

## **“Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees”**

### **The Gospel According to Mark 8:1-21**

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A recent issue of *WORLD* magazine (Dec 9, 2017) shared a humorous outcome of today’s engrossing social media experience. The lampposts in Salzburg, Austria are getting a new feature – airbags!

The local city council voted to install the airbags to cut down on injuries suffered when pedestrians crash into them while staring down at their smartphones. (Such pedestrians are known as ‘smartphone zombies.’) According to the city’s Board for Traffic Safety, pedestrian accidents are now more common in Salzburg than driving or cycling accidents!

(The German words in the picture mean “whether the next car is so well padded?”)

Incredible! Oh, the things that can happen when our attention is diverted elsewhere! Similarly, if we are distracted, both individually and as a congregation, our ministry can come to a crashing halt because of false teaching!

Such was Jesus’ concern in the passage of sacred Scripture before us today. We come this morning to the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark’s account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we closed our study of **Mark Chapter 7** last Sunday, Jesus healed a Gentile girl afflicted by a demonic spirit. He also healed a Gentile deaf man who had difficulty communicating by speech. Evidently, Jesus and His disciples were still in a Gentile area as chapter 8 opens.

### **The Gospel According to Mark 8:1-21:**

In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples *to Him* and said to them, <sup>2</sup>“I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. <sup>3</sup>And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.”

<sup>4</sup>Then His disciples answered Him, “How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?”

<sup>5</sup>He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven.”

<sup>6</sup>So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke *them* and gave *them* to His disciples to set before *them*; and they set *them* before the multitude. <sup>7</sup>They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before *them*. <sup>8</sup>So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. <sup>9</sup>Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away, <sup>10</sup>immediately got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha.

<sup>11</sup>Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. <sup>12</sup>But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.”

<sup>13</sup>And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. <sup>14</sup>Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup>Then He charged them, saying, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

<sup>16</sup>And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “*It is* because we have no bread.”

<sup>17</sup>But Jesus, being aware of *it*, said to them, “Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? <sup>18</sup>Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? <sup>19</sup>When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?”

They said to Him, “Twelve.”

<sup>20</sup> “Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?” And they said, “Seven.”

<sup>21</sup> So He said to them, ‘How *is it* you do not understand?’”

*Some of this sounds familiar, doesn't it?* Back when we studied **Mark Chapter 6**, we learned that Jesus fed 5,000 hungry people. He did so using just 5 fishes and 2 loaves of bread. (**Mark 6:30-44**) Some theologians have concluded that Jesus' feeding of the multitudes in the present chapter and that 6<sup>th</sup> chapter are one and the same. While the premise is, indeed, similar – Jesus feeding thousands of hungry people with very little – there are significant differences in the accounts. For instance, Jesus here feeds 4,000 (not 5,000) with seven loaves and a few small fish (not 2 loaves and 5 fish). The locations where these two feedings took place were different, the duration of each differed, and the audiences were also dissimilar.

It's striking that in the conversations recorded here in **Mark 8:1-21**, Jesus posed a number of questions. By my count, Jesus asked 11 questions in the course of these 21 verses. Several of those questions are particularly intriguing, and I'd like to study them in more detail, along with a statement that Jesus utters that we shouldn't miss.

**The first question we'll study is found in verse 12** – “Why does this generation seek a sign?” The Pharisees (religious leaders of the day who didn't see Jesus as the long-promised Messiah) disputed with Jesus, demanding that He produce a sign miracle from heaven to validate Himself as Who He said He was. We can see in His sighing that Jesus grieved over the blindness of the Pharisees. Jesus had just healed a blind Gentile in chapter 7; but these Pharisees in chapter 8 were blind *spiritually*. Though they prided themselves in knowing the sacred Scriptures (the Old Testament was the Bible of the time), they were ignorant as to the divinity of the Son of God Whom they challenged.

Jesus' ministry was not primarily about proving His claims about Himself. In reality, He had been performing miracles since His public ministry began – they had seen or heard Jesus heal a man's paralyzed hand, yet they credited that to Satan. Further, Jesus had healed the sick, cleansed a leper, cast out demons, stilled roaring waves, fed the hungry, and even raised a girl to life. That the Pharisees demanded another sign implied these miracles already performed were insufficient testimony that He was the Divine Deliverer!

No, Jesus would not consent to their demands. He'd provided many already. If those numerous miracles wouldn't persuade His critics, then neither would a man's testimony even though He were dead and raised back to life!

So, Jesus' enemies were blind, but His friends were thick-headed (dense). We see this in **two of the questions Jesus asks in verse 17** - “Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?” **Then, down in question 21, Jesus asked a third such question** – ‘How *is it* you do not understand?’ All three of these questions Jesus asked of His followers, each of whom should have understood what was taking place before their very eyes.

