

THE DIMMING OF THE LIGHT

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we look at the section in which Mark describes how and why Jesus began to use the parabolic method of teaching. A parable is a little story which illustrates a truth. It is a vocal cartoon. We all appreciate cartoons because they drive a point home in a very striking way.

Pastors especially enjoy cartoons. Not long ago, I visited a pastor who had plastered one whole wall of his study with cartoons -- some of them funny!

I like cartoons myself. My wife gave me one the other day and I stuck it up on my bookshelf. It shows an old man, bald-headed and hook-nosed, standing up in the middle of a congregation and saying, "I've just received a message direct from the Lord. He says he's sick to death with guitar music and tambourines!"

Now, that does not represent my point of view, but I appreciate the humor of it because it drives a point home. That is what a parable is like. It is a way of driving a point home verbally. This is the method Jesus began to use.

We are still in the section of Mark in which he deals with the danger of popularity. In our last study we saw one of the perils which arise out of a popular movement. It was the time when our Lord was beset with great multitudes who flocked in from all over the land. We saw how this very fact aroused satanically designed opposition which threatened to divest Jesus' ministry of its truth. Today we want to examine the matter of the dimming of the light which was made necessary by his popularity. That is what a parable is -- a slight dimming of the light. It is hiding the truth somewhat, as we will see when we go into this more fully.

Mark introduces the theme to us in chapter 4:

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he taught them many things in parables, {Mark 4:1-2a RSV}

This opening description takes us back to Chapter 3, where the great multitude is described to us. They came from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, from beyond the Jordan, and from the region of Tyre and Sidon. Verses 8-10 of Chapter 3 tell us that

a great multitude ... came to him. And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they should crush him; for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. {Mark 3:7a, 3:8b-10 RSV}

We need to remember why this crowd had come. They were looking for healing. They had brought the sick in great numbers to Jesus, and they pressed him to heal them. He did heal many, but he was not interested, primarily, in healing bodies. He had a greater mission in mind -- to teach and preach the Word to them so as to heal the hurt of the heart and the spirit. The crowd was making this very difficult because of their focus upon the physical. This is still happening today, so the account is right up-to-date.

Our Lord had prepared an emergency exit in case they pressed him too hard. He asked his disciples to have a boat ready for him which he could enter and push out from shore, to keep the crowd from reaching him so that he might teach them. Mark tells us this is what actually happened. The crowd pressed him so much that he had to get into the boat. Thus they defeated their own purpose by pressing him so on this matter of healing. Jesus made use of his emergency preparation, got into the boat, withdrew from the crowd, and began to teach them.

But he taught in a way he never had before; he began to tell them stories -- parables. This is the first occasion

Jesus ever made use of a parable. It was the parable of the sower, and all the gospel writers agree that this was the first one he had ever told. The disciples were impressed by this story and by the way Jesus told it, and they asked him about it later. Let us read the story he told:

... and in his teaching he said to them, "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundred-fold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." {Mark 4:2b-9 RSV}

This parable of the sower and the soils is linked in this section with two other stories of seeds. There is the seed growing secretly, in Verses 26 and on, and this is followed immediately by the story of the mustard seed which grew into a great plant. We will not take time now to look at these stories directly, but will reserve them for our next study. Instead I want to focus on what immediately follows this telling of the story of the sower, because the disciples were curious as to why Jesus used parables.

I would like to face this problem directly, since Mark gives us the explanation from the lips of Jesus himself.

Why did he turn to the use of parables, and never turn back from it, from this time on? Well, we have an explanatory paragraph beginning in Verse 10:

And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." {Mark 4:10-12 RSV}

That latter verse has caused a great deal of difficulty in many people's minds. What did he mean? Did he actually mean that he spoke in parables in order to hide the truth so that people could not understand it and thereby be forgiven? This is what it sounds as though he said. But this is only one of three explanatory paragraphs Mark inserts here, right from the lips of Jesus which help us to understand the reasons why Jesus spoke in parables.

