

“Do You Still Not Understand?”

There are some things that I may never understand. For example, when I was in high school, I enjoyed and appreciated math. However, there is very little use for math in studying to be a pastor. So I never learned things like calculus. And as interesting as it might be to some, and as obvious to many who know higher level math well, I doubt I will ever understand it.

In a similar way, as I have worked with college students, I have had the opportunity to see some of the homework that they were working on in the form of massive equations written out on whiteboards. And I could stare at these equations for hours without having any idea what they possibly meant.

And I'm OK with not understanding these things. I trust that the people who need to know calculus, or need to be able to decipher equations, can do that when necessary. But if there is one thing that I want to understand, it is God's Word. And I hope that you share that feeling. In his Word, God reveals to us much important information about us, about the world around us, about where we're going, and even about himself. We know that this is important information. And yet, at times, as much as we want to, we fail to understand it.

Jesus' disciples failed to understand him from time to time as well. One particular failure provides the context of the question that Jesus is asking today: “Do you still not understand?”

As we look back at the events that preceded that question, we can appreciate why Jesus was so frustrated with his disciples. One event we know as the Feeding of the 5,000. Jesus and his disciples were surrounded by a crowd of people, as they often were, even though they had travelled across the Sea of Galilee. There by the shore of the sea the people listened for hours as Jesus taught them. And as evening approached, Jesus told his disciples to give the people something to eat. Well, there was a problem. There were 5,000 men in the crowd, plus women, plus children. It would take a fortune, a fortune that neither Jesus nor his disciples had, to feed so many. And even if they had that fortune, it wasn't like there was a supermarket nearby where they could stop in to buy that food.

What the disciples had, thanks to someone in the gathered crowd, was five loaves of bread and two small fish. And that was enough in the hands of Jesus. Jesus prayed and blessed the food, and had his disciples distribute it to the people. Everyone ate until they were satisfied, and the disciples later picked up twelve baskets full of leftover food. Jesus had miraculously provided for the people enough food, and in such a way that there was more left over than there had been at the start of the meal.

And this wasn't the only time that Jesus had provided for the physical needs of the crowds that followed him. Some time later there was a slightly smaller crowd, about 4,000 men. They were in the same condition as the first, in a remote place without food. This time on hand were 7 loaves of bread. And this time, when the meal was finished, there were seven baskets full of leftovers.

Shortly after this Feeding of the 4,000, Jesus and his disciples were again travelling by boat across the Sea of Galilee. As they travelled, Jesus warned them, **“Be careful. Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”** By this, Jesus meant that his disciples should watch out for the false teachings of people around them. The Pharisees were work-righteous and self-righteous. They believed that they could earn God's love and earn salvation by the things that they did. They did not need Jesus, nor anyone else, to help them. Herod and those in league with him, including the Saducees, were a rationalistic group. They didn't believe in miracles like people rising from the dead. Jesus didn't want any of these false teachings to disturb his disciples, whom he had taught the truth that he was their Savior and Lord.

But the disciples didn't understand the warning. They realized that, once again, they were short in the food area. They had only one loaf of bread that they had taken with them on the boat. They thought that Jesus was upset or disappointed in this. But they should have known that was not the case. They should have known that Jesus by his almighty power could easily and instantly provide them with all the bread

that they would ever need. He had already proven, not once but twice, that he was able to provide food to care for the needs of his followers. They didn't understand. They thought that Jesus was speaking about earthly things like food. Jesus was talking about something even more important: spiritual matters.

Jesus disciples had fallen into the same trap that we so easily do. They had in mind only their own personal issues, and physical issues at that. And in so many ways, we are just like those disciples. Slow. Unable to grasp the truth. Full of misunderstanding.

Like the disciples, our sinful natures constantly make themselves known. Just last week we heard about the importance of hearing God's Word, of reading it and attending church where that Word is proclaimed. But so often, we fail to understand what it says to us, or what it means for our lives. So often we fail to take it to heart or to apply it to our own situations. And so often the root cause is lurking within our own hearts. Like all sinners, the natural inclination in us toward sin and evil and against God never leaves us completely, at least not in this life. Our lives are a constant struggle between what we love as believers, which are in line with what God wants, and our sinful selfishness. And our sinful natures cannot understand God's Word, nor do they have any interest in doing so.

Jesus also asked his disciples whether their hearts were hard. Unfortunately, at times, we too harden our hearts. We hear what God says about sin, yet we are too caught up in those sins to allow his condemnation to reach us. For example, many hear what God says about marriage and waiting to exercise his gifts of intimacy, and yet dismiss it as old-fashioned advice or unrealistic expectations. And they go on living in sin, hardening themselves against God's Word. Or they hear what God says about the sin of homosexuality and dismiss it because of so-called modern sensibilities. Or we hear what God says about the danger of selfishness and greed, and yet so many of our decisions are made for the sole reason of how I can make or keep the most money and possessions.

And in addition to all of the temptations that come from within us and our own hard hearts, we also deal with the yeast of false teaching about which Jesus warned his disciples. Even when we hear the warnings against false teachings, we can be slow to understand. They can be sneaky and subtle in the way they twist the Word of God. We might read the latest popular religious books and fail to notice how often they speak against the truth of God's Word or how easily they take the emphasis away from where it belongs. Like so many, we can look to religious radio as our favorite source of spiritual inspiration without guarding against the false teachings that creep in to so many of the songs and comments.

Do you see why this question is an important one for us to consider? Jesus' disciples give us an example of people with strong religious training and opportunities to see God's love and power who still failed to understand. We rightly take warning. But we also find in this account the answer to our misunderstandings.

The answer is Jesus. He patiently instructed his disciples so that they would see and know the truth. He continued to train them as he walked his road to the cross, to the tomb, and back to his Father's side in heaven. And he sent them the gift of his Holy Spirit to give them the understanding and the confidence that they needed to be his witnesses.

And the truth to which they bore witness, the truth that he has given us, was this: Jesus has saved us from our misunderstandings. Jesus read and heard and studied the Scriptures. And he fully and perfectly understood what they said. They said that he was the chosen Messiah, the promised Savior. They said that he would be led like a sheep to slaughter. They said that he would suffer and die for the sins of the world. They said that he would give eternal salvation to all who follow him.

And Jesus not only understood these words of Scripture, he fulfilled them. He carried them out. He went to the cross to pay the price for our sinful misunderstanding and selfishness and hard-heartedness. He gave up his life so that we might have eternal life. And he taught us that this is the most important blessing that we can possibly have or know.

There may be plenty of things that you or I don't understand, but may God always give us the understanding that he is our Lord and Savior and that we can rely on him for all that we truly need.

Sermon Text: Mark 8:14–21 (NIV84)

¹⁴ The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. ¹⁵ “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

¹⁶ They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.”

¹⁷ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

“Twelve,” they replied.

²⁰ “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

They answered, “Seven.”

²¹ He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”