



Tales of the Unexpected

The Power of Jesus' Parables

Melvin Tinker
with
Nathan Buttery.



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





Melvin Tinker is Vicar of St John's Newland in Hull. His other publications include *Alien Nation* (Christian Focus Publications, 2001, ISBN 1-85792-677-3) and *Road to Reality* (Christian Focus, 2004, ISBN 1-85792-958-6). Melvin is married to Heather and they have three boys.

Nathan Buttery's first degree was in Latin and Greek, then after a few years working as a Youth Worker in North London he did another degree, this time in theology and became the Assistant Minister at St. John's Newland in Hull. Nathan is married to Debbie.

Copyright © Melvin Tinker & Nathan Buttery 2006

ISBN 978-1-84550-116-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2006

by

Christian Focus Publications,
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Scotland

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by
Moose77.com

Printed and bound by
Nørhaven Paperback A/S

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licenses are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.





Preface

‘Every picture tells us a story.’ The genius of Jesus as a communicator was his ability to paint a picture with every story he told. Some of these ‘parables’ are simple similes— ‘the kingdom of heaven *is like* a man who sowed good seed...’. Others are simile stories, as with the labourers in the vineyard, while others are example stories, the best known being the story of ‘The Good Samaritan’. These parables, often taken from everyday Palestinian life, aimed not simply to ‘inform’ people about the nature of God’s rule, which Jesus came to establish (the kingdom of heaven), but to *transform* people’s lives. In other words, they were part of the *means* Jesus used to secure that saving rule in men and women’s hearts. Sometimes Jesus’ parables had the effect of getting people to see things differently as he provided a new lens through which to view reality aright.

Other parables provoke and challenge people into action. They perform more than one function, helping us see things we have not seen before and at the same time making us reflect upon where we stand and what we are going to do with this new insight. By enabling the hearer to ‘get inside’ the story, perhaps by identifying with some of the characters or themes, Jesus disarms us. He gets in below our radar, which would otherwise cause us to erect defences to offset his teaching. Jesus speaking in parables may at times have left the crowds puzzled or affronted. They may have





8 TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

laughed or cried, but one thing is certain, they were never bored.

This book will suit Christians and non-Christians alike. It seeks to allow Jesus' parables to do their God-intended work. This involves providing some explanation of their original setting in the life of Jesus' ministry and relating them to our present day.

The book began life as a series of sermons delivered at St John's Newland. Jesus preached the parables, so we have tried to follow suit and where possible to keep something of the direct nature of the original sermons.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Joanna Tinker for her tireless work in editing the manuscript. Also our thanks go to the congregations of St John's and their encouragement in being good 'hearers and doers of the Word.' Lastly, we would like to express our appreciation of our wives, Heather and Debbie, for their unceasing support in our ministry.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Melvin Tinker and Nathan Buttery.
St John's Newland, Hull, 2006.





1

The Power of Parables

Matthew 13: 1–23

We had been praying for Tom and Sarah for a long time, so long we had almost given up hope. They were two ordinary students who were living lives that ordinary students are supposed to lead: eating, drinking, sleeping, and occasionally working. After a while, however, both of them became interested in Jesus Christ, and then, eventually, to our complete joy, both of them appeared to become Christians. It seemed to be a happy ending to a long story. At least, that was how it was for the first few weeks. Both came to church, both read the Bible, both met with Christian friends to talk about Jesus. But, after a few weeks, it became clear all was not well. Tom began to get some strange ideas about what being a Christian meant. He never came to terms with the change in lifestyle that following Christ entailed. He found church difficult and in the end he just gave up. Sarah, however, seemed to blossom. She did not find things easy, but she did stick at church. She went on a Christian camp in the summer, she found a decent church to go to when she moved cities, and she took Jesus seriously. As far as we know, she is still going strong as a Christian. Two students, one gospel, two responses. Why





did that happen? Two people who appeared to start so well, but only one is still going ten years down the road. Why? That is the question we are left asking! Why do people respond in different ways?

