

# The Use of the Parables of Jesus

**Makoto Yoshii**

Jesus taught many things in the parables. A. M. Hunter says that the parables of Jesus comprise more than one-third of His recorded teaching.<sup>1)</sup> Matthew records: “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matthew 13:34). Jesus used the parables to instruct the disciples (Matthew 18:23ff); to teach the crowds (Mark 4:3f); to rebuke the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 7:41f). C. H. Dodd says: “The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels.”<sup>2)</sup> For understanding the teachings of Jesus it is necessary to understand Jesus’ use of parables, particularly focusing on Mark 4:10-12. In these passages Jesus said to his disciples:

The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.

The aim of this study is to understand what Jesus meant here and help our understanding of Jesus’ teaching.

First, we need to understand what we mean by parables. The Greek root word is *παραβολή*; it means comparison, literally to set alongside. It is a saying or story that seeks to drive home a point the

speaker wishes to emphasize by illustrating it from a familiar situation of common life.<sup>3)</sup> It is a form of teaching; it uses the comparison between the unknown and the known, the strange and the familiar. C. H. Dodd says that the parables are the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceived in abstractions.<sup>4)</sup>

There are numerous ways to classify the parables of Jesus. C. H. Dodd divides them into three groups: (1) figurative sayings, (2) similitudes and (3) parables proper.

The figurative sayings are the concrete, pictorial expressions. Instead of saying, "Beneficent should not be ostentatious," Jesus says, "When you give alms, do not blow your trumpet"; instead of saying, "Wealth is a grave hindrance to true religion," Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

The simplest form of the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life. This type of parable catches the attention of the hearers by its vividness or strangeness and leaves the minds in sufficient doubt about its precise application and it helps the hearers to tease the lesson of the parable into active thought.

The similitude is an elaboration of a simple metaphor into a picture by adding the details. These are some examples of this type: The Son Asking for Bread, the Eye the Light of the Body, the Sons of the Bridechamber, the Fig-tree as Herald of Summer and others.

The parable proper is also an elaboration of the metaphor (or simile) into a story instead of a picture. The additional details here serve to develop a situation. The story may be a very short one like, "The Kingdom of God is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened." Little longer

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ones are the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, the Hidden Treasure and the Costly Pearl, the Mustard-seed, the Seed Growing Secretly and the Two Sons. Longer ones are the parables of the Two Houses, the Sower, the Importunate Friend and others. There are full-length parables too: The Money in Trust, the Unforgiving Servant, the Prodigal Son, and the Labourers in the Vineyard.<sup>5)</sup>

Dodd's clarification is based on the form of the parables. A. B. Bruce clarifies them by their content. Bruce divides Jesus' teaching ministry into three titles: the Master, the Evangelist and the Prophet. Jesus was the Master who instructed His disciples. He was the Evangelist who went about doing good among the common people and preached the Gospel. He was the Prophet who predicted, fulfilled prophecies and proclaimed the truth of God's moral government over the world. In relation to these titles Bruce puts the parables into three groups: the theoretic, the evangelic, and the prophetic. The theoretic parables are those which contain the general truth. The evangelic ones are those which express the mercy, grace and love of God to the sinful sinners and to the miserable; some are more obvious and direct, others are implied. The prophetic ones deal with ethical issues rather than prediction. The prophetic parables convey the idea of Jesus as the Messenger of God who spoke, rebuked and warned to an evil time.<sup>6)</sup>

According to these clarifications the parable of the Sower, which comes before Mark 4:10-12, belongs to the parable proper and is also classified as the theoretic (or predictive) group.

Thus far we have looked at the definition and clarification of the parable. One thing needs to be noted here: when Jesus preached so strikingly in parables He did not create a new literary genre. Rather He made brilliant use of a genre which was already of long tradition; it was familiar to all throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>7)</sup> The

ancient rabbis of the first and second centuries in the Christian era used the parables for their method of teaching. There was a similarity between Jesus' parables and the rabbis'; but there was also a big difference. Rabbinic parables normally were introduced to explain the law, verses of Scripture, or a doctrine. They were not used in teaching new truths, as was the case with the parables of Jesus. By means of His parables, Jesus explained the great theme of His teaching. Rabbis did not teach anything beyond an application of the Law; Jesus revealed God to man. Being commissioned by God to make known God's will and word, Jesus, in His parables, revealed new truths. The parables of Jesus are God's revelation; Rabbinic parables are not.<sup>8)</sup>

Did Jesus use parables from the beginning of His ministry? The answer is no. Mark 4:10 (Luke 8:9; Matthew 13:10ff) tells us that Christ did not, in the beginning of His career, use parables as a method of teaching but introduced it later. This might have taken place evidently during the second year of His public ministry. It was the time Jesus changed His attitude toward the people. Christ wanted to win over the people and the nation to His cause and to the Gospel; but the leaders and many others wanted Him to be a political leader. It was the time Christ ceased largely to appeal to the crowds, and confined His instructions chiefly to His disciples and special friends.

