

Jesus' Parables as Judgment

A Response to Leighton Flowers' View of the Purpose of the Parables

By Drew S. C. Mery

Professor Leighton Flowers has recently written an article titled, "[The Messianic Secret](#),"¹ wherein he explains his understanding of the purpose of the parables. According to Flowers, the reason Jesus spoke in parables was to prevent the Jewish people from coming to repentance and faith, so as to bring about the crucifixion, otherwise the crucifixion would not have taken place. While I will not address every single point and Scriptural reference in his article – and I don't necessarily disagree with everything he says in the article – I do want to respond to a few of his key points. Before I do so, however, let me first briefly explain my understanding regarding the reason Jesus spoke in parables.

Why Jesus Spoke In Parables

I believe the primary reason Jesus spoke in parables – though I do believe there exists a two-fold nature to the purpose of the parables – was *to enact a form of judgment on the Jewish people*. Let us give consideration to Matthew 13:10-17 in making this point:

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

""You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."

¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears

¹ Flowers, Leighton. "The Messianic Secret". <https://goo.gl/ze8itm>. Accessed on January 3, 2016.

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 For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

To these close disciples of Jesus – those who had ears to hear and eyes to see – the parables were a means of explaining the kingdom of God. To those who did not have ears to hear and eyes to see, but hardened their hearts at the teachings of Jesus, the parables were a means of judgment, confirming them in their rebellious way. Note that Jesus explicitly says that he speaks in parables “because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” He does not say that he speaks in parables so that they won’t see and hear and understand; it’s that they already don’t see and hear and understand. Verse 15 makes clear that the people’s hearts had already grown dull, that they had already closed their eyes, otherwise they would see and hear and understand and turn and be saved. But that is not what they wanted. *Note, the parables did not harden the people or prevent them from understanding so that they would not repent and believe (and otherwise thwart God’s redemptive plan). Their hearts were already hard, and they had already failed to understand the truth of Jesus and his redemptive mission.* John MacArthur’s words are spot-on:

While the parables do illustrate and clarify truth for those with ears to hear, they have precisely the opposite effect on those who oppose and reject Christ. The symbolism hides the truth from anyone without the discipline or desire to seek out Christ’s meaning. That’s why Jesus adopted that style of teaching. It was a divine judgment against those who met His teaching with scorn, unbelief, or apathy.²

MacArthur goes on to explain this two-fold nature of the parables:

In short, Jesus’ parables had a clear twofold purpose: *They hid the truth* from self-righteous or self-satisfied people who fancied themselves too sophisticated to learn from Him, *while the same parables revealed truth* to eager souls with childlike faith – those who were hungry and thirsting for righteousness. Jesus thanked His Father for both results: ‘I thank You, father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight (Matt. 11:25-26).³

Two final points need to be made before moving on to consider some of Flowers’ points. First it is important to keep in mind that Jesus did not always teach in parables. There are plenty of times in the Gospels where we find Jesus teaching in a more straight-forward and didactic manner (e.g. Mk. 1:14-15; Lk. 4:14-30). The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the best example of this. Even though it concludes in a brief parable, “the substance of the message, starting with the Beatitudes,

² MacArthur, John. *Parables* (Thomas Nelson, 2015), xix.

³ *Ibid.*, xxi. Emphasis is his.

is delivered in a series of direct propositional statements, commandments, polemical arguments, exhortations, and words of warning.”⁴

Second, there are times when Jesus used parabolic language – the use of provincial imagery meant to communicate a spiritual truth/reality – and the intent was not to hide the truth, but to reveal and clarify the truth. Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are good examples of this (Jn. 3-4).

In summary, Jesus used parables to teach those with ears to hear and eyes to see, as well as to confirm those with hard and unbelieving hearts in their rebellion. The parables were not used to keep people from repenting and believing, because the people were already unrepentant and unbelieving. Further, Jesus did not always teach in parables, but often taught in a straight-forward and didactic manner.

Responding to Leighton Flowers

Early on in the article Professor Flowers references 1 Corinthians 2:8-9 in support of his perspective. I find this very interesting, considering the context in which this passage is found. First, let’s look at Flowers’ words and then I’ll respond:

As the Apostle Paul noted, “We speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8-9). Jesus knew that had they believed in Him before the right time then they would not have crucified Him. Therefore, the Lord graciously taught in parables “to those on the outside...so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” (Mark 4:11b-12).

In essence, Flowers is asserting that God actively blinded or hid the wisdom of his redemptive plan from these rulers so that he could bring about the gospel – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This, however, is the exact opposite of the meaning of the text. Paul is not addressing the concept of hiding the truth, but of revealing the truth. The truth was hidden from them, not because God was actively hiding it from them, but because they themselves did not understand it (i.e. a spiritual inability to understand the things of God). It’s not that the truth had not been made known to them, but it’s as Paul goes on to say, these things are revealed by God through the Spirit. We understand these things because we have received the Spirit of God (vv. 10-13). So why did the rulers not understand this mystery of God? Because God was actively hiding it from them? No, it’s because “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (v. 14). This point is all the more striking when we consider the fact that Paul just spent numerous verses speaking of the unique/effectual call of God’s chosen people (1:17-2:5). To make this a general

⁴ Ibid., xxi.

call is to flip Paul's teaching on its theological head, stripping it of all its polemical and pastoral power.

