

Once Upon a Time
An Introduction to the Parables
Matthew 13:10-13

We all love a good story. There is something about a good story that touches the heart. Whether it is “once upon a time” or my personal favorite “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” a story has the power to do something to us that mere facts and information cannot.

What do children ask? They do not say, “Tell me some facts. Will you read me some information?” No. They say, “Tell me a story.” We tell them stories not just to entertain them, but to shape their minds and mold their hearts. Children's Sunday School is built around the idea that teaching children certain stories, from a certain source, with certain conviction can shape their character in a certain way.

But stories are not just for children. Adults are also captivated by an engaging tale. From Homer to J.K. Rowling great storytellers have been capturing hearts and minds for thousands of years. Before the onset of written language, ancient cultures passed on their tradition and values through stories. The written word only expands the power of the story, and stories and their tellers become part of the culture itself as is the case with Mark Twain or Will Rogers.

Today, stories are not limited only to spoken or written word. We have them portrayed before us on giant movie screens, beamed into our homes on T.V. These stories can cost into the millions of dollars. Peter Jackson's Hobbit trilogy cost a record \$623 million dollars. But these stories are played out before us in rich, full digital color, and 3d stereo surround sound.

The computer age now brings us this same quality of story that we can participate in and help decide the outcome. Last week I was talking to Zach about Fallout 4, an epic computer game that pulls the player into a gripping story about a father searching for his kidnapped son. But even with all our technology and expensive special effects, it still takes a good story teller. Images and effects can fascinate the eye, but they don't capture the heart. George Lucas, creator of Star Wars, said “A special effect without a story is a pretty boring thing.” Cameras and lights don't make characters come to life. Only a finely honed plot and a well-crafted story can do that. A good story moves you to re-evaluate the world and your place in it. A good story changes the world, because a good story changes you.

Whenever a movie comes out that is based on a book, what do people always say? “The book is better than the movie.” Why? Because the power of the story rests entirely in the hands of the story teller, not the interpretation of actors or directors. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but words allow your mind to create pictures all its own. The words of a good story have the greatest special effect of all, our imagination.

A good story weaves into words a net that ensnares you. When a good story comes across the tongue of a capable wordsmith; it can seemingly suspend reality, or make a hard to understand truth so real you can almost feel it.

When it comes to great story tellers, Jesus is one of the greatest of all time. A full third of all the teachings of Jesus we have are stories.ⁱ “Jesus’ parables are among the best known and most influential stories in the world.”ⁱⁱ Even people who know nothing of Jesus are aware of concepts such as the Good Samaritan. And for those of us who follow Jesus, we can hardly imagine our faith without the powerful image of a father who rushes out to welcome the return of his prodigal son. It is very likely that many of you grew to love the Scriptures or even came to follow Jesus through one of these stories.

These stories of Jesus are a particular kind of story. We call them parables. Over the next few weeks we will be looking at the parables of Jesus. I fully expect that as we take a fresh look at these stories, you will find them just as moving as you did as a child in Sunday School, or as powerful as they were when you were still dripping wet from the baptistery. And I pray that for some of you, that these parables of Jesus may move you to a first-love, a love for the Bible as God's infallible word to us, and a first-love for Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

The word "parable" means to place one thing beside another. A parable compares an unknown thing to a known thing. It has been said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. A parable is a fictional story that tells the truth. Jesus would take abstract spiritual truth and put it in terms of a down-to-earth story, that his listeners could identify with in a very practical way.

These were not just stories to entertain, but they were powerful metaphors woven into a story that changed lives. For some, Jesus' parables were like the turning on of a spiritual light, but for others it put them in the fog of confusion. They awakened the hearts of some, but

perplexed the minds of others. They were enlightening and subversive. They have been called both works of art and weapons of conflict. They delighted some, and offended others. But without a doubt, Jesus' parables had a powerful impact on all who heard him. The crowds were awed and amazed at Him. They said he taught differently from all the other teachers.