The disciples were in a boat, and had somehow forgotten to bring food with them. They had one loaf of bread with them in the boat. And they were quibbling with each other – you can just imagine what they might have been saying:

- “Who is the dolt who forgot to bring along something to eat?”
- “Don’t look at *me*, I was minding my own business getting the boat ready for the trip!”
- “*I* wasn’t in charge of getting food together”

And on and on. Men hand-picked by the Messiah to share in His ministry all acting like a bunch of children arguing, complaining, and charging each other with their own inadequacies.

Yes, they were men whom God had brought to faith in Jesus Christ. They were so very slow to realize what Jesus was doing through the repeated miracle of feeding thousands with next to nothing.

Some people need extra help, like the man who went into a bank and said he wanted some money. The teller asked him to make out a check. But the man wouldn’t do it. So the teller said, “If you won’t sign the check, I can’t give you any money.”

The man went across the street to another bank, where the same conversation took place. But after this conversation, the teller reached across the counter, took the man by his ears, and banged his head three times on the counter. After that the man took out a pen and calmly signed a check.

The man then returned to the first bank and said, “They gave me money across the street.” “How did that happen?” asked the teller. The man replied, “They explained it to me!”

How quickly these men had forgotten that Jesus fed thousands and had lots left over. In fact, the 7 “large baskets” mentioned in verse 20 full of leftover bread and fish were actually hampers. Such hampers were big enough to hold a full-grown person!

When we lived on the farm, ours was a two story house. My mom had a couple of clothes hampers located upstairs for us kids to put our dirty clothes in. While they weren’t big enough for adults to hide in, they were great hiding places for littler people to hide in!

Given we have access to the completed Bible, and its doctrines are made easy for us to understand by such resources as pastors, Bible teachers, seminary professors, and commentaries, we can be just as dense as the disciples were. So, let’s not be hard on them. Instead, we should be more dedicated to having our own daily personal time with the Lord, spending ample time each day seeking to know Him more completely. “The words and works of Jesus must be pondered and taken to heart. They must not be quickly forgotten.” (Hendriksen, 320) Take responsibility for your own lack of knowledge and do something to overcome it.

Before we close, I’d like for us to consider **the statement Jesus utters in verse 15** - “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

Jesus gives two commands of caution when He says, “Take heed” and “beware.” One paraphrase puts it this way, “Be very careful. Keep a sharp eye out for the contaminating yeast of Pharisees and the followers of Herod.” (*The Message*)

Your Bible may have the word ‘yeast’ in place of the word ‘leaven.’ Whichever one, yeast or leaven, they usually are an image of something evil when found in the Bible. The parallel account of this passage in Matthew’s gospel account (**Matthew 16:12**) tells us that the leaven of the Pharisees is their teaching. **Luke 12:1** sees it as their hypocrisy. So Jesus is warning His followers about the presence of false teachers, who typically arise from within the number of the fellowship of God’s people.

Such leaven/yeast describes the small beginnings of false doctrine – the subtle quiet way in which it insensibly pervades a man’s religion.

**Applications:** I have gleaned three applications from today’s passage:

1 – **We, dear ones, are the hungry pictured in this passage.** That means that we are those who will faint on the way in our own strength. We are the hungry and faint if we remain apart from Jesus. If you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, you have experienced Jesus’ compassion in a special and powerful way against those who are not believers in Jesus Christ. David’s advice in **Psalm 34:8** is, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD *is* good; blessed *is* the man *who* trusts in Him!”

2 – Apart from the grace of God flooding our souls, **we are the Pharisees.** In a graceless state, we are the ones who dispute with Jesus, who demand Him to perform signs. We are the ones who test Him. It is not hard for me to understand the mindset of the Pharisees; after all, you’ve heard me say many times before that I am a recovering Pharisee. And, let me remind you, I’m not alone in this room. Some of you are, as well. Let us always remember that there is a God, and we are not Him! He knows best; His decisions are perfect; His ways for our good.

3 – And, whether we are numbered among the redeemed of God or not, **we are the ones who are prone to forgetfulness.** At times, **our hearts are hard.** And, occasionally, if not regularly, **we are the ones lacking in understanding.** We deceive ourselves if we think otherwise. In verses 11-21 of today’s passage, Jesus poses such questions to His followers. Even those who knew Jesus best were prone to forget the good things He said and did. To help us overcome our tendency to forget even the good things God has done for us, God commands that we decide each day to follow Him; that we gather to worship Him once each week on Sunday, the Lord’s Day.

Though we may forget, and do so regularly, God does not forget us. Because of grace, He chooses not to remember our sin, removing them as far from us as the east is from the west. But He always remembers His children. **Isaiah 49:15** reads, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you.”