

Jesus, Unleashed

By Joel M. Killion

Chapter Six:

The Riddler

As I think about the church today, it seems the preaching of sermons is a centerpiece to the faith (Ironically, this has also been true throughout church history). Pulpit-based ministers are constantly graded by how graceful, logical, and clear they are, as well as by the stories they tell to further illustrate their monologues. But after studying homiletics (the art of preaching) and various public speaking resources and comparing them to Jesus' life, I cannot help but notice some major distinctions.

Let me explain...

After thousands of years of living under the darkness and pain of The Fall, Jesus came on the scene with the greatest message of all time: "the Kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe." This was the Gospel of the Kingdom. This was his message, his purpose, his calling: to preach this Good News to the poor, to seek and save those who are lost (Mark 1:38; Luke 4:43; 7:22; 19:10).

But there was a problem...

He communicated with allegories and dark speech (Psalm 78:2; Matthew 13:34-35; Mark 4:33-34). I like what Aiden W. Tozer once said, "Preachers' illustrations were given to throw light and illustrate, where many of the parables of Jesus were given for the purpose of obscuring truth." In other words, Jesus' riddled words veiled Truth from the merely curious and stimulated the inquiry of the really concerned, confusing most (if not all) of his hearers, leaving them with more questions than answers. Then, when he was asked to explain his allegories, he sometimes would, but it rarely helped.

And if that wasn't enough...

- 1) He frequently addressed multiple topics in one long-winded message, thousands of years before the invention of the 4 hour chair.
- 2) He often devastated his audiences by saying things no one else would ever say that were hard if not impossible to accept, leaving the people offended (Matthew 8:18-22; Luke 11:29-32; 14:25-35).
- 3) He would answer questions with questions (Or, better yet, he would answer them with more symbolic stories or anecdotes).
- 4) He would repeat himself, using a different parable when his audience didn't understand what he was trying to say with his first, second or third parables.

Today leaders do all they can to improve the appeal, clarity, and entertainment value of their messages, but Jesus was a different kind of communicator. If he knew anything about the art of preaching or public speaking, he certainly didn't show it.

But why did Jesus talk like this? Was he simply trying to be different, or was he just trying to be difficult? Did he like being misunderstood? Did he not care about improving his chances of success or broadening his circle of influence? What about the popular majority? Didn't Jesus have a board of directors or "headquarters" to keep him on track? Whatever happened to meeting your listeners where they are, on their level? If Jesus was a man of God, would he not have been more sympathetic and loving in his delivery? Did he not read Darius Carnegus' book on "How to Win Jews and Influence Greeks"?

Who would have thought that God would come in the flesh in an effort to restore all things but would do it all wrong, so contrary to conventional wisdom? And yet there was something alive in his words that touched people deep inside where no one had ever touched them before. Every word carried grace and truth inside it, astonishing some and terrifying others, stirring the desperate, freeing the bound, and healing the broken.

Many wondered, "How is it that this man has learning...when he has never studied?" (John 7:15, Amplified; see also Matthew 13:54; Mark 1:22). Where did his boldness, authority, knowledge and wisdom come from? He had no degrees or credentials from any school or university and he wasn't ordained by any religious organizations. He didn't present theories or philosophies with "excellence of speech" but spoke the wisdom of God in a mystery. His preaching and teaching was not presented with persuasive words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, so people's faith would not rest on human ability but in the power of God. He only spoke what he heard his Father say, as he heard his Father speak (Matthew 10:27 and John 5:19, 30; 8:25-29, 38; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24, 31). This is why those who were naturally-minded rejected his teachings. His words were non-sense to them (1 Corinthians 2, Amplified).

He was like an alien in this world who spoke every language but those of the people around him. He didn't think or communicate like everyone else because his mind and heart were constantly preoccupied with Kingdom matters, influencing his interactions with everyone and everything, everyday. As C. S. Lewis once said, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse."

To an oppressed people yearning for freedom from Roman rule, he gave startling advice, such as, "If an enemy soldier orders you to walk a mile with him, walk two, and if he slaps you on one cheek, offer the other." He would also tell them things like, "Rejoice in persecution" and "Be grateful for your poverty." His unbending principles and absolutist qualities left everyone gasping for air, confused and perhaps outraged - not comforted.