As Jesus would walk along the seashore or the countryside he could point to something such as a net, or a farmer planting seed, and use it to teach a profound spiritual truth. Someone would ask, "What is the kingdom of heaven like?" and Jesus would say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who planted seed in his field..." Thus Jesus was throwing an earthly story alongside a spiritual truth. Jesus would use common things like a coin, or a wedding, or sheep, to teach uncommon things like repentant prayer and unconditional love. He would use everyday things to teach the eternal.

Many of the parables were told in answer to a question. Instead of giving a direct answer, Jesus would tell a story, forcing the hearer to search the story for her own answer.

Why did Jesus do this? Why did He teach using parables? Fortunately, we are not the first to ask this question. Jesus' disciples also asked Jesus this question and he answered them. Turn with me to Mt. 13:10-13, and we will see how he answered this question.

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "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 he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

We see here two purposes in the parables. 1.) conceal the truth. 2,) reveal the truth. On the surface these might seem like contradictory purposes. How can a story at the same time both conceal and reveal the truth. Which purpose a story served depended entirely on the hearer. The listener's own attitude determined the purpose of the parable in his own life. So, in one parable, Jesus may be revealing to the truth to some, while concealing it from others. Each purpose was directed toward a separate audience. Let's look at each of these purposes, and what audience we might find ourselves in in our own spiritual lives.

I. Parables Conceal the Truth

Jesus makes it very clear in our text that the secrets of the kingdom were given to some,

but not to others. Why would Jesus hide the truth? That doesn't seem loving and fair. Jesus was not hiding the truth, but putting it where only those who really wanted it could find it.

Have you ever taken your young children, or grandchildren to an Easter egg hunt? Easter egg hunts for little kids don't really hide the eggs. They are just strewn about on an open lawn. It's not really about who can find the eggs but who can run and put them in their basket the fastest. That is not how Jesus dispensed the truth. He put it where you had to seek for it. You had to hunger and thirst for the truth to find it.

The truth was only revealed to those who really wanted it. The only soil that could receive the truth is the heart that is willing to find it. But to those hearts that were hostile to the truth, that were rebellious, that had no love for the things of God, to them the truth was hidden. Jesus knew that the truth would only be abused in their hands. They would take the treasures of the kingdom and twist and distort and pervert them to their own liking, just like they had done with the O.T. law. You don't give your treasures to thieves, or your pearls to swine.

Jesus was not being unfair or unloving by deciding who could know the truth or who couldn't. He was protecting the truth from those who had already shown that they had no love for the truth in their lives. They had rejected the truth they had already been given. They rebelled against what they already knew to be true. This is why Jesus said, *"Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."*

Let's look at an example of this in Scripture. Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 7:13 and we will see what happens to Pharaoh as God through Moses asks him to let his people go.

Exod 7:13

Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.

Exod 7:22

But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Exod 8:15

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Exod 8:19

The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said.

Exod 8:32

But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

Exod 9:12

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.

A similar thing happened to the nation of Israel. Look at Is. 6:9-10

Isa 6:9-10

⁹ *He said, "Go and tell this people: "'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'*

¹⁰ *Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."*

God wasn't being cold and cruel to His people by keeping the truth from them. If you read through the first five chapters of Isaiah you will see how the Israelites had rejected, abused, perverted, or rebelled against every truth God had given them. They had made it plain that they had no love for the truth, so even what they had would be taken from them. Jesus used these very verses to explain why he spoke in parables.

This process of hardening one's heart to the truth is something that can happen in our own lives today. We must be on guard against it. This is why the Bible can be fresh and alive, and exciting, and challenging and encouraging to one, while it is dull, and boring, and meaningless to another. The Christian life can be filled with great awe, with continual new insights for living for one, but for another it is an old fashioned, senseless way to live.

