

THE MYSTERY OF HISTORY

by Ray C. Stedman

We have completed our studies in the book of Acts. We left Paul a prisoner in Rome, dwelling in his own hired house. He was awaiting trial before the emperor, but was free to have his friends visit him and to write letters to all parts of the empire. That is as far as Luke's inspired account goes. That is as much as we know from Acts of what happened to the early Christians. The book of Acts closes about A. D. 62. We know from suggestions in Paul's later letters that he very likely was freed and traveled about again during the time when Nero was emperor and Christianity was rapidly spreading throughout the Roman Empire as it brought new hope and new light to a pagan world which had lost its hope and light.

Within two years of the close of Acts the great fire broke out in Rome for which the Christians were blamed, bringing on the first widespread persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. And within eight years came that terrible, troublous time in Palestine when the Jews rebelled against the authority of Rome and a Roman army under Titus subjected Jerusalem to probably the most terrible siege in all history, when thousands and thousands of Jews died within the city, starved to death in a great famine caused by the siege. Eventually the city was captured, as Jesus had predicted it would be. The temple was invaded and burned to the ground, every stone overturned so that "not one stone was left standing upon another," {cf, Matt 24:2, Luke 21:6}. If you visit Rome today you can still see the great Arch of Titus, erected in honor of that conquest.

Most people are of the opinion that the close of Acts is the end of the inspired record of church history and that in the Bible we have no hint of the developments that were to arise in history after the events of Acts. But we are not left without help in this area. Many Bible scholars find that there are several major passages of Scripture which deal in a sweeping, broad way with what was to follow in human history after Acts.

One of these passages is in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation where we have the letters to the seven churches of Asia from the hand of John, written as he received them in a vision of Jesus Christ. Though these letters were written to actual churches which were there in the Roman Empire at that time, nevertheless many feel, and I agree, that these are also predictive of certain stages through which the church would pass. As history has unfolded itself we have found that those letters have accurately predicted what would be happening within the church throughout the ages that have followed.

Two other well-known passages of this nature occur in Matthew. One, with corresponding passages in Mark and Luke, is the *Olivet Discourse*, the sermon delivered by Jesus on the Mount of Olives just before his crucifixion. He sat there with his disciples and looked out over the city of Jerusalem and knew that his death was near. And in the most amazing terms he described what would happen in the centuries that followed, when nation would rise against nation, and wars, famines, and earthquakes would characterize the whole period. Eventually, he said, a world government would develop, headed by a great leader who would exalt himself as God and the world would follow after him. Then God would bring about a time of great trouble such as the world had never seen from its beginning till its end. At the end of that time Jesus would appear again for all the earth to see and would establish his kingdom. That passage is well known and you can find it in Matthew 24 and 25.

But I want to turn now to the other passage, which occurs earlier in Matthew. We might call it the *Sermon on the Sea*. Jesus gave three great messages which are recorded in Matthew: The *Sermon on the Mount* (Chapters 5-7), the *Sermon on the Sea* (Chapter 13), and the *Olivet Discourse* (Chapters 24-25). The passage in Matthew 13 is less well-known than the *Olivet Discourse*. It consists of seven parables which our Lord told all in one day. In them he traces not the events of history but the principles which affect all of human life during what we call the present age, the age between his comings.

I propose that we study these great parables very carefully, relating them to their corresponding fulfillments in history. So we are not finished with history in the Bible yet. We are going to look at history in the light of what Jesus has revealed will be the governing factors of human life during this period. We will see history then as God sees it. All of us are familiar with history as man sees it -- the rather meaningless jumble of kings and empires, presidents and wars, discoveries, betrayals and exploitations, etc., which constitute what we call the record of history. That is, at best, a very twisted and distorted view of history. But in these seven parables we want to look at God's view of history, at the great, meaningful, effective forces which are at work in human lives to bring about the events that we see recorded in our newspapers and history books. This series of parables began on a very eventful day when Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. Matthew tells us,

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, {Matt 13:1-3a RSV}

We are not going to study the parables today. Beginning next week we will take them one by one, and devote a whole message to each.

