

PARABLES & DARK SAYINGS

“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: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand.” — Mark 4:11-12

Jesus often used symbolic lessons which were meant to teach his disciples important truths, but which also served to hide these truths from those not fully committed as a disciple. *“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him... because they are spiritually discerned.”* (1 Corinthians 2:14) Jesus therefore spoke in *parables* and *dark sayings* for the double purpose of hiding his meaning from the worldly minded, and, at the same time, making the truth clear and reasonable to those of a humble and teachable mind.

In this *time of the end* we have the advantage of hindsight and are able to see where many of Jesus’ parables have been in process of fulfillment. Some of these parables are of special interest to Christians at the end of the Gospel Age, revealing where we are in the stream of time.

WORD PICTURES AS A TEACHING TOOL

Some Christians are inclined to take every passage of Scripture literally, but, discerning between *literal* and *symbolic* meanings is one of the most necessary tools of effective Bible study. How much clearer do the lessons of the Bible appear when symbolic language is properly understood. Consider the words *water*, *fire*, *flesh* and *blood* as examples.

Water, if taken literally in Ephesians 5:26, 27, would make no sense: *“Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word...”* Understanding that *water* is an illustration of the *cleansing power of truth* makes perfect sense.

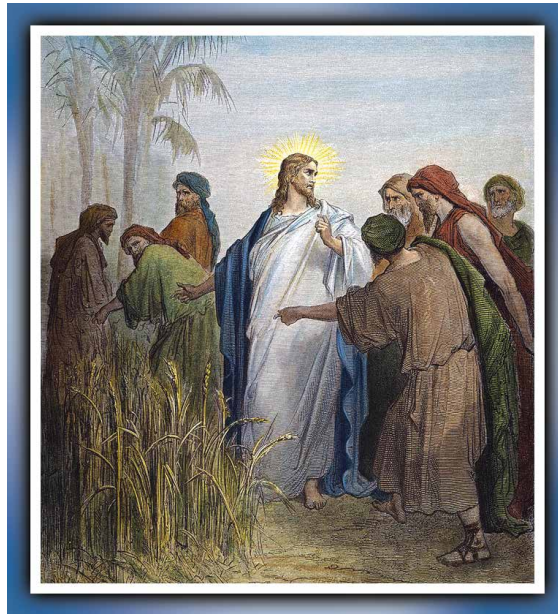
The word *fire* in 1 Peter 1:7 has a symbolic meaning of *purifying*: *“The trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire...”* This same symbolism is also found in Malachi 3:2. *“...he is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap... he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.”*

Jesus declared that he was *“the bread of life,”* and *“Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you...”* This was a very *hard saying*, which, if taken

literally, would be disturbing. In fact, many of Jesus’ disciples left him at that point, because they could not comprehend the lesson behind the symbolic language — they lacked sincere faith. (John 6:53, 66) *Eating Jesus’ flesh* is meant to illustrate taking to one’s self the merit of his *ransom* sacrifice. *Drinking his blood* is meant

to show *participation* in the sacrifice of his life. *“For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake...”* Philippians 1:29

Having the key to understanding *parables*, therefore, provides depth of meaning to the true disciple. To deny that God used word pictures to help His children understand His plans and purposes more clearly, is to turn away from one of the most beautiful means of communing with Him. *“A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.”* Proverbs 1:5, 6



PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE CHAFF — Matthew 3:11, 12

At the time of Jesus’ first advent, there was a *harvest* of the *Jewish Age* which applied to that nation only. John the Baptist referred to this *age* as a time of separating the *wheat from the chaff*. *“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me... will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff...”*

For more than sixteen hundred years the Law Covenant had been in operation between God and Israel. Under it they had been disciplined and instructed. Jesus came to offer himself as King to the Jews and to make them his joint-heirs in his Father’s Kingdom. At the close of the Jewish Age, therefore, that people should have been prepared to accept their Messiah. Thus, after our Lord presented himself to them, he began to do a *harvesting* work among his Jewish brethren. The *wheat class* were sincere believers, and the *chaff* were those who rejected their Messiah.

Had there been a sufficient number of Jews in heart-readiness to receive the Gospel message at Jesus’ first advent, the entire Church class would have been chosen from that

one nation, and the extension of God's call to the Gentiles in the Christian Age would not have been necessary. Nevertheless, the Lord knew that Israel would not be ready to receive him, and, rejecting that nation, he opened the door of the high calling to worthy individual Jews and Gentiles.

PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS — Luke 16:19-31

Understanding the parable of the *wheat and chaff* leads to a proper understanding of the following: “*There was a certain rich man... clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*” Luke 16:19-31

Many Christians draw conclusions from this parable as though it were a literal statement, and they use it to prove their doctrine of eternal torment. However, to regard this parable as a literal statement one would have to conclude that Lazarus was blessed, not because he was full of faith, but simply because he was poor and sick, implying that only the poor and sick will be saved. In that case, *Abraham's bosom* would be a literal place where billions of the earth's poor will reside.