If we had been with Jesus following him around, seeing the things that happened in the early chapters of Matthew's gospel, then we would be asking the same 'why?' question. Matthew has made it clear who Jesus is. He is the Saviour and King promised in the Old Testament, who is here to rescue people from their sins and to bring about God's kingly rule in their lives. There can be no better news than that. And yet already Jesus has faced opposition. It has been mounting in chapters 11–12, to such an extent that the religious establishment have decided to kill Jesus. So when we get to the end of chapter 12, we are beginning to ask several 'why?' questions about Jesus: 'Jesus, if you are the king as you say you are, why do many people reject you? Jesus, if you are such a powerful king, how come there is still evil in the world? Jesus, if you and your kingdom are so great, why does this kingdom of yours seem so small and insignificant? Jesus, if your followers keep getting flack for following you, why should they bother with you?' Those are the questions being asked; questions we ourselves may be tempted to ask. We look around and see our friends rejecting the gospel. We look at our nation and see the kingdom of God ignored and despised. We look at our lives as Christians and find hardship and struggle. So we ask the question, why? Why is it this way? And it's exactly those questions Jesus stops to answer in this chapter of Matthew.

Matthew places this chapter at the heart of his gospel, like an intermission that helps to explain some key truths about the kingdom of God. The way Jesus answers these 'why?' questions is by teaching seven parables or stories in which he teaches us important spiritual truths about the kingdom of God. One key phrase which crops up in this chapter is 'the kingdom of heaven is like such and such'. So, these parables teach us about the nature of that kingdom.





The first parable is the well-known parable of the sower, or, to be more accurate, the parable of the soils. This answers the question, ‘Why do people respond in different ways to the message about Jesus?’ It is clear the passage is about the word of God, or the gospel, because Jesus says as much in his interpretation of the parable: ‘When anyone hears the message about the kingdom’ (v. 19). Jesus teaches three things about the message of the kingdom of God and the Word that extends that kingdom: God’s word is divisive (vv. 10–17); God’s word is rejected (vv. 18–22); and God’s word is fruitful (v. 23).

GOD’S WORD IS DIVISIVE

The first thing we learn about God’s word, or the message of the kingdom, is that it is divisive (vv. 10–17). It may seem strange to begin in the middle of the passage, but once we have understood this part of it, we will be in a better position to understand this parable and the whole of chapter 13. Jesus has told the story to the crowd, but a little later, the disciples ask Jesus in verse 10: ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ They ask him this question privately, and the interpretation of the parable is given only to the disciples, and that is key to understanding why Jesus speaks in parables. Jesus uses parables as a filter, or a sieve. To the casual observer these parables are just nice stories. Most of the crowd were in this category. They could not, and did not want to see the spiritual truth contained in this teaching of Jesus. But to those who wanted to know more, and who were keen to follow Jesus, the parables made them ask questions and made them think. The disciples show they are followers of Jesus by their desire to find out more. So there are two kinds of reactions: some want to think and know more about what Jesus has said others are turned off. God’s word is divisive. It invariably divides people.

But Jesus also explains why there is this division in humanity, between those who reject his teaching, and those who accept it. There are two complementary answers. The





first reason for this division is that God reveals the truth to people: 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them' (v. 11). The disciples have had this truth about the kingdom of God revealed to them. God has opened their eyes. The truth is, we cannot make ourselves understand about Jesus. We are sinful to the core and natural rebels against God. The only way we can have our thinking turned around to worship God, instead of hating him, is for God to reveal the truth to us and open our blind eyes. And what a relief that is, because it means our salvation is in God's hands. God reveals his truth to people. And by definition, says Jesus, that means others do not have the truth revealed to them.

Before we think that is unfair, there is a flip side to this coin which Jesus explains in verse 15. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah. God told Isaiah the people would reject his message, and the reason for this rejection was entirely the responsibility of the people. Thus we learn our second reason for the division. People are responsible for their decision about Jesus. So Matthew quotes Isaiah as saying: 'This people's heart has become calloused [or, hardened]; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes' (13: 15). The people have deliberately closed their ears to the message of Jesus. They have walked away and so they will be judged for their rejection of the Saviour. That is what the second half of verse 15 means. It is not that Jesus does not want to rescue people; rather, people do not want him to rescue them. In one sense, they do hear the message in that they hear the parable, but in another sense they do not hear; they do not penetrate below the surface meaning, so they fail to understand.

