

4:10–12 *The Purpose of the Parables*
Cf. Matt. 13:10–17, 36; Luke 8:9, 10

10 When he was alone, those who were about him together with the twelve were asking him concerning the parables. 11 He said to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for the outsiders everything comes in parables, 12 that:

They may see and see but not perceive;
And hear and hear but not understand;
Lest they should turn again and be forgiven.”

The admonition, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” did not remain unheeded. **10. When he was alone, those who were about him together with the twelve were asking him concerning the parables.** Jesus was now *alone*, in the sense that he had dismissed the crowds and had gone home. Nevertheless, he was not entirely alone. With him were The Twelve. But note: “those who were about him together with the twelve.” The meaning must be that in addition to twelve well-known disciples there were present also some who belonged to the wider circle of constant followers. Mark pictures this combined group in the act of asking Jesus about the parables. The plural is significant. Though Mark, before describing Jesus as being now “alone” has related only one parable, that of The Sower, Matthew reports four parables—The Sower, The Tares, The Mustard Seed, and The Leaven—before telling the readers (13:36) that Jesus dismissed the crowds and went home (or “into the house”), where he was interrogated by his disciples. However, when we fix our attention on the *wording* of the incident recorded in Mark 4:10–12—the questioning done by the disciples and the answer given by Jesus—, we should turn again to Matthew 13, but this time to verses 10–17, especially verses 10, 11, 13–15. Luke’s report (8:9, 10) looks like a very brief summary.

Those who surrounded Jesus wanted to know two things: *a.* why he used parables in addressing the crowds (cf. Matt. 13:10), and *b.* what was the meaning of a certain particular parable; for example, that of The Tares (Matt. 13:36), or (here in Mark 4:13) that of The Sower. **11. He said to them, To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for the outsiders everything comes in parables....**

This word “mystery” is very interesting. Outside of Christendom, in the realm of paganism, it referred to a secret teaching, rite, or ceremony having something to do with religion but hidden from the masses, and known (or practiced) only by a group of initiates. In the LXX (Greek) translation of Daniel 2, where the word occurs no less than eight times (as a singular in verses 18, 19, 27, 30, and 47b; as a plural in verses 28, 29, and 47a), it refers to a “secret” that must be revealed, a riddle that must be interpreted. In the book of Revelation, where it occurs four times (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7), it is perhaps best explained as being “the symbolical meaning” of that which required explanation. The word occurs twenty-one times in Paul’s epistles (Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19, Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Tim. 3:9, 16). There it can be defined as *a person or a truth that would have remained unknown had not God revealed him or it, a revealed or open secret.* Thus, had it not been disclosed we would not have known that in every age a remnant of Jews (as well as of Gentiles) will be saved, until at last through faith in Jesus Christ “all Israel” will thus have been gathered; and that this process will continue until Christ’s return,

when the full number of Gentiles destined to be saved will also have been brought in (Rom. 11:25). Again, had it not been revealed we would not have known that “we shall not all sleep,” etc. (1 Cor. 15:51). A very similar “mystery” or revealed secret is Christ himself in all his glorious riches, actually dwelling through his Spirit in the hearts and lives of both Gentiles and Jews, united in one body, the church (Eph. 3:4–6; Col. 1:26, 27). And how, apart from divine disclosure, would we have been able to discover that one day the spirit of lawlessness will become incarnate in “the man of lawlessness”? (2 Thess. 2:7).