The chapters preceding Mark chapter four portray well what was happening at that period of time in Jesus' ministry. Jesus encountered unbelief and direct opposition. He was accused of being possessed by Beelzebub and of driving out demons by the prince of demons (Mark 3: 22). Jesus began to see clearly the contrast between the two groups in His audience: believers and unbelievers, followers and opponents, and receivers and rejecters of God's salvation. Those who do the will of God receive the message of the parables for they belong to the family

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of Jesus (Mark 3:35). Those who seek to destroy Jesus (Mark 3:6) have hardened their hearts to the knowledge of salvation. It is a matter of faith or unbelief. That was the reason Jesus said to His disciples:

The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing and never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven (Mark 4:10-12).

Many have different opinions about this passage. Many raise various questions about this passage. Who are the recipients of the mystery of the Kingdom of God? What is the mystery of Kingdom of God? Who are the outsiders? Most frequently asked is this: "Does this passage mean Jesus purposely concealed the mystery to the people except for the few?" "Does this mean that Jesus, who was sent by God to proclaim redemption to fallen sinful man, hide this message in the form of incomprehensible parables?" If Jesus is the great teacher, we might expect Him to teach spiritual truths in simple language. It would be difficult to believe that Jesus, by adopting a certain mode of speech, intended to conceal teaching from the crowd. Some made a conclusion that the parables were spoken by Jesus in order to prevent those who were not predestined to salvation from understanding the teaching of Jesus. They hold that the parables are some kind of riddles understood only by those who are initiated; the parables were used to exclude outsiders from understanding conversion and forgiveness. To face this type of deterministic interpretation and to seek the biblical teaching these questions must be answered: "Is it Jesus who excludes 'those outsiders?'" "Did they exclude themselves?" "Is there an interaction at work?" Numerous attempts have been made to

explain these verses in ways that would get rid of some of these difficulties.

C. H. Dodd denies the authenticity of Mark 4:10-12 to save Jesus at the expense of Mark. He held that this was not a saying of Jesus but a later church construction. Those who agree with him see this passage as a Markan creation that seeks to equate Jesus' teaching in parables with the Evangelist's own theory of the Messianic secret and of the divine rejection of Israel. They say that this saying reflects the doctrine of the early church that the Jews were providentially blinded to the significance of Christ's coming. After Jesus' death, people raised the question, "Why did they fail to convert the Jewish people?" This passage was their answer.<sup>9)</sup>

There are, however, a number of reasons to support the authenticity of Mark 4:10-12. Stylistic features back up the Palestinian origin of these verses. Mark 4:10-12 differs both from the Masoretic and Septuagintal text forms and agrees with the form found in Targums. This argues strongly in favor of a Palestinian-Aramaic origin.<sup>10)</sup> There is no textual reason to assume these verses as a Markan creation. On the contrary, there is good reason to assume that these words ultimately go back to Jesus.

T. W. Manson and others accepted that these were the very sayings of Jesus but it was the writer's mistranslation of verse twelve from the Aramaic. They say that Mark mistranslated the Aramaic term used by Jesus (*de*) and instead of translating it as "who" (*hoi*), he translated it as "in order that" (*hina*). According to this explanation Jesus originally said it like this: "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside who see but do not perceive and hear but do not understand, everything appears as *mashalim* (riddles or parables)."

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This explanation, however, has a serious problem, for it seeks essentially to save Jesus by sacrificing Mark. They hold that the problem of these verses lies with Mark who supposedly mistranslated Jesus' words. Once one denies the infallibility of Scripture, what will happen next? What kind of consequence is going to be brought once one denies the innerancy of Scripture?

Joachim Jeremias also accepts Mark 4:10-12 as Jesus' saying. He agrees with Manson's point about the Targum but does not believe that the saying originally referred to teaching by parables. He translates the passage this way:

To you God has given the secret of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside everything is obscure, in order that they may see and yet not see, may hear and yet not understand.

Jeremias believes this is a genuine saying of Jesus, but it does not deal with parables but with Jesus' teaching in general. He takes the passage as a sombre comment by Christ on his mission which was unsuccessful in the Galilean cities (Luke 10:13-15; Matthew 11:20-24). The secret of the present kingdom was disclosed to the disciples, but to the outsiders the words of Jesus remained obscure because they did not recognize the true mission of Jesus and repent. Therefore, the terrible oracle of Isaiah 6:10 was fulfilled to them. But they still have hope if they repent because God will forgive them.<sup>11)</sup>

A couple of questions are raised against Jeremias' interpretation of this passage. First, it should be noted that if Jesus wanted to emphasize the purpose when He quoted Isaish, why did He omit the section "Make the heart of this people collapsed, make their ears dull, and close their eyes" (Isaiah 6:10)?

