

Why Did Christ Teach in Parables?

By L. D. MORSE (Jan. 12, 1889) BEFORE THE JUNIOR CLASS IN DEPARTMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION, NEWTON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

(Published by Request.)

It was one of the most natural things in the world for Christ to teach in parables. If there is an analogy between the natural and the supernatural, if there is such a thing as a spiritual law in the natural world, it is certain that a Divine teacher should notice these resemblances and say, "The kingdom of heaven is like this." If the "everlasting power and divinity" of Jehovah are printed bright on every leaf of the physical world, in every phase of human life, is it surprising that incarnate truth should try to make us see these things? If to discover hidden and beautiful resemblances is evidence of a lofty kind of mental greatness, shall there not be some measure of greatness in the man who in the perfection of manhood—the goal and crown of all true greatness in heaven and earth? Many of the great and ardent spirits of the world have exhibited their genius in identifying principles which had been veiled in human flesh, and in subsuming under some single sweeping law, what had hitherto seemed several laws, all ultimate and separated by an impassable gulf. Why should we not expect the noblest and purest spirit that ever shone in human flesh, should be also the profoundest and richest philosopher—seeing clear through the labyrinthine system of the universe, tracing its multitudinous ramifications back to the one great law and the first great cause of all and before whom the nature of God and all His works would be open as the starry heavens to His single eye? If Newton saw, in the tumble of an apple, a manifestation of the law that keeps every part of the universe whirling in its track, why should not humanity see, in the speaking of a seed, a manifestation of the unswerving habit of the Eternal Spirit in generating life from life everywhere—even in the planting of Divine life in the human soul? When the boy who was brought up in the vale of Nazareth, and by the richest industry and study, increased in wisdom and in favor with God and man—when he was mysteriously but thoroughly one with the true God and Author of all; then we might expect a Teacher who could bring heaven and earth together, and make them teach at every pair of symmetrical points.

It was not only one of the most natural things in the world for Christ to teach in parables, but it seems to have been also one of the most necessary. Sinful man walks on the earth condemned by every prospect. Nature, conscience, and God's Word place their three hands together on his head and crown him with a curse. Paul teaches that the most sinless heathen is left without excuse. "For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; so that they are without excuse." What we call Nature is the voice of God, speaking to face with man. Man has left God, but God has not left man. The phenomena of the external world, beating upon his senses, are the hand of God knocking at his heart. In a little later development of his theme, Paul proceeds: "For as many as have sinned without law, shall also perish without law: for when gentiles which have no law, do by nature the things of the law, they are a law unto themselves, in that they show the work of the law written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts some one with another, accusing or else excusing one: conscience man has rebelled, but God is not disposed. The two are not done with each other yet. Man's conscience is God's vice-gerent. The fall of man should be out of his seat. If he were seen to be justified to itself, he is only gathering strength against the day of doom. If man had torn out his conscience and buried it at the roots of the forbidden tree, he would have torn out and buried the seed that makes him a man. Instead of being fallen, he would have been gone. So that, although no one has ever defined man, we can come as near to a definition as anybody, by saying that man is an earthly being with a conscience. Man's conscience is the record of himself, and when he sins, he is under protest of himself, although that protest be sometimes a grim and gnashing of teeth.

Nature and conscience. If the heavens declare the glory of God, and every manifestation of His power, and His voice, and if God still holds a throne in show, where a plummet-ray of His image still persists in the very constitution of the human spirit; why should there not be a persistent appeal to these co-witnesses in the precious eloquence of Jesus? If he ignored these voices of nature and conscience, he would have ignored his best friends on earth. "He came into his own, and his own received him not"; but these two received Him, and were true to Him as flint and steel. To have divorced Himself from their friendship would have been unnatural and unchristianlike. The laws of nature and of conscience are living laws of God, written: sleep in the external world and in man's spirit—law, indeed, which the sun of man came not to destroy but to fulfill. He did not fight against laws; why should these laws and make all his teaching importations, outright, of dogmas from heaven? as if God had been running this world for thousands of years without ever writing His name or leaving one print of His hand, which there were no such thing as all as the voice of God crying out of nature and conscience? As if, then, there could be no such thing as a guilty world "without excuse," and "every mouth stopped" echoing at the judgment seat its own condemnation? No, Christ was no such teacher. He taught in parables, and gave new, and sweet, and startling articulations to the voices of nature. "Consider the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them: are ye not much better than they?" If, then, God so clothes the grass—Behold, a sower went forth to sow. Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit; etc., etc., etc.