Notice the very beautiful natural setting that Matthew records for us. It is on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, not very far from the scene of our Lord's first great message, the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus has come out of the synagogue at Capernaum and gone down to the beach, and great crowds have gathered. Matthew does not tell us how many people but it must have been well up into the thousands. They are drawn by the power that our Lord has displayed, and by the wisdom of his words, and they are ready to see and hear more. In order to be able to address them he pushes out from shore in a boat and there he begins to teach this great crowd of people.

There is a puzzling new development here in the ministry and teaching of Jesus which we ought to note. This was a most remarkable day in our Lord's life. The record of this day begins back in Chapter 12 with Verse 15 where Matthew tells us of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue. He began by quoting a most unusual passage from Isaiah, a prophecy that the message of God would go out to the Gentiles. Our Lord seldom said anything about the Gentiles early in his ministry. He came to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" {Matt 15:24}, he said. But now he quotes this passage from Isaiah:

**"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will any one hear his voice in the streets;
he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,
till he brings justice to victory;
and in his name will the Gentiles hope." {Matt 12:18-21 RSV}**

And on that strange note he went on to say some very solemn words to Israel. We'll just skip through them quickly:

1. He warned them about the possibility of committing the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
2. He warned them, "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or else make the tree bad, and its fruit bad: for the tree is known by its fruit." That is, "Come out into the open and quit being hypocritical!" And then in response to the insistence of the Pharisees he said to this great crowd of Jews in the synagogue that he would give them the sign for which they were continually clamoring. Jesus said,

"... no sign shall be given ... except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." {Matt 12:39b-40 RSV}

In other words, the resurrection is to be the sign to Israel that God is behind the whole enterprise of sending Jesus and that he is indeed their promised Messiah.

3. Then he went on to warn them about the danger of being reinhabited by demons after they had once been cleansed, and then to speak of the priority of spiritual relationships over natural ones. Perhaps this is a good theme for Mother's Day! At the close of Chapter 12, Matthew says,

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." {Matt 12:46-50 RSV}

And with those unusual words, Matthew says, that same day Jesus went out and sat beside the sea and then began to teach the crowds these parables.

That bit of background is necessary in order to understand that something strange is happening here in these parables. Some corner has been turned. Jesus is unfolding truth that he had never unfolded before. Furthermore he does it in a way that he has never used before. You may not realize that this is the very first time, as far as we can tell by comparing the record of the Gospels, that Jesus ever spoke in parables. You might think that he used parables all through his ministry. He often did employ metaphors and similes and he was constantly referring to pictures drawn from life around him. But this is the first time that he ever spoke in stories which have a spiritual message hidden in them. So the disciples are struck by this. Matthew records their reaction in Verse 10:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And 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. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 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.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are heavy of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should perceive with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them.'**

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." {Matt 13:10-17 RSV}

That is undoubtedly one of the most important and revealing paragraphs in all of the Bible. In it is what we might well call "the key to history," the great principle upon which God acts to determine human events. That is what Jesus is setting before us in this series of parables. It is all based upon this great principle which he declares in the midst of this paragraph. You can never understand what is happening in current events nor in the whole scope of history unless you understand this principle. It is not only the principle by which God judges nations and determines the course of international events, but it is the principle by which he governs what happens to individuals as well.

So this morning we want to look only at this interlude Jesus has with his disciples in answer to their question. I want to examine with you four things in this section:

- We want to look more closely at the question the disciples asked and at our Lord's answer to them,

- Then at this central principle on which all of history turns,
- Then at the illustration of it in the nation Israel, and,
- Finally, at the unique privilege enjoyed by these disciples, which we now share, in hearing these things.

That is our program. So look again at the question with me:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And 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." {Matt 13:10-11 RSV}

I am sure that it was curiosity which prompted these disciples to come. They had never heard our Lord talk this way before, and they could not understand it. It is clear that they did not understand the meaning of the stories. Jesus had to explain some of them to them. And neither did they understand why he used this approach. So, puzzled and curious, they came to him and said, "Why are you doing this?"

His answer must have pleased them greatly because he said to them, "Well, to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." The word translated *secrets* means, literally, "mysteries." In Scripture a mystery is a truth which cannot be known by the normal exercise of human wisdom and knowledge. It is a truth about life which, if we are to know it, God must tell us about it, because it could never be discovered by the exercise of human intelligence. That is why these secrets, these mysteries, about the kingdom of heaven, and therefore about life, will never be found in science or literature or history or any other discipline of human knowledge or investigation. They are simply not there. And yet they are essential to the understanding of life. They must be disclosed to us by God.

