

August, 2011

THE MYSTERY¹

Jeffery D. Woodhams

I found out some time ago that if I wanted students to pay attention to something I had better luck if I would partially conceal it. I'd say something like, "I'm going to tell you the story of the second stupidest thing I've ever done." Well, of course, they would want to know what was number one? What was the *stupidest* thing I'd ever done? To be honest, there are probably a few things that tie for that honor! But my point is that we are curious by nature and we love a good mystery.

The Bible mentions quite a few mysteries established by God. He knows we're curious about things which are partially hidden, much more so than about things that are open and obvious. God has made some things secret so that we will investigate, and in investigating we will find out more than we thought we'd find. I'll prove all of this from the words of Jesus in our passage today.

Let's begin in Mark 4 today, starting with verse 1 and part of verse 2:

¹ *And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land.*

² *And he taught them many things by parables*

We learned in chapter 3 that the crowd was so large that there was serious danger of people getting hurt by being crushed. Most people wanted to press in on Jesus and be healed. In order to prevent a dangerous situation, and in order to be able to actually tell them something that they needed to hear, Jesus resorts to teaching from a little boat. His voice will carry across the water, and He will be removed from the immediate crowd so that no one will be crushed. On a side note, I think there's a bit of irony in the fact that the people were so eager to be healed they were impatiently pushing to up the Healer in such a dangerous way: "There's the Healer! Let's go crush Him to death!"

But no! Jesus moves off shore and then begins to teach. Now, we're going to delve into the actual teaching next week, because this is a wonderful parable and it deserves great attention. This week we're going to discuss Jesus' *method* and His *reasoning* for using it. Next week we'll talk about the *content*.

Starting from this point in Jesus' ministry, He began to teach by using parables. The gospel writers agree that this is the first one He used, the parable of the sower and the seed—or, rather, the parable of the *soil*. In this same passage, He teaches two other seed-related parables. But the question for us today is, why teach in parables *at all*?

So, for the time being, let's skip ahead to verse 10 and get the news straight from Jesus Himself:

¹⁰ *And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.*

¹ This sermon is unedited.

¹¹ *And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables:*

¹² *That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.*

In verse 10, the crowd has dispersed and Jesus is with His twelve disciples and with a number of others who were genuinely interested in His teaching. They have heard what He said but didn't understand it, and they asked Him to explain it.

Jesus explanation here is quite shocking, isn't it? If we were to look at these verses alone we would think Jesus didn't want people to be saved at all; and yet if that's the case, why should He preach? He obviously does want people to be saved, so what are we to do with these verses?

I want to point out two things. First, I want you to remember that Mark is "the action gospel." Mark condenses things down and leaves out most of the details. Second, I want you to realize that Jesus is quoting Scripture, and when you realize what Scripture He's quoting this whole passage makes sense. You get a better idea from the other gospels. Let me read to you from Matthew's account:

¹³ *Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.*

¹⁴ *And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:*

¹⁵ *For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.*

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.*

What Jesus is doing here is explaining that there are two kinds of listeners. Some listen but don't really *want* to hear; they don't *want* to be affected or be changed by what they hear. They don't *want* the truth that Jesus offers. Therefore He speaks in parables, in hopes that the parable will catch their interest enough to allow the truth to penetrate their hardened hearts. If He can't reach them through parables, He probably won't be able to reach them at all. So please don't be confused by Mark 4:12 into thinking that Jesus does not want people to be healed of their sinful condition. He absolutely does; yet He knows that some will not receive His teachings by conventional methods.

On the other hand, there are others in the crowd who do wish to hear and understand Jesus' words. These people, on hearing the parables, respond by wanting to know what the parables mean. The parables are like a mystery. They create a thirst for knowledge based on curiosity; and those who dig in to discover the meaning find more than they expect to find!

In fact, that is exactly what Jesus calls His teaching: the mystery of the kingdom of God. He says it right there in Mark 4:11. The Bible uses this word "mystery" a number of times. I want to park here for a minute because this is a key concept in Scripture. What does the Bible mean by "mystery"?

First of all, there is the "mystery of the kingdom of God" mentioned here in Mark 4. Simply put, the "mystery of the kingdom of God" is God's working in this present age, using the events of this world to reach people and accomplish His will. Yes, God can even take the evil that men do and turn the results

into something good. When we see evil and suffering in this world, the cruelty that men inflict upon each other, we do not see how anything good can possibly come of it. We do not see the end from the beginning, but God does.

You know, we are witnessing a level of barbarity and depravity in Britain that we've not seen in our lifetimes; but I can tell you most assuredly that this is not the first time Britain has been overrun by such ugly behavior. What we are witnessing in Britain right now is much like what John Wesley witnessed in Britain as a young man—and there was widespread misery all over that land. But because of that misery, the people began to finally listen to the message of the gospel as presented by John Wesley, George Whitfield, and other evangelists. Friends, over the course of fifty years of Wesley's ministry, Britain changed radically and improved in every respect. There was a return to civility, to the rule of law, to morality, and a decrease in corruption. Britain was transformed.

Now, as we read the news today, we see that many people in Britain are beginning to seriously consider what has gone wrong in their society. They are seeing that their society has failed at almost every level to produce stable, responsible and honest citizens. Their upside down judicial system gives protections to the perpetrators and removes protections from the victims. These terrible riots are causing a national introspection into what's gone wrong, because things didn't used to be that way in Britain. And it seems that at least some of the people are beginning to understand that when we teach kids that they have no purpose in life other than to make themselves happy, when we teach them that all truth is relative, when we teach them that they have all rights but no responsibilities, then what is happening with these riots in London and across the UK is simply the end result. And the basis for all of this is moral relativism, for which there is only one counterpoint: absolute truth. The more a society follows moral relativism, the more miserable that society will become. That self-imposed misery will drive at least some to absolute truth, and absolute truth is only found in the Absolute God. That is the mystery of the kingdom: God is at work drawing men to Himself even in an ungodly world.

