Rev P Archbald

Seeing is Not Believing

Isaiah 6:8-13

Mark 4: 1-12, 33-34, Text: 4:1-2, 10-12, 33-34

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would grant that we would not simply pay lip service to your word simply repeating its doctrines, simply claiming to trust its promises and to agree with its ethical principles, Father, we pray that you would grant that we may love Your word, that we may receive it inwardly and keep it with the help of your Holy Spirit. Will you grant us that help again today, we pray and we ask in Jesus name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, as we have worked our way through thus far in the gospel of Mark we found that the crowds, those who are coming to hear the teaching of the Lord Jesus, see the miracles and so on, that crowd is gradually growing larger and larger. Now at this point, we read that it is a very large crowd – before it was large, now it is a very large crowd, in fact such a very large crowd had gathered to Him that He had to get into the boat and teach the crowds from there as they gathered on the shores of the lake. And some have suggested that the Lord Jesus did that because on a very calm day with flat water the sound would carry and disperse more widely to a very large crowd so that everyone could hear Him. Isn’t that great, the crowds getting larger and larger. This is the dream of every mega-church pastor to have the crowds getting larger and larger like that. And what do you do if you are a mega church pastor, when you get such a large crowd of people, maybe a church of ten thousand or more, as some places have – what do you when you have a large crowd like that – well, you keep doing what you’ve been doing because it’s working. And if it works and it gets the people in, then that’s what you want to do. And you also make sure that you don’t offend them too much because then things might go the opposite direction and you might lose that large crowd. And then of course also you want the crowd to grow even larger and larger so you might try a few new gimmicks so that even more will come.

What does the Lord Jesus do with His very large crowd. Does He do any of these things? Does He seek to make the crowd larger and larger and to make what He is saying more and more easy and accessible for them? No, He begins to teach in parables. Mark chapter 4 gives us some examples of these parables, which Lord willing, we will look at in the weeks ahead. This chapter also has interspersed in it in three places, an explanation of why the Lord Jesus did this. Why He taught in parables in this way.

Three points as we look at that. We are going to group those three sections together so that this teaching on parables, the nature of them, why they are there, that we get this gathered together. First of all, the Old Testament background to the parables; Second – Jesus’ use of the parables; and thirdly the reflection of God’s kingdom in the parables.

In the first place then, Jesus’ use of parables is rooted in the Old Testament. And the background in the Old Testament parables there have at least three main aspects. First, parables are an aspect of wisdom. Second, they are used to judge those who are hard of heart, and third, the parables point ahead to the coming of the Messiah. As to the part played by the parables as an aspect of wisdom one of the best ways to gain insight into this particular aspect is to consider Proverbs 1:1-7 gives us a definition of wisdom and it also gives us a description of all the different aspects of wisdom, it packs a whole bunch of wisdom words in there – each one with a slightly different meaning – so that we see wisdom in all its many shades and colours. And especially in verse 6 of Prov. 1 we are told that wisdom enables man to understand a proverb and a figure, and the word proverb could also be translated ‘parable’ – so it gives wisdom to understand a parable or a proverb and a figure – the words of the wise and their riddles , you could also translate that word ‘puzzles’. So what that is telling us here is that parables are essentially - the word means a comparison, and the word ‘figure’ probably means something like that as well, a comparison in which some truth is compared to a certain aspect of everyday life. The sowing of seed, soil, harvesting or whatever it may be – some aspect of everyday life. A figure might be something similar, a comparison, a figure of speech, that makes a comparison or it may also mean a riddle or a puzzle being something that you have to work at. In order to apply it to yourself you have to wrestle with it, because it is not immediately straight forward and open what it means – you have to wrestle with the meaning and you have to work on that in order to apply it to yourself with the Lord’s help. You do that by asking the Lord for help and then by comparing scripture with scripture. That is how you work out these biblical riddles, puzzles and parables.