This first one gives us a very illuminating reason. The Lord himself points out that there are two kinds of hearers, and that this is why he speaks in parables: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God." That is, one class of hearers is the disciples of Jesus -- those who follow him, who are obedient to him, who listen to him and accept his authority as Lord and teacher. To them is given the secret of the kingdom of God.

The word he actually uses is "mystery" -- the mystery of the kingdom of God. I am always entranced by these mysteries which are mentioned in Scripture. They are not vague and difficult to understand, the word does not mean that. But they are secret from the majority of people. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, says of the apostles, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," {1 Cor 4:1 RSV}. That is, as men entrusted with sacred secrets which God has told to men.

What are these mysteries? Basically, as you read through the Scriptures, you see that they are inside information on life which only believers, only disciples, are given to understand. They are, in fact, truths which the natural man cannot discover by himself. They are great missing pieces, if you like, of the jigsaw puzzle of life. Here is the world and all humanity, working away trying to explain what we are, to understand the universe in which we live, and the society in which we function -- how it works, and why it embodies such difficult problems. The nuclear physicist comes along and puts in a piece of the puzzle. Then along comes the geologist and he fits in a piece. Then the psychologist and psychiatrist fill out a part of it, and we begin to understand a bit more. Then the philosophers add their part. We keep working away at putting together this tremendously complex, amazing jigsaw puzzle of life, trying to understand it.

But Jesus declares here that there are certain missing pieces which only God can put in. And they are essential to the understanding of the problem! These he calls "the mysteries of God." In Chapters 1 and 2 of First Corinthians, Paul describes them as the "deep things of God," {1 Cor 2:10 KJV}. He says the natural man cannot understand them, for they are revealed only by the Spirit of God: "For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," {1 Cor 2:11 RSV}. Only the Spirit of God knows these deep things of God, these great and enlightening secrets which help you to grasp fully what is going on in your life, or in anybody else's. Therefore, this is not merely a certain amount of theological hogwash. This is practical truth which is hidden from us and can be revealed only by God himself.

Scripture speaks of various mysteries:

In Second Thessalonians Paul speaks of the "mystery of lawlessness," {2 Th 2:7 RSV}. This is what men all around us are trying to solve today -- the reason why evil persists in human hearts, why there seems to be a fountain of evil and violence in man which, no matter what we do to treat the symptoms, continues to pour out ever-increasing manifestations of violence and bitterness and hatred and prejudice and persecution. This is where educators, legislators, and social planners wrestle. Why is all this true? The revelation which explains it is in the secrets God alone reveals. That is why more than anything else we need to understand the Bible, because it holds the key to the problems which are at work in our lives.

Then Paul speaks of the "mystery of godliness" {1 Tim 3:16 KJV} -- the counterpart of the mystery of lawlessness. This is the secret of how to cope with life, how to handle these problems of violence and evil which you find even within yourself, how to handle pressures and disasters, perplexities, and all the common irritations which come our way, how to react to them, what to do about them so that you can handle everything which comes, and remain calm and poised and at peace, and effective in the lives of others. That is the mystery of godliness -- Godlikeness, if you like, which is the full meaning of the word.

But here Mark speaks of the "mystery of the kingdom," {Mark 4:11 KJV}. What does this mean? It means the understanding of what God is doing now in history -- how the events of our day are being used in the program and planning of God, God's rule over men at work in current events. This is the mystery of the kingdom -- how God functions in human society, just exactly what he is doing today, and how he is doing it. The world would have us believe that everything takes place quite apart from God, that if there is a God he is sitting up there some place watching us poor, struggling mortals down here on the sinful plains of life, but that he really has nothing to do with it; he is just watching it happen. But the Scriptures reveal that God himself is involved in every single event, that nothing occurs which God is not in touch with and has not arranged and brought into being. Without destroying our will to choose, or our freedom to move, he nevertheless is working things out to a vast and cosmic purpose which he announces to us. That is the mystery of the kingdom of God. "And to you," Jesus says, "you who are disciples, is given that secret. You can understand it."

