

# Life Group Questions

November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022

**Secrets to Treasure** – Pastor Vinh Doan – [Matthew 13:10-17](#)

To the Life Group leader: thank you for your ministry leading this Life Group. **Take time to review the questions, selecting those you believe will be most helpful for your group study.** You will not have time to use all the questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead, as you select questions, and as you guide the discussion.

## Reconnect

Come together with these preliminary questions:

- How has God gifted you to serve Him?
- How will you serve Him this fall at Willingdon Church?
- Where has God placed you in the city? What is your role there?

## Open in Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the text, the questions, and each other.

## Message Recap Questions

**Review the message using these questions**

1. What stood out to you most in this week's message?
2. What was the most meaningful thing you heard in the message? Why?
3. What questions are still lingering?

## Questions

1. What would be the modern day equivalent to a parable? What makes parables hard to understand?
2. Can you find any examples of parables in the Bible other than those taught by Jesus?
3. What are the common themes of Jesus' parables?
4. How did the disciples know that the crowds of people did not understand Jesus' parables (Matthew 13:10)?

5. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus mentions the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven'. Why do you think God would want it to remain a secret?
6. What is the warning and the encouragement in Matthew 13:12?
7. Why did Jesus speak to the crowds in parables?
8. What are the common denominators between the audience of Jesus' time (Matthew 13:14-15) and those of Isaiah's time (Isaiah 6:9-10)?
9. Describe how you typically present the gospel message to others. What role do stories have in what you share? What stories do you use to more clearly communicate the truth of the gospel?
10. Determine how your Life Group could serve as an encouragement for sharing the gospel. How can the group hold each other accountable for sharing spiritual truth with others?
11. List the names of people you know who need to know about Jesus. Record the steps you need to take to make it possible for them to hear the gospel.

## Choose Your Next Step

**What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?**

## Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God's leading.

# Commentary

Although Matthew has recorded only one parable prior to this one, he tells us that the disciples came to Jesus and asked him why he taught in parables. Clearly he had used the method much more than Matthew records. The explanation is given in terms of prophecy: Jesus points to Isaiah 6:9–10, a passage that tells of the way people refused to accept divine direction. He is saying that although the people heard the words, they did not understand them and did not want to understand them. That was the fault of the people in Isaiah's day, and it was the fault of the people in Jesus' day.

1. What would be the modern day equivalent to a parable? What makes parables hard to understand?
2. Can you find any examples of parables in the Bible other than those taught by Jesus?
3. What are the common themes of Jesus' parables?
4. How did the disciples know that the crowds of people did not understand Jesus' parables (Matthew 13:10)?

*The disciples* lacks any indication as to whose they were, but there is no doubt that Jesus' disciples are meant. They *came* to him and asked, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" where *them* evidently refers to people as yet uncommitted to Jesus. We may understand *speak* in the sense "keep speaking"; it certainly means more than that Jesus had told one parable. Commentators differ as to whether parables were meant to make the truth plain and simple or whether they were a way of making a veiled witness to truth. Paradoxically there is truth in both suggestions, but certainly in the present passage the emphasis is on hearers who did not understand. The disciples' question "presupposes that the crowds—together with the readers—do not understand this kind of speech". The parable is a powerful method of teaching, but perhaps some measure of commitment is required in hearers if they are really to understand what a parable is saying. It is a fallacy that everyone can understand a parable. Did David understand Nathan's parable (2 Samuel 12:1-13), even though it referred directly to him? An unexplained parable is usually open to interpretation in any one of a number of ways, and those who lack devotion to Jesus may be relied on to go astray even when they hear the very stories that convey truth so vividly to disciples. Jesus expressly speaks of those who *know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven* as those who understand. If someone does not know the great basic truths of the kingdom, what is he to make of the parables that set it forth or indeed of other parables? Commitment to Jesus is the prerequisite for a true understanding of his parabolic teaching.

5. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus mentions the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven'. Why do you think God would want it to remain a secret?

*But he answered* puts a difference between Jesus and the disciples. The doctrine of election lies behind these words. It is not a merit in the disciples that they understand where others do not; their comprehension is due to the fact that God has chosen them and given them the gift of understanding. They have received a gift that outsiders have not received (*to you* is emphatic), and the perfect tense signifies that the gift remains with them. This is Matthew's one use of the word *mystery* (which is found 20 times in the Pauline corpus). It signifies something that people could never work out for themselves, which is why it is a "mystery." But in the New Testament it usually carries the further thought that that which people can never work out for themselves God has now made known to them (it is not without its interest that some translate it by "secret" [NRSV] and some by "open secret"). Jesus is saying that the truths about God's kingdom were not known to people in general. Nobody could know such truths unless they were revealed to them. This had happened to the disciples (which was why they were disciples), but the crowds had not responded to the revelation; they were still ignorant of the mysteries of the kingdom. Now the most significant truth about the kingdom was the place of Jesus in it. It was precisely because they had accepted the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring in the kingdom that the disciples were able to understand and respond to the teaching in the parables. And it was because people like the Pharisees had not accepted it that they did not understand. Jesus does not explain who he means by *them*, but clearly it is the multitudes who came to hear him but who did not commit themselves to his cause. They had heard Jesus' words, but they had not apprehended the revelation.