Further, in regards to Flowers' reference of Mark 4:11-12, Mark basically quotes several Old Testament passages that speak of the people's hearts already hard, their eyes already unseeing, their ears already plugged, and of the need for God to give them an understanding heart, seeing eyes, and hearing ears (Deut. 29:4; Jer. 5:21; Ezek. 12:2). In short, it is a word of judgment on the people. Flowers seems to think that this passage undercuts the concept of the inability of man and God's effectual calling. It does no such thing.

Here is another example of Flowers' understanding of the purpose of the parables:

Jesus is not attempting to persuade everyone to come to faith in great numbers as we see following Pentecost when Peter preaches (Acts 2:41). Quite the opposite seems to be the case, in fact. To accomplish the redemptive plan through Israel's unbelief, we see Jesus actively instructing His apostles not to tell others who he is yet (Matt. 16:20; Mark 8:30; 9:9).

In other words, Jesus used parables in order to prevent the vast majority of the Jews from repenting and believing, because if they did so, then they would not have crucified him. Again, Flowers' attempt here is to undercut the concept of the moral inability of man and God's effectual calling, while putting forth his perspective of judicial hardening.⁵ Is this actually what we find though? I think not.

First, the fact that Jesus went around preaching repentance and faith, sending out his disciples, and identifying himself as the Messiah at times, disproves Flowers' first assertion (e.g. Mtt. 4:17; 10:5-14; Mk. 1:14-15; Lk. 4:15-21; 10:1-12).

Second, the reason Jesus hid his identity was not to prevent the vast majority of Jews from repenting and believing so as to accomplish God's redemptive plan of the cross, but to prevent the Jews from attempting to carry out their false concept of the Messiah – a ruler of an earthly kingdom who would free them from Roman suppression. Even his close disciples were confused about the Scriptural witness of the Messiah (Mtt. 16:21-28). It took Jesus' supernatural ability to open the minds of the disciples so that they could understand the Scriptures (Lk. 24:44-47). So Flowers is correct to assert that it was for the purpose of bringing about the redemptive plan, but he's in error to think that the crowds would have repented and believed in him if his true identity had been broadcasted. It's at this point, regarding the fact of Jesus not broadcasting his identity

⁵ Note, judicial hardening is not a concept that contradicts Calvinism. Judicial hardening is a biblical concept. Flowers has repeatedly stated that Calvinists believe that mankind is born judicially hardened. This, however, is not the case, and actually mixes categories. What Calvinists believe is that mankind is born with a sin nature due to their federal head – Adam. This means that we are born with corrupt hearts, and therefore our desire from our youth is that of wickedness (this takes various degrees and forms). We do not desire the things of God; we are enemies of God and by nature children of wrath (note, man is not morally neutral). This does not mean that man is as wicked as he can be. By God's common grace the world of men continues to thrive in its institutions with relative progress (though man's work continues to be tainted by corruption and sin). Throughout redemptive history God may judicially harden a nation (or individual) for his redemptive purposes (e.g. Pharaoh and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt). Judicial hardening, however, and the state in which man is born are not the same thing.

as Messiah and Jesus' use of parables, that Flowers seems to conflate the two. He says the following:

Moreover, Jesus purposefully speaks in parables in order to prevent the Jewish leaders coming to faith and repentance (Matt. 13:11-15; Mark 4:11-13). When great numbers began to believe Jesus was truly prophetic, notice how Jesus responded: "'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself" (John 6:14-15). Earlier in the same gospel we learn that "many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and believed in His name. But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them" (John 2:23b-24a).

Flowers seems to be asserting here that the reason Jesus spoke in parables was to conceal his identity as the Messiah. Yet, the parables were primarily about the nature and expansion of the kingdom, not the person and work of Jesus.⁶ Further, John 6:14-15 only confirms the point that Jesus hid his identity as the Messiah, not to prevent the Jews from repenting and believing, but to prevent them from attempting to carry out their false ideas of the Messiah's mission. Lastly, Flowers seems to be implying that "Jesus would not entrust Himself to them" has something to do with Jesus concealing his true identity and speaking in parables so as to prevent mass conversions. This is not the case, however. Rather, Jesus did not entrust himself to them because he knew their hearts (Jn. 2:25), which means he knew their true intentions and motives. This again confirms that Jesus was preventing them from attempting to carry out their false view of the Messiah's mission, not that he was keeping them from truly repenting and believing. Needless to say, this paragraph by Flowers is somewhat muddled, and it seems that he may be mixing categories.

Conclusion

The purpose of the parables is not so much on the subject of the ability/inability of man, but on the providence of God to accomplish his redemptive purposes in the way in which he ordained them to be accomplished. It cannot be overlooked, too, that Jesus did not always teach in parables. It would certainly seem that, for Flowers' interpretation to hold water, one would have to conclude that he always taught, or at least primarily taught, in parables. Yet, this is simply not the case. What is more, Jesus hiding his identity as the Messiah is not the same thing as Jesus teaching in parables. Flowers seems to conflate the two, which causes some confusion regarding his point and perspective (in my opinion at least).

The primary purpose of Jesus teaching the people in parables was to confirm the unbelieving Jews in their rebellion. It was a form of judgment on the people. To those with ears to hear and eyes to see, however, it was a means for Jesus to communicate the truth of his kingdom.

⁶ Of course, the kingdom of God is established through the redemptive work of Christ, but this is not overly clear in his parables, which primarily focus on the kingdom itself.