

**Why is the Kingdom of God a secret?
A Series on the Mysterious Nature of God's Kingdom: Part 3**

When asked why He was teaching in parables by the disciples, Jesus responds with some enigmatic words:

“To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”
(Matt 13:11)

“To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.” (Luke 8:10)

What did this mean and why does Jesus keep the kingdom of God a secret?

Before any attempt is made to make sense of any observations made of this passage, it is important to understand what is currently happening: what is the histo-cultural context of this passage?

Opposition to Jesus had been steadily growing (Matt 9:3, 11, 14, 34; 10:25; 11:19), and by Matthew 12, Jewish opposition became more direct and pointed. Critical of Jesus' Sabbath activities, the Jews are enraged by His authority and claim of deity, and it is here that the first mention of a plot to kill Jesus can be found (Matt 12:14).

While Matthew 12:15-16 essentially summarizes Mark 3:7-12, Matthew 12:17-21 quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 as a fulfillment of prophecy and presents Jesus' healing ministry in terms of Yahweh's Suffering Servant. In contrast, Mark 3:11 portrays Jesus' healing ministry in the messianic term "Son of God".

The immediate context of Matthew 13 is understood against the events occurring in Matthew 12. Since Jesus' response in Matthew 13:11 is part of the Parable of the Sower, this story can be used to locate the parallel passages in the other gospels, and this can be seen in Mark 4:3-20 and Luke 8:5-15. However, only Mark 3:22-35 provides some context by recording and sharing similar events as Matthew 12 leading up to the Parable of the Sower. This is significant as the Parable of the Sower is the first of seven parables pertaining to the kingdom of God.

In comparing the two accounts (Matt 12:1-50 vs Mark 3:22), the Parables of the Kingdom (Matt 13:1-53) appear to be a response to the events that took place in Matthew 12:22-37 or 12:38-50.

Matthew 12:22-37

The Pharisees accuse Jesus of being the prince of demons, because He could exorcise (vs. 22-24).

Jesus' reply: a divided kingdom cannot stand, and if the exorcism is accomplished by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of heaven has come upon you (vs. 25-28).

Jesus' argument is advanced: If Jesus' exorcisms cannot be attributed to Satan, then they reflect an authority greater than Satan (vs. 29).

Jesus' inverted saying (He who is not with Me is against Me) reveals that faith is not indifferent or neutral; one is either in or out. To willfully reject the work of the Spirit despite the fact that there could be no other explanation of Jesus' exorcisms is unforgivable (vs. 30-32).

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Matthew 12:38-50

The Pharisees respectfully ("Teacher") ask for a sign such as something that would immediately confirm prophecy or something done at command that would remove their doubt of His miracles (vs. 38).

Jesus' reply: the Pharisees represented the "wicked and adulterous generation" and only the sign of Jonah will be given to them. Presuming that the Ninevites learned of what happened to Jonah and how he got to their city, Jonah himself was the sign (Jonah 3:1-10). Similarly Jesus is the sign; He will be delivered from certain death and be resurrected in three days attesting that He is indeed the Christ. Like the Ninevites, the Queen of Sheeba (1 Kings 10:1-13) traveled to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Pagan people were more commendable than the Jewish nation who was unresponsive to One who was greater than either Jonah and Solomon (vs. 39-42).

Against the background of the Beelzebub controversy, Jesus warns the Pharisees the danger of being reinhabited by demons once they've been cleansed. There is great risk for those who remain neutral about Jesus, or require signs or fail to see that One greater than Jonah or Solomon is present (vs. 43-45).

Jesus reveals what it really means to be committed to Him; He sets a priority of spiritual relationships over natural ones. By doing His Father's will are the disciples identified as being a part of His family (vs. 46-50).

Thus, while the Jews never denied the success of Jesus' miracles, they refused to accept the divine source of His work and, more importantly, His deity. Jesus just did not fit their idea of the Messiah. With rising opposition and people who proved themselves deaf to His claims, Jesus is encouraged to teach more in parables. Jesus' method of teaching in parables did not start here (Luke 5:36; 6:39) but, in contrast to using parables to illustrate a truth, He uses the kingdom parables to present the truth about Himself and the kingdom of heaven in a veiled way.

When asked why He was teaching in parables by the disciples, Jesus begins with, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever do not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." (Matt 13:11-12)

When establishing the covenant with Moses, God clearly lays out the qualifications of who will be His priests:

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (Ex 19:5-6)

The Pharisees failed to qualify as God's own possession and thus were not granted to know the mysteries of God.

In this passage of Matthew 13, Jesus answers in terms of the elect, God's choice people, defined by those who have genuine faith in God juxtaposed with the rebellion, spiritual dullness and unbelief of the Jew. And this is seen very clearly in Jesus' reference to the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 while speaking of unbelieving Jews ("they") and the disciples ("you"). Matthew records Jesus' answer in the form of a well structured chiasm.

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Therefore I speak to them in parables;

- 1 because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.
- 2 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,
- 3 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
- 4 YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
- 5 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
- 6 WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
- 7 **AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,**
- 7' **OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,**
- 6' HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
- 5' AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'
- 4' But blessed are your eyes, because they see;
- 3' and your ears, because they hear.
- 2' For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men
- 1' desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The literary beauty of the chiasm is apparent. It contrasts the faith of the unbelieving Jews (first half of the chiasm) with that of the disciples (second half of the chiasm). In fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, the apex of the chiasm emphasizes the volitional aspect of faith and one's responsibility for its consequences:

AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,

It is apparent that the first recipients of God's revelation bear responsibility for divine rejection when they fail to "open their eyes" and become disciples on their own; yet nothing of what is taking place stands outside of God's control and plan.

If Jesus really wanted to keep a secret from anyone outside of His circle of disciples, he would not have spoken to them. He was concerned about His mission (Matt 9:35-38; 10:1-10; 28:16-20); however, He preached here in a manner without casting His pearls before pigs (Matt 7:6). The kingdom parables do not simply convey information nor mask it, but challenge the audience with eyes to see and ears to hear.

References:

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