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Matthew 13:10–13, NRSVue.

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

¹¹ He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

Grab yourself a parable.

There is something about the parables that many believers who are familiar with the Bible are not fully aware of. It gets to the heart of why the parables are so worthy of study. At the beginning of Chapter 13, Jesus tells the parable of the Sower. In this chapter, Jesus preaches to crowds, and he does so largely with parables. Let’s look at this highly memorable parable. He is standing in a boat, preaching to the crowd on the shore:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears, hear!”

This parable is not about sowers. It is about soils. Jesus’ teachings take root differently in different kinds of soils. Seeds that land on a hard path are eaten up by birds. Seeds that fall on rocky soil survive for a while, but then are scorched and

they die. Other seeds get choked in weedy ground. But some seeds fall on good soil and bring forth grain. Here is something very interesting. Jesus only explains two of his parables fully. This is one of them. He does so several verses later:

¹⁸ "Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

Here is why the explanation of this parable is critical to understanding Jesus' use of parables. The point is that he does not, in general, explain his parables. The reason he gives is not because they are obvious. Rather, consider this:

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹ He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.

The Apostles ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. He tells them that it is so he can tell them secrets. Only those who "see", in other words, those who believe in him, can "perceive" and "understand". In other words, the parables are a sort of coded or secret way of conveying truths. This sounds intriguing, the idea that only those

of us who are true followers of Christ can understand what he is saying to us in his parables. The problem is that very few of us read the parables and cannot come up with reasonable ways to interpret them. Some are a bit difficult to understand, while others are obvious. Often a parable will have a straightforward interpretation, but also have a deeper, not so obvious meaning. But in general, we don't think of them as being written in some sort of spiritual code. So, what is happening here? I'm going to get back to this. We'll see what Jesus really means when he says this of those who cannot understand the parables: *"seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."*

But let's step back and look at the nature and history of parables. Jesus did not invent the parable. Jesus was teaching in a way that was a developing Rabbinic tradition. There are a handful of parables in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. But starting around the time of Christ, parables began to appear in Jewish literature. Around 2,000 of them have been identified. More significantly, the ancient world produced many, many parable-like stories. Fables are often very similarly structured to parables, in that both are short allegories – and fables date back to the 4th century B.C. Jesus was carrying on the long-standing, ancient tradition of teaching moral concepts by using stories that superficially were about everyday situations and concepts. It made his teachings easy to relate to – which

is the key reason why his explanation that they are somehow encoded difficult to understand. In his parables, Jesus talked about agriculture, shepherding, formal meals, household finances, building, family relationships, and business. The parables appear only in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and not in John, and Matthew and Luke contain most of them. Some stories are cast as parables in one Gospel, but not as parables in another Gospel. They vary in how they are told. The Gospel writers sometimes interpret the parables for us – as Jesus does not frequently do this. There are some significant differences in how the same parable is interpreted in different Gospels. Jesus tended to use parables when he ran up against opposition. Many of the parables depict the Kingdom of God.

Rather than looking at parables we are familiar with, such as the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, and the Rich Man and Lazarus, let's look at a lesser known one. In Matthew 21, Jesus tells us the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Notice that like many of the parables, it involves slaves:

“There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away.³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way.³⁷ Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what

will he do to those tenants?”⁴¹ They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

In this parable, the landowner is God. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God. The tenants are the Jewish leaders, the aristocratic Sadducees from the Temple, the successful businesspeople who served as Pharisees in the Synagogues, and the Chief Priests. The slaves, who in many translations are called “servants” – we talked about this in a recent message – are prophets whom God has sent to teach the people. The messengers from God are rejected to the point that God had to send his own son, Jesus, to bring the Word to them. Jesus, in this parable, is predicting his ultimate crucifixion at the hands of his corrupt religious leaders and the Roman authorities. The tenants even kill the son. Because of this, God will cast aside these tenants, and God will bring his Word to other people, those who are willing to accept him. The new tenants are a small fragment of the Jewish population, along with a growing number of Gentiles. In this parable, Jesus is telling the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Chief Priests that they are going to kill him, but their time is up. As it turns out, historically, the Second Temple would be destroyed about 35 years later, and the Pharisees and Sadducees would disappear from history.