For those of you sitting here this morning, this problem will likely present itself in one of two ways. First, there are those of you that have never received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You've been coming to church. You may have even been reading your Bible. You're like one who's been coming up to the fence to see what's on the other side. At first you are fascinated by what you see, but somewhat intimidated. But you can't observe forever. You have had many opportunities to respond to God's truth. But every time you walk away, every time you decide to wait you may be endangering yourself. Because sometime you will walk away and will find no reason to come back.

There is also a danger for those of us who are Christians. Believers can also harden their hearts to the truth. We can grow lazy in our walk of faith. We can let a certain sin go unchecked in our lives. And when sin is allowed to become continual and habitual it has a strangling effect on our faith. It chokes our desire for the truth. Listen to this stark warning from the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 3:12-13

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Another thing that happens is that our thinking can be taken captive by deception that sounds like truth, but it isn't. This is what we talked about last Sunday night during the Truth Project. Listen to what Colossians 2:8 says,

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

Sin and worldly philosophy can deceive us, and once we are in the grip of this deception we can become incapable of seeing the truth for what it is. The truth will be concealed from us, because we haven't loved the truth. We haven't held on to the truth. We haven't been faithful to the truth. This is why we're seeing large number of so-called Christians in our country abandon biblical Christianity. We are seeing churches and people who wear the label of Christian, but they are giving up things that Christianity has believed and taught for 2,000 years. They have been hardened by sin's deceitfulness. They have been taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy. It has all the polish and shine of truth, but it is built on nothing but human ideas and spiritual darkness. The truth is concealed from them.

II. Parables Reveal the Truth

But To those that are hungering for the truth, the parables present a buffet. To those that are thirsting for understanding, they are a fountain of wisdom. To those that are hurting, they are a healing balm. To those who are lost, a guiding light.

Parables reveal the truth because they show us the connection between the spiritual and physical. It is easy to think of spiritual truth as something obscure and otherworldly. But the

parables teach us that God's truth involves the everyday, the down-to-earth, the here and now.

To those seeking the truth, parables act as both a mirror and a window. They are like mirror in that they help us see ourselves for who we really are. They reveal what really lies deep within our hearts. They help us understand our lost condition without Christ, they help us gauge how much we really love God. They reveal the true nature of our faith.

Parables are like a window in that they help us see God as he really is. In the parables we see the great reach of His grace, the great breadth of His love, and the great depth of His mercy. We see his compassion and mercy on the one hand, but also his righteous judgment. The parables won't let us just worship God as we want him to be. He won't be the god of our choosing. We must see Him as He is. In the parables the nature of our heavenly father is revealed through the words and actions of an earthly father. Our heavenly king is revealed through an earthly king. Over the next several weeks, I invite you to join us on this journey of discovery as we explore the amazing, life-changing parables of Jesus. I pray that you will find your story in Jesus' stories. These are stories that will change your life.

Conclusion:

So as we come to a close this morning, I ask you "which audience are you in?" Are you one of those to whom the truth is concealed, or revealed? What is your relationship to the truth of God? The same message awakens one, but hardens another. They melt the ice, but hardens the clay. Are you hostile to God's truth? Have you walked away time after time? Is there some sin hardening your heart? Ask yourself this question, in the last year has your heart grown harder or softer to the things of God. Your answer to that question is important.

What is the difference between the truth being concealed or revealed? It is the recognition of one's own spiritual state. It's the same as with an alcoholic. The first step in changing is recognizing and admitting your condition. "My name is and I am an alcoholic." The first thing necessary to finding your way when you're lost, is to realize you're on the wrong road. Have you made that recognition in your life? Is there a change that needs to be made this morning? Is there something to confess? Is there some repentance needed? Are you ready to say yes to Jesus Christ? Do you want Him as your Lord and Savior? You are invited to take care of that right now.

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- ⁱ Klyne Snodgrass, "Parables of Jesus", n.p. [cited 21 Sep 2016]. Online:
<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/parables-of-jesus>
- ⁱⁱ Snodgrass, Klyne 2008. *Stories With Intent*. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1.