Related to this mystery of the kingdom of God are a number of others. Paul talks about the mystery of lawlessness in II Thessalonians 2:7 and the mystery of godliness in I Timothy 3:16. The mystery of lawlessness is the true problem that liberal social thinkers cannot solve because it has to do with the sinfulness of the human condition. Why is it that there is evil in the human heart, and why is it that this capacity for evil can be increased so easily? The Bible tells us that we have a sinful nature; that is, we are born sinful and the only corrective measure is being trained according to the truth of God's Word. Even so, our sinful nature persists with us until we die. But liberals reject this notion outright, and therefore they turn to education, to positive reinforcement, to redistribution of wealth, to counseling, to medication, or to any number of other hopeful remedies. And the result is always the same: we breed a generation who love themselves, who rarely if ever come to grips with their sinfulness or selfishness. In short, the result is the UK riots. Even now, there are those championing the rioters, blaming society for *not doing enough* for the lawless. They do not understand the mystery of lawlessness. It is hidden from them.

On the other hand, the mystery of godliness is the principle of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of God's children. The Holy Spirit allows us to live calmly in the midst of trials. The Holy Spirit allows us to do the right thing even when the world around us would tell us that it's not in our best interest. The Holy Spirit in us guides us to return kindness in place of spite, to return love in the place of hatred, to bless those who curse us, to do good to those who despitely use us and persecute us. The Holy Spirit works within us to maintain purity in the midst of an impure world, and the tool that He uses is the absolute truth of God's Word. Listen to Ps. 119:9–11:

⁹ *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.*

¹⁰ *With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.*

¹¹ *Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.*

That's how it's supposed to work, at any rate. We Christians don't always get into the Word the way we ought to or listen to the Holy Spirit the way we ought to; but when we do, He can do things in us and through us that just aren't possible any other way. That's the mystery of godliness.

These "mysteries," then, are open and able to be discovered by the curious mind, informed and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. But for those who do not wish to hear such things, the mysteries will remain hidden.

Jesus tells us a little more about His motives for teaching in parables a few verses later. Let's look at Mark 4:21, shall we?

²¹ *And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick?*

²² *For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad.*

²³ *If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.*

²⁴ *And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given.*

²⁵ *For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.*

Jesus gives three very important principles about parables here. First, He talks about putting a candle under a basket. God's light is like that candle. It is the truth. And it is there to be known! "For there is nothing hid (that is, within a parable) which shall not be manifested." The truth may be partially concealed but it is *meant* to be found.

Second, He promises that those who want to find the truth will find it, and find more than they had expected: "with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given." So not only is the truth meant to be found, but the more you look for it, the more of it you will find. God will reveal more of the answer than you had originally thought to ask.

Third, those who choose not to seek will lose even what they have: "For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath no, from him shall be taken even that which he hath."

"But wait, Preacher! That's not fair!"

Maybe. Maybe not. But it is a fact of life. We hear it more commonly as "use it or lose it!" It is a fact that if you stay bedridden for a few weeks you will lose muscle mass. I have been trained to fly, but I haven't flown in over two years. Now, my friends, let me ask you: who among you would want to be my passenger today? Anyone? No? I will tell you that in flying, the principle "use it or lose it" holds especially true. Even letting a week go by between flights will make a pilot of my skill level lose some

of his skill. Spiritually speaking, my friend, you must “use it or lose it.” It’s not enough to say, “Well, I used to be active in church; I used to teach Sunday school; I used to read my Bible.” Friends, what if a person were to say today, “Well, I used to eat food.” You can only say that so long before you waste away and die! It’s never enough to say, “I used to seek God.” Take the light He’s given you and use it—or lose it!

We’re going to look at two last verses and then we’ll be done. Let’s scan ahead to verses 33–34:

³³ *And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it.*

³⁴ *But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.*

This is the final thing I want us to see today: Jesus gave them only as much of the truth as they were able to handle. To the crowd that was least ready to receive His truth, He gave just a little. He gave them enough to think on, to become curious about, and possibly—possibly—desire more. To those who were ready for more truth, He gave more.

You know, if I need to be somewhere early in the morning, I’ll stumble into the bathroom to shave; but my eyes will not yet be ready for the full brightness of the bathroom lights. I have my lights on a dimmer switch. Early in the morning, I couldn’t possibly see to shave under the full brightness; but I can actually see better in dimmer light, until my eyes adjust; then I can bump up the brightness bit by bit, degree by degree, until I can see in the fullness of the light.

And that is the way it is with us. God gives us as much truth as we can handle—and no more! Thank God for that! That is why Jesus came to us as an ordinary human being. We couldn’t handle being in God’s presence; therefore He veiled Himself in human flesh. He “dimmed the light,” so to speak. He spoke in parables, and in doing so he “dimmed the light.” But by dimming the light, He made it possible for us to see and to understand the truth, little by little, bit by bit, degree by degree. And it’s a lifelong process for us! The more we seek God, the more we read Scripture, the more it opens up to us.

I encourage you today to keep seeking so that you will keep finding God’s truth. And if you’re here today but have not yet accepted Jesus as Savior, why not today? Jesus loves you just as you are, and His whole mission to this earth was to heal us and bring us into His light. Won’t you come today?