

A Word Fitly Spoken

Matthew 13:24–35

This message is part of a series based on texts which contain the words “that it might be fulfilled”—a phrase used exclusively by Matthew (9x), though the author of the fourth Gospel uses variants of this phrase: “that the *saying of Isaiah the prophet* might be fulfilled,” “that the *word* might be fulfilled *that is written in their law*,” “that the *scripture* might be fulfilled,” and so forth.

The title of my message this morning is taken from Proverbs 25:11, which says, “*A word fitly spoken* is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Here is a beautiful reference to skill and artistry in putting words together in the service of the King, as did our Lord in his mastery of the art of using parables in public speaking. A “word fitly spoken” is an exquisite word-picture, apt and fitting for the occasion, memorable, to be treasured and looked at again and again like a fine work of art. Such are our Lord’s parables. They illuminate and illustrate the kingdom of God and are of use to teach and train successive generations of Christ’s disciples.

We are looking this morning at Matthew 13, a text that houses a collection of our Lord’s most memorable parables. This chapter contains seven of them, grouped together: “The Sower,” “The Wheat and the Tares,” “The Mustard Seed,” “The Leaven,” “The Hidden Treasure,” “The Pearl of Great Price,” and “The Dragnet.” But note that right in the middle of these parables (v. 34) Matthew remarks that “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in *parables*; and without a parable He did not speak to them, *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘I will open My mouth in *parables*; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.’”

Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, takes pains to impress upon his readers that Jesus’ practice of using parables in addressing the multitudes was the direct fulfillment of the Old Testament text, “I will open my mouth in *parables*.” This comes from the opening of Psalm 78. After the sermon it will be our privilege to sing some of these timeless, inspired words: “O my people, hear my teaching, listen to my spoken word. Parables my mouth will utter; old, dark sayings I make heard—things our fathers have made known, things that we’ve been told and shown.” Here is one of the Psalms of Asaph. Asaph was a Levite; one of the leaders of David’s choir. Psalms 50 and 73–83 inclusive are attributed to Asaph¹—twelve Psalms in all—masterpieces! This is no minor achievement. Asaph’s composing and delivering Psalm 78 is thus a foreshadowing and type of our Lord’s composing and delivering his numerous and insightful parables throughout his earthly ministry. And as preachers of the gospel and God’s people in general use our Lord’s inspired parables to drive home spiritual truths into the

¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary, “Asaph” (Logos Bible Software)

hearts and minds of churches, families and neighborhoods, God's people again and again derive incomparable benefit more valuable than a celebrated work of art: "apples of gold in pictures of silver" from these parables. Let's devote ourselves to learning from them. A word fitly spoken is like a stunning work of art that lodges in the memory, to be savored again and again.

Sometimes, as Norma and I gather at the piano and sing from *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, we will take note of a particular selection's author and composer. Occasionally, when we are struck by the striking beauty of a hymn or Psalm, we go to the indices at the back of the book to locate other selections by the same creators. Appreciating beautiful music and well-crafted, insightful poetry cheers the soul of men and women made in the image of our great Creator. It is no accident that the Holy Spirit intentionally preserved the superscriptions to many of the Psalms, such as those by Asaph, whose creative gifts were dedicated to the glory of God. This reminds us that the Holy Scriptures, breathed out by the Holy Spirit of God, were written down and recorded by mere men—mortals, subject to death, as we are. God uses "earthen vessels" to communicate his truth,² sovereignly superintending the whole process, so that the result is, in the words of Christ, "Thy Word is truth." We should all marvel at the process by which God gave Holy Scripture. When men and women use their creativity in the service of the Creator, God who gave such gifts to man is glorified in the work of his hands.

Scripture notes that Asaph was skilled in music, and a "seer" or prophet (2 Chron. 29:30). Imagine this skilled musician singing the words of God as he went about the temple, serving in the worship of God, getting ready to lead choir practice! As we sing Psalm 78 today after the sermon, your participation will help make the inspired words of the ancient Scriptures come to life. Notice particularly the references to speaking God's inspired words *aloud*. Asaph writes: "*Listen to my spoken word. Parables my mouth will utter, that they—even the children yet unborn—rise and tell their sons in turn.*" God intended that his words be *in our mouths* and *on our lips*. The greatest gift we can give our children is for them to hear God's holy Word in their parents' authentic voices. When we are dead and gone, our children will long remember—and hopefully treasure—our words. What kind of words will they remember? Oh, that they might remember the Word of God on our lips, flowing out of a heart transformed by grace, full of the Father's inspired thoughts! There is no better gift that we can give.

