

TO HIS DISCIPLES HE EXPLAINED EVERYTHING

Mark 4:33-34 (NASB)

³³ “With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it;

³⁴ and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”

Jesus employed everyday language and images in his parables to talk about God, the kingdom of God, and the life of faith. Jesus doesn't just use the term “**the kingdom of God**” and expect his hearers to understand right away. He says, “**The kingdom of God is like ...**” and then adds the image of a farmer sowing seed, a pearl, a mustard seed, and other tangible objects or everyday images.

In this way Jesus could get people's attention or make it easier for people to understand difficult things. The parables contained the grain of truth—“**the word**”—but the message was wrapped in a story of camouflage because the full impact was not intended for all hearers, as we see in Jesus' quotation of the **prophet Isaiah** in the passage in [Mark 4](#). The full meaning was for those who had understood and were saved by “**the word.**” The same remains true for us today because Scripture is “**the Word of God.**”

There are, however, those who view Scripture as general moral advice rather than as an authority to live by, an authority that defines how the world really works. Yet we learn from Scripture how we are to understand faith as received by the grace of God. This goes beyond a general moral view, beyond advice about how to live a “**good life**” or create a “**good society.**”

When we live by faith, Scripture guides us in how to understand the world around us. The parables are given to us for illumination, and they are to be penetrated not by a general morality but by belief. The parables can be basically understood by anyone, so that the word they contain can take seed in the memory of the hearers and then eventually the truth can blossom in the hearts of those who truly hear. If this does not happen, then the judgment that they will not understand the parable will remain with them.

This means that it is only through true faith that the word is understood. Those who stand in unbelief never penetrate the word, so we should not be surprised when people give us a mystified look when we confess Christ, the one born of a virgin, the one resurrected and ascended, and all those points of doctrine that people find so hard to understand in our material world.

This disbelief in our creed is not a new thing belonging to a secular age; it has always been so, as we see in **Mark 4:33–34**:

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³³ **“With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it;**

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If the seed of faith is within us and we have the word explained to us, then we will understand what the kingdom of God means for us and we will know what Jesus wants for us.

The trouble with Jesus is that He makes you do things you don't want to do! When He spoke to the young man, He knew what stood between the young man and discipleship. Jesus deliberately placed upon him what seems to be an impossible demand because his material things stood between him and God. In our modern economic world, we must ask ourselves the same question: What seemingly impossible demands does Jesus make on us?

By reading through these economic parables and listening directly to the words of Jesus, you can discover for yourself the answers to this question. This journey will surely enrich your faith; and some of the answers will be surprising, in part because Jesus was a more sophisticated economist than He is given credit for by the modern world. He understands the complexities of our world. He knows we can become enslaved to economic realities, but He also knows that we can live in this economic world in the light of the gospel.

Many of the kinds of problems we have to face and the decisions we have to make have not changed in two thousand years. Jesus told stories using economic images and ideas because He understood that is how people in all times and places live. What is incredible is that Jesus can look at our complicated problems and address them in simple terms, such as a sower, a rich fool, or workers in a vineyard. All those listening to Jesus then knew what He was talking about, and we too can understand today.

The important point to make about our economy (or any economy, for that matter) is that our lives are to be lived in submission to God's will. When we look at life in this way, then his blessings follow. However, there has been a tendency among theologians to dismiss the modern economic world as ungodly. Capitalism, corporate enterprise, and the financial markets have been singled out for condemnation. The most overt attacks have come from the social gospel and liberation theology movements of the twenty first century.

But there has been a propensity among many theologians to regard the economic arena as a place incompatible with faith. You will find a number of books written by theologians over the last hundred years attacking the capitalist economy in various parts of the world, particularly on the issue of poverty in urban America and in developing

countries. These books favor a reading rooted in a material, socialist political understanding of economy rather than in Scripture.

We saw this in the social gospel movement of the 1930s. Later we witnessed the birth of liberation, feminist, civil rights, human rights, and other movements that I contend likewise are driven more by secular theory than Scripture. The story of the young man and Jesus that we have looked at, and sayings like **“Blessed are the poor”** and **“You cannot serve both God and Money,”** are taken as ruling out any commitment to working positively in our modern economy, since it is seen as a sphere beyond redemption.

To understand how we as Christians in the modern, globalized world can think about economic issues, we do need to understand the basis of the economic world. The bold claim I wish to make is that the common theological criticism is a result of a socialist understanding of the economy creeping into moral discourse. Socialism arose in Europe in reaction to the development of capitalism and eventually spawned communism and the Soviet Union. Socialism became cherished in the West as a moral political force—and communism as evidence of an alternative to capitalism. As long as communism existed, intellectuals in the West could argue that there was a valid alternative, even if it did not work very well.

This gave them the confidence to imagine alternatives and inspired theologians to imagine that their moral critique could join forces with Christianity. For the most part, these theologians adopted a socialist critique as the “scientific” basis to their theological assault on capitalism, and more recently on globalization. The problem with socialism is that it is based on a view that humanity can improve and can strive, through its own will and power, to create a “good society.” Scripture does not share this view because the purpose of life is reserved to God and because we are sinful individuals; therefore, our sinful nature will defeat any realization of such a society.

The fall of communism has left us with one economic system and that is capitalism in the form of the free market economy. Is capitalism bad? It has certainly been successful, lifting more people out of poverty than any plan advanced by socialists and other critics. In fact, socialism took people in the opposite direction, and you would be hard-pressed to name a single successful economy that is truly socialist. Many would argue that Europe has socialist economies, but in fact they are capitalist economies that are controlled by realistic socialists who abdicate their socialist theory to maintain their partisan grip on power.

The free enterprise system, for all its faults, works. This reality is important to reflect upon as we progress in our study because it is both a threat and an opportunity. The threat is to blindly bless the system; the opportunity is to utilize it as a tool (though imperfect) to help improve our communities. Capitalism promotes freedom and democracy since these are the conditions under which it works best. It has weaknesses because it is a way of organizing human beings, and therefore, like all things human, it is imperfect.

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Pastor Eddie Idefonso

The belief that the government can best direct the economy at the expense of private enterprise—and engineer a more moral society in the process—is ill-founded. Nevertheless, this belief appeals to advocates of a socialist basis to the economy because of the conviction that the state is more moral than the individual.

When it comes to the rules of science, Christians argue that God created the earth for humanity to harness and manage—and, therefore, potentially to abuse. Can we not say the same of the economy? In a large, interconnected world, couldn't it be that God has made the economic tools for the distribution of wealth, discovery of new foods, and extracting the goods of nature also open to abuse? This is not to say that economics is blessed, any more than we say that science is blessed. Both are tools for us to live in the world. If this argument holds, then we might say that the economy is theologically neutral, open to both good and bad uses.