I chose this parable for two reasons. First, most of us are not that familiar with it. Second, and more importantly, it does lend some credence to Jesus’

apparent statement that unbelievers, those who reject his Word, are not likely to understand it. It's not the most obvious parable. Here are some general guidelines as you read the parables, especially the ones that are not explained by Jesus in detail or by the Gospel writer. First, look at each parable from the perspective of Jesus' ministry. Put them in proper historical and spiritual context. Think about how they would impact a first century reader living in the emerging world of the Christian Church. Second, keep in mind that the parables tend to have something to do with the Kingdom of God. Jesus uses parables to illuminate aspects of God's Kingdom. Third, and this can be difficult for some of us, the parables often contain allusions to the Old Testament. The parable we just looked at begins with language that is very reminiscent of material from the fifth chapter of Isaiah. Jesus's listeners would have recognized this, and it would have helped them interpret it. Fourth, remember that each parable typically has a very focused point. Don't overcomplicate your interpretation of a parable. Fifth, and finally, and this can be difficult to recognize, as well, the parables are often arranged in the Gospels as part of a longer theme, running through given sections of the Gospels. The authors use them to accentuate the overall message they are trying to convey.

Here is a very short parable from Chapter 2 of Luke. It is also told in Matthew.

²¹ *“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”*

In the context of this Gospel, the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees were heckling Jesus. This parable makes Jesus’ position on this clear. Jesus is telling them that he isn’t there to lift up the old law. He isn’t putting a patch on an old garment. He is doing something very new. He is bringing a new covenant to us. If the Pharisees want to fully understand what Jesus is up to, they need to keep this in mind. This brings us back to the issue we began with. Remember that Jesus, when asked by his Apostles to explain why he taught with parables, said this:

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

Consider what comes immediately after this. Jesus is still speaking:

¹⁴ *With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:*

*‘You will indeed listen but never understand,
and you will indeed look but never perceive.*

¹⁵ *For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes,
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart and turn—*

and I would heal them.'

¹⁶ *"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

Jesus quotes the great Prophet Isaiah. This is important for us today, when considering the parables of Jesus. Remember that Jesus is talking to religious leaders who have rejected and attacked him. They will fully recognize and understand this reference, as they themselves teach from the words of the great Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is saying here that the People of God have grown resistant to their Covenant with God. Jesus is thus telling the people to whom he is speaking that a parallel thing is happening here: even though God sent prophets to speak for him, they often did no good because a corrupt people refused to listen, and likewise, Jesus has come to introduce a new covenant – and yet only a few will pay attention. He then says that his followers are the ones who do see and who do hear. They are understanding things that so many people before them refused to understand.

So, what does this mean for us today? The parables are not meant for those who are not going to listen. They will hear them and not understand. In other words, the parables are for those who are open to the Word. This is not a literal statement. Of course, any intelligent person of the time of Jesus could have

interpreted what he said. The same is true today. Jesus is really saying that these parables are a gift for us. They have been placed in the Gospels for all those to come who want to learn the truths about the Kingdom of God. Have you ever read a textbook that periodically has a box inserted in the text, and in that box, the primary points being made by the author in the given chapter are stated in simple, clear, summary terms? That's what a parable is: a compact illustration, one that is also poetic, and that tells us about the New Covenant and the New Kingdom.

Let's end with the parable of the Mustard Seed, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The mustard seed was proverbial in ancient Palestine. It was very tiny, but a large plant, about eight feet high, would quickly grow from it, sometimes in just one season. However, it was not a tree. So, the typical interpretation of this parable is overly simplistic and a bit incorrect. The parable is not about a tiny seed, our initial faith, growing into a huge tree, meaning the greatest faith imaginable. As it turns out, in the parable in Matthew, we are told that the branches of the mustard plant are big enough to give shade to "the birds of the sky". An ancient reader would have seen a reference to Ezekiel and Daniel in this. In Ezekiel in particular, a similar metaphor, "a noble cedar" tree, gives birds a place to rest in the shade. In Ezekiel, he is talking about David's kingdom. So, in truth, Jesus, in the mustard seed parable, is talking about the Kingdom of God growing out of

something very common and very small - and giving us all a peaceful place to rest. So, keep in mind that the parables on one hand are sometimes simple and obvious. But more often, there is a lot of truth to Jesus' statement about the hidden meaning in the parables, things that only deep and learned believers will catch on to. You must be open to God's word to grasp the deeper truth that a parable often conveys. Remember that Jesus did say: *"The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'"* So, grab yourself a parable. They are meant for us, for you. Read them and be blessed by them. You might want to look at a commentary as you read them. Find God speaking directly to you in the parable you choose.

Please pray with me.

God, thank you for Scripture, Old and New. Thank you for its truths and its depth. We thank you for the parables of Jesus. They tell us of your kingdom, your grace, your fairness, and your love for us. We ask you to guide us as we read and study them. Amen.