

Hard to Understand: Why Is It So Unclear?

Matthew 16:5-12

Intro:

Beginning communication studies; lone person of 19 who wasn't interested in teaching; didn't understand a lot of the dialogue (DOI); wondered whether I belonged.

[Read from NCA program]

Many of us don't feel too differently from that when we try to read the Bible. We're told it's God's Word, and we believe that; We hear it's necessary for our spiritual growth, and that's true. But why, then, does so much of it seem so hard to understand? Shouldn't it be easier than it seems? Or is something wrong with us?

Actually, we're not that different from the disciples. They had some of the same struggles we do—and for the same reasons. Let's look into it.

PRAY

vv. 5-7: Jesus had just come from a confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He and His disciples left for the other side of the lake, where it was harder to get food. The disciples had forgotten to take bread with them (Mark says they had just one small loaf [8:14]). The disciples are thinking about food; Jesus is still thinking about the Pharisees and Sadducees. So He says, "Be careful and be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Immediately the disciples start discussing among themselves what this might mean. Finally they decided Jesus had said this because they had forgotten to bring bread.

Now, we read that and we tend to think, *What a bunch of dolts*. Clearly, we chuckle to ourselves, Jesus was talking about his opponents' misguided teaching. How could the disciples be so dense?

I think we tend to be too hard on the disciples. I'm sure I am. We too quickly forget that they weren't *reading* about this story, they were *living* it for the first time. They didn't know how the whole thing would turn out. We've had 2,000 years of knowing how it turned out.

And also, in fact, Jesus often used language in ways that startled people and made them scratch their heads. He could speak very plainly and literally; but He was also very fond of metaphors and pictures and parables and images that might have more than one meaning. Already by this point in Matthew, for example, He has spoken of: the eye being a lamp; throwing pearls to swine; scoundrels dressing in sheep's clothing; letting the dead bury the dead; a dead girl only sleeping; taking crosses and following Him; taking His yoke; seeds and birds and soil and thorns; yeast and flour and dough; plants being pulled up by the roots—and many more. Which ones were literal? Which were figurative? How could you tell which was which? They'd already been wrong more than once, which is probably why they discussed this particular warning in private.

vv. 8-9a: Of course, it didn't help them to try to conceal their discussion, or their confusion. Jesus knew. He wasn't part of their discussion, but He knew what it was about nonetheless. Why is it, do you suppose, that we have such a hard time saying, "I don't know"? Instead, like the disciples, we try to bluff our way into respectability, pretending we know when we really have no clue.

Jesus responds to His disciples' discussion with a mild rebuke, but one that also instructs us on a critically important subject. He says to them, "You of little faith," *not*, "You of little intellect." Why? Their problem here, one that we very often share, was not lack of brains, but lack of spiritual involvement. They tried to figure things out on their

own, rather than involving God in the activity. Paul would later write, "The man without the Spirit [and someone who doesn't tap into the Spirit's wisdom might as well be without the Spirit completely; atheists and practical atheists are in the same boat here] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). God generally gives us understanding about the meaning of the Scriptures through a hard-working brain baptized in Spirit-soaked prayer. It's not one or the other, either brain or Spirit. So the Reformed scholar B.B. Warfield once declared, "Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. What! Than ten hours over your books on your knees?"

Jesus then asks His disciples why they are talking among themselves about having no bread. And He asks, "Do you still not understand?"

This is not a rebuke, but a correction. Jesus wants them to know that they haven't gotten it right. Their interpretation—"yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees = we forgot to bring bread" — is wrong. This should remind us that we don't find the true meaning of Scripture by taking a vote, which is how some Bible studies go. We say, "and what does this mean to you?" and fifteen different interpretations get trotted out, not merely fifteen different applications. Remember, the disciples outnumbered Jesus 12-1. And they were wrong.

So how does Jesus go about leading them to the right interpretation? Notice that He doesn't make it easy. He doesn't just hand them the answer. He makes them work for it. In this instance, as in others, Jesus points out the dots, but He lets His disciples connect

them. So He reminds them of what happened not long before, when He fed a crowd of 5,000 men and who knows how many women and children with just a few loaves and fish, and then later a similar crowd of 4,000 men with similar meager provisions. And then He says, "How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?"

Do you see His unstated logic? He had spoken to the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the disciples thought He was talking about literal bread, since they had forgotten to take along any bread except a single small loaf. Apparently they thought something like this: "Hey, we have to eat. And all we have is this single loaf. What are we going to do? We certainly can't get any bread from some stray Pharisees or Sadducees we might find; they'd like only too well the chance to poison us with a little arsenic in the yeast. We blew it, guys; we forgot to bring along our own, safe bread." That's something like what they thought; and Jesus tells them plainly they're wrong. They missed His point. So He goes about correcting them by reminding them that they just came from two separate incidents where He took some meager provisions and multiplied it to feed thousands. Yes, they had brought along only one loaf, but so what? Was that a problem before? Feeding thousands with just a few loaves is much harder than feeding just 13 with one loaf.

