

Leaven—Without and Within

Mark 8:13-21

Halifax: 15 December 2019

Introduction

Last week in our sermon series from Mark's gospel, we saw in Mark 8:10-13, that Jesus, after having ministered in Gentile regions, returned to Jewish territory.

- After having enjoyed a very warm reception from the Gentiles who concluded that He had done all things well, He was, as soon as He came on shore in Galilee, immediately accosted by a band of Pharisees.
 - They did not come to receive His mercy and grace or to learn of Him, but to challenge Him—to dispute with Him and to insist on a sign from heaven...
 - suggesting by that that He had only done earthly miracles and needed to do a heavenly sign—the objection being that while Moses called down bread from heaven, Jesus had only multiplied bread on earth.
- Jesus' groaned from deep within His spirit and asked how it could be that "this generation" should be seeking a sign.
 - Here was the very generation that had enjoyed His ministry among them in which all the signs of the Messiah had been done—and yet *they*, of all generations, were looking for a sign.
 - Last week, I talked to you about the danger of skepticism like this that is never satisfied—skepticism that always demands one more proof before it will believe.
- We saw that Jesus, rather than playing their game, told them that no sign would be given to them—
 - He then turned on his heel, as it were, and got back into the boat with His disciples, and sailed to the other side of the lake.
 - These Pharisees and the people in their region did not get to enjoy the blessing of the Messiah's ministry of mercy and preaching among them... they did not get to enjoy these like the Gentiles in the Decapolis had.
 - These Pharisees were left without a Saviour, as are all those who demand yet another sign before they will believe.

As we move on in Mark's narrative today, we have Jesus with His disciples coming to the other side of the lake.

- Mark does not tell us this, but in Matthew's account we learn that this conversation happened after Jesus and His disciples had reached the other shore.
 - Matthew 16:5 begins, "**Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they have forgotten to take bread...**"
 - That detail from Matthew will help us in understanding what transpires here.

Give careful attention now as I read to you from God's holy Word.

- I will begin reading in Mark 8:13 and read to verse 21:

Mark 8:13-21: And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. ¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the

boat. ¹⁵ Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." ¹⁶ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "*It is because we have no bread.*" ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ “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.” ²¹ So He said to them, “How *is it* you do not understand?”

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy word.

I. Consider the warning of Jesus about leaven.

- You can see this warning in verse 15 where it says:
 - **Then He charged them, saying, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”**
- This warning, though given to the disciples in their particular historical setting, should certainly be taken to heart by every follower of Christ.
 - It is written in the Bible, not for them, but for us, and it is our duty to consider how it applies to us.

A. First, we need to understand what leaven is.

1. The substance itself is dough with yeast in it.
 - When the Jews made leavened bread (bread with yeast in it) they would take out a little of the dough after the batch was all leavened and save it for the next batch.
 - When they mixed up the next batch of wheat flour, then they would take that bit of leavened dough and mix it in—and, of course, like magic, the yeast would spread into the entire lump—it would leaven the whole lump.
 - And then, once again, before baking, they would take out a bit of the leavened dough from that lump to be used in the next batch.
 - This was a good way to keep the active culture of yeast alive.
2. Leaven, very naturally, came to symbolise anything that spreads and permeates,
 - something that once it is introduced, leavens the whole lump!
 - In Israel, it especially became a symbol of a sinful influence that spreads.
 - This came about because God, when He delivered Israel from Egypt, commanded them get rid of all the leaven in their houses and eat unleavened bread for one week to symbolise that they had left Egypt behind.
 - He appointed the annual feast of unleavened bread at the time of the Passover to commemorate the fact that they had been delivered out of Egypt to be His people.
 - This reminded them that God had given them a fresh start as a new people who were no longer to serve Pharaoh, but the LORD their God.
 - It also reminded them of their need to purge sin from their lives, that they must leave the influence of Egypt and the world behind.
 - It was a way of calling them to renew their walk with God.
 - Because of this ritual, leaven became a symbol of sin.
 - In the New Testament, it is used twelve times to refer to a pervasive sinful influence, but only once to refer to a positive influence.

