

More About Jesus, Week 18: Jesus made his listeners think

(Mark 4:24-25)

by Paul Hammons

Jesus was the great teacher, providing us a blueprint of what it looks like to effectively teach God's word to people who are willing to listen – at the same time challenging hardened hearts to either change their own thinking or simply to be left confused.

In Mark 4, Mark records a series of parables that Jesus presented to the people, and when the disciples asked him why he was only speaking in parables, he answered that parables were intended to allow the one with a hard heart to miss the meaning (v. 10-12).

But what we also see in this passage is that for someone who wanted to understand, the answer wasn't always going to be spoon-fed, either: *And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" - Mk 4:13.*

Jesus then explains the parable, but adds in v. 24:

"Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." - Mk 4:24-25.

Jesus emphasized to his disciples the importance of careful listening and consideration, developing an ability to think more deeply about his teaching. Understanding mattered, and in many cases, he forced them to think, expecting them to make inferences and draw deeper lessons from his teaching.

In many cases, the concepts Jesus presented were far from simple. Jesus' statements about a new spiritual birth in John 3 were all rooted in scripture, but even one of the leading teachers of Israel was confused (John 3:9), saying "How can these things be?"

Jesus' cryptic description of himself as the "bread of life" in John 6 - as well as his discussion of eating and drinking his flesh and blood - was so offensive on its surface that many of his disciples stopped following him. They could not or would not reach a deeper understanding of what Jesus was teaching.

When the lawyer tested Jesus in Luke 10:25, asking him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus' response was "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" He wasn't asking for an opinion or interpretation; he was calling the lawyer to think about his own life in connection with the law and draw the right conclusion with an honest heart. Because God's law requires that we be introspective people (2 Cor. 13:5).

In Mark 7, Jesus addresses the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, who were harshly enforcing their own traditions, while at the same time disregarding the law itself. When he addressed the question of eating with unwashed hands, which the Pharisees saw as a violation of tradition, he told them,

“There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” Mk 7:15

The premise of purifying hands before eating was based on the tradition that was intended to show concern for purity - an empty gesture, since hand-washing alone would not have purified someone who had touched an unclean thing. They would have been considered ritually unclean regardless. Jesus reiterated the point to the apostles after they failed to understand what he was teaching:

Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled? Mk 7:18–19.

But in v. 19, Mark adds a point that Jesus did not specify: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

Jesus’ expectation was that the apostles would understand his point (you are defiled by sinful acts and thoughts, not by whatever you might eat, digest, and expel) and infer that the law wasn’t telling them that certain types of food were inherently unclean or unlawful to eat. So when the law of ordinances passed away, the dietary requirements passed away as well - as the Lord confirmed in Peter’s vision (Acts 10:12-15).

And when Paul wrote later about matters of conscience, he told the Roman church, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”

Even in matters where there are no specific instructions, God’s word equips us to make the right decision in any situation if we have trained our hearts to think clearly and truthfully on the word of God (Heb. 5:14).