It's easy to criticize someone for being contrary to the way we think things should be done, but how do we know our way is best? Jesus could have met people where they were but how would that have helped? There is more knowledge in the earth today than has ever been, and there are more ways to communicate truth than have ever existed, but

are we better for it? In the end, it all comes down to having a deep and personal love for Truth, and only those who love Truth will seek it, even to their own hurt. Jesus baited everyone with veiled, offensive Truth, and said, “Blessed...is he who takes no offense at me and finds no cause for stumbling in or through me and is not hindered from seeing the Truth.” (Matthew 11:6, Amplified) The internal struggle that takes place deep within our hearts and minds when we are confronted with Truth must be embraced, not shunned, and we are the only ones who are responsible for casting the deciding vote in favor of Truth. Of course, this can be a very hard process, but when we want the freedom and liberty that comes from his reality more than the false comfort of what we’ve always felt and believed, we will run to him, away from everything that’s not him.

A Holocaustic Homily

As I’ve spent the last couple of years dissecting the four Gospels, I’ve been intrigued, for one thing, by Jesus’ “sermons,” all of which would have a dramatic, negative effect on the average person today. One message that rocked me in more ways than one is in John 6. As you will see, Jesus had an agenda to fulfill, even if it meant losing popularity.

According to this chapter, on one particular day a huge crowd (larger than 5000 people) was following Jesus, drawn to him by the miracles, signs and wonders he had performed. Knowing the people were physically hungry after following him for quite some time, he multiplied five loaves of bread and two fishes and fed them until they were full. Of course, this so impressed the people that they tracked him down a little later, hoping he would repeat the miracle and feed them a second time.

However, Jesus didn’t give them what they wanted. His reason for multiplying the food the first time was to keep the crowd from starving, but this time he had something much better in mind.

So, in response to their request, he said, “Stop toiling and doing and producing for the food that perishes and decomposes...but strive and work and produce rather for the [lasting] food which endures [continually] unto life eternal; the Son of Man will give (furnish) you that, for God the father has authorized and certified him and put his seal of endorsement upon him.” (John 6:27, Amplified)

What was Jesus talking about? Didn’t he understand what these people wanted? Didn’t he understand that you have to please people to keep them around? Evidently, he wasn’t too sensitive to their needs, and he certainly didn’t know how to talk to them because what he said went right over their heads. We know this because they then asked a question that had nothing to do with what he was talking about (John 6:28). Then, after answering their question, which again didn’t meet their satisfaction, they asked him, “What sign...will you perform then, so that we may see it and believe and rely on and adhere to you? What [supernatural] work have you [to show what you can do]?” (John 6:30, Amplified) These people were incorrigible and were so desperate for food and a “show” that they asked him to rain manna out of heaven like Moses did for the children of Israel in the desert.

But Jesus replied, “Moses did not give you the bread from heaven...but it is my father who gives you the true heavenly bread.” (John 6:32, Amplified)

This confused the people even more because they still thought he was talking about literal bread (John 6:34). They were physically hungry and Jesus was talking about heavenly food and he wasn't even hinting at feeding them after “church.” Instead, he proceeded to talk about this strange, mysterious bread and would intersperse even stranger statements about himself such as when he identified himself as “the bread of life” and told them, “If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” (John 6:51, Amplified)

Of course, this upset the Jews who thought he was talking about cannibalism; they even started fighting among themselves. It would've been nice if Jesus had merely explained himself, but he didn't. He just kept preaching and then, to make matters worse, he made a statement that was even more unsettling:

“..You cannot have any life in you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood...He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has...eternal life, and I will raise him up...on the last day. For my flesh is true and genuine food, and my blood is true and genuine drink. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continually in me, and I...in him. Just as the living father sent me and I live by (through, because of) the father, even so whoever continues to feed on me [whoever takes me for his food and is nourished by me] shall [in his turn] live through and because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven...he who takes this bread for his food shall live forever.” (John 6:53-58, Amplified)

Now, how many of us, if we had been there, hearing this message, would have given Jesus a piece of our mind? Can you imagine your reaction? How would you respond? This was definitely the kind of message that begged clarification but was “lost in translation.”

Think about it - if Jesus really loved those people, he would have spoken to them on their level, right? He would have been more “seeker sensitive,” more compassionate, more considerate; he would have read his audience and met them where they were, on their level. Am I wrong?

How many of us would have said something like...

“Jesus, we know you're the Son of God, and we don't want to presume to tell you what to do, but can you be more practical? We have no idea what you're talking about. Keep it simple. Don't be so super-spiritual, so mysterious. We're ‘average’ folks you know. Don't you think it would help if you spoke more plainly? Just say what you mean. If we can't understand what you're saying, what good is it?”

I can even hear some religious leaders saying...

“Jesus, I’ve been in ministry a long time. Let me give you some advice. When you’re in Rome, be as the Romans. Speak to them on their level. Don’t talk over their heads. If you keep this up the crowds won’t come back to your meetings. Your reputation will plummet and attendance will drop, and you know what that means: no more tithes and offerings. Is that really what you want? Oh, and by the way, your message was very arrogant. Who do you think you are? You need some humility. Let me pray for you.”