This same general definition of “mystery,” namely that it is a divinely disclosed secret, a person or thing which apart from revelation could not have been discovered, fits very well into the context of the present passage of Mark’s Gospel (4:11) and its parallels (Matt. 13:11; Luke 8:10), the only Gospel instances of its use. Here *the mystery* is the powerful manifestation of the reign (“kingdom,” “kingship”) of God in human hearts and lives; which reign, in connection with Christ’s coming, was attended by mighty works in both the physical and the spiritual realms. Jesus declares that this mystery—that it was indeed God who was doing all these things, not Satan—had been “given,” that is, “graciously disclosed” to those who were with him at this time; in fact, to all who had accepted him by genuine faith. To outsiders (literally: “to those outside”) “everything comes in parables”; that is, to them Christ’s teaching had to be presented in parabolic form. From what follows it is clear that when Jesus here speaks about “outsiders” he is thinking especially of hardened Pharisees and their followers, men with impenitent hearts (cf. Matt. 13:13, 15), for he continues: **12. that**

**They may see and see but not perceive;
And hear and hear but not understand;
Lest they should turn again and be forgiven.**

In this way Mark summarizes the substance of Christ’s quotation from Isa. 6:9, 10. Luke 8:10 is even shorter. A fuller statement is found in Matt. 13:13–15.

Jesus, then, is saying, “For the outsiders everything comes in parables, that they may see and see but not perceive ... lest they should turn again and be forgiven.” But how can that be? Isn’t this shocking? Can it be true that the kind and merciful Savior, the very One who was constantly extending tender invitations, would take great pains to prevent people from perceiving and understanding the truth? That he would actually go out of his way to keep men from turning to God and being forgiven?

There have been various attempts to solve this problem. Among them are the following:

1. We misinterpret the little word “that” when we take it to mean “in order that” or “so that.” Or else, Mark himself misinterpreted the Aramaic word which Jesus probably used.

Answer. Mark represents Jesus as saying not only “that” but also “lest.” This combination *that ... lest* shows that the little word “that” can best be taken to indicate purpose.

2. The saying is an unauthentic and intolerable version of a genuine saying of Jesus. It is sometimes added that in view of such passages as Matt. 11:28–30; Rev. 3:20 Jesus could never have spoken the words ascribed to him in Mark 4:11, 12.

Answer. For the theory that this saying is unauthentic and intolerable there is no proof. Also, is it fair to refer to Matt. 11:28–30, but to forget about verse 25; or, to Rev. 3:20, and to ignore verse 16? Besides, does not Mark’s summary truly reflect Isa. 6:9, 10?

3. If Christ’s words were those reported by Mark, they must have been spoken in jest. Jesus evidently wanted his words to be taken in a sense which was the exact opposite of their literal meaning. This is clear from the fact that Matthew diametrically changes the meaning of the statement, for he makes Jesus say “*because* [instead of *that*] seeing they do not see....”

Answer. If it be granted that when the Master uttered the words, “To you has been given the mystery of God” he was speaking in earnest, stating what he knew to be a fact, and not making a joke, the rest of the closely knit saying must also be considered a fact. And as to the alleged conflict between Matthew, on the one hand, and Mark and Luke, on the other, why cannot both be right?

The true explanation, as this author sees it, is as follows: Both *because* and *that* (whether “in order that”—my preference—, or “so that”) are correct. It was *because* by their own choice these impenitent Pharisees and their followers had refused to see and hear, that, as a punishment for this refusal, they are now addressed in parables, “*that* they may see and see but not perceive, and hear and hear but not understand, lest they should turn again and be forgiven.” They must “endure the blame of their own blindness and hardness” (Calvin on this passage). God had given these people a wonderful opportunity. It is his sovereign will to remove what man is unwilling to improve, to darken the heart that refuses to hearken. He hardens those that have hardened themselves. If God even surrenders to the lusts of their hearts the unenlightened heathen when they hold back the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18, 26), will he not punish more severely the impenitents before whom the Light of the world is constantly confirming the truthfulness of his message? And if he blesses those who accept the mysterious, will he not curse those who reject the obvious? It is evident, therefore, that Matt. 13:13 is in harmony with Mark 4:12; in fact, the “*because*” of the former helps to explain the “*that*” or “in order that” of the latter. When, of their own accord and after repeated threats and promises, people reject the Lord and spurn his messages, then he hardens them, in order that those who were not willing to repent will not be able to repent and be forgiven. See also N.T.C. on Matt. 13:10–15; and on John 12:37–41.