But then notice something. Jesus doesn't give them "the answer." He doesn't say, "Look, guys, this is what I meant." He lets them work it out for themselves, with God's Spirit helping them.

[Howard Hendricks story: riding in car with former student, "I don't notice any ashes in your ashtray." "You don't seem to have any cigarettes in the car." "Why don't you smoke?"]

vv. 11-12: Jesus does just one more thing in this encounter with His disciples. He's told them their interpretation of His words was incorrect; He's helped them to see why their interpretation made little sense; and then He simply repeats what He said before, word for word: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

And then, voila, the curtain lifts and the light shines bright. Matthew says, "Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." At last they made the correct leap. "Yeast does not equal bread," as they thought, but rather, "yeast = teaching." Now, how did they make that leap? Well, they used their brains, and then God gave them insight. They had to work for it, and then the Spirit graced them with enlightenment. The two are not contradictory, but complementary.

Application

OK, so much for the disciples. What about us? The fact is, when we hear the words of God, we likely will not understand them either completely or at all right away. We'll get some ideas that may well be wrong. Taking a vote on their meaning won't help much. And you're not stupid or incompetent just because some Bible passages don't seem to make much sense to you.

Toward the end of his life, years after he had served as a chief apostle in the early church, Peter wrote, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand . . ." (2 Peter 3:15-16). Have you ever read the book of

Romans? Not easy, is it? But why is it rather hard? Couldn't God have made it easier? He could have, but He didn't. Why not?

The writer of Hebrews chastised his readers for not working hard enough to understand what God intended them to solidly grasp. He said that while some of them should have become teachers by that time, instead they needed to be taught the basics all over again. And then he writes this: "solid food is for the mature, *who by constant use* have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). Understanding comes by constant use, and in no other way. It takes work.

Paul instructed his protégé, Timothy, on how to become an effective pastor. He gave him loads of advice and counsel. And then he wrote, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Tim. 2:7). Do you see the same pattern there as we just saw in Matthew? It's not brains *or* Spirit, but both. Paul says, "reflect on what I am saying." The word translated "reflect" comes from the Greek term *noeow*, which refers to "rational reflection or inner contemplation; to perceive, apprehend, understand, gain an insight into" (Arndt and Gingrich, 540). So Paul is telling Timothy, and us, "If you want to understand the Scriptures, it's going to take mental exertion. You have to meditate on it, ponder it, mull it over, turn it over in your mind, think about it." Years ago when I worked at Multnomah Press, I passed our receptionist one afternoon. She was deep in thought, with her hand to her chin and staring off into space. I said, "My you look pensive today." She shook herself out of her near-trance and said, slowly, "No, just thinking." That's what it takes.

But it takes more than that. Lots of brilliant people put the text of the Bible under all sorts of high-powered microscopes and come away with impressive-sounding

gibberish. So Paul adds, "the Lord will give you insight into all this." You work hard, and the Lord gives you insight. Brains *and* Spirit.

Now, don't think I'm giving you a formula! I'm not. I don't know it, if one exists. I think of what Paul had earlier written to Timothy: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. *Persevere* in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim 4:16). What does the word "persevere" indicate to you? (**That's not a rhetorical question, by the way: I'm really asking you.**) What does it mean to "persevere" in doctrine? Does the word "persevere" indicate something easy, or potentially hard? Does it suggest a short time period, or a long one? So if that's true, then what does that suggest about getting a solid grip on the Scriptures?

Let me wrap up today by giving you five bullet points that may help to summarize what we've learned.

1. Don't worry if you don't understand some text right away; maybe you're not supposed to. Chew on it a while.
 2. How hard you work at understanding the Bible indicates your true interest level in hearing from God and discovering His will for you.
 3. Working to "get" some passage helps to cement the lesson in your brain and sink it into your heart.
 4. There are many levels of correct understanding of a passage; the deeper levels come only with time and experience. Comprehension is not God's goal; transformation is.
- [Story of Cecilia]**
5. Transformation of the whole person starts with the mind. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Conclusion

Remember how unsure I was three years ago about whether I should pursue communication studies? So much of it sounded like gibberish to me. And today I have only my dissertation left to finish. A lot of it still sounds like gibberish, frankly, but at least I understand what sort of gibberish it is. The Lord led us to Regent, and to that program, for a reason. It's taken a lot of hard work. But now it looks as though we are about to see some of the fruit of that labor.

Bible study is like that, only moreso. I'll leave you with Paul's words on that score: "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim 4:8). Amen.