If Jesus were alive today, as he was in John 6, how would we perceive him? Would we praise his “ministry” as being “fruitful” and “effective”? Would we see him the way heaven does or would we only see him through our own eyes?

Jesus was gentle and humble in heart but not like we think. We think confusion only comes from satan which is why we blame the enemy every time “confusion” shows up. We think that being offensive is unkind and unloving, but Jesus served as he was directed by our Father. This is why we must learn to know and judge after the Spirit (the heart) and not the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). We must see the heart of every person and every matter with the eyes of our hearts.

Jesus was offering the multitudes the greatest gift he could ever give: himself, his flesh and blood, his very Life! And yet Jesus wrapped his gift in ambiguous, cannibalistic, pagan language (e.g. “Eat my flesh” and “Drink my blood”), and no one liked it. And as a result, he didn’t just rock the boat - he sunk it! He offered them another level of communion (relationship) with himself with strong and offensive words that brought everyone up short. Even many of his own disciples were upset. They said, “This is a hard and difficult and strange saying (an offensive and unbearable message). Who can stand to hear it? [Who can be expected to listen to such teaching?]” (John 6:60, Amplified).

But Jesus wasn’t their kind of Messiah. He didn’t meet their needs and provide circuses on demand. So the large and restless crowd filed away. The feeding of the multitudes attracted thousands, which is a “good thing” to those who crave success, but when he opened his “unsanctified” mouth, they split. Why? Because they followed him for his works, not his words; they wanted what he had, not who he was.

Jesus’ sermon was like a T-bone steak to a new-born baby, like trying to fit a square peg through a round hole; it was too hard to swallow. And he knew it, which is why he asked his disciples, “Is this a stumbling block and an offense to you? [Does this upset and displease and shock and scandalize you?]” (John 6:61, Amplified).

His words were Spirit and Life and could not be understood apart from his Spirit and faith in him (John 6:63-64). But Jesus wasn’t surprised or discouraged when most of his followers deserted him and went back to their old lives and associations (John 6:66). He knew no one could follow him on their own unless they were enabled by our Father. This is why he didn’t beat himself up for preaching the way he did. He simply delivered the message he was given by our Father and trusted him to do the rest. He knew he was only the vessel, not the source.

Jesus' message turned up the heat and drove everyone away except his original disciples. Why? They could have easily followed everyone else, but they didn't. When Jesus asked them if they too would leave him, Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words...of eternal life." (John 6:68, Amplified) In other words, they discerned that Jesus was the only one whose words made them come alive; they no longer had any confidence in the religious system of their day. When Jesus spoke, their hearts burned within them. He had something they wanted, and they were too desperate to be critical, easily offended, or scared away by what they didn't understand.

The Inner Circle

Despite popular opinion, Jesus didn't treat everyone the same. Within the ranks of the multitudes who "followed" him, he had an inner circle – his disciples – with whom he shared more revelation (Mark 4:10-12, 34). He spoke in code to the crowds but gave his disciples a little more light than the rest. I say "a little more light" because even being on the inside track, they were still often confused and distressed by most of what he said (Matthew 19:25; Luke 18:31-34; John 4:31-38; 11:8-10). And sometimes they were too afraid to ask him what he was talking about. Why? Because he would often rebuke them for their dullness and lack of faith (Matthew 15:17; 16:5-12; Mark 4:13; 7:18; 8:14-21; 9:30-32; Luke 9:43-45).

Jesus did not make it easy or comfortable for his disciples to follow him and yet they stayed with him because they knew he had more, and was more, than anyone they knew. They didn't react out of pain when Jesus shined light on their darkness or raised the standard on their lives. They abandoned their need for self-preservation enough to keep a tight hold on him when everyone else was running away.

Go Get It!

Jesus preached, taught, and conversed as he was directed by our Father, and no one understood him except those who had ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to understand (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 13-16, 43; Mark 4:9-11; 6:52; 7:16). His words were veiled to those who did not believe, whose minds were blinded by the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). He spoke mysteries in mysterious ways to a spiritually deaf and dull generation. Many hung on his every word while others, especially the religious leaders and crowds, were enraged to the point of plotting his death. Yet, he wasn't moved.

