

PONDERING THE PARABLES

Over the next few weeks we will be “*Pondering the Parables*” of Jesus. Perhaps you’ve heard a parable defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. I’d say a parable is a brief allegory, a simple illustration of a spiritual truth. Though some may be based upon actual characters and events, more often than not they seem to be merely referencing common cultural occurrences which the typical “*man*” on the street could easily identify. They were relevant narratives that anyone who wished to could grasp.

Having said this, on one occasion Jesus told His disciples that His motive for teaching in parables was so some people wouldn’t understand them. In Matthew 13:10-17 we read: **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. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 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.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”**

It’s not that the parables are too hard to comprehend, but that people whose hearts are not inclined to see their meaning will miss it entirely. I’ve found that can also be true of those who try to over analyze them, looking for cryptic meanings in every word and phrase. Typically, there is one main point to each parable, and we don’t want to miss the forest for the trees. So with that in mind, incline your hearts to hear and learn...

Jesus used over 40 parables in the gospels. I’m choosing to expound upon just a few - not necessarily because they are the more important than the others - but because the Spirit has led me to marvel over the truths they espouse. The first ones, which may have been the earliest of the parables, is found in Matthew 9:14-17.

¹⁴John's disciples came and asked (Jesus), **“How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”** ¹⁵Jesus answered, **“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while He is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.** ¹⁶ **No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.** ¹⁷ **Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined.”**

Then, Jesus concludes His parabolic teaching by saying: **"No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."**

Though familiar to His listeners, perhaps the illustrations of cloth patches and wineskins are lost on many of us. Yet, ask any seamstress (*or mom or granny*) and she'll tell you that **new patches are not compatible with old cloth**. If you sew a piece of new denim onto an old worn-out pair of jeans, the first time you wash them, the new patch will shrink and the threads will pull loose. And you may not be able to find a little old winemaker still living who used them, but in Jesus' time, wine was stored in skins made of an animal's bladder or hide. If **"new" wine was put into such a skin** that had been previously used, the fermentation process would cause the bag to burst.

I imagine we've had experience with some similar things. What would happen if you refilled a water balloon several times with soda pop? I'll tell you: the balloon would pop. The other day, being the frugal guy that I am, I poured hot coffee into a paper cup, which though clean, I'd used before. Guess what? It leaked. The sole of a pair of my favorite shoes was allowing water to seep in. Not caring much for wet feet on a cold day, I repaired them with some sealant. It worked for a day or two, but then I had wet socks all over again. They've since been replaced.

I've heard many applications to this principle, such as:

- 1) New ideas will split a traditional style church wide open. You have to plant new churches if you're ever going to update methods and introduce technology.**
- 2) Contemporary Christian praise won't blend with hymns. You've got to have one or the other in a single worship service. Want both? You have to have two services.**
- 3) Anybody over fifty is so stuck in their ways that they will never accept change. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.**

Now, though you may think these things are true, this church is proof that it isn't always the case. Newcomers may think we've always been the way we are, but they'd be wrong. Ask someone whose been around for a while. In fact, whether you see it to be better or not, in the 12 years I've been here, this church has opened her heart to truths she'd not previously understood, becoming more gracious and accepting in the process. She's embraced new ideas of ministry, incorporated newer technology, and broadened her horizons concerning worship. Yet, listen carefully, Jesus intended for them to get a simple and singular meaning – and it had little, if anything, to do with worship or ministry ideas.

Many people in the audience that day were torn between following their past leaders (*the Pharisees or John the Baptist*) and following Jesus. In essence, He is confronting that issue, letting them know that they couldn't straddle the fence. They had to come down on one side or the other. They had to make a choice. That is still true for you and me today.

Listen very carefully. Jesus is not a new patch for an old garment. He didn't come to patch up your marriage, mend your broken heart, or repair a rift in your family or your church. He didn't come to fill a hole in our life. He can do all of that and more - but He didn't come to fix or weak areas, or make us comfortable with our old lives. He came to restore and to make all things new. **His teaching is the new garment** meant to replace the old.

Neither is Jesus some “*feel good*” energy drink. He did not come to fulfill our wishes or satisfy our desires. He won't merely pour Himself into our old habits. He didn't come just to give us a buzz, take the edge off of our stress, make us forget our troubles, or help us unwind at the end of the day. **His teaching is the New Wine** that'll stir things up within us.

In practical terms, Jesus will not fit into “*our*” religion. That might seem easy for us to accept for those who embrace witchcraft or Satanism. But what of the Islamic faith or the Hindu philosophies of reincarnation and nirvana? Or how about the ancestry worship of the Shinto religion or the path of enlightenment of Buddhism? Aren't some of the things some religions teach similar to Jesus' teachings? In context, Jesus is saying that many of the traditions of Judaism weren't compatible with His teachings. The Pharisees and Sadducees and the Essene sects all taught practices of men. Jesus is also saying that even the strict self-denial and works merited salvation associated with following John the Baptist conflicted with His message of grace and love. In fact, much of Paul's writing is addressed to these very issues. The book of Colossians for instance specifically deals with syncretism – the attempt to blend Christ into world religions and philosophies into some sort of spiritual fruit salad. In Colossians 2:4, after insisting the Christ is supreme, says this: **“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”** If neither Judaism, nor the strict teachings of John the Baptist - or any other religion of the time, for that matter, could accommodate Jesus and His teaching, which “*religion*” today will? The answer is simple: **NONE OF THEM! No matter how we may try to force Him into their mold.**

So what about the Christian cults today? Will the teachings of the Jehovah's witnesses align with the teaching of Jesus? How about the followers of Joseph Smith? And what of the “*so-called*” mainstream Christian denominations? Will Jesus' teaching ever conflict with that of a devout Catholic or Protestant? Will His words cause the concrete ideas of eschatology or theology in any of the over 700 denominations to crumble?

More personally, will Jesus' teaching fit into our preconceived ideas and judgements? Will strict republicans, democrats, constitutionalists, socialists, and libertarians ever find Jesus' teaching challenging their tightly held beliefs? Will those who believe in defending their rights struggle with Jesus' call to turn the other cheek? What will those who are always passive, avoiding conflict and confrontation at all costs?

What will they do with the Jesus who drove the money changers from the temple and boldly confronted the hypocrites, calling them a brood of vipers and whitewashed tombs? Will a rigid sense of justice block Jesus' call to pray for those who trespass against us? What of His insistence that we must forgive those who've hurt us or those we love? Will our right to be angry be able to contain that?

The reality is that Jesus and His teaching are not merely to be accommodated – as if we're making room for them as long as they don't interfere with our lives. There's no way that will work. I confess that I have tried to do that and it has been disastrous. Only in abandoning the concept of approaching God through "*religious*" observances can I embrace a "*relationship*" with Him through Christ. And only when I am ready to accept that Jesus' Word must trump the words of any prophet, pastor, priest, or parent – no matter how close to God they may be - am I going to be fully ready for Him.

Jesus' teaching was – and still is - new, fresh, and transformational. Our old ways - no matter how noble or sincere they may be - cannot contain the Way of Christ. If we try to swallow only what we find palatable, even that radical teaching will eventually burst our bubble, tear apart our imperfect interpretations, puncture our faulty perceptions, and leave us empty. Becoming a Christ follower means exchanging our old life for a new one. Christianity is not just another religion to be added into the mix.

The first and most fundamental claims of Jesus is a deal breaker. Jesus was God in the flesh who said, **"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me."** (John 14:6) That will not fit into the culture of relativism. If you are absolutely sure that there are no absolutes, will Jesus burst that bubble? Will He tear our religion apart at the seams? Absolutely!