Jeremias translated the Greek word *παραβολῆ* as riddle (obscure). The rules of exegesis, however, do not support his interpretation unless the writer shows a difference in the understanding of a word. Since Mark does not show this, one should keep the same meaning throughout the passage when he exegetes.<sup>12)</sup>

Another attempt was made to explain Mark 4:10-12 in relation to the cultural background. It is suggested that in the Semetic mind in general there was little difference between purpose and result in the case of divine decisions. In the Western mind, thinking flows from cause to effect. Thus, the Scripture is interpreted: Since God purposed that Jesus' listeners would not repent and be forgiven, Jesus taught in parables and as the result they did not understand, repent, and receive forgiveness. But the Eastern world thought from effect to cause, interpreting Mark 4:10-12: "Since Jesus' teaching in parables resulted in his listeners not understanding and repenting, this must ultimately be due to the purpose and plan of God."<sup>13)</sup> But this does not give us the full explanation for such expressions as "to you has been given," and "those outsiders," and, it leaves the impression that God purposely shut the door for outsiders.

As one can see from the discussion above, numerous "solutions" have been suggested for solving the difficulties found in Mark 4:10-12. As it stands in the Greek text, the meaning of these verses seems fairly clear. Matthew Black states that it is certain that Mark actually wrote and intended *ξνα---μηποτε*, and that his original purpose is clear from the *ξνα* clause and is reinforced by the *μηποτε*.<sup>14)</sup> The problem does not lie so much in the area of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary as in the area of theology and in Jesus' use of the parables elsewhere. Some hold Calvinistic-predestination interpretations of verse twelve but it does not solve all the problems. It is evident that Jesus intention-

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ally used certain parables to teach “those outside” (Luke 15:1-2 and subsequent parables). At times “those outsiders” understood the parables of Jesus (Mark 12:12). Then what was the real purpose of Jesus using parables? Why did Jesus teach in parables?

According to Mark 4:10-12 one reason was to conceal the teaching of Jesus from those outside. Jesus needed to do this at times. Time after time Jesus found those in his audience who were hostile toward Him. The Sadducees saw in Jesus a threat to their doctrine system. The attitudes of Jesus towards their doctrine (Mark 12:18-27) and to their abuse of administering the Temple of God (Mark 11:15-19) were a direct threat to them (Mark 11:27-33). Many pharisees found in Jesus a threat to them. Jesus had direct conflict with them on numerous issues: their self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14), leadership, hypocrisy (Matthew 23:13-36) and the oral traditions (Mark 7:1-13). Large and devoted crowds misunderstood Jesus. The title “Messiah,” “Christ,” gave them a wrong impression of Jesus as a political-military figure who would lead Israel victoriously in battle against her enemies, i.e. Rome. Thus, His message was often misunderstood by His use of parables. Jesus made it difficult for those who tried to find fault in Him, to accuse Him as a political leader. He spoke of the Kingdom of God as being like a grain of mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32) or like leaven (Matthew 13:33). This seemed politically quite harmless. Using parables Jesus made it difficult for those who were opposed to Him to bring charges and accusations against Him (Mark 14:55-59).

David A. Redding said about the parables:

The parable is the shell He (Jesus) gives His seed to protect it from overexposure and disinterest. He would keep His secret in parabolic code to hide it from those who merely wished to play with it, and so no

one would be forced-fed or know more than he wanted.<sup>15)</sup>

The parables confused those outside. They could not understand the meaning of the parables. They concealed the message to those outside. But to His followers, Jesus explained the parables - then they became revealers of truth.

But Mark 4:10-12 says more than this. The passage seems to say that Jesus withheld His message from those outside not only in order that they would fail to understand, but in order that they would be unable to repent and be forgiven. Determinists hold this view: God chose those who are to be saved and those who are to be lost and man can do nothing about it. There are other sayings of Jesus which maintain that the message of Jesus was intentionally concealed from certain people. Matthew 11:25-27 records Jesus' prayer to the Father:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The Scripture seems to teach that understanding and faith are a divine gift. To those who were willing to receive the message of Jesus, His parables helped make it clear. To those whose ears were stopped, the parables were so many riddles that obscured the truth.

There seems to be a spiritual law at work in the hearing of the word. While the hearer makes the initial decision to see or not to see, to hear or not to hear, God assists the hearer in that decision. Mark 4:24-25 records this:

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Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you - and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

The openness and attentiveness which the hearer brings to a parable will be the measure of understanding he will receive from it.

