



## Full Glory: No More in Parables

**Read: John 16:12-33**

Perhaps you don't remember much about the day when you stopped learning the letters of the alphabet and started reading words. But you may have seen children make this transition. Individual letters become parts of a bigger reality, a word. This example might help us to understand the transition Christ speaks about to His disciples in John 16.

Christ had used many parables to train and teach His disciples. But in the night He was betrayed, as He was about to go to the cross, He told them that the days of parable-teaching were over. *"These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs (literally, 'parables'): but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs (parables), but I shall shew you plainly of the Father"* (John 16:25). These are remarkable words. Christ is basically saying, "Parables were a good beginning, but I won't leave you with only the elementary things. I will take you to the next step. Instead of parables, I will speak plainly."

Christ is referring to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the disciples' lives. He had just announced that *"when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come"* (John 16:13).

John Calvin says that *"the disciples were far above those who had no relish for the word of the gospel, and yet they were still like children learning the alphabet, in comparison of the new wisdom which was bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit."*<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you remember sitting in one of the early grades of school and having your teacher tell you a little bit about the subjects that you would study in higher grades. You may have been struggling with simple arithmetic, and your teacher said, "Someday you might use these numbers in formulas that help scientists send rockets into space." Your brain could not even begin to understand how arithmetic could ever get you to that point. How puzzling and overwhelming your teacher's words would have been! The disciples must have felt something similar when Christ spoke to them on the night before His death.

### **A Gradual Dawning**

Imagine that the changes from night today and from day to night were sudden instead of gradual. Heavy darkness would give way suddenly to broad daylight, and brilliant sunshine to pitch black. Sudden transitions like that would leave us reeling, wouldn't they? We admire the Creator's wisdom in designing a gradual dawning of the day when light begins faintly on the horizon, painting hues of orange and pink, while the blackness of night slowly recedes. Even when the morning light has arrived, it still takes some hours before the strength of the noonday sun hits us.

The parables of Christ were part of the gradual dawning preparing for the full light of Calvary. Remember, it was just before He went to the cross that Christ transitioned away from parables. This is an important point. The parables had been leading up to Calvary – introducing the disciples slowly but surely to the mysteries of what would happen there. They were like the early stages of morning light, making way for the full splendor that would be seen. The truths they taught could be plainly seen by those who believed as Christ accomplished redemption for His people.

There are people who enjoy reading the parables over other parts of the Scriptures. A reader of one of the four Gospels may prefer these simple, seemingly harmless stories over the more disturbing narratives detailing Christ's sufferings and death on Calvary. But a true student of the parables will find Calvary in the parables; they lead to Calvary. Think of the man who invited many guests to the supper and was dishonored and spurned. Did not this rejection climax at Calvary? Or think of the prodigal's father, who went out to meet his son. Wasn't it at Calvary that Christ went out into the far country to take to Himself the death this prodigal deserved and bring the prodigal back through the power of an endless life? Think of the shepherd who gave his life for the sheep, or of the heir who was thrown out of the vineyard and killed. Both of these parables picture the reality of Calvary.

So the truth of Calvary underlies the parables and is key to its meaning. Calvary explains how seed sown in the earth can produce a hundredfold harvest. It explains how none of the tares will ever affect any of the good seed. It explains how God can welcome unjust stewards into His household. Calvary explains why the publican could go to his home justified, and why the persistent widow was heard. It explains why the owner of the vineyard took people standing idle in the marketplace and brought them into fellowship with himself and into the inheritance of his grace. Calvary explains why the Lord can forgive an impossibly large debt to debtors who should be imprisoned until they pay all that they owe. Calvary explains how the Son, rejected and despised, could become the headstone of the corner.

It's no wonder that Paul called the cross itself a mystery.

He writes to the Corinthians: *"But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."*

(1 Cor. 2:7-8)

To the natural eye, the cross couldn't possibly contain any glory – it is far too base and shameful. But it was not too base or shameful for Christ. At the cross, the most glory was hid in the most shame. And thus, Paul explains, the cross is *"to them that perish foolishness"* (1 Cor. 1:18). People turn away from the cross because they don't see any real significance in it and are instead offended by it and stumble at it.

## **Full Clarity**

In John 16:25, Christ promised a coming day of full clarity for His disciples. He wasn't speaking of heaven, although knowledge in heaven will also be perfect. Instead, as I said earlier, Christ was speaking of the coming of the Spirit. The parables would be finished; plainness would follow. The Holy Spirit works faith, sustains faith, gives clarity through faith, and steadies faith upon its object.

Imagine yourself in a little boat during a vehement storm on a boisterous sea. Somewhere in the distance is a lighthouse, but between the waves, the wind, and your own fears, you can't see much of the light. But now imagine that you have a telescope that was permanently focused on the light and was suspended in front of your eye. Your view of the light would be amazingly constant and clear. This kind of clarity is what the Lord was promising that His disciples would experience upon the gift of the Spirit.

In fact, right after Christ announces to the disciples that that time of plainness will come, He gives them a taste of it right then and there. Among other things, He says, *"I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father"* (John 16:28). Christ is plainly revealing His relationship with His Father, as well as the doctrines of His incarnation and ascension. There is a sublime clarity to these statements! He is not using the stuff of stories, but simple and direct truth. The disciples themselves exclaim, *"Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb"* (John 16:29).

This "gradual dawning" and "plainness" continued after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Think of the clarity and directness that Peter uses on the day of Pentecost as he says,

*“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up...”* (Acts 2:23, 24). Or think of Paul’s frank explanation of our total depravity and our lost state before God in Romans 3. He does not paint the picture of a prodigal son, who has left his Father’s house and is now wallowing in the mire. Instead, he states, *“They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (v. 12). Everyone can sense the directness of such speech!

## **Conclusion**

As we close our study of a number of the parables, I want to ask you whether you have truly understood the meaning of the parables. This is the question that Christ asked His disciples once after a long day of speaking in parables. Matthew 13:51 reads, *“Jesus saith unto them, Have ye understood all these things?”* How important it is that we ask ourselves the same question!

It is possible to read and study these parables and even find them attractive and inspiring without being truly impacted by their truths. It is possible to read the words and yet never have the glory of them render you small and contrite before their Teacher. How we need the Spirit of God and the full clarity that He provides! He guides believers into all truth.

If we do know the ministry of this Spirit, conversion will continue in our hearts and lives. We will need this as long as we live here on earth; whether by parable or plain teaching, we need to be continually mastered by the message of the kingdom and the glory of the King Himself. Those who are mastered by this unveiled glory now will reign in glory with Christ in eternity (Rom. 5:17).

## **Questions**

1. We are often rather slow or unwilling to grow in knowledge. For that reason, Peter exhorted the early Christians, *“Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet. 3:18). How can we grow, and what sorts of things should we do now that we have gone through the parables?
2. In their writings, the apostles did not use parables like Christ did. Nevertheless, through the inspiration of the Spirit, they recorded and preserved the parables. What is their value today now that we have all the Scriptures?
3. We live in times when people have low tolerance of the study of doctrines and preaching on doctrine. Why is this, and how do Christ’s words in our passage shed light on this?
4. In what way can you say that all the parables lead to Calvary and Calvary ultimately unlocks the meaning of them all?
5. Read 1 John 3:2b. Think of what it will be like to see the Son face to face in glory and to witness the change that will come upon believers then. How should seeing Christ in the parables now by faith bring about change? Give an example of this in your own life or in someone you know or have read about.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 2, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 157), 155.