



Speaker:
Paul Forrest

The Leaven of Sin

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 26 of 26

11/15/2020 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 8:1-21**

Our reading today is from the beginning of Mark’s eighth chapter. We’ll read the first 21 verses.

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Our reading covers three episodes. It’s tempting to treat each of these with separate sermons. And there are cases where it’s more useful to focus on a small section. Today, however, I thought it best to take in a larger section to help us get an overview what’s going on.

These three episodes—the feeding of the crowd, the dispute with the Pharisees and the conversation with the disciples—are very much connected. The use of literal bread by Jesus at the start, and the use of bread as a figure afterwards, are like a pair of brackets, with the Pharisee dispute in the middle.

You might be interested that there are striking parallels between this chapter and the previous two. In Chapter 6, we have a crowd of people followed by a lake crossing, as in chapter 8. In Chapter 7, we have a dispute with the Pharisees followed by a discussion about bread, and we see those two elements in our reading today also. And finally, Chapter 7 goes on to include a healing followed by a confession of faith, and in the next week or two we’ll see those two factors repeated in chapter 8.

Now even though we have this parallel structure, there are of course clear differences:

- Our present chapter is in a different location.
- The types of basket used in the two mass feedings were different.
- The quantities of bread and fish were different.
- And this second crowd were Gentiles. We should take note that they’d spent a lot longer with Jesus than the previous crowd. They’d gone *three days* with little or no food, showing just how attracted they were to the ministry of Jesus.

If you read Bible commentaries at all, you’ll come across this notion that the two feedings of the multitudes were one event. The reason they conclude this is because they can’t believe the disciples would ask the same question again. Remember they asked Jesus how they were going to feed all these people out there in the middle of nowhere, just like they did

last time! Some people find it so difficult to accept the disciples' hearts would be so hardened, they surmise this is the same event but reported slightly differently.

I think it's very clear these are two separate events. For one thing, our reading today ended with Jesus quizzing the disciples about **two** events, drawing out from them details that prove they're distinct.

But the question remains: how could the disciples be so stupid? They'd seen Jesus feed a crowd before. They'd seen him create myriad copies of some loaves and fish, so they should have known quite well how all these people could be fed.

That the disciples were hard-hearted was made clear by Jesus himself in our reading today. But before we start shaking our heads in disappointment, I thought I'd offer some possible explanations for their surprising question.

- Firstly, this incident may have been months after the first one. And since Jesus drew crowds wherever he went, there may well have been occasions when the crowds went home without being fed, not being in as much need.
- Secondly, the disciples may have questioned whether Jesus would feed a crowd of Gentiles. They didn't yet see clearly Jesus was about to cause an explosion of the gospel, the shockwaves of which would reverberate all around the world. As I mentioned last week, this gospel era was a fulfilment of a prophecy in Isaiah.
- Thirdly, we might propose the disciples were showing they didn't take Jesus's miracles for granted. They may have thought it sinfully presumptuous to assume Jesus was going to feed the crowd by use of a miracle.

Also significant about this position in the gospel account is we're roughly at the halfway stage. And we're about to witness a fundamental shift in the direction this gospel takes. Up till now, we've seen Jesus darting about around Galilee, healing and teaching. What we'll see in the weeks before us is Project Jerusalem, the series of events leading to Calvary, all preceded by a clear confession of faith from Peter.

What I want us to meditate on today is about bread and, more particularly, **leaven**. Now you may be aware leaven is a raising agent used in baking. Some translations use the word "yeast". Technically, the leaven in the Bible wasn't yeast, but it's close enough for our purposes.

In your Bible reading, you'll have come across leaven, and you'll have seen it used in different ways. Contained in the Mosaic Law are commands about the use of leaven. Some offerings to God were to be of *unleavened* bread, while in other offerings the bread was to be baked *with* leaven, in the normal way. If you want an example of each, have a look at Exodus chapter 12 and verse 15: "Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel." And another in

Leviticus 7:13 says, “Besides the cakes, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings.”

The reasons why God required both leavened *and* unleavened bread in the sacrifices is a study for another time. But we can take note that, just as bread in its unleavened state is more prominent in the Law, in the New Testament we see leaven used mostly in a negative sense. It’s used figuratively, and it usually denotes sin, although Matthew uses it to symbolise the rise, not of sin, but of God’s kingdom. But Jesus here continues the tradition of its usual use as a metaphor for sin. It’s a small ingredient in the baker’s mix, but its effects are great. And he teaches us that sin is subtle and can start off as something very small and seemingly insignificant yet end in destruction and death.

I’d like us today, then, to consider the warning in our text from Jesus: **beware of the leaven of sin**. Leaven is also used to represent more particular aspects of sin, such as malice and hypocrisy. And we’re going to spend a short time thinking of some aspects of sin we should beware of.

1. BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN OF UNBELIEF

This is of course found throughout mankind. This is our natural state when we come into this world. Now just to be clear, by “unbelief” we don’t mean absence of belief in the existence of God. A lot of people believe that. Two-thirds of the British population believe in some sort of higher power, even if some prefer not to call it “God”. And that’s in a country regarded as one of the most irreligious in the world. Most of the other countries in this world have a higher percentage of people who believe in God than Britain. Yet even here, most believe we’re overseen by an almighty power.

So we’re not talking about a belief in the *existence* of God. **We’re talking about a belief that he is a personal, all-powerful, all knowing God who has accomplished salvation from sin through Jesus Christ**. We’re talking about a belief that this saviour is *our* saviour; about placing our entire trust in him for our deliverance.

Jesus warns about the terrible sin of unbelief. You may remember a while back in Mark’s Gospel we saw Jesus stunned by the level of unbelief among the people—so much so, he did very little in the way of healings in that place. If our country is as unbelieving as the research suggests, it’s in an awful place. All the while the atheists celebrate the decline in Christianity, our nation sits under God’s judgement.

It’s good to pray for your countrymen. The Apostle Paul had a deep love for his countrymen, and we can foster the same kind of love by daily begging God to have mercy on our nation. He’s still at work. Only the other day, a colleague in the prison ministry mentioned one of the prisoners. This lad had got hold of a Bible in order to show Christianity was false. Instead, the word of God persuaded him of his need of a saviour! He repented and trusted in Jesus Christ, and now he’s testifying to other prisoners.

So we have a warning about unbelief. Let's move on to our next point.

2. BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN OF FALSE RELIGION

It's not surprising, given that most people in this world believe in God, they adhere to some religion or other. And of these, most make the **wrong choices**. Most religious people are in spiritual bondage to sin and Satan right now.

In today's story, Jesus encounters false religionists. Remember that almost all false religion is an uncontrolled outgrowth from true religion. The roots of popery are in evangelical Christianity. Even the pick-and-mix religion of Islam stole most of its ideology from Christianity and Judaism.

At the time of Jesus's advent, the religion of the Jews was a corruption of what was once a God given true religion. As we've seen, man-made traditions were introduced that eventually overtook the godly foundations of the Hebrew religion. It became so bad Jesus warned people to *Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees*.

The phrase in our passage talks about the leaven of the Pharisees *and of Herod*. In one sense, the leaven can be thought of as the same in both cases. It was indwelling sin that caused the false ideologies of both the Pharisees and Herod.

One result of the leaven of the Pharisees was the request they made in our passage. They asked Jesus for a sign from heaven. Now it's interesting to note the Pharisees will have either witnessed genuine miracles performed by Jesus or heard of them from reliable eyewitnesses. But that wasn't good enough for them. They didn't want just another miracle. They wanted confirmation from God in heaven himself.

Their request was refused quite pointedly. Mark exaggerates the bluntness of it by abbreviating the conversation. Jesus asks them *why* they want a sign, and tells them he won't give them one. He wasn't going to be distracted by some Signs Circus. Certainly, one of the purposes in his miracles was to confirm his authority as God's prophet. But his miracles of feeding and healing were also expressions of compassion that naturally flowed from him. He was no more likely to perform some impressive stunt here than he was when the devil tempted him to prove who he was by throwing himself off a building. In both cases, the requests were thoroughly sinful.

In recent years, we've seen an explosion of churches who claim to exercise gifts from God in the form of miraculous signs. For some of these people at least, there is a *need* for signs, and this is sinful.

Another change we've seen in western Christendom over the past century or so is in social work. Not so much today, but we need only go back a hundred years or so to see there were people in society who were genuinely in need. And in Victorian England we had our fair share of poor people. There was genuine hunger. I don't mean people begging for money

because the money they get in welfare benefits have been blown on drugs. There *was* no state-run welfare system.

The church stepped up to the mark. They fed the hungry. They provided shelter for homeless people. They provided support for people who had drink problems and the like. The Liverpool City Mission, to which our own church belongs, has always been very active in providing for the material needs of our communities *as well* as its spiritual needs.

But with the state structures in place today, there's far less need for Christians to engage in these activities. But many people out there believe this is the church's main job. And for this reason, many churches feel obliged to engage in social action in order to prove they're genuine.

Primarily, our social work is aimed at the church, the Lord's people. We care especially for them. Secondly, it's other people in society. And if no real need exists, we don't try to pretend there is one so we can engage in activities to prove we're real Christians!

But how will they know were genuine? Some will ask that. What you should remember is

- Your faithfulness in attending worship is a sign to the world
- Your consistency in walking in God's ways is a sign to them
- And your genuine love for them, when they're in *genuine* need, will also have an impression on them. We don't need to invent anything spectacular to show them we mean business.

We looked then at the leaven of unbelief and the leaven of false religion. Now we look at the third point.

3. BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN OF **BAD DOCTRINE**

Let's say a man by the grace of God has left unbelief behind. Let's say, by the guidance of God, he escapes the trap of false religion. Let's say God in his mercy leads him to full and free salvation in Jesus Christ. He yet faces many dangers.

The disciples on the boat have got it wrong again. When Jesus tells them to beware of the leaven of the religious leaders, they assume he's talking about not buying a loaf! And this is why we see Jesus rebuking them. We see in a different account of this episode that they eventually realise he's talking about **false doctrine**.

Christ's rebuke came in the form of seven questions. *Do you not see? Do you not understand? Is your heart so hardened?* And so on. If they were astute enough, they'd perceive Jesus was using a humbling question from God found in Isaiah. If you take a look at chapter 40 and verse 21, you read: "Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood *from* the foundations of the earth?"

It's the same tactic, bombarding the listeners with questions to force them to examine themselves. It may sound harsh to us. **But you must remember: the rebukes of Jesus Christ to his followers are as much acts of love as his praise and encouragement.** He deeply loved his disciples, and he deeply loves you who are his disciples today. And he'll rebuke you and chasten you in order to keep you from falling into to sin.

Keep an eye on your beliefs, he's telling them. Keep your eyes sharp for the emergence of faulty doctrine, whatever the source. If they took their lead from the Pharisees, they too would be asking for a sign. They too would be steeped in unbelief and utter hardness of heart. Jesus had been teaching them a different way. A **spiritual** way. But it's as if they hadn't learnt anything. It reminds us of their forefathers in the wilderness. They'd received food from heaven itself, yet they didn't learn to have faith in God as a result.

We who believe are faced with the same threat of false doctrine today. It may appear in different forms. It may come from different sources. **But it's there.**

- It can be found in books in Christian bookshops
- It can be found in academic papers coming from theological colleges
- And it can be found in our pulpits!

You need to be careful brethren what you read and what you listen to. When you read a Christian book, take what's good from it, but always be on your guard—no matter WHO the author is! And this principle applies to the preaching you hear from this very pulpit. I haven't been vaccinated against getting things wrong. Now I **am** very careful! I consider carefully everything I preach to you. But you should develop an attitude of friendly wariness, and I'll be glad if you do. It's the Berean spirit.

The leaven of unbelief. The leaven of false religion. And the leaven of bad doctrine. As we wage warfare for our Captain, we should mark these three as enemies of God and do all we can to slay them, in others as well as ourselves.

I'd like to give you some exhortations as you wage this warfare. I encourage you firstly to lean more on God. He's given you access to the courts of heaven where you can make requests for help, and he's provided an inspired written word for us to make use of as much as we can. Like this multitude did, you should seek spiritual things before material.

And of course, I have to mention the ministry of the word. It was never God's intention to create believers who would live their lives by only reading the Bible for themselves. He raises men up to expound the scriptures. This is one of the means he's given you as a gift, and Christians should seek out faithful ministry and make full use of it. Pray about your pastor's preparation. Pray about his private devotions. Pray about his family responsibilities. Pray his preaching would be in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Here's a New Testament reference to leaven applicable to today's message. In 1 Corinthians 5:8 we read, "Therefore, let us keep the feast—not with old leaven, neither with the leaven

of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” And in order to encourage sincerity and truth within ourselves, we must look to the means God’s provided.

You know, I had to consider this line of questioning by Jesus which is, in one regard, a little unusual. I wanted to know why Jesus was trying to draw out from them the numbers of baskets of leftovers after these mass caterings. Why do the original accounts even *mention* leftovers? Was the point of the feeding not to demonstrate his compassion? Was it not to show his power? Wasn’t it primarily to picture the grace he shows throughout the ages in saving souls?

Yes. **All of these.** But all these points were made by the feeding itself. So why these details about leftovers? When we went through the Book of Revelation together, there were many examples of numbers being used symbolically. Yet we still need to be careful before attaching symbolism to numbers used in other parts of scripture. If we take our cue from Revelation, we might venture to say the numbers of baskets, 12 and 7, indicate something.

But what I declare confidently is what the leftovers speak of in a more general way. **The abundance of leftovers tells us the grace of God in Christ is likewise abundant.** The grace of God is so vast, it will be seen in the end of days to have been exercised to eternally save a “multitude that no man can number”.

Beware, friends, of the leaven of sin. And when you see the disciples, and people in our own day like them, don’t judge them harshly. Remember the light you have was *given* to you. And even those truths you do hold, you only understand them partially. 1 Corinthians 8:2 tells us, “And if any man thinks that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.”

Jesus calls you to be faithful. He calls you to run the race without the need for signs. He calls you to watch out for the leaven that can so easily give rise to all manner of sin. Any he calls you to be charitable towards those whose understanding is less than ours.

Amen.