But there is a second class, described as "those outside" -- "for those outside everything is in parables." Who are these? Well, of course, they are everyone who is not a disciple. There may be many right here this morning -- church members, or regular church attenders, but not really disciples, not really open to understanding and obeying the Lordship of Christ (which is what a disciple must be), and so the truth is hidden from them. To them the parables will be simple stories without much meaning.

Jesus then said this rather solemn, amazing thing: "...everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." This is the part which troubles many. It does indeed sound as though Jesus is saying "I don't want them to turn again. I've hidden this truth so that they won't. The last thing I want is for them to be forgiven." But we know immediately that is not true; that cannot be what this means.

We will be helped greatly if we understand two things about this account:

One is that it is highly condensed. Mark's account of this statement is the most condensed of all. We need the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke as well, particularly in Matthew, to understand what Jesus is saying here, and we will look at that in a moment.

The second thing we need to understand is that this is a poorly edited account. The editors have failed us at this point. It would help a great deal if you would take pencil or pen and put some additional quotation marks around these words: "...they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." Jesus is not originating this statement; he is quoting Isaiah. He is saying that this word of Isaiah is being fulfilled at the present time. He does not say, "I'm speaking in parables in order that it might be fulfilled"; he is saying, "I'm speaking in parables because it is being fulfilled." That makes a big difference. It would be perfectly valid for you to insert the words "it is fulfilled" in Verse 12: "...so that it is fulfilled, 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.'" If you look at Matthew 13 you see that this is exactly what has happened. In this parallel passage, the full quotation from Isaiah is given to us.

Verse 14:

**"With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says:
'You shall indeed hear but never understand,
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.'" {Matt 13:14 RSV}**

Then Isaiah goes on to explain why this is happening. Mark leaves this out, quotes only the conclusion.

Verse 15 of Matthew 13:

**""For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are heavy of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed..." {Matt 13:15a RSV}**

Who closed their eyes? Not God. The people closed them. And why did they close their eyes?

**""lest they should perceive with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them..." {Matt 13:15b RSV}**

The people did not want to be healed. That is the point. In order to prevent the healing of their spirit, of the hurt of their heart, which Jesus wanted to bring them, they closed their eyes and ears. What did the people want? They wanted physical healing, and that is all they wanted. They wanted Jesus to cure their diseases and get rid of all their afflictions so that they could go on just as they were before. Jesus, knowing this, tells them "You are fulfilling the very words of Isaiah the prophet, in that you are not willing to listen to what I have to say. You want me to heal only the body."

This is what happens in many of the so-called "healing meetings" of our day. Exactly the same principle is operating. People do not want the spirit to be changed, the real problem to be solved. This was what was happening then; they turned off their minds when Jesus began to teach.

So, to capture their attention, Jesus said, "I'll tell you the truth in parables. If you won't listen to this teaching, then I'll give it to you in a different way -- in order that he might reach them." This gives us clear understanding of what he is saying here in Mark -- that parables are designed for the uninterested, for those who have turned their minds off. This is his first explanation -- that there are two classes of hearers.

Immediately there follows the explanation of the parable of the sower and the soils, which we will reserve for next time. Let's skip to the paragraph beginning with Verse 21 of Mark 4, and notice the second reason Jesus gives for his use of parables:

And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear." And he said to them, "Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get,

and still more will be given to you. For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." {Mark 4:21-25 RSV}

In that paragraph are three principles for understanding how parables work:

The first is given in Verses 21-22: "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?" Of course not! If a man brings a lamp into a house, he puts it on a stand; he doesn't hide it. Notice that Jesus is still talking about why he speaks in parables. He says, "For there is nothing hid (and a parable is a way of hiding truth), except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light." In other words, to put it plainly, hiding makes truth more visible. Is that not amazing? That is what we call a paradox. But it is true. If you hide the truth slightly, it makes it even easier to see.