In our text this morning Matthew notes that "Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables," and remarks that this is a fulfillment of Holy Scripture. If you have ever wondered why we have that odd word "parables" in Psalm 78—the only time that plural word occurs in all the Hebrew Scriptures—here it is. "Jesus spoke to the

² 2 Cor. 4:7

multitude *in parables*,” and to prove his point, here in our present chapter Matthew preserves seven of our Lord’s finest parables collected together. What is a parable? A short story that compares earthly with heavenly things: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Earlier in the chapter, back in verse 10, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Why do You speak to them *in parables*?” Jesus’ answer was cryptic: “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” One commentator helpfully observes that Jesus taught in parables so that by them the things of God were made more plain and understandable *to those willing to be taught*, and at the same time more difficult and obscure *to those who were willingly ignorant*.³ What about you? Are you *willing to be taught*? Do you have a heart to know God? Do you have a longing to experience his truth and grow in his grace? Do you earnestly desire to reorder your life as Jesus’s disciple? Then you can grow from your study of the parables. Otherwise, they will profit you nothing. Christianity will seem to you to be an enigma and a waste of your time. The things of this present world, like having fine possessions, enjoying pleasures and excitement, climbing the social ladder, living “the good life” and gaining the approval of your friends, will be far more important to you. Worshipping God and learning the ways of Christ will seem more of an intrusion and a waste of your time. What are your priorities? Do Christ and his kingdom come first, or are they only an afterthought, if you have nothing better to do? Is Christ for you a *hidden treasure* or a *pearl of great price*, so valuable to you that you will sell all you have in order to gain him? Do you have a heart for God? Is knowing him and bringing all your thoughts and words and ways into obedience to him your highest priority? Can you honestly say with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”? Then listen to Christ’s parables!

Parables clarify heavenly truth with homey, earthly illustrations for those who are born again, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, but spiritual truths cannot be understood by those dead in trespasses and sins. Jesus made this clear in John chapter 3: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God.” But if we seek him with all our hearts, spiritual treasures abound.

In our present chapter Matthew teaches us that it was Jesus’ practice to use parables in his sermons addressed to the multitudes. He was quite rigorous and intentional about this mode of speaking. Matthew flatly says, “without a parable He did *not* speak to them.” But later, when he was alone with his disciples, he would explain in their ears what the parables meant. Two of the parables in this chapter, including the familiar “Parable of the Sower,” which is recorded in all three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke (the word “synoptic” means

³ Adapted from Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary, Matt. 13:1–23 (<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/13-13.htm>, accessed 1-24-26)

sharing the same point of view)—are given detailed explanations by the Master Communicator himself. All Jesus' parables express truth about the church, and they do so in a manner that is artful, memorable and suitable for reflection and meditation. Here, then, are parables that teach us about the church. And as we shall see, Jesus is not talking about the church in *heaven*, which will be gathered from the four corners of the earth at the final day to worship the Lamb throughout eternity. Rather, he is talking about the church on *earth* right now—the kingdom of which he is the King and Head, and to which all his saints are to be joined by professing the most holy faith, as Jeff Carlson did this morning. How do we know that? Easy! These parables show that the true church of which he speaks contains *hypocrites* and *false brethren*. Faithless disciples are part of the church for now, during time, but will be permanently removed at the final judgment, cast out into outer darkness. Their lot will be the more sorrowful than those who never knew Christ, for “to whom much is given, from him much will be required.”⁴

The existence of hypocrites in the church of Christ is made clear in two of the seven parables in our chapter. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat.” The tares have been identified as darnel or poison darnel, known scientifically as *Lolium temulentum*, a troublesome weed for cereal crops, especially wheat, due to its similar appearance making it all but impossible to identify. Poison darnel is native to the Mediterranean region but has spread globally. Or consider the other parable, the last one: “The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.” Both these parables, “The Tares among the Wheat” and “The Dragnet,” show that the church on earth, despite the efforts of faithful preachers and ruling elders, is never pure, but awaits the judgment seat of him who perfectly knows the thoughts and intents of every heart. The heart-cry of the believer is: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” Oh, how important it is for us to listen to Jesus' parables!

The parables teach us that *God wants us to understand and remember his truth*. He wants us to understand it. The Bible is a big book—some 1189 chapters, over three-quarters of a million words. It contains various types of literature—simple narrative, stories, genealogies, commandments, precepts, poetry, song, prophecies, miracles, biography, apocalyptic, types, symbols, and so forth—but it has essentially one message: Christ. It teaches us the truth about God, his Son and his Spirit; about the works of God in creation and providence. It tells us how God made all things for his glory, and how he upholds all things by the word of his

⁴ Luke 12:48

power. It teaches us about man—how he was created in perfection, yet fell from his first estate and brought sin and condemnation upon the whole human race. It unmasks the depth and ugliness of sin and human depravity. It reveals the only way of salvation through Christ and his gospel. It teaches us about the church, its membership, officers and order. It teaches us how to live as disciples of Christ, about God’s plan for the future—the Second Coming, the final judgment, heaven and hell. It takes a lifetime both to learn and to live out this truth. God wants us to understand his truth, so he mercifully gives us the parables—masterful, exquisite word-pictures of the Master Teacher. Simple, heartwarming stories with profound meaning.