And that is done in order that we understand something of the depth of God’s word. That everything in it is not just easy stuff, there is deep and profound truth. Yes, it is explained so that we may understand but there is also a depth to it that goes way beyond us and therefore we need the Lord’s help as we wrestle with the Scripture. We need the Lord’s help as we work at these parables and so on, that aren’t immediately clear to us what they mean, or difficult prophecies and so on. And also it teaches us how much we need the Lord’s help in doing that but it also teaches us how satisfying the word of God is, it reminds us of that, because when you work at something in the Bible, when there is something that you don’t really understand and you sit down and you put effort into working that out, and suddenly the penny drops and there is a real sense of satisfaction in that and there ought to be – but then all of the word of God is satisfying and we ought to be satisfied by it. But these kind of puzzles and riddles they help to teach us that satisfaction comes with studying the Word.

The wise man – the one who fears the Lord and loves His word will receive that help when he asks for it – but he will also be the one who makes this effort and who in time is blessed by the Lord to be able to figure out the things he needs to figure out. How appropriate it is then that the one who is the wisdom of God made flesh, the One who is the word of God made flesh, the Lord Jesus, that He would come speaking so much in parables as He imparts what we could see as New Testament wisdom literature. That is really what the parables are – they are New Testament wisdom literature. Though it is true that the rabbis of Jesus’ time also used parables as a teaching method. And so, no doubt, as the crowd heard Jesus using parables, they might have thought he is just another rabbi, he may be an interesting one, but He is just a rabbi, He is not the son of God. And there were others, as we know, who heard these things and believed, and there were others again, who heard these things and seethed with anger and hatred over what they saw, from their point of view as false and blasphemous pretensions on the part of the Lord Jesus.

Closely related to this wisdom aspect, the Old Testament also shows that parables can be instruments of God’s judgement. When books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes give us comparisons that are a puzzle, the foolish and those who are really disinterested in God’s Word, they don’t have a deep interest in it at least, they quickly give up on it – they put it in the too hard basket. If it requires a bit of work or study, reading some commentaries or reading books, or speaking to other Christians to find out what a passage means, they are not interested, they can’t be bothered – just put it in the too hard basket. And that is certainly what happens with parables which require this work. Parables are like the rubics cube – those coloured cubes that you had to twist and align them in the right order – it was a three dimensional puzzle – and you know how frustrating those things could be if you didn’t know the solution. You fiddle away with them for a few minutes and you start to get all frustrated even to the point of slight nausea, and then you throw the thing away in disgust. It is that kind of effect that the parables had on those who weren’t really interested in the truth. Parables increased the understanding for the Godly when they put that work into it and when the penny drops. But they conceal, they prevent understanding in the case of the wicked who walk away in frustration, anger and disgust. And that is the point of the Old Testament quote here in verse 12. From Is. 6:9ff which we read, where Isaiah was not specifically told to use parables, but he was told that in his ministry God was going to use him to render the ears of Israel dull, the eyes dim, in other words to veil the truth as a judgement upon those who were hard of heart. And that is what God does and we often warn those who have turned away from the faith, we have warned them that the Lord may well do this to them, they may think – ‘I’ll come back to God when it suits me at some point later in my life when I’ve had my fun and so on, or maybe at the end of my life on my deathbed when it is convenient , I’ll come back to God’ – they don’t understand and they don’t believe that very often the Lord prevents that. He veils the truth, He covers the truth over so that they cannot do that. That is a deserved punishment on the part of those who spit the truth that they know back in His face. And that is what Isaiah was told to do.

