

to sell everything he possibly can to buy that field. He knows he has found something of incredible worth apparently just by chance, and is prepared to give everything he owns in exchange. We might wonder whether we ourselves value the gospel that highly.

In the second parable the pearl merchant is searching, on the lookout for good pearls. No doubt he is always watching out for the one that is just that bit better than all the rest. What he finds is something far, far better, and, like the other man, gives everything to get his hands on it. He has been looking for such a thing, and eventually he has found it. Many of us will know of someone who has found the Truth like this. It might even apply to us personally, that we have been searching for truth, maybe looking at other sects and religions before coming across a reality that leaves the rest looking worthless in comparison.

Summary

The main lesson for ourselves we can glean from all the parables we have considered is this. We must work hard to fill our lives with the light of God's Word so that it shines out from us in our words and our deeds. We must ensure that the seed we possess is good seed, the true gospel, and not full of weeds. That gospel message of salvation that has come to us so freely must then be freely scattered, whenever and wherever we can. But we must acknowledge that the power to change men is in the seed of the Word itself, a living and active force in men's hearts that can grow to produce a plenteous harvest. The work is of God, and He it is Who brings men to eternal salvation in Christ. In our work of service to Him we take our place with countless others who have laboured to bring about a harvest that gives glory to Him.

Jesus' use of questions

Eric Marshall

Questions are used by the Lord Jesus in a variety of ways, including developing people's faith and understanding, or dealing with opposition. His use of questions provides lessons for ourselves, including the way questions can expose the real issues to be considered.

QUESTIONS CAN BE USED in many ways, from the simple enquiry for information, as, "How many loaves have ye?", to the loaded question designed to catch out the respondent, as, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?". Jesus quite frequently asked questions in his teaching, as a quick perusal of the Gospel records would show. Occasionally Jesus asks for information that he had no reason to know, for example, his question about Lazarus to Martha and Mary, "Where have ye laid him?" (Jno. 11:34). More usually Jesus used questions to aid his teaching. The type of question that Jesus used depended on the audience (whether an individual or a group, and whether responsive to him or opposed) and the situation.

Jesus used questions to:

- engage the hearer in what he was saying
- challenge and develop understanding and faith in his hearers
- challenge and refute opposition to his teaching.

We will look at each of the categories shortly.

When we consider the questions that Jesus asks we are impressed by the appropriateness of his questions and how skillfully they identify the matter of real importance. Thus when he challenged each individual from among the multitude and those who were already disciples to "deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mk. 8:34), he points out the reason for this choice by using two questions: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"; and, "Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (vv. 36,37). These questions powerfully make the point that life is essential to everything that we have and experience. Consequently, to grasp prematurely what we desire without regard to God's requirements is at best of very short-term value. Maybe also Jesus is asking the questions of himself, for only he could have gained the whole world; yet he could see that this would be at the cost of his life.

Engaging the hearers

Jesus used questions to engage the minds of his audience and provide the background to his teaching. Some examples are:

“And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” (Mt. 6:27, ESV); “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?” (7:9,10, ESV); “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (10:29, ESV);

“When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you’” (Lk. 7:24-27, ESV).

In each of these examples the question serves to reinforce the teaching being presented.

Challenges to develop understanding and faith

We place under this heading the questions that Jesus asked of individuals, and especially the twelve disciples. Because such were willing to listen to and accept what Jesus said does not mean that his questions were not searching, and in some cases too demanding.

So he challenged his disciples: “‘Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’ Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm” (Mt. 8:26, ESV);

Of the two blind men who sought restoration of their sight, Jesus asked; “Believe ye that I am able to do this?” (9:28);

In the garden of Gethsemane he said to his disciples, all of whom had declared that they would not forsake him, “Why sleep ye? rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation” (Lk. 22:46).

His disciples misunderstood his warning, “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6), thinking that Jesus was rebuking them for not bringing any bread. Jesus by questioning reminds them of the two recent miracles of feeding and what they should have learned from them: “O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how

many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (vv. 8-12).