6. What is the warning and the encouragement in Matthew 13:12?

The words of this verse (repeated with small alterations in Matthew 25:29; it is found also in Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18; 19:26; the repetition shows that it is an important saying) are an occasion of offense for some people, who consider it grossly unfair that more should be given to the rich and that the poor should be stripped of what little they have. And that, of course, is unfair, but it is not what Jesus is speaking about. He is referring to spiritual truth; he has just drawn attention to the importance of God's gifts of grace, and he now emphasizes the importance of human responsibility. When anyone uses the spiritual truth he has, that truth grows. More is added to it. By contrast, if he does not use it, he finds that it vanishes away little by little (Plummer says, "the purpose is educational to disciples, and disciplinary to those who refuse to become disciples,"). The principle is capable of application in many areas of life (the achievement of sports people, for example). But Jesus was not speaking of such areas; he was referring to a spiritual truth of permanent importance. He confines himself to saying *whoever has*, without specifying what it is that he has, but in a land where the very poor had nothing at all it was enough to separate the haves from the have nots. The person who responds will receive much more. The saying is an encouragement to those who have committed themselves to following Jesus. They have made a good beginning and have received blessing and understanding; therefore they will receive more. It has nothing to do with the selfishness that aims only at piling up earthly goods. But the saying is a warning

as well as an encouragement. The person with little and who does nothing with that little will find that his little disperses.

7. Why did Jesus speak to the crowds in parables?

That is the reason, Jesus says, that he speaks to them in parables (cf. Mark 4:33–34). Many think that Jesus would not have used parables (or any other method) “in order that” people would not understand. There is a sense in which this is true, but it is not the whole truth, for the whole truth includes election and the complete purpose of God. We must bear in mind that everything that is has its place in the purpose of God, who created it all. The disciples were not disciples because, left to themselves, they had decided that this would be a good thing. They were disciples on the Gospel view because God had chosen them. And it was in the outworking of this divine choice that they came to see Jesus for who he was and for what he was doing in bringing in the kingdom of God. They could understand the parables because of the insight that God gave them, but God did not give this insight to those who rejected Jesus. The word of God is always effective: it brings enlightenment or judgment—enlightenment to the disciples, judgment to those who rejected Jesus. It was in this sense that it was the divine purpose that they should not understand. If people rejected the Christ and set themselves in opposition to God, how could they understand the teaching that came from God through the Christ?

There is a certain emphasis on the word *parable*: “that it is in parables that I speak to them.” Jesus proceeds, *because seeing they do not see*, a Hebraic construction signifying that, while there is a sense in which they certainly see, there is a more meaningful sense in which they do not see at all. Gutzwiller draws attention to Augustine’s remarks about a man who looks at beautiful writing in a foreign tongue; he may admire the calligraphy, but the meaning he cannot appreciate. So when a person who rejects Jesus hears parables. He may find things in them that he can appreciate and admire, but their essential meaning he cannot attain. So is it with hearing. The repetition indicates that the people in question are shallow. They have the habit of seeing and hearing without appreciating the real significance of what they have seen and heard. This is brought out in the final expression, *nor understand*; they have no comprehension of what their sense perception has brought them.

8. What are the common denominators between the audience of Jesus’ time (Matthew 13:14-15) and those of Isaiah’s time (Isaiah 6:9-10)?

Characteristically Jesus sees a fulfilment of prophecy, and he specifies that the words he quotes were spoken by Isaiah before going on to cite the passage he has in mind. The quotation opens with the accusation that the people addressed will not respond to what they hear. They will not understand what they are hearing, which evidently means that they will have their minds so made up and will be so set in their ways that when they hear the word of God that challenges them to new thinking and new ways of living they simply do not understand it. They interpret what they hear in terms of they have always thought and done. So will it be with what they see. There will be no shortage of things they see, but there will be no perception.

There is a change of approach. In the previous verse the people are addressed (“you will hear,” etc.), but now God describes them. *For* gives a reason for the foregoing. The *heart* stands for the whole of the inner being, thought, will, and feelings, but here the emphasis is on thought. They have become sluggish in the way they think. So they hear new teaching from God but do not take it in nor model their lives on it. The same truth is put in terms of their ears and their eyes. With their ears *they scarcely hear*, while as for their eyes, they have shut them. This is probably to be understood as a stage worse than the preceding. It would be possible to have a problem of partial deafness, but the shutting of the eyes is a deliberate refusal to see.

The prophet brings this out with a series of clauses introduced with *lest*. He traverses the ground he has covered, mentioning the eyes, the ears, and the heart (the last-mentioned is singular, though referring to many, a Semitic construction). Those to whom the prophetic words come make sure that they are not disturbed by it. At the end of the quotation the prophet comes to what God would do if the people responded. Their response is that they should *turn* (“be converted,”), which signifies an alteration in the whole direction the life is taking. It is a turning away from worldliness and self-centeredness, a turning to God. And when that happens, God heals. Sin is a disease, and the people of whom Jesus speaks decline to be healed of it. Using the imagery of eyes that refuse to see and ears that refuse to hear, he rebukes people who refuse to heed God’s gracious invitation and choose to go their own way. So, Jesus says, is it with the people of his day. They are the very fulfilment of the ancient prophecy.

9. Describe how you typically present the gospel message to others. What role do stories have in what you share? What stories do you use to more clearly communicate the truth of the gospel?
10. Determine how your Life Group could serve as an encouragement for sharing the gospel. How can the group hold each other accountable for sharing spiritual truth with others?
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