This was the task of parables as well. To cover the truth to those who were hard of heart – especially of God’s covenant people. Abraham reminded the rich man in the parable that Jesus told that seeing is not necessarily believing. You can see the truth with your eyes. You can read it. You can speak it with your mouth, you can hear it with your ears but if you do not have faith then you will not really understand it – not in your heart where it really needs to be. You hear many people say today that seeing is believing. And this is an important thing that we tell them that is not the case – seeing is not necessarily believing – not unless it is coupled with faith. And the reaction of the crowds to the Lord Jesus showed this that if people say seeing is believing you can point this out to them. It is an important thing to say that the crowds who gathered around Jesus they saw many many mighty miracles. They saw all kinds of great things that even we haven’t seen and still they didn’t believe. You can also point out to them the other side of the coin that there are in fact many things they believe in that they cannot see – they might believe in love, or something of that kind, and you can’t see that as such – we can point out their inconsistency.

Well, the third purpose of the parables in the Old Testament is to point to the coming of the Messiah. In the parallel passage in Matt. 13:35, Psalm 78:2 is quoted, ‘I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter dark sayings of old’. Dark sayings is the word for riddle or puzzle – something obscure, something dim. Or as Matthew translates Psalm 78:2 ‘I will utter things hidden, since the foundation of the world’. Now who is this passage talking about? Who is the person who speaks in parables and who makes plain these obscure things of old? Who is the one who does that – according to Psalm 78? Well Matthew says that person is the Lord Jesus – He is the one who fulfils this. So when the Lord Jesus comes speaking in parables He was actually giving evidence that He is the Messiah because Psalm 78 said that when the Messiah came, He would come speaking in parables.

That is the Old Testament background and the Lord Jesus Himself uses the parables in essentially the same way. To impart wisdom but also to conceal it. To show that He is the Messiah, but also to conceal it. Our second point – Jesus’ use of parables.

This term tells us that once Jesus was alone with the disciples, they began asking Him about the parables. The parallel in Matt. 13:10 shows us that that didn’t just mean that they asked Him to explain specific parables, more than that, they were asking Him why He spoke in parables, and why He was not explaining things in a more open and direct manner. And the Lord’s answer to that question is twofold, matching the twofold use of parables in the Old Testament, both to conceal and also to reveal. First, there is the situation with the largely unbelieving crowds, and then the other situation with the believing disciples. With the crowd the judging purpose is the one that comes more into play. To them, teaching in parables became a customary thing for the Lord Jesus. That is, a point was reached where He did not speak to them without a parable – verse 34. In other words, in virtually every one of His sermons to the crowd on those many occasions when He went out to preach, He pretty well always used one or more parables. This was because so many in the crowd did not really believe. They came for the miracles, they came to see an event, they came to spy on Him and get Him into further trouble, but they brought their hard heart with them and as a result of that the judgement of God, on the hardness of heart, that the truth would be veiled through parables.

This shows us that God does not have a universal saving intention. You will often hear this in Arminian circles – that God equally savingly loves absolutely every single person in this world and He really equally wants and intends every single one of them will be saved, but He has to leave it to their own free will and there is nothing He can do about it when they decide they don’t want Him. That is the Arminian doctrine in its classical form, and there is still a lot of that thinking around today. But here we see that is not the case, that God does not have a universal saving intention for mankind, though it is certainly true that He does not desire, that it so say, He does not delight in, He takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner, that is also true. God loves repentance and He hates to see sinners holding out on repentance.

But the fact remains, that the Lord Jesus could have explained the truth openly to the crowds as well, had He wanted to do so. And God could have sent the Holy Spirit to every single person there, so their heart of stone was softened and every single one of them believed – had that been His intention. Instead the Lord Jesus, following His Father’s will, veiled the truth giving the wicked over to their hard hearts.

Now we today in our evangelistic outreach, we are not God. We do not stand in the place of the Lord Jesus. We cannot see the hearts of those to whom we talk and proclaim the gospel and therefore it is not for us to say ‘I’m going to hide the truth from this one, but I’m going to make it nice and open to that one – to veil to some, to unveil to others’. On the other hand, we do not need to feel guilty, by definition, if we proclaim the truth and find that the vast majority around us refuse to listen and openly reject and become hostile to that truth. We don’t need to start looking for all sorts of gimmicks and new ways of doing things, and develop a new kind of theology and way of worship that is more acceptable to people around us, so that they will suddenly start flocking into the church. We do not need to do that because we know that our God is One that wants the truth proclaimed by us, but He will decide and has decided, to whom it will be veiled and to whom it will be unveiled.