Every morning when I get up I stand in front of a mirror -- not to admire what I see, which is very discouraging -- but in order to shave. My mirror has two lights, one on either side, capable of yielding two different intensities of light: very bright, and dim. Long ago I learned that if I turned the lights on bright, they would shine so intensely into my eyes that I could not see my face. The only way I can shave successfully is to dim the lights; then I can see what I am doing. When the light is dimmer, my face is easier to see. That is something of what Jesus is saying here.

In Proverbs 25:2 you find this great teaching:

**It is the glory of God to conceal a thing,
but the glory of kings is to search it out." {Prov 25:2 RSV}**

God loves to conceal truth. And we like it, too. We are all intrigued by mystery, by things cryptic and hidden. We love to search them out. God appeals to this in human nature and hides truth from us. But it is only to make it more visible. He does this in nature. How much truth God has hidden away in the world of nature all around us! Through the centuries men have puzzled, thought, scratched their heads, and tried various approaches as they have worked on finding it. As they gradually have begun to understand something about it, that truth discovered has changed the whole course of life. God hid it in order that men might find it.

He did the same thing with Jesus himself. The Gospel of John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" {John 1:14a RSV} -- God reduced to a man. If we suddenly saw God in all his splendor we would be absolutely pulverized. But the glory of God, so bright and brilliant that no human creature can stand in its presence, was hidden in a man, in Jesus. John says, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," {cf, John 1:14b}. Grace and truth -- the two things which glorify God. But men could never have seen this glory if it had not been hidden in the life of Jesus.

Understanding this principle, Jesus knew that men would grasp the truth more readily if he hid it in a parable. And men know this, too. One of the ancient philosophers, the Stoic, Epictetus, wanted to teach his disciples a truth everyone needs to learn: that truth understood is of no value; it is truth acted upon which changes things. That is a great truth. But you can say that to people, and it seems to run right off their backs. Sometimes we try putting it in a little epigram, like "Practice what you preach." That says the same thing, but in a little more graphic way. But I think the old philosopher did it best, for he taught it this way: He gathered his disciples around and said,

"Have you ever noticed that a sheep does not vomit up the grass it ate at the feet of the shepherd, in order to impress him. The sheep digests it to produce wool and milk."

That is a vivid way of illustrating that truth, is it not? -- one you are not likely to forget! And that is what parables are -- ways of putting truth succinctly and compellingly and accurately, in ways you will not forget.

That is why Jesus resorted to parables -- because men's hearts had turned away and needed to be recaptured, brought to attention. The first principle, then, is: hiding makes truth more visible.

In Verse 24 Jesus reveals another principle: "And he said to them, 'Take heed what you hear; the measure you

give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you." What does he mean by that? He means that in searching for truth, you will discover far more than you expected to find. That is a principle on which to act. To parody the superlative theologian, Dr. Flip Wilson, "What you seek is what you get plus!"

Plus more: "... and still more will be given to you," Jesus said. You cannot get it apart from seeking. If you do not want to search the Word of God, and seek the truth, and think about it -- forget it! It will not mean a thing to you. Your Bible will be as dull and deadly as any book could possibly be.

And so it is for many, many people. But if you are willing to look, if you want to search, and ask, and pray, and seek, then God will give you what you are looking for. In searching, you will find -- and more than you expected to find. I know that is true. I have seen it happen hundreds and hundreds of times, as people have begun to seek out the truth.

The third principle is found in Verse 25: "For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." "But that's not fair?" you say. It may not be, but that is the way life is. That is a basic rule of life: If you do not use what you have, you lose it. It is true on all levels:

- If you bind up your arm so that you cannot move it for as little as two weeks, when you remove the binding you find you have temporarily lost the use of your arm. You have to work on it for a time before you are able to use it again.
- If you do not use your brain to reason and to think things through, you lose the ability. Life then becomes very shallow, and you see no depth in anything. You are caught up with the emotion of the moment, moving from one feeling to another.
- If you do not seize an opportunity that is given, you lose it -- "from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

That is a principle of life. That is why Jesus spoke in parables -- because these things are true. If you search, you will find truth you could not see otherwise, and more than you expected. If you do not search, you find that you have lost even the truth you once thought you had.