3. When Jesus speaks of the leaven of the Pharisees in our text, He is obviously using it of negative influence of the Pharisees on His disciples.
- B. But just what is the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod?
1. In the parallel passage in Matthew 16, we are told that by leaven, Jesus meant the doctrine or teaching of the Pharisees...
 - And in Luke 12:1, we have Jesus speaking about the leaven of the Pharisees in the phrase, “leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”
 - And then there is the leaven of Herod mentioned here as well—and in Matthew it is the leaven of the Sadducees that is added...
 - Likely, the leaven of the Sadducees and the leaven of Herod were interchangeable because the Sadducees were closely aligned with the ruling class.
 2. There are a number of ways that we can describe this leaven...
 - Yes, it was their doctrine and their hypocrisy, but in what respect?
 - Certainly we could speak of the formalism and traditionalism of the Pharisees and of the rationalism and the worldliness of Herod and the Sadducees...
 - But the most serious error of both parties was their failure to grasp who Jesus really was—that He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, who came as promised to save His people from their sins.
 - That was the great error that damned both parties.
 - It is the skepticism that we saw last week that always comes up with a new objection to Jesus as soon as the previous one has been answered.
 - It is a skepticism that passes by the obvious and embraces a trivial objection... it sees a hundred signs, then demands another.
 - All of this comes from a heart of hypocrisy—from a heart that does not really fear God—or want to serve Him...
 - a heart that is more concerned about what people think than what God thinks...
 - more concerned about worldly prosperity than about knowing God...
 - about getting what I want rather than doing what God wants.
 - a heart where the opinions of man are more highly esteemed than the word of God.
 - The bottom line is that God is not important to the hypocrite.
 - God is not savoured and loved and so His way is missed.
 3. This kind of leaven is all around us.
 - It is doctrine that misses the plain, simple teaching about Jesus and becomes entangled in something else... social justice, healing, prosperity, traditions of men, rationalism, worldliness, pietism, prophecy, learning, therapy, psychology, church growth, doctrinal precision, poverty, politics, unity—etc.
 - Many of these things have their place, but when Jesus and His gospel is missed and trivialised on account of these things, the problem is very grave indeed.
- C. You can see how deeply concerned Jesus is about this leaven.
1. He is very intense in His warning.

- a. Notice how it says that He *charged* them in giving this warning.
 - The word *charge* means that He ordered them or commanded them.
 - This is more than a mere suggestion.
 - b. Notice also how He uses a doublet—
 - He might have just said, “Take heed,” which is a call to mental alertness...to watch out...
 - But He also says “beware!” which calls them to avoid the object of concern—in this case, the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.
2. Jesus recognised that the leaven of the Pharisees was a real danger for His disciples.
- He knew that when we are surrounded by errors—when errors are part of the very culture in which we live—they will have an impact on us.
 - As Calvin says:
 - “In the midst of these dangers it was very necessary to warn His disciples to be on their guard; for, since the human mind has a natural inclination towards vanity and errors, when we are surrounded by wicked inventions, spurious doctrines, and other plagues of the same sort, nothing is more easy than to depart from the true and simple purity of the word of God; and if we once become entangled in these things, it will never be possible for the true religion to hold entire sway over us.”
 - My brothers and sisters, consider how difficult it is to remove leaven from bread once it has worked its way in!
 - It takes divine power and grace. It takes an act of God.

TRANS> So you see then that Jesus warns about leaven because He is deeply concerned about it. And here is the problem:

II. We do not share His concern.

A. Jesus’ disciples certainly did not!

1. No doubt, our Lord was heavy with thoughts of the cold reception He had just received at Dalmanutha.
 - Jesus, you will recall, groaned from deeply within His spirit when the Pharisees came looking for a sign.
 - After all that He had done before them, they were still just as blind as if He had not been there at all.
 - It was deeply troubling to our dear Lord to see such men and to see their influence on others...
 - Here He was, full of mercy, and they would have none of it.
 - No doubt, this is what was on His mind as they crossed the Sea of Galilee.
2. But what was on the mind of the disciples?
 - They had forgotten to get bread!
 - That is what they were thinking about when they reached the other side.
 - They realised that they only had one loaf—suitable, perhaps, for one person.
 - While Jesus was thinking about the leaven of the Pharisees, they were thinking about what they were going to have for supper.

- Perhaps one was saying, “Philip, I thought you were going to get the bread—where did you go when you left us at Dalmanutha?”
 - And he responded that it was Andrew who was supposed to get it.
 - You know what these things are like—and what the twelve were like at such times—
 - And indeed it *was* their responsibility to look after these things.
 - They *had* forgotten and this was occupying their minds much more than it should have...
 - Who is going to get our supper? and where will we get it?
 - Perhaps it was starting to get late.
 - But whatever the case, when Jesus charged them and said “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod,”
3. The disciples thought He was talking about bread.
- Verse 16 tells us so: **And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have no bread.”**
 - This is what you call completely missing the point!
 - They missed it because they were not thinking about the things of God but the things of the world.
 - Perhaps they thought that Jesus was telling them not to buy bread from those who had shown themselves to be their enemies?
 - that they should not have dealings with them?
 - I don’t think it is likely that they were worried that they would have nothing to eat—for as I mentioned before, Matthew tells us that they had already arrived on the other side when this discussion ensued.
 - I will have more to say about that in moment—but the point is that they were completely out of step with our Lord and what was really important to Him after what had happened at Dalmanutha.