Sure, we explain the truth openly in the hope that many will come to see the truth, but we must leave that to the Lord. The Lord’s veiling actions show that we ought not to feel guilty if He declines to open the eyes and hearts of those to whom we proclaim the truth. God does not operate in the same way as a mega-church pastor. However, there is not only a veiling of the truth here, there is also an open disclosure. There is not only judgement here, there is also grace. There’s grace to the disciples of the Lord Jesus. The mystery of the Kingdom of God is given to them. The parables of the kingdom are explained to them as we find in chapter 4. In fact there is a contrast here between those outside, those who have turned against God and the covenant people, those who are unbelieving and hard of heart, those who are outside, who get everything in parables, verse 11, over against the disciples in verse 34 to whom He was explaining everything privately. Everything in parables to one group, everything explained to the other group. And this is the graciousness of God that He saves some, even if He would only save one or two in this world, that would show the graciousness of God. He is under no obligation to save a particular percentage of the human race. That He has saved any is great evidence of grace on His part. That He has saved the disciples, that He has saved us by uncovering to us everything that we need to know, by sending His Spirit into us that we may lay hold of those things from the heart and believe – that is grace.

But there is also a measure of grace implied in the second half of verse 33. It tells us that Jesus spoke parables to the crowds so far as they were able to hear it. In other words, there was a limit to the number of parables and to the extent of confusion that Jesus sowed in the crowd. The Lord could have spoken so many parables, and He could have spoken them so fast, that there would be a sudden information overload to people, people would have trouble remembering any of it because there would just be so much in parables, and perhaps they would become very annoyed and turn away from Him all the more quickly.

By moderating the number of parables the Lord gave the possibility that some by God’s grace, some in that crowd might remember vividly, even if they did not understand at that point, the parables that had been taught, and later if God willed it, come to understand those things and come to repentance.

You see the Lord Jesus was allowing time for repentance, though always according to God’s electing purposes. Because this is the day of grace – the day that has come with the coming of our saviour, and we should be very thankful for this, that we live in this day that gives time. Hell will be a place of utter confusion as respects the truth – total confusion, total breakdown and failure to understand and lay hold of the truth in any sense. And God could have brought that hell on earth as a punishment for man’s rebellion. Instead there is a measure of veiling, there is also time given and things are taught in a way that people may at least remember something and perhaps come back to it later. And we wouldn’t be here today if that were not the case.

There is something else we see in the Lord Jesus’ parables, how they reflect the fact that He had brought in the kingdom of God, that He had caused that Kingdom to break into this world. Our third and final point, the reflection of God’s kingdom in parables.

We see this in verse 11 where the Lord explains to the disciples where on the one hand the crowds are getting stuck with this mystery of the kingdom of God. A mystery is something that you can only know if God reveals it. That is what a mystery means in the Bible. You can only know it if God reveals it. He had not uncovered this mystery of the kingdom to those in the crowds as He spoke the parables to them, and so they were stuck with it – it was still a mystery to them. But the disciples were given this mystery, it was to them explained. The mystery of what? The mystery of the kingdom of God. They were given an explanation of the parables and also other teachings. They were given understanding by the Holy Spirit; they were given the gift of faith in order to receive in their heart truth to do with the Kingdom of God. What the Kingdom of God means, what its coming means, and what is happening in the kingdom.