As a symbolic lesson, however, this parable becomes much more reasonable. In symbol, *Abraham* represented God and His promise that *Abraham's seed* would *bless all families of the earth*. (Genesis 22:18) The *rich man* represented the Jewish nation which inherited this promise through Isaac and Jacob and then to Jacob's twelve sons — Israel. Romans 3:2 states that the Jews enjoyed great advantage “... every way: chiefly, because to them were committed the oracles of God.” Thus, they had “*fared sumptuously*” as special recipients of God's favors. They were a *royal* and a *holy* nation as represented by the rich man dressed in *purple and fine linen*—symbolic of righteousness.

Lazarus pictured not only the *publicans and sinners* of Israel estranged from God, but also truth-hungry Gentiles who were *feeling after God*. In Jesus' day, these were outcasts from divine favor under the Law. These hungered after righteousness — lying at the gate of the *rich man*. The parable states that they were companions of *dogs*. Dogs were regarded as detestable creatures, and the *typically* clean Jew called outsiders *Gentile dogs*. Jesus' words to the Syro-Phoenician woman provide the key to understanding this symbol: “*It is not meet [proper] to take the children's [Israelites'] bread and to cast it to dogs [Gentiles].*” But she answered, “*Truth, Lord, but the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*” (Matthew 15:26, 27) Jesus healed her daughter, thus giving her the desired *crumb* of favor.

After Jesus' death, there came a great dispensational change in Israel's history when, as a nation, they had rejected and crucified the Son of God. Then, the promise of royalty ceased to be theirs, and the Kingdom was taken from Israel to be given to a people bringing forth fruitage. (1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 21:43) Thus, the *rich man died*

to all special favors, and soon he (the Jewish nation) found himself in a cast-off condition — in tribulation and affliction. Lazarus also died, picturing that the condition of the Gentiles and the God-seeking outcasts of Israel underwent a great change, being carried by the angels (Greek: *messengers* — Apostles) to what is symbolized by *Abraham's bosom*. These became heirs of all the promises made to Abraham: “*if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*” Galatians 3:29

“*In hell [Greek: hades — the grave] he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off...*” This illustrates that great sufferings would be added to the Jews *after* their national dissolution, and that they would plead in vain for comfort at the hand of the formerly despised *Lazarus class*. For two thousand years the

Jews have been relentlessly persecuted by all classes, including professed Christians. This is a reference to the *burning of the chaff* of the previous parable — the great time of trouble with which the Jewish Age ended.



PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE — Matthew 24:32-35

Jesus gave assurance that the *rich man*, the Jewish nation, would once again return to divine favor. He illustrated this in the parable of the *fig tree*. “*Now learn a parable of the fig tree; when his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh.*” Throughout the Bible we learn that the *fig tree* represents the nation of Israel. (Jeremiah 24:1-10; 29:17-23) *Leaves* sprouting on a tree are an evidence that the tree has sprung to life after a dormant winter. The *fig tree*, which Jesus cursed in Matthew 21:19, has been putting

forth leaves since 1878, thus showing the return of divine favor. The Jews, after being without a homeland for nearly 2,000 years — scattered throughout the world — have been returning to their homeland, and in a miracle of history, Israel became a nation again in 1948.

Luke 21:29-33 adds even more detail to this parable: “*Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand.*” Here, Jesus mentions “*the fig tree, and all the trees.*” If the *fig tree* pictures Israel, then *all the trees* would refer to other nations. Jesus is telling us that, together with Israel springing to life, many other nations would put forth leaves, sprouting into existence. For centuries, up to 1945, the number of independent nations in the world had remained relatively constant at around 70. However, since 1945 the number of independent nations has grown dramatically to 196 nations! More than 126 new independent nations have sprung into being that were previously held as colonies. Thus Israel, simultaneously with 126 other nations, has put forth leaves, sprouting into existence.

PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND TARES — Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

This parable touches on the previous lesson. It refers to the Christian Age, when Jesus no longer confined his calling only to the Jewish nation, but he sent his disciples to the Gentiles who had been *aliens and strangers*. Jesus, through the Apostles sowed the *good seed* into his field. But *while men slept* [the Apostles] — in the nighttime of the Dark Ages, the *enemy* over-sowed the wheat field

with *tares* — weeds. As a result, the field looked very prosperous, although, in reality, the tares, which look very much like wheat, had a disastrous effect — choking, entangling and sapping the nutrients of the soil from the wheat. The Bible intimates that the tares became so intertwined with the wheat that to have plucked them up would have brought destruction to the wheat. Hence, the decree that both should *grow together until the Harvest* — the full end of the Christian Age. “*The Harvest is the end of the Age.*” Verse 39

Most Christians today would agree that we are living in the *end of the age*, and this means a time of *separation*. The *tare* class seeks to compromise with the world by making truth and righteousness relative to the society in which they live. Sincere Christians lament that a worldly and commercial atmosphere often overshadows their worship. These confess the sad lack of spirituality in their membership and lack of doctrinal teaching from the pulpit. Furthermore, there are ever increasing appeals for donations. Statistics also indicate that immorality in the church systems is rampant. “*One in ten ministers have had affairs with members of their congregations, and about one in four have had some kind of sexual contact with parishioners.*” *Christianity Today*, 4/9/90

Throughout the Christian Age, tares have continually been *bundled* into tighter sects, denominations, organizations and cults. (Verse 30) Under this irresistible mass appeal to conform, the binding into bundles continues against the hour when the *fire* of trial shall try every man's work of what sort it is. (1 Corinthians 3:13-15) Notice that it is the *work* that will be symbolically *burned* and *not* the person. The promise to the wheat class, those whose work was *tried in the fire* as gold which does *not* perish, is that Christ will bring the nourishment of truth for their hungering souls. Those who are sincere in their love of God, appalled at the worldliness pervading their congregations, feel compelled to separate. This brings us to the lesson of the next parable.

PARABLE OF THE *LEAVEN* — Matthew 13:33

Jesus chose *leaven* to illustrate a corrupting influence which would come upon his young Church. “*The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*” Note Jesus' explanation of leaven in Matthew 16:6-12. “*Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees... Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*” Jesus warned that *leaven* is the corrupting influence of erroneous doctrine.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 sheds light on the *three measures of meal*. “*Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven... Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*” As yeast kneaded into bread dough permeates the entire mass, so it would be with the Church of Christ — the *food* of the entire household becomes corrupted by the *leaven* of *insincerity and error*.

In this parable, the *Kingdom of heaven* represents the Gospel Age Church in its pure state, before the corrupting influence of pride, selfishness, insincerity and error had spread and contaminated

all *three measures of meal*. This degenerating influence of leaven was added by a *woman*. In Scripture, the symbolism of a *woman* often represents either the true, virtuous Church, or the false, impure church. Jesus is considered the head of the true Church — represented as his virgin bride — whereas, Satan is the head of the false, corrupted church. Therefore, this *woman*, who inserted the *leaven* of error into the bread of truth, would be an ecclesiastical system organized and in power at an early date in church history.

It is extremely important for sincere Christians to examine the doctrine to know whether it has corrupted the congregation to which they are associating. If so, Revelation 18:4 implores true Christians to “*Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.*” At some point in the near future, our returned Lord will purge out the leaven of error, and the false systems will be completely pulled down. Revelation 18:2



PARABLE OF THE *TREASURE*

HID IN THE FIELD — Matthew 13:44

“*The Kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.*” This seemingly simple parable is really the most sublime. The *field*, which Jesus said was the *world of mankind* in the parable of the *wheat and the tares*, was cherished by him.

“*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...*” (John 3:16) Jesus *purchased* the world of mankind by *selling all that he had* — his very life! This *ransom sacrifice* is spoken of throughout the Old and New Testaments. “*He poured out his soul unto death.*” (Isaiah 53:12) Jesus “*gave himself a ransom for all to be testified in due time.*” 1 Timothy 2:6

If Jesus gave himself a *ransom for all*, then why did he speak in parables which were only understood by a few? He even said that he purposely spoke in parables “*lest at any time they should... understand with their heart, and should be converted...*” (Matthew 13:15) Why did Jesus not give a clear message so that *all* could have an equal opportunity to understand his words of salvation? The reality is that *now* is the time for the selection of just a few with *ears to hear* — a *little flock*. This *little flock* is the *treasure* which *the man hid in the field*. The church has been hidden from others, often considered *peculiar*, and at times, they are despised to the point of persecution. To Jesus, these are a *precious treasure*. But note that Jesus paid an enormous price, not only for this *hidden treasure*, but he also *purchased* the entire *field* — the *world of mankind*. These, too, shall become a *treasure*, when, through the gift of His only begotten Son, God “*...will [in due time] have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*” (1 Timothy 2:3, 4) Jesus was “*the propitiation [atoning sacrifice] for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*” 1 John 2:2

Ever since the time of Jesus' first advent, only a faithful few have had the desire to know the *deep things* hidden in *parables and dark sayings*. But, the time is coming when “*the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*” (Isaiah 11:9) In His *due time*, God's Kingdom will provide the first full, fair opportunity for salvation to *all* through the knowledge of His Son.

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