We will skip over the parables of the growing grain and the mustard seed, reserving them for next time, and move on to Verses 33-34, where our Lord concludes his explanation of why he spoke in parables:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. {Mark 4:33-34 RSV}

There again are the two classes of hearers. And there is also here one great rule of revelation, given in these words: "as they were able to hear it." On another occasion he said to his disciples, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now," {John 16:12 RSV}. Jesus teaches men only as they can take it. This is the rule upon which God works with us. He does not show us everything at once. If he did, he would destroy us.

One of the laymen who attended the pastors' seminar held at PBC these past two weeks was a great big man from Albuquerque. He was drinking in all that was given to him, and at our closing meeting it was amusing to watch him. He was like a child around a Christmas tree, so turned on by all he had discovered that he was just glowing, going around hugging everyone he met. He is such a big man that if you were hugged by him you knew you were hugged! He was rejoicing in the new birth of freedom he had come to in his marriage, in his business relationships, and everywhere, as he found the secret of the kingdom of God, the mystery of God at work in his life. He told me, "Oh, this has been so great! I'd like to go home and take my Bible and get into it, and find so much more of this." Then he stopped himself, and said, "But I suppose if I did, it would kill me! I just couldn't handle it." And he was right; he could not have handled it. It would have been too much. And God knows that, and does not show you any more than you are able to handle.

That is the glory and the wonder of the Scriptures. They are put together in such an amazing way that it takes both the Word and the Spirit to understand the Bible. You can read the Word, and if you are not ready for them and open to them, those words will not say a thing to you. But if you are open, you will learn something from them. The next time you can come back, read the same words, and learn something more -- and again and again. Each time you will learn something more. It never ceases to refresh your spirit and instruct your mind, and to open and expand your capacity to receive from God. That is the way God teaches us truth -- as we are able to bear it.

And this is true also of his revelation to us about ourselves. One of the things about Scripture is that it shows you who you are, and who you have been all along. God is gracious to us that way. He does not just rip the veil off, and suddenly you see the whole ghastly thing. If he did, we would be wiped out, absolutely wiped out. But he lifts it little by little. You shake and tremble, and say, "Is that the way I've been?" You are aghast at the way you have been treating people, and you think, "Thank God that's over!" The next week he lifts it a little higher. You shake and tremble and go through it again, and say, "At last we got to the bottom!" Then God lifts it high enough for you to see more, and you are wiped out again. But you handle it, little by little. Because, along with the revelation of yourself, he also reveals himself, and his adequacy to handle it. So gradually you begin to see what you have been all along -- as you are able to bear it. This is the way God works.

This is why he hides truth from us, why it takes a long time to understand the Scriptures, why you will spend the rest of your life studying them and never get through. This is the rule upon which Jesus acted. He explained things to them, and taught them many, many things, as they were able to bear it. Is it not wonderful that he understands us that way, and deals with us like that? If he revealed the glories of heaven to us suddenly, every one of us would be running out to jump into the ocean, to get there as fast as possible. But he lifts the veil only a little at a time, as we are able to bear it.

May God encourage you to begin to seek out these great mysteries.

The most terrible thing I see happening today is that people with Bibles in their hands are going to churches where the Bible is taught, and yet never understanding the secrets of the kingdom of heaven -- these vast truths which change your life -- because they really are not open and obedient to them, and are not willing to search and to seek and to find what God has hidden in his Word.

May our hearts be encouraged to do this now, because of our study together.

Prayer:

Open our eyes, Father, that we may see "glimpses of truth Thou hast for me". Help us to understand what we read, and to search out what we do not understand, to be intrigued and drawn into further searching by those truths which are hidden from us. Keep us, Lord from treating your revealed Word with indifference, and sometimes even with scorn, but make it come home to our hearts with vividness and with power. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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