Think of it like this: you are about to go on holiday. To get to your destination you have to take a plane. And when you go on a plane there are the usual safety announcements telling you where the exits are, how to put on your life jacket and so on. But how many people listen to the announcement? Almost no one. Yes, in one sense all the





people hear. You cannot fail to since they turn up the sound so much. Yet in another sense they do not hear, because it goes in one ear and out the other. And when it comes to a crash, they will be found wanting, because they have ignored the safety briefing and will not know what to do. They will have to take responsibility for their fate because they heard the safety message and ignored it.

Jesus, then, is telling us two things. First, God chooses to reveal his truth to some and we cannot understand that truth without his revelation, and second, at the same time, we are responsible for whether we accept it or not. Those truths may seem contradictory, but throughout the Bible they run in parallel: God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Yes, God is sovereign, but we are also responsible for our actions. And so, to come back to the parables, the reason Jesus speaks in parables is to filter out his hearers. Those who follow Jesus and want to know more will seek the truth of what he is saying; those who have will be given more. But those who do not want to know will hear, yet not understand. And tragically, the more you hear, the more hardened your heart will become; even what you have will be taken from you. If you fail to respond to the light God has given you, then even that light will be taken from you. Your rejection of Jesus becomes your judgement.

God's word is divisive. The evangelist sees that every time the gospel is proclaimed, some reject the message, others accept it. Of course, some will accept it later, after having initially rejected it, yet still the division stands. Those who accept the message, whose hearts are softened to God, and those who reject Jesus, whose hearts are hard. And the parables show up that division as clear as day.

Following the success of the film 'Titanic', an exhibition was mounted. It was a fascinating exhibition of various bits of the Titanic that different rescue ships had picked up in the mid Atlantic. It was clear the ship was a marvellous place to be if you were wealthy. But there was one obvious thing in that exhibition: although there were three classes





of passenger on that ship, depending on wealth, on that cold night in April 1912, there were only two classes of passenger. At Southampton Docks on the day following the disaster, there was a notice which had two lists, showing the two classes of people: those known to be saved, and those known to be dead. The great divide on that ship was no longer based on wealth, but on whether you were rescued or not.

Jesus teaches us in this passage that there are two types of people in the world: those who are saved and those who are lost. It depends on our response to Jesus. The question that immediately arises is: which category are you in? Have you accepted the Word, or rejected it? Either way, God's word is divisive.

GOD'S WORD IS REJECTED

Having looked at this central section first, let us move on to the parable itself, as we see Jesus' second point: God's Word is rejected (vv. 18–22). Jesus' parable works out some of the applications of how people respond to God's Word, or the message of the kingdom as Jesus says in verse 19. It explains what happens whenever the gospel is preached, whenever the farmer sows the seed, whether the farmer is Jesus or us today. The story itself is straightforward and would have immediately rung bells in the minds of his audience. Jesus uses a homely example to make his point: a man sows some seed—a common sight in ancient Palestine. The seed lands on four different types of ground: the hard-trodden path; the shallow, stony ground; the thorny ground; and the good, rich soil. The first three all die after a while: the first is eaten by birds straightaway, the second scorched by the sun, and the third choked by thorns. Only the last survives—it takes root and bears a huge harvest. That is the story. Later, however, when he is alone with the disciples, Jesus explains the parable. The common thread with the first three types of soil where the gospel seed lands is that the word is rejected. It may look as if there is genuine acceptance and





growth, but sooner or later, the seed dies. The problem is not with the seed—the message of the gospel—but with the soil where it lands, that is, the person the gospel is given to. Notice, too, that in each of these three cases, Jesus says the person hears the message. The problem comes in what happens next.

The Path

Firstly there is the seed that lands on the path: ‘When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path’ (v. 19). This person hears the message about Jesus, and yet, instantly, the devil snatches the message away. Their heart is so hard there is no chance for the word to take root in their lives. It is the person who perhaps comes to a church service, but simply walks away with no thought whatsoever of accepting the message. The chilling thing Jesus tells us is the devil is at work to take away the seed. The Bible makes it clear that if we are without Christ then we are going the devil’s way. So any attempt to share the gospel with others is, by nature, a spiritual battle.