B. And what about you?

1. Are you not aware of the vain thoughts that dominate you?
 - I personally find this to be extremely convicting.
 - It is so easy to spend more energy on whether I should replace my van than on what I read in God’s word—or on fixing the washing machine than on the danger of souls that I have neglected to pray for.
 - Not that there is no place for replacing a van or preparing supper—we are to do these things for the glory of God...
 - But the problem is that such things can claim such a place in our thoughts and affections that when we sit down to read the word or kneel down to pray, we can’t even think about what we are reading or what we are saying...
 - When we walk about, we hardly think of the LORD...
 - Only about our temporal concerns of this world.
2. We can be oblivious to the dangers that lurk in our own souls.
 - This leaven of the Pharisees, this leaven of Herod—

- It is not just with the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
- It is in our own hearts and souls and we don't even realise it.
 - We are missing the precious things that God has for us because our focus is elsewhere.
 - We savour the things of this world and we do not savour the things of God.
- Our concern is like that of the Gentiles...
 - Did Jesus not say, Matthew 6:25: **“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? ²⁸ So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹ and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”**
- Certainly, we have seen Jesus' concern about food in the feeding of the 5000 and especially in the feeding of the 4000 where He brought it up...
 - but how tragic when concern for food and clothes dominate us so much that we cannot see our Lord.
 - Is that not the leaven that Jesus is warning about?
 - that ruinous leaven that spreads in us until we are completely leavened and cannot see our Lord?

TRANS> This leaven is the cancer of the soul and we don't even pick up on the danger.

III. Jesus comes down very hard on us about this.

A. Look at how hard He is on His disciples.

- He pelts them with a fusillade of questions.
- 1. The first question is in verse 17: **But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “Why do you reason because you have no bread?”**
 - After all the time that they had been with Jesus, how could they think that He was talking about bread?
 - After the grievous response they had just seen and the grief that it had caused the LORD, how could they ever think He was referring to the fact that they had forgotten to bring bread?
- The next question is also in verse 17:
- 2. **“Do you not yet perceive nor understand?”**

- They were blind to the dangerous influence that these Pharisees and Herodians were having on them and on the people.
 - They did not yet see who Jesus really was themselves and why it mattered.
 - They did not realise how harmful their traditions and their pride and their worldliness and their hypocrisy was to the people and to them as disciples.
 - That is the great problem with leaven—it gets in you and it does its work and you don’t realise it.
 - The disciples were imbibing the unbelief of their day.
 - You have to be careful about your associations.
 - Be careful about your friendships.
 - Be careful about the influence of the media and the books that you read, about the culture you live in and even the courses that you take.
 - Unbelief about Jesus is potent and it is contagious.
 - When they first met Him, they had thought Him to be the Messiah, but now they too were wondering why He wasn’t doing what they had always thought the Messiah was supposed to do.
 - They were wondering who He really was and why He didn’t go and take His throne at Jerusalem.
 - Instead, He seemed to be dodging trouble.
 - They may have secretly thought it would have been good if He did a sign from heaven, too.
- Jesus’ third question is even a harder punch. At the end of verse 17, He says:
3. **“Is your heart still hardened?”**
- Think about that question!
 - He didn’t just say, “Is your heart hardened,” but “Is it *still* hardened?!”
 - That’s not an easy thing to hear.
 - Failure to understand is an intellectual problem, but a hard heart is a problem of rebellion.
 - A hard heart is the problem of those who have had much light and still don’t see or understand.
 - They know stuff, but they have not received the truth in such a way that it transforms them.
 - Theirs is not just an ignorant unbelief, but a wicked unbelief!
- In verse 18, Jesus hits them with questions that relate to Israel in Isaiah 6...
4. **“Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?”**
- With these questions, Jesus is putting His disciples in the category of the rebellious unbelieving Israelites that God told Isaiah to preach to...
 - A people who, although they have ears would not hear and although they have eyes will not see... people who were unbelievers!
 - Jesus had used this description earlier in Mark with reference to the multitudes who would only hear parables, but not get the meaning...
 - They were those who had ears to hear but did not hear, and eyes to see but did not see.
 - Jesus had even set His disciples in contrast to them...