This is why man's wisdom is never enough. We can discover many things about life and, by our technology, we can invent a lot of useful implements and gadgets but we will never, never satisfy human life on those terms. We must know more; and only God can tell us. That is why these mysteries are of great importance.

The gospel itself is one of these mysteries. Its great secret, Paul says, is "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27}. And Paul announced in several of his letters that it was given to the apostles to unfold these great mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But the unfolding began with Jesus.

These disciples must have been pleased as punch when Jesus said to them, "To you it has been given to know, but not to them" That made them feel like a special "in" group. They felt like the privileged few and that is a great feeling, is it not? We all like that wonderful feeling when somebody gathers us in close and says, "Come here, I want to tell you something. Don't tell anyone else. It is for you to know, and not for them." What a delicious morsel to chew on that is! We are instantly all ears.

The reason for this is that we suspect it only underscores what we have long believed about ourselves -- that we are superior people with a special ability which others do not have, and that, therefore, we have the right to know things which are hidden from others. And you can imagine the pride of these disciples inflating itself as the Lord says, "To you it has been given, but not to them." But our Lord pricks that balloon of pride instantly. He goes on to tell them the basis upon which they were chosen and not someone else. It is simply this:

"For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." {Matt 13:12 RSV}

That is a basic, fundamental law of life. That is the great principle upon which God operates to govern human lives and human history. "To him who has will more be given ... but from him who has not, even what he has [or, as Luke says, 'even what he thinks he has'] will be taken away." Now, what does that mean? It is so fundamental that it applies to everything in life, to every realm of existence. It is true on the physical level. You have muscles in your body. Suppose you deliberately refuse to use one? You will find that soon it will begin to weaken and atrophy, and that what you have is taken away. All you need do to render your arm paralyzed is simply to tie it up and not use it for a few months. Soon you will find you have lost the ability to use it. Life is built this way.

Reduced to its simplest statement, the principle means this:

Truth must be acted upon in order to be retained.

Truth rejected or unused is lost. God is constantly confronting men with truth about everything, at every level of life. Man is so constructed that he is made to act upon truth. But if he doesn't he loses the truth which has already been given to him. That is a very vital and important principle in understanding human life. That is the basis upon which God determines advance or regression either in individuals or in nations.

This is a fantastically important statement that Jesus makes here! It explains, for example, why the disciples were called. When the Lord saw them -- simple fishermen, tax collectors, etc. -- he saw in the heart of each one a willingness to act on truth. When they saw the truth, and knew it to be truth, they acted on it. The proof of that is the way they responded when he called them. The moment he said to them, "Come, follow me," they rose, and followed him. They acted on truth. He had perceived that in them. That is why to them it was given to know the secrets while to others it was hidden. Their willingness to act on the truth they knew qualified them for more truth.

Yesterday up in the mountains we had a meeting of some of the Christian Education leaders of the church. We had a little body life sharing time among ourselves up there. David Roper told us about an encounter he had with one of the Christians on the Stanford campus. A young man who is associated with the athletic department there has recently become a Christian and has been reading the Scriptures and growing in the Lord. The other day this young man had on a sweater which David admired. Just in passing David complimented him on it. The young man didn't say anything then and they went on talking about other things. All of a sudden, to David's astonishment, this young man pulled his sweater off over his head and handed it to Dave, saying, "Here, you take it" Dave protested, "No, why should I do that? I didn't intend anything like that when I admired it. It's yours." But the man insisted. Dave said, "Why are you doing this?" And he said, "Because I've been reading the Bible and I learned there that Christians are to be generous with their possessions. So I want to start practicing that, and I want you to have this sweater."

Since I heard about that I've been admiring quite a few things and I must say that the degree of obedience to this truth has been discouragingly slight!

But that is a beautiful illustration of just exactly what Jesus meant -- a willingness to act on truth, not to say that it applies to someone else, not procrastinate, but to begin immediately to act upon it, to risk, to lose, if necessary, in order to step out on truth that is learned. That, he says, is the secret of advance and growth in Christian life.