The Rocky Ground

The next type of soil where the seed lands is the rocky soil: ‘The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away’ (v. 20). Notice that this person again hears the word, and even receives it with joy, and yet, down the track, they are shown up for their shallow profession. This person seems at first to be going well; they are full of joy, and involve themselves in everything. As time goes by, however, it becomes clear that they never put down any real roots. Their faith is so shallow that, when trouble strikes, they dry up and wither away; all fizz, no





substance. They have no spiritual backbone to get them through the tough times of life. There is a serious danger that many Christians may be like this; enthusiastic at first, yet so busy doing church things there is no time to read the Bible and develop their relationship with God. So, when trouble strikes, either persecution for the faith or other suffering like unemployment, bereavement, financial stress, or illness, there is no anchor to hold them. Their faith is shown for what it is—rootless and hopeless. They are spiritual fireworks: loud and exciting for a few brief moments, and then nothing.

The Thorny Soil

Then there is the thorny soil: ‘The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful’ (v. 21). This is the most challenging to twenty-first-century Christians. How many Christian lives are slowly choked to death by worry and materialism? You may not be able to detect it on any given day, but over the months and years, slowly this professing Christian is dying. Yes, they keep coming to church, but Jesus has little impact on their lives. All sorts of weeds grasp at the throat of this little shoot, slowly draining it of spiritual life, until at last it is just a lifeless twig. Wealth is perhaps the biggest killer. Not that money in itself is wrong, but the love of it has shipwrecked many a faith.

The true story is told of a rich London banker who died, and who had wanted the hymn ‘Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah’ at his funeral. The third verse was supposed to go: ‘When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death, and hell’s destruction, land me safe on Canaan’s side.’ But there was a misprint on the order of service, and, instead of saying, ‘land me safe on Canaan’s side,’ it read, ‘land my safe on Canaan’s side.’ The trouble was that it summed up his life: a professing Christian who loved money more than God. You do not have to be a rich





banker to love money more than God. We always want that little bit more, and the way we spend our time and money reveals our priorities. Then there is worry, another weed to sap our spiritual life. Jesus said: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matt. 11: 28). Do we believe that? If so, we are to do it, and not let the thorns get their hands on our spiritual throat.

We see three ways in which the seed is rejected, and yet it is not the seed that is the problem; it is the soil, the heart of the individual. The seed may be rejected immediately, or it may take longer, but, whichever it is, it is finally rejected.

GOD'S WORD IS FRUITFUL

Lastly, we see that God's word is fruitful—the fourth soil: 'But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown' (v. 23). Like all the others, this person hears the word, but, unlike all the rest, he or she understands it. The word takes root in their life and they produce a wonderful crop. The key is not so much the greatness of the crop, but that fruit is borne. Fruit in the Christian life is seen in all sorts of ways, but perhaps we could sum it up by saying that the person who truly accepts the gospel loves and obeys Jesus Christ. They long to pray, to grow in holiness, to be more like Jesus, to use their time, money, and energy for the kingdom of God, and to share their faith with others. That is the fruitful person, the one in whom God's word has taken root and is growing. Sometimes the progress will be slow, at other times more steady, but over the months and years, there will be growth. For where God's word takes root, it will bring back a wonderful harvest in the life of the believer.

Jesus asks each person a very important question: which soil are you? Are you the person who has rejected the gospel straight off? Then be aware of what you are doing. You are rejecting the only one who can save you. Or are you stony





soil? Is your faith so shallow that when the tough times come, as they inevitably will, you will not have enough spiritual roots to survive? Or are you thorny ground? Are other concerns and the deceitfulness of wealth slowly draining your faith away? Or are you growing and bearing fruit for your Saviour? Unless we are growing, however slowly, we are in danger of being found out as one who started well but who in the end fell away. We are not to rest on our spiritual laurels or to think we have made it. We are to keep growing and bearing fruit.

So when we ask Jesus the question, 'Why do people respond in different ways?', he gives an answer. He tells us God's word is divisive. He tells us God's word is rejected. But he also tells us God's word is fruitful. Then he turns to ask us a question: What are you doing with the word of God?