You see both the parables and also Jesus’ other teaching had as their main theme, the kingdom of God. And we have seen this already in Mark 1:15 where Jesus’ teaching was characterised as a preaching of the gospel in these terms that the Kingdom of God is at hand. What Mark refers to as the gospel of the kingdom. We find the same thing in Matt. 4 verses 17 and 23. And Matt. 13 especially brings this out with the parables, more so than Mark does. Brings out that the parables were, by and large, about the kingdom of God. The parable of the sower was about those who hearing the word of the kingdom Matt. 13:19. The parable of the tares, the kingdom of heaven may be compared, Matt. 13:24. The mustard seed parable, the kingdom of heaven is like Matt. 13:31, and so on with similar expressions in Matt. 13:33, 44, 45, 47, and in Mark’s gospel chapter 4:26 and 30. The parables are generally about the sowing, the growing or the harvest of the kingdom of God, which had become especially relevant at this time because the kingdom had come, it had been brought in, by the coming of the King.

However, that kingdom that Jesus brought in was both present and future. Men were, and are called, to enter that kingdom now because it is present – it is already here. But they were also called to realise that the completion of that Kingdom would not come until Jesus returns again. The kingdom is not only present, it is also future. And that explains why you could have so many people at this time and at present who do not believe, so many people who are hostile to the Lord Jesus. This is why there can be given a time of grace, a time for repentance rather than immediate judgement falling on all of those who reject the Messiah. This is why you can have the truth veiled to some through the parables while others have the truth disclosed. Because the end, the fullness of the kingdom, the completion, still lies ahead of us and yet the kingdom is still here. Rejection, opposition, hostility, a relatively small conversion rate and so on, these things in no way mean that the kingdom of God has not come, they do not mean that the kingdom of God was not sown at the time that Jesus came and that it was not growing. And this is something that we need to remember today. In fact in our evangelism there is a couple of things that we can learn from this. First of all that we ensure that as we bring the gospel to people we not only tell them about our Saviour, we certainly should do that; tell them about how wonderful He is. Tell them about the person of Christ; tell them that the King has come. But we also tell them about His work. And not only that we tell them about His work that affects sinners so much the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ but that we also tell them about the kingdom of God. This was the main theme of Jesus’ preaching. He emphasised the Kingdom of God. How often do you hear that today in evangelistic preaching? How often do you hear people talking about the kingdom of God?

In the evangelical world today that is not something that is dwelt on so much. Because there is far too much concern about the individual and what perks I can get out of it. And not enough on the overall scheme of what God is doing to glorify Himself in the advance and triumph of His kingdom through Jesus Christ.

The second thing we may learn from this is that we not be dismayed by the negative reactions. That we not be dismayed by the relatively small size of reformed churches. And I have come across this so many times in reformed churches around the world – the logic goes like this – ‘we have declining membership, our seats are not full, there are not many people who are coming along from the community, we are not winning many converts, therefore we must be doing something wrong we have to start changing things – not changing them to make them more Biblical, but changing them to get more people in and that is not the same thing. We ought not to be dismayed by this because we know that our God is one who veils the truth from many. In fact, we know that our God, He is not only one who keeps the truth from the hard of heart, but He is also one who prefers to deal with that which is small and weak in the eyes of the world so that He may show His great power and wisdom.

We ought to take comfort in these truths as we thing about these issues. But we may take that comfort only so long as we are actually being faithful to the great commission. And not using these truths in the wrong way. Using the truth of predestination, or using the truth of the veiling of the gospel as we find it here, or using the fact that there is so much opposition as an excuse to keep quiet.

If we are going to make excuses and avoid the things that we should be doing then we are not entitled to take that comfort in that way. The Lord Jesus veiled the truth from many, but He certainly did not keep quiet. He proclaimed the truth fearlessly and He also calls us to do the same. AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we have access to the whole counsel of God. We thank you Father for giving us a Word that is clear with everything that we need to know about salvation and worship and about glorifying You in our lives during the week – everything explained clearly in one part of scripture or another. Father, we thank you for sending your Spirit to work within us so that we may understand these things, and believe and apply your Word from the heart. We are especially thankful Father for this grace when we realise that the truth is veiled from many. We do not deserve the mercy of this illumination and yet You have freely bestowed it on us. We thank you for this mercy in Christ’s name. AMEN.