He taught in parables, and no man was able to pluck his conscience out of their merciless hands. "Which of them, therefore, will love Him most?" said

Jesus. "He, I suppose," said Simon, "who he forgave the most." Here is the full expression of Simon's judgment. That is what Jesus wanted. "Thou hast rightly judged," said Jesus, and the Son of God laid the "Parable" as answer for a text. At another time, he was telling about the forgiven debtor who would not forgive—a story that would stir the soul with righteous indignation against the base ingrate, and while unanimous satisfaction with the doom of the poor chief priests and elders were prowling around, haughty and angry, plotting against His life. Jesus laid before them a case that they could consider without prejudice; and they pronounced, by their own free judgment, the very doom that He had intended for them, and that He had intended for the scattered children of Jacob to this day. "When, therefore, the Lord of the vineyard shall come," said Jesus, "what will he do unto those men?" Their verdict is simple, and they answer and said unto them, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away, even that which he hath. Therefore speak I unto them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith: 'By hearing ye shall hear and shall in no wise understand; and seeing ye shall see and shall in no wise perceive; for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have closed; lest haply they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand, and should turn again, and I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and say them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not. Hear then ye the parable of the sower." (Matt. 13: 10, 18).

To put it in a sentence, Christ taught in parables, on this occasion, so that those who hated the truth could not find it, and so that those who loved it could find it well enough. The truth was hidden in those parables just as God is hidden in the world to-day. Some find Him and some do not. The difference between those who find Him and those who do not is a matter of heart. "Ye shall seek me and find me; when ye shall search for me with all your heart." (Jer. 29: 13). Or to say the same thing in almost the same words, the truth, in those parables, was hard to find just as Christ is hard to find to-day. Some never find Him. It is not because He cannot be found; but because they do not really want to find Him. It is not because Christ has shut Himself up, but because they have shut themselves up. "I would have said, but ye would not; I would have spoken, but ye would not hear; because they would not hear." "Everyone that is of the truth," said Jesus, "heareth my voice." So, then, everyone who does not hear his voice, is not of the truth. He shuts out the truth; and every heart that shuts out the truth, shuts out Christ for Christ is the truth. This is all in perfect accord with a doctrine taught, a few days ago, in this classroom, that "a man's attitude toward the truth determines his attitude toward Christ." In full harmony is all this with the spirit of the invitations and beatitudes of Jesus. "On the last day, the day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7: 37). "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." (Matt. 5: 6). So, whether or not a hearer got the most of these parables, depended mainly upon the condition of his heart; and Christ intended that it should be so. A signally righteous judgment upon his hearers' hardness of heart. He who loved darkness, rather than light, these sayings were his; and these were the things that he could not value. "This people's heart is waxed gross. Their ears are dull. Their eyes have closed." All shut up! Forlorn, God forsaken condition! There was no response to the truth in them; if there ever had been any heaven in them, it was all unstrung now and taken down, and they had turned their souls to the songs of hell. When a plot was made to kill the Prince of Peace his earthly dig touched a chord in their hearts. But when Jesus came, they were shut out everything at once by shutting out the truth. He has stripped and singled himself of everything in the world that is worth having. He has nothing. "And whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath." Unto him it is not given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. "Therefore speak I unto them in parables." But these parables were not midnight

to all. The cloud that was darkness to Egypt was light to Israel. There were some that loved the truth, and to them the parables were unfolded. As hungry birds in winter flock to the fields of corn, and the child who loves them and drops fresh seed or them on the snow, so a cluster of humble men crowded around Jesus and hung upon his lips. "Blessed are your eyes," said Jesus, "for they see." (That is the kind of eyes that have the truth. They had "whosoever" hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance." These open hearts found open treasures. "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. And not only that, but to know the things which are hid, which no man knoweth, save the Father only, and the Son whom the Father hath chosen to reveal unto him." "It is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." 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