I can see this being demonstrated in a thousand different ways in this congregation. One of the wonderfully encouraging aspects of life today is the tremendous spiritual growth we are seeing in young people who are coming to Christ out of the despair and emptiness of existential rationalism. These young men and women are hearing truth and when they hear it they act on it. That is the reason why some of them are advancing to maturity with such leaps and bounds that they are putting to shame many who have been Christians for years. They are ready to act on what they know. That explains their rapid progress in the gospel.

The truths to which they are responding have been there in the Scriptures for centuries. They have been taught in churches in every section of the land; but, for some reason, very few seem to want to take them seriously, to obey them. To the degree this congregation is experiencing the blessing of God, it is because we have been simple enough to believe and obey what God has said. Try it, and you will see immediately that to those who have more will be given, and they shall have in abundance.

But the contrary is also true. If you don't obey truth, it is taken away from you. This great principle is visible in international affairs:

1. Why, for instance, has Great Britain lost its empire and been reduced to a second rate power in our day after being the leading nation of the world for many decades? The answer is that the English

people knew truth which they failed to act on. They did not incorporate into their economic and national life the truth which they admitted widely as a people. They were false to principles they knew to be true, and, as a result, their scepter of power has been removed and they have sunk into relative obscurity. There is no other explanation for it. You can talk about economics, about politics, and other such things, but those are merely the processes by which this principle is worked out.

2. Why did the Roman Empire fall before the barbarian hordes after it had been queen of the world for centuries? The answer is that, when its paganism was confronted with the truth of the cross of Christ, it rejected that truth and fought back with fire and sword and wild beasts and cruel tortures. And the empire crumbled from within. All the wisdom of the Senate and all the experience garnered in centuries of world dominion was unable to hold that empire together.
3. Why are the Russian people now deprived of the right to worship, and of freedom of speech and of the press, and forbidden to travel abroad or even to read of other cultures? Because, when the truth of the gospel was widespread in Russia, as once it was, it was canonized and ritualized and evacuated of its content until it became a hollow shell of pretense and religious hypocrisy. When that happened the nation was rendered ripe for revolution.
4. What do you think is happening in the United States today? This nation is facing exactly that same possibility. The open rejection of the truth about Jesus Christ on the part of the American people, truth which they have known and seen, and the hollow pretense of obeying it when they really do not believe it, is dimming the light in this land and removing the barriers to savagery and violence -- and the barbarians are at the doors again. And evangelicals can be as guilty as anyone else in this respect.

This is the great principle upon which God determines history. It is illustrated in Israel, as Jesus goes on to show. He says,

"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." {Matt 13:13 RSV}

And then he quotes Isaiah, saying that 725 years previously Isaiah had predicted that this would be the case, that when this people heard and saw the truth they would not understand it nor receive it:

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

What does Jesus mean? Well, the fact that he spoke in parables was the beginning of the process of taking away the truth from a people who would not receive it. They had it, but they did not act on it. Jesus spoke very plainly to them at the beginning. They knew he spoke the truth -- they even said so: "Never man spake like this man. Where has this man received this wisdom? Why is it that he teaches us not as the scribes and Pharisees but with authority?" {John 7:46 KJV}. They watched him and listened to his matchless words. Crowds were greatly attracted to him, and followed wherever he went. But only a relative handful did anything about it.

And so the time came when he began to veil the truth. That is what a parable is -- a veiled, hidden truth. By it truth is being removed, taken away. Jesus says, "This is why I am speaking to them in parables -- because they will not see. They have the truth set before them and they will not act. They will not understand, just as Isaiah said." Then he quotes Isaiah further:

**"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}**

Do you notice who did this? Do not read it as though God dulled this people's heart and stopped their ears and closed their eyes. They did it. Their eyes they have closed, their heart they have made to grow dull, their ears have stopped up. Why? Well, as Isaiah said,

**"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}

In other words, they understood what he was after and they sensed deep inside that he could do what he said he would do. He could heal this nation, heal its hurt, its sickness and weakness, its darkness and slavery. But the amazing thing is that these people did not want what God wanted to give them. They didn't want to be healed. They sensed that, in the coming of Jesus, God was reaching out to them to restore them, to make them whole. And in the terrible perversity of their hearts they didn't want it. They preferred their own evil, weakness, and folly, because to be healed meant to confess and to acknowledge that they were wrong. Their pride had to be humbled and they weren't ready to pay that price.

