.

The first two lines depict the people's muted senses of *hearing* and *seeing* without being able to *understand* or *perceive*.

You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;

You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

These lines are followed by: *the heart of this people has become dull*. This indicates the real issue is a matter not of the mind, which hears and perceives thoughts, but of the *heart*, which decides. In this case, the people had decided to seek their own way rather than to seek what was true. The result is that they got their own way, which always the same result. When we follow our own way instead of God's way it always leads to some form of death.

The pattern of ears—eyes—heart repeats.

The first line of the repetition is *With their ears they scarcely hear*. This echoes what Jesus previously said verse 12: *whoever does not have, even what has shall be taken away from him. Even what their ears hear, they hardly hear*.

The second line is: *And they have closed their eyes*. It is not God who has *closed their eyes*. *They have* closed their own eyes. The people *have* willfully blinded themselves and refused to *see* the reality of who *Jesus* is. They don't want to see. There is a kind of lamentation over the missed opportunities that the people *have closed* themselves from. *Otherwise they would see with their eyes*. In other words, if the people had not *closed their eyes*, they would have seen the truth about *Jesus*.

The third and final thought of this repetition is: *And understand with their heart and return, And I would heal them*. Because their ears and eyes do not hear and see, because their mind is confused their hearts do not repent (which would be the proper response). The consequence of this is tragic.

The most grievous result of not *seeing* or *hearing* the truth, *hearing* the truth, and understanding the truth in their hearts and finally repenting is not being healed. The outcome of repentance is that *I [God] would heal them*.

The Greek word for *heal* in this last line of *Jesus's* quote from *Isaiah*, where God said "I would heal them" if they understood with their hearts and returned, occurs in the middle voice, which is quite surprising. In the English-speaking world, we are familiar with active voice, where the subject does the action (i.e. Moses struck the rock). And we are familiar with the passive voice, where the subject receives the action (i.e. The rock was struck by Moses). But we are not that familiar with the middle voice where the subject both does and receives the action (Moses struck himself).

When *Jesus* used the middle voice to say *And I would heal them*, He is saying that He is the One who will heal, but astonishingly He is also including Himself among those who would be healed! What can He possibly mean by this? How can *Jesus* who is perfect and omnipotent God be healed?

When God the Son became man, He identified with all of man's frailty and weakness (Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 2:9-10, 17). He also assumed all of humanity's sin upon Himself (Isaiah 53:5; John 1:29; II Corinthians 5:21; I John 2:2). *Jesus* died so that we might be healed through His death (I Corinthians 5:15; I Peter 3:18) so our relationship with God could be restored, and we might enter His family. This restores creation to the place it was intended. Since *Jesus* made everything, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:17) perhaps *Jesus* is indicating here that bringing all people to Himself would bring healing to that which He created, and which is an extension of His glory.

It may be in this sense that *Jesus* is both the Healer and One who was healed (Romans 8:11; I Corinthians 6:14).

After quoting the fulfillment of *Isaiah*, *Jesus* affirmed *the disciples*. *But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears because they hear*. His *disciples* do see and understand because they have chosen in their hearts to trust and follow *Jesus*. They have repented of their ways, returned to their God, and been healed by Him. They were poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3), mourned over their sins (Matthew 5:4) and are now pure in heart (Matthew 5:8). Consequently, *the disciples* are “Makarios” and able to *understand* the meaning of *Jesus’s parables* and *the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*.

Jesus concluded His response to *the disciples’* question with a wonderful thought. He told them

that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and that they desired to hear what you hear but that they did not see or hear it. The thing *what they desired was to see and hear* the Messiah which they longed for and loved. *The disciples* have the wonderful privilege of seeing and hearing *Jesus*, the Messiah, daily as they minister and proclaim His kingdom together.

It is fascinating to note that even though the disciples were *granted to see*, they were still missing much of what *Jesus* was teaching them. They will not understand that *Jesus* needed to suffer and die, and will resist the thought even when *Jesus* tells them plainly. Peter will go so far as to rebuke Him over this (Mathew 16:22). They will *not understand* many things until after *Jesus* rose from the dead (John 2:22; 12:16). This makes it clear that coming to *know Jesus* by faith is a journey that takes time and experience. If *Jesus’s* own *disciples* failed, and *Jesus* was patient with them, that is encouraging for us.

Biblical Text

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” *Jesus* answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of *Isaiah* is being fulfilled, which says,

**‘YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.’**

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.