

Sliding towards Unbelief

- Mark 8:10-21
- I have told you before about what would have been the biggest mistake of my life. I got engaged as a senior in college to a woman I barely knew and who was not a Christian, at least not any more serious about Christ than I was at the time. That was in October, I believe. That December I was home and went to the college and career Sunday School class. The teacher that morning challenged all of us that we needed to know three things in our lives and we must not get these out of order. He said, "Do you know who your master is? Are you serving Him?" And, "Do you know what your mission is? Are you pursuing it in Him?" He said too many young people choose a mate before they truly know who their master is, and before they know what their mission is. It was one of those two-by-four to the head moments for me. The Lord used those questions to totally change the direction of at least one young person in that room, and I will be eternally grateful that he did!
- Let's look at this text today under three main points: signs, leaven, and 7 questions.
- **Signs (vs. 11-13)**
- The Pharisees came and began to argue with Jesus. The word literally means, they came to oppose him. They were not engaged in an argument for the purpose of understanding. They were arguing with him to test him. Mark says they were seeking a sign from heaven to test him. Mark uses the word for test four times in his gospel: once by Satan, and three times by the Pharisees. Beware the company you keep! The word for test means "an obstacle to discredit."
- Notice they are seeking a sign from heaven. This is not a miracle, like healing the sick or even raising the dead. Oh no, that was not enough for these Pharisees; they had heard about those things and even witnessed them with their own eyes. What they wanted was that God in heaven confirm to them that this man was truly the Messiah. Apparently, they were not there when God did just that. Remember at John's baptism of Jesus? God spoke from heaven, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." But this is a sign of a skeptic who has no intention to believe, no matter what he sees or hears. He only doubts the truth about Jesus, and never doubts those who are also sons of unbelief.
- Jesus sighs. Remember when Jesus sighed last? When the man who was deaf and mute stood before him. There he sighed with anger over the devastation that sin has brought to mankind. Here he sighs with dismay at the unbelief, the hardness of heart, and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and tells them there will be no sign. Matthew recorded that he also said the only sign would be the sign of Jonah, and that this generation would be judged by the people of Ninevah. Because they repented and believed!
- **Leaven (verses 14-16)**
- The irony of the disciples' concern about just having one loaf of bread is rich. They had just seen Jesus feed 4,000 people with 7 loaves and 2 sardines. Before that, Jesus fed 5,000 men plus women and children, with five loaves and two fish. Oh, how fickle we are. How weak in our faith. How forgetful we are of God's rich and abundant mercy and grace.

- Jesus warns them, and us, with this: “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” (verse 15) It’s a double warning. Three if you add Mark’s words. Caution. Watch out. Beware. If Jesus says something once, it is important. What if he says it twice?
- Matthew calls leaven the teaching of the Pharisees, and Luke calls it the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. In every instance of the word in Scripture, it refers to a tendency of the human heart, sometimes good and sometimes bad. But in this case, it is clearly a warning. The only thing the Pharisees had in common with Herod was their opposition to Jesus. And their unbelief. Jesus is seeing the same thing in his disciples, as they quibble about bread while in the presence of the one who is the bread of life. Their failure to understand could produce in their hearts a hardness that was just as deadly as the unbelief of the Pharisees and Herod! James Edwards writes that this is particularly dangerous for those who were with Jesus every day, as the disciples were. “(That closeness) may lead them to presume they are also with him in purpose and mission. Their proximity with Jesus must grow into understanding and faith, or else, like Judas, it will in the end inoculate them to the meaning of his person and his work.” This is true for all of us who are living in Christian homes and attending a church that promotes the gospel. Being present does not equal belief. And the enemy of our souls knows that and has a plan to lead astray any who do not truly believe.
- The story is told of an African tribe that came up with a plan to capture ducks in a river. Catching their agile and wary dinner would be a feat indeed, so they formulated a plan. The tribesmen learned to go upstream, place a pumpkin in the river, and let it slowly float down into the flock of ducks. At first, the cautious fowl would quack and fly away. After all, it wasn't ordinary for pumpkins to float down the river! But the persistent tribesmen would subsequently float another pumpkin into the re-gathered ducks. Again, they would scatter, only to return after the strange sphere had passed. Again, the hungry hunters would float another pumpkin. This time the ducks would remain, with a cautious eye on the pumpkin, and with each successive passing, the ducks would become more comfortable, until they finally accepted the pumpkins as a normal part of life. When the natives saw that the pumpkins no longer bothered the ducks, they hollowed out pumpkins, put them over their heads, and walked into the river. Meandering into the midst of the tolerant fowl, they pulled them down one at a time. What’s for dinner? Roast duck.
- Casting Crowns has a song that has this chorus: It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white have turned to gray Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid When you give yourself away People never crumble in a day
It's a slow fade, it's a slow fade
- Paul wrote, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” (Gal. 5:9) Jesus said, Watch out. Beware. He helps his disciples with...
- **7 Questions (verses 17-21)**
- Look at these seven questions again. There’s only one that requires an answer, and points to an objective reality, two miracles Jesus performed. Five loaves broken for five thousand, and how many baskets full left? 12. Seven loaves broken for four thousand, and how many baskets full left? 7. Those are the facts. Jesus points them to the facts.

The Bible points us to the facts of who God is, who we are, who Jesus is, what he did for us, what we are called to do and be in him. Facts. Jesus sees his disciples sliding towards unbelief and he goes on the counteroffensive. These are the facts, men. You were there. You saw it. Jesus is not calling for blind faith. Not then. Not now! Our faith is not blind but is standing upon the solid rock of God's Word.

- All of the other questions point to their lack of understanding, which is rooted in their unbelief, and is producing the hardness in their hearts. You have eyes. Do you not see? You have ears. Do you not hear? Is your heart hardened? Do you not remember? When Jesus reminded them of the miracle of the two meals, and they answered correctly, he asks them one final question: Do you not yet understand?
- James Edwards again: "An ignorant heart cannot harden itself. Only a knowing heart can harden itself, and that is why those closest to Jesus—the disciples and the Pharisees—stand in the gravest danger. The disciples mirror humanity-at-large, which is so stuck in its own world and (concerns) that it is blind and deaf to God. The disciples are anxious about lack of bread, but Jesus is anxious about their lack of faith."
- Derek Thompson wrote last year in *The Atlantic*, "Although belief in God is no panacea for these problems, religion is more than a theism. It is a bundle: a theory of the world, a community, a social identity, a means of finding peace and purpose, and a weekly routine. Those, like me, who have largely rejected this package deal, often find themselves shopping à la carte for meaning, community, and routine to fill a faith-shaped void. Their politics is a religion. Their work is a religion. Their spin class is a church. And not looking at their phone for several consecutive hours is a Sabbath."
- This is one of the reasons we come together as a church and why we must come together as a church! To look each other in the face and ask, "Do you see the Lord working? Is your heart growing softer and more tender towards him? Is your faith growing?" If the answers are no, then we ask, "How can I help? Let's look at the facts again. Let's review the truth of the Gospel again, and what Jesus has said about you. Let me help you learn to doubt your doubts and turn your faith back toward the truth of God's Word."
- Prayer