Here in Matthew 13 we have seven parables. In “The Sower” we learn that we need to have hearts prepared by the Holy Spirit in order to receive God’s truth and bring forth fruit unto God. In “The Wheat and the Tares” we learn that Satan works tirelessly to sow lies in the world and induce false disciples to join the church. In “The Mustard Seed” we see how the Gospel starts with small beginnings but becomes a great tree that fills the earth. In “The Leaven” we see how the Gospel, introduced into the world, will ultimately spread through all of society, Christianizing the world. In “The Hidden Treasure” and “The Pearl of Great Price” we see the incomparable value of the kingdom of heaven, that it is worth giving up everything one has, in order to attain it. In “The Dragnet” we see that the church of God, so long as it exists in the world, is a mixture of the good with the bad, and is never free from stains and pollutions; yet it is of little consequence to us, to be gathered into the fold, unless we are his true and chosen sheep, bringing forth fruit unto God.⁵

God wants us to understand his truth. The “deep things of God”⁶ require much effort and meditation to master, but the goal is noble yet attainable with the power of his Spirit. Not only does God want us to *understand* his truth; he wants us to *remember* it, so he has made his truth memorable. Christianity is an established body of truth, yet it is a living faith, expressed in every generation in fresh, new ways that communicate to God’s people. Grace OPC’s resident author of daily devotionals is, with the Spirit’s help, showing himself to be exemplary in this way, yet he is only one. In the church of Christ, ministers of the Word, ruling elders, deacons and ordinary Christians are all involved in this process as we speak to one another and live out the Gospel. You, if you commit your life to Christ, can be a part of this. Christ is, as he claims, “the truth”—truth incarnate (John 14:6)—but his people, as they worship corporately and go through their daily life, express that truth as living testaments to the Truth.

⁵ Adapted from Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Logos Bible Software)

⁶ 1 Cor. 2:10

We should *voice* his truth. It should be on our lips, seven days a week, in our worship, and in our daily life. We are to meditate on it day and night (Ps. 1:2). Family members, neighbors, friends should hear it on our lips.

What do you talk about? It's easy for us to talk about the things that are important to us—things that keenly interest us, things that we enjoy. This winter I picked up a bicycle with big, fat tires that go through snow and over ice, making it possible for me to get out and exercise and enjoy the beauty of the winter months. When it snows, I can hardly wait to go out and ride it. And I find myself excitedly talking about it, perhaps to the annoyance of the people around me. I enjoy it, so I enjoy talking about it. In the same way, if we enjoy Christ (remember: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and *enjoy* him forever”⁷; that is the true purpose for which we were created)—if Christ truly is the One we love most of all and desire to please with our whole lives—then we should find ourselves talking about him every day. We want to know him and make him known. We want all the world to experience the forgiveness of sins, assurance of salvation, the love and joy found in knowing Christ. Here is the one who found us in our lostness, who sent his Spirit to convince us of our sin and misery, enlighten our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renew our wills; here is the one who persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.⁸

Salvation is not wrought by human effort. No man can save himself or prepare himself for salvation. All the glory must go to Christ, working through his Holy Spirit, to prepare for himself a people as trophies of his grace.

Moreover, *Christ himself* is “the Word fitly spoken.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”⁹

Jesus is the Word made flesh—the perfect expression of God the Father. There are three Persons in the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is a Spirit, and does not have a body like men. He does not have the limitations of a body. He is transcendent above all his creation. He is present everywhere at all times. But only the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, became flesh. In the fulness of time, God sent forth his Son. Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, he was nurtured in the womb and came into this world through the ordinary process of birth. As with countless mothers both before and since, Mary rejoiced at his birth, and hid all these things in her heart. Jesus was reared in

⁷ <https://opc.org/sc.html>

⁸ *Ibid.*, Q&A 31

⁹ John 1:1–4, 14

a loving family. He was like us in every way except one: he was not a sinner. He did not fall in Adam. He only, of all the members of the human race, was absolutely sinless and perfect. He went to the cross, not to die for his own sins, for he had none; rather, he took the sins of his people, given to him by the Father before the world began, upon himself. Our sins became his, and he died for them, if we look to him in faith. He is the Word of God—the perfect expression of the Father. And he is the *Word fitly spoken*, the only one who can save us from our sins.

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Let us all dedicate our voices and pens to bring glory to God through uplifting words and well-crafted thoughts, as we live our life and bring every thought to the obedience of Christ our Lord. Amen.