On one particular occasion, when Jesus was speaking to a crowd of people who did not understand his words, he explained why they were so dull:

"I tell the things which I have seen and learned at my father's side, and your actions also reflect what you have heard and learned from your father...If God were your father, you would love me and respect me and welcome me gladly, for I proceeded (came forth) from God [out of his very presence]. I did not even come on my own authority or of my own accord (as self-appointed); but he sent me. Why do you misunderstand what I say? It is because you are unable to hear what I am saying. [You cannot bear to listen to my

message; your ears are shut to my teaching.] You are of your father, the devil, and it is your will to practice the lusts and gratify the desires [which are characteristic] of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a falsehood, he speaks what is natural to him, for he is a liar [himself] and the father of lies and of all that is false. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe me [do not trust me, do not rely on me, or adhere to me]. Who of you convicts me of wrongdoing or finds me guilty of sin? Then if I speak truth, why do you not believe me [trust me, rely on, and adhere to me]? Whoever is of God listens to God. [Those who belong to God hear the words of God.] This is the reason that you do not listen [to those words, to me]: because you do not belong to God and are not of God or in harmony with him.” (John 8:38, 42-47, Amplified)

Then, in John 10:26-27, he told another group, “. . .You do not believe and trust and rely on me because you do not belong to my fold [you are no sheep of mine]. The sheep that are my own hear and are listening to my voice; and I know them, and they follow me.”(Amplified)

Everything Jesus said was Spirit and Life, hidden from the wise and learned and revealed only to the childlike: those who were trusting, lowly, loving, and forgiving (Matthew 11:25-27; John 6:63; Proverbs 1:23; 1 Corinthians 2:9-16). Therefore, Jesus placed the responsibility for understanding his words upon his hearers (Matthew 19:11-12; Luke 8:18). He never cast his pearls to pigs and never gave holy things to dogs (Matthew 7:6). Rather, he sowed his seed on the ground of humanity, expecting a harvest from those whose hearts were as the richest soil, hungry and desperate for him.

He shrouded his Truths in smoke and mirrors because “it is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.” (Proverbs 25:2. See also Revelation 1:6) Jesus used parables to conceal truth for those who were spiritually hungry enough to invest themselves in an imaginative pursuit for meaning. He used this method, rather than easy answers and obvious explanations, to entice his hearers into a deeper, more inter-active relationship with him and his world.

As Bill Johnson says, “God doesn’t hide things from you, he hides things for you.” The mysteries of the Kingdom have been wrapped in layers, like an onion, waiting for those who have the essential passion and guts to start peeling, as long as it takes, to get to the heart of the “matter.” He has placed gold, silver and precious gems in rocks and caves and said, “If you want it, go get it!” He wants us to discover his treasures, but he isn’t going to make it easy for us. Why? Because we will not value what we do not pay for. Also, we cannot be trusted with his resources until we have developed the needed character within us to responsibly steward what we find. This is why, from heaven’s viewpoint, the journey is as important as the destination; the process of exploration is as significant as the discovery itself.

Talk Like God

What if we followed Jesus’ example? What if we only spoke what we heard our Father

say? Would we talk more or less? Would our words not be more profound, more edifying, more eternal?

Am I encouraging parabolic preaching over clear-cut, three-point sermons? Do I think we should talk in code all the time, using riddles, telling stories and answering questions with questions? Am I discouraging socially relevant oratory methods and styles? Absolutely not! Christianity isn't about mimicking what Jesus said in the Gospels, verbatim. We're not parrots or robots! Our Father doesn't want us to be like Jesus in every single way, just like no loving parent wants their younger children to be just like their oldest sibling. We are all unique and every situation we face is different.

The core principle of Jesus' life is very simple: In every situation, at every fork in the road, he sought our Father's heart and only spoke what he heard our Father say (John 7:16; 8:26, 28, 38; 12:49-50; 14:10). He never left room for anything but his Father's influence. He never went to school to learn public speaking or the art of preaching. Of course, this isn't to say that formal oratory training isn't beneficial; there are times when we may be lead by our Father to educate ourselves in this way. But when our focus is more on connecting with people, with our audiences or congregations, than it is on hearing and obeying our Father, we have strayed from the simplicity of devotion to Christ. "Seeker sensitivity" should never become more important than being sensitive to our Father's heart. Jesus lived to show us how to live, like a little child, dependent on our Daddy for his wisdom for each and every situation. As a result, he lived out of the wisdom and strength of God, putting the wisdom and strength of man to shame.

What if we flushed out every thought or concern in our heads that allows peer pressure to have any say in what we say and how we say it? What if we simply stopped caring about pleasing ourselves and everyone else? What if we spoke as if only one Person was listening? Would we not speak Life? Why do we fret about what things may sound like to so-n-so? How can we ever live the true Christian life when we still care so much about being liked by mere men?

Those who have set their hearts on following Jesus, as he followed our dear Father, will see his fruit in their lives. Like Jesus, their words will be powerful and profound, offending the religious, restoring the broken, freeing the bound, feeding the hungry, and shaking the nations as they hear and speak the words of God from his lips.