It should be noted here that contrary to Deterministic idea, it is the hearer who makes the choice. God does not predestine one's choice. Man has been given complete free will. It is man who makes his decisions and choices; God does not determine who are to be lost. He is always ready to welcome sinners when they repent and return to Him.

Madeleine I. Boucher pointed out that there were two levels of meaning in the parable: the story itself (the direct/literal meaning) and what the story teaches (the indirect and topical). The hearer may get the story itself without any difficulties but he may miss the lesson or point of the parable, because it is only implied and must be deduced. The hearer may be either unwilling or unable to grasp the parable's lesson. This does not mean, however, that every parable is hard to comprehend. In Mark 4:10-12 the hearer's unwillingness to seek the true lesson was dealt with.<sup>16)</sup> After the parable of the Sower, those who were willing to find the lesson of the parable came to Jesus and asked. Those who were not willing did not ask, then remained without knowing the meaning. Again it was not God who determined one's willingness and unwillingness. It was all up to the individual's decision and choice.

A third and final reason why Jesus taught in parables was to disarm his hearers. At times Jesus sought to penetrate the hostility and hardness of the hearts of his hearers by the use of parables.

In Luke 7:36-50, in order to pierce through Simon's hardness of heart and prejudice, Jesus spoke in a parable. The parable was used to *quicken understanding by putting truth in a vivid and challenging and memorable way*. The gospel parable was designed to make people think. It appeals to the intelligence through imagination.

What then does the parable mean to us today? Is there anything we can learn from Jesus' use of parables?

When we hear a parable, we nod in agreement because the story is *true to life and readily understood*. Though the application of the parable may be heard, it is not always grasped. We see the story unfold before our eyes, but we do not perceive the significance of it. The truth remains hidden until our eyes are opened and we see clearly. Then the new lesson of the parable becomes meaningful.

Ada R. Habershon pointed out two things that we can learn from Mark 4:10-12.<sup>17)</sup>

We too must ask. After the parable of the Sower, the disciples and others came to Jesus to ask Him what it meant. They wanted to know more about the parable and the lesson from it. God does not force us to have an answer. He always waits for us to take the initiative to seek the answer with our free will. As He said to Jeremiah He still says to us: "*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know*" (Jeremiah 33:3). We too must be alone with Him. Those who come to Jesus to ask came when the crowds were gone. The Scripture says, "When he was alone, the Twelve and others around him asked him about the Parable." We live in a very busy world. It is full of activities. We often have little time for sitting at the Master's feet and hearing His word.

We too need quiet time alone with Him as the disciples and other followers did. We need to be set aside from the busy daily activities

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and problems and so on so that He may open our ears to hear, and our eyes to see many things that He would teach us.

We have often wished that we too could have heard the message directly from Jesus. We could have asked Him many questions. We, at times, even envy the disciples who could have done this. But one thing needs to be remembered here: After Christ was taken up to heaven, the gift of the Holy Spirit has been promised to each Christian. A clearer understanding of God's purpose has been given to us than the disciples could have borne.

Now we have Scripture, the very words of God. By His Spirit God is as ready to teach us through Scripture as He was before. The reason why we do not better understand His teaching is probably because we are content with the little that we already understand. We do not spend enough time alone with Him to seek more. It is our unwillingness to seek more of the Word of God and its message.

As we have looked at in this paper, the parables work in two ways: to conceal and to reveal. The difference is made by the hearer's attitude toward the Word. If we are willing to see, hear and seek truth, it will be given to us. If we are unwilling, not only will it not be given, but also even the little that we have might be taken away from us. Are we willing to seek the real meaning of the parables? Are we willing to search the truth in Scripture?

### Notes

- 1) A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 7.
- 2) C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1935), p. 11.
- 3) Merrill Tenny, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*

- (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), pp. 590-597.
- 4) C. H. Dodd, pp. 15-16.
  - 5) C. H. Dodd, pp. 16-18.
  - 6) A. B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ* (N.C.: George H. Doran Co., 1886), pp. 3-4.
  - 7) Madeleine I. Boucher, *The Parables* New Testament Message, Vol.7, (Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1981), p. 11.
  - 8) Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. x vii.
  - 9) C. H. Dodd, pp. 13-15.
  - 10) T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 74.
  - 11) Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1954), pp. 11-16.
  - 12) Kistemaker, p. x viii.
  - 13) Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (n.p.: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1971), p. 29.
  - 14) Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 155.
  - 15) David A. Redding, *The Parables He Told* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1962), p.viii.
  - 16) Boucher, pp. 41-48.
  - 17) Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Kregal Publicatione, 1957), pp. 6-7.

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