Jesus’ threefold question to Peter, “lovest thou me . . .?”, was a challenge indeed, and a prompt to Peter to continue faithfully as Jesus’ disciple and to rise to the responsibility to “Feed my sheep” (Jno. 21), which he did.

Questions to deal with opposition

Many of the questions Jesus used came from encounters with the authorities, who opposed his teaching and rejected his call to repentance. Early in Mark’s record, Jesus shows his insight into his opponents’ thinking: “And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? (2:8,9). They believed that physical infirmity was the consequence of sin (see John 8:34 and context), so the subsequent healing of the palsied man gave incontrovertible evidence that Jesus had been given the authority to forgive sins, even though they refused to accept it. He later rebuked their lack of insight when he asked, “Have ye never read what David did . . . ?” (Mk. 2:25). In the next chapter he asked, “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace”. They refused to answer because they could see the force of his argument but would not accept it, which provoked anger in Jesus: “. . . being grieved for the hardness of their hearts” (3:4,5).

The question, “Have ye never read?”, is recorded twice more in the Gospels. The disapproval of the scribes and Pharisees at those who shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David” is answered by the question, “Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise?” (Mt. 21:16). Then, at the conclusion of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, “Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our

eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (vv. 42,43). Of course they had read these words; they had failed to see their meaning! What a warning to all readers of God's Word!

In the case of the question asked by the Pharisees and Herodians, "Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?", Jesus shows his insight into their motives: "Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?"; and also his supreme skill at selecting a line of argument to answer their question comprehensively. He presents his argument by involving them through a request for a sample of the tribute money and then the question, "Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (22:17-21). No wonder they marvelled! How sad that they still missed the point!

It is evident from this brief selection that Jesus was skilled at selecting the right question, and that he had an unmatched understanding of the Scriptures.

Lessons for today

It is easy to read how Jesus questioned individuals, whether disciples or opponents, and be impressed with his skills. What does this teach us about our role as teachers and preachers?

Surely we need to note that Jesus' questions were designed to develop understanding of His Father's purpose and honour. Jesus was not seeking his own honour (see Jno. 8:49,54). Additionally, Jesus does not ask the loaded question designed to make a fool of somebody, as those asked by his enemies, who tried to "ensnare him in his talk" (Mt. 22:15, RV). It is true that the questions Jesus did ask often caused the hearers to look into their hearts and perhaps see themselves truly for the first time.

In our role as teachers and preachers we do not have the same authority as Jesus. Our role is expressed in the words, "And the Spirit and

the bride say, Come" (Rev. 22:17). What we have to say must be soundly based on the Word of God. However, many of our contemporaries are ignorant of any Bible teaching and need help to understand. Often this can be assisted by asking simple questions about the text. For example, "Who said this?"; "Why might this detail have been recorded?"; "Where else is this referred to?"; "What is the sequence of thought?"; etc. A reader with an enquiring frame of mind will more easily understand the points being made in the text and any subsequent explanation we might offer. Such an approach is essential, because God has told us, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8,9).

Sometimes we are involved with those who have considerable Bible knowledge, but hold views that we believe are erroneous. It is in this situation that thoughtful questions, based on relevant scriptures, can be helpful. It is also worth restating the other person's point as a question before we attempt to answer it. This clarifies what exactly is under discussion and avoids misunderstanding.

We need also to practise the apostolic advice to Timothy, "the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Perhaps the most important point to glean from Jesus' use of questions is his ability to ask the question that exposed the real issue to be considered. A key factor in Jesus' ability to do this was his unmatched understanding of Scripture and his Father's purpose. As it is prophetically recorded of him, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8). This is an example to follow indeed!

"Ye are the light of the world"—the words are a testimony to the exalted position of those who know and believe the truth in Jesus, and also to their very grave responsibility . . . The function of the disciple is to shine—he is failing in duty if light is not radiating from him. This does not apply solely to the spoken word by which the gospel is proclaimed. He who was "the Light" himself preached; but he also walked in light, as he counselled other men to do.

John Carter, *Parables of the Messiah*, p. 16