- Telling them that to you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God—they would have the parables explained to them by Jesus.
 - He had set His disciples in contrast, but now He puts them in the same category with the unbelieving multitude!
 - The leaven of unbelief was working in them. Even though they had all these privileges, they were not benefitting from them.
- His sixth question is also in verse 18 and breaks into two parts in verses 19-20:
5. **“And do you not remember?”**
- They had been with Him and seen Him in action... so here He forces them to acknowledge that they have seen what He has done...
 - Verse 19: **“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.”**
 - Verse 20: **“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.”**
 - It must have been painful to have Him ask these questions—of course they remembered—of course!
 - He was showing them that although they were there and saw it all, it was as if they had not been there because they had missed the point.
 - This is like asking a person who has read much in Bible...
 - Did you read about Jesus’ birth? Where was He born?
 - Did you read about His death? How did He die? For what reason?
 - Did you read about His resurrection? How many days was He in the grave?
 - Of course a Bible reader can answer these questions.
 - But the question is, what good has it done you to know about His birth and death and resurrection if you do not believe?
 - If you have not trusted in Him for your salvation, what is the use?
 - Did you forget these things?
- The seventh question (in verse 21) drives home the point:
6. **So He said to them, “How is it you do not understand?”**
- What’s wrong with you that you are thinking about bread when the Messiah tells you to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees?
 - When He is warning you about spiritual cancer that is highly contagious and has destroyed the souls of the Pharisees and the Herodians...
 - And about this cancer that has potential to destroy the souls of many others and this cancer that is getting a foothold in you.
 - How is it that He can warn you about this and you think He is talking about bread?
 - How is that that He can be with you all this time, teaching you and doing signs and wonders among you and you are still unsure about who He is?
 - He doesn’t say, “I don’t want you to feel bad.”
 - They ought to feel bad.
 - They did not get it because they had hard, rebellious hearts.

B. Let these questions search you out!

1. Are there plain things in God's word that you ought to have seen by now, but haven't because of your hard heart?
 - After all that you have seen in the scripture, do you still doubt the goodness of mercy of the LORD?
 - Do you still grumble and complain about your trials when you see everywhere in the Bible that such trials are necessary to shape you for God's kingdom?
2. And about your sin...
 - Are you so distracted, like the Pharisees with their rituals and with the form of religion, or the Herodians with their worldliness...that you do not see your sin?
 - Are you so distracted and hard hearted that you are not full of gratitude for Jesus and His death on the cross?
3. Have you read His commandments?
 - Didn't you read about gossip? cursing? murmuring? sinful lust? anger? bitterness? tempting God? greed? lying? seeking the praise of men instead of pleasing God?
 - How is it that you have not repented of these things?
 - Do you think it doesn't matter? Did you forget?
4. Haven't you heard that Jesus came to save us from our sins?
 - That there is forgiveness with Him?
 - Do you not know about the cross and the power of the resurrection?
 - Do you not know about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and His transforming power in those that believe?

TRANS> These questions are NOT supposed to make you comfortable.

- They are meant to smack you in the side of the head and wake you up.

C. We should be so thankful to our LORD for smacking us like this.

1. If He didn't, we would never have come to Him, nor would we have continued with Him after we came.
 - Leaven is very powerful and it is very contagious and it would take us over completely if Jesus did not intervene.
 - It was only by exposing the unbelief that was in His apostles that Jesus prepared them to make the confession that Peter will make in Mark 8:29.
 - If Mark 8:13-21 had never happened, neither would Mark 8:29 have happened.
 - If Jesus had not graciously challenged their hardness and unbelief, they might have gone on in it forever—like so many of the Pharisees and the Herodians did.
- But how does He come to us today? We are not with Him in the boat.
2. He comes to us by His word and His Spirit.
 - a. We read it, we hear it preached, a friend comes to speak it to us—
 - and then He sends His Spirit to cut us, to expose us, and to show us how hard our hearts are.

- b. It is so important for us to be faithful in His word... so that He can do this work—His disciples had the benefit of being with Him, and we have the benefit of continuing in the word that He has appointed to use in His people today.
 - We are fools if we do not avail ourselves of this.
- 3. But be sure that you know why He exposes us... it is to give Himself to us.
 - It is so that we will turn to Him as He is offered to us.
 - That is the dynamic of the Christian life—
 - exposure, repentance, more of Christ; exposure, repentance, more of Christ; exposure, repentance, more of Christ.
 - In His word and by His Spirit, He reveals Himself as a gracious Saviour who went to the cross for us, that we might be forgiven and cleansed from our sin.
 - Leaven is impossible to get out once it gets in, but with Jesus nothing is impossible.
 - He came to save us and that is what He does.