This is the terrible judgment that our Lord brings down upon history. He said, "light has come into the world and men love darkness rather than light," {John 3:19 RSV}. That is the condemnation.

"And because of that," he says, "I am going to speak to them in parables. I will still tell them the truth, because I am truth. I cannot speak anything else but truth. But they will not hear it nor understand it. Only those who are prepared to act upon what they hear will understand it." -- That is the great lesson which forms the background of these parables.

But then, in contrast, Jesus said to his disciples, "How happy you are, how privileged you are."

"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." {Matt 13:16 RSV}

That is, "You are ready to act, and thank God for that. And what a blessing this will bring to you, because you can get more truth!" They were twice blessed, he said, because:

"Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." {Matt 13:17 RSV}

He is thinking back across the whole range of the Old Testament, thinking of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Daniel and Elijah, and Elisha and Samuel, and David and Moses, and all the others. He is saying, "The Spirit of God, speaking through them, showed them that there would be a revelation of truth the like of which man had never seen before. It would be in the coming of a person who would speak and perform the ultimate unfolding of truth. Nothing that the mind of man in its present capacity could ever grasp would be omitted in that unfolding." And, he says, "You are those people. How happy you are! How carefully you ought to listen to this because this is the final, ultimate revelation of truth the way God sees it, the hidden answer to all the problems and confusion of life. You are so fortunate because you are seeing what men have longed to see for centuries."

We stand with those disciples today.

These words are addressed to us because we can see what they saw. We can hear what they heard, and, like them, we are truly blessed. We have set before us the unfolding of the secrets of life.

If we don't hear it, if we don't grasp it, if we don't heed it, we have only ourselves to blame. God has given to us not only the life that comes from Jesus Christ, but also the promise that he will unfold to us all the understanding we need to meet any difficult problem or circumstance of life and to see it as God sees it -- if we but give ourselves to the study and understanding of his Word. As Paul says, "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," {cf, Col 2:2-3}.

As you look around at life today it is very obvious that something is terribly lacking in the understanding of men. We have vast technological ability and can construct all kinds of useful machines, and we can improve the physical standard of our lives, but something is still terribly lacking. We do not know how to enable people to live in harmony with one another. We do not know how to remove the frictions, the hostilities, the guilt of man. We do not know how to heal his hurt. And yet those secrets are given to us -- but only to those prepared to act upon them. That is the key.

That is why it is so terribly important that when God teaches you something, you do not delay acting on it. Do not just put it up on your wall and say, "I learned a great truth today. It blessed my heart. There it is: You can read it for yourself." -- No! Act on it!

This means that when you read in the Scriptures that the Lord says to Christians, "Practice hospitality" {Rom 12:13} without grudging, you should go home, open your door, and invite somebody in, and use your home without grudging, without partiality, for the benefit of those who are in need. This means that when the Lord says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" {cf, Eph 4:32}, if you have a grudge in your heart against somebody and you have been holding it against them, and you are resentful and have been trying to hurt them, or you have excluded them or turned your back on them, then go and deal with that situation, heal that relationship. Act upon the truth, or you are committing yourself to blindness and to finding that the truth which would have delivered you will be taken away so that all you will have left is but the hollow shell of words, with no content whatever.

Our Lord is putting his finger right on the great mystery of history, the secret of human life. How desperately we need to understand this, and to follow it. As we go into this passage on succeeding Sundays, we will study these mysteries, these parables one by one; and each will unveil something to us.

May God grant that our hearts will be prepared to listen, and to act, because it is as we act that new truth is given and we begin to unfold, like a flower before the rising sun, as God causes our life to blossom with an abundance of fruit and knowledge.

Shall we bow together in prayer?

Prayer

Our Lord Jesus, we wait before you, awed and humbled by these words. We know that in you are hidden great and marvelous truths which man has never grasped and which we desperately need to know. Our lives' happiness depends upon it. We pray that you will make us willing to act upon what you do show us. Save us from the folly of sitting back in scornful skepticism, waiting to have everything unveiled to us before we will act on it. Help us to act upon those bits and pieces of truth which come to us, Lord, and which we know are true. For then according to your promise: "To him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance." And help us to take seriously this warning: "But from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." We ask it in your name, Amen.

Title: The Mystery of History
Series: Behind the Scenes of History
Scripture: Matt 13:1-17
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 452
Date: May 9, 1971

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