

## *Do You Not Understand?*

Mark 8:1-21

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We turn now to the Gospel of Mark. And we'll be looking together at 8:1-21. This is just after Jesus had did a miraculous healing. The one who was deaf and unable to speak clearly, he restores his hearing and his speech. After this particular set of verses, we will also hear of the Lord's healing of one who is blind. As we say, as we study the Scriptures, as well as we understand all literature—context matters. The fact that these events happen sandwiched between one who is deaf and one who is blind ought to be a tip-off to us of the genius of Mark. Because this set of events demonstrates both those who should be hearing but aren't, and those who should be seeing but refuse to. And all this—all of the outline, as well as the title, is all based on the questions that Jesus asks in the midst of these events.

It's very easy to look at something, to receive something as a gift, and yet not fully understand. That happened to me several weeks ago. My birthday, I turned forty-seven. And as is the practice of our wonderful administrative staff, particularly Mary Erickson who's gifted and created, she custom-makes birthday cards for everyone on staff for their birthday, and everyone signs it. And so on the outside, it's designed on paper and it has the number 47 with a question mark. You open it up, and it says, "Randy is in his prime." See? That's why I'm so different than so many of you. Because I got that card, and the messages were great, it was awesome, it was good. You know, happy birthday.

So last week, Mary walks into my office, picks up the card which I had prominently placed on my bookshelf and goes, "So, did you get it? Did you understand?" And I was like, "Yeah, it was a cool birthday card. Thanks." And she said, "Well, 47, you're in your prime. It's a prime number." And I'm like, "Oh, no—I had no idea!" And I'm like, "That's why I was an English major, and my wife does all the money." Anyway, I digress. But you can receive something as a gift. It can stare you right in the face with a question mark. It can even describe it in quotes, "prime." But you can miss things, yes. You can be hearing, and you can be seeing, but you can completely misunderstand. That is exactly what happens in this passage.

Hear now the Gospel of Mark 8:1-21.

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why

does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, “Seven.” And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?” [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Lord, your Word is a gift given to us, spoken to us. By your Holy Spirit, help us to receive this gift, to hear and to see, and to understand that you are the Lord and that you are with us. And that fact changes everything in how we live our daily lives. Help us to believe and forgive us of our unbelief. Now help us, we pray, by your Holy Spirit. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

So you’ll see I’ve outlined this passage with questions that Jesus asks those who are with him. Each one is a demonstration again and again of what is the most important question: do you not understand? But to get to the base of this, we need to walk through these three different, very close-together events, from the four thousand to the question of the Pharisees ultimately to the disciplines arguing on the boat. Let’s look together, then. *How many loaves do you have? Why does this generation seek a sign? And are your hearts hardened?*

*So how many loaves do you have?* It is a rhetorical question, Jesus knows. But he also asks this question to answer their question. Because it is not until later in this series of events that Jesus reminds them of what took place at the feeding of the five thousand. Nor can we gain any sort of insight—and I don’t believe it is the case—that during the early part of the events as these four thousand, or likely very more than that, were following Jesus for several days, that the disciples had suddenly forgotten what had happened with the feeding of the five thousand.

But what is clear is the disciples are demonstrating something that is very much a part of our lives. It is very much crowded in by our most direct and immediate circumstances. We would like to say that when we are faced with similar circumstances through the different parts of our lives that we will draw on mistakes or draw on lessons learned from previous events and apply them to our immediate circumstances. They’re demonstrating something that happens to us, and it is very human. Their circumstances and what’s immediately facing them cries out to them, so much so that it distracts them from what has already happened, lessons learned, things experienced. And it is a remarkable parallel to the very wording Jesus uses with his disciples at the feeding of the five thousand.

But his question of, “How many loaves do you have?” is after a question that they ask. Of course, like with the feeding of the five thousand, we see that Jesus has compassion. He has insight. He has care for these people. He also has great care for the fact that they come from a place. He knows that the food will not be enough, wherever they go. They have now been following him. They have a great need. He cares for them. All of that is demonstrated. But in this particular event—and it’s so tightly woven by Mark with many fewer words—really what is on display here is what’s happening at the interplay between him

and the disciples. And they say to him, “How can one feed these people here in this desolate place?” And then comes Jesus’ question, “Well, how many loafs do you have?”

Now, what’s happening in those two questions? We’re beginning to see what’s going on in the hearts of his disciples. Because their question to him in verse four is this, “What are you going to do?” They simply, immediately shift not what they’re going to do but, “How can one feed these people?” They asked him. And they are, in essence, in their own hearts forgetting what happened—not because they literally forgot it. It’s that they’re not remembering who it is they’re actually dealing with, who it is that is in their presence. And they look at him and they say, “What are you going to do?” And Jesus doesn’t look back at them and say, “Well, what are you going to do?” No, Jesus’s question is a statement of mission. “I know what I’m going to do.” And he says, “How many loafs do you have?”

Now, to begin opening up those two questions, the interplay of relationship, I want open up a little bit of where we’re going to end up. What is happening in the circumstances of the disciples is out of their control. But their circumstances are blinding them. And what they want is ultimately, they want Jesus to do something and at least deal with their circumstances. They believe that’s the most important thing. Because circumstances of our lives do just that. And all of you, all of us, come into this room with various circumstances—some good, some extremely and excruciatingly challenging. And what we desire is to be able to say, “Lord, what are you going to do about our circumstances?”

But Jesus’s statement by way of question, “How many loafs do you have?” he already planned out—he knew how he was going to respond. But his disciples had forgotten, and they didn’t know how he was going to do it. Does that not happen? If you are a Christian, does that not happen to you in your life? It happens in mine. Where the most important question we have on our minds is, “Lord, what are you going to do? What can you do?” When actually the most important thing, even before we ask the question—because there’s nothing wrong with the question—but to make the question even more powerful is the thing that precedes the question. It’s not, “What is the Lord going to do?” It is, “Who is the Lord?” Is it what he does that demonstrates his faithfulness, or is it who he is? Let me repeat that. Is it what he does that makes him faithful, or is it who he is?

You see, that question begins to go as a thread all the way through this text. But it begins by this set of questions. “Jesus, how can one feed this many people?” Jesus says, “I know what I’m going to do, because I know what I’ve been called to do. I know the one who empowers me. I know who I am. And I know what I’m bringing.” It is a right question in our lives to ask an analogous question to this: “Lord, what are you going to do?” But the point of the passage is that Jesus wants them to see and to hear, it’s not first and foremost what he’s going to do; it is who he is—the Lord of glory.

The second question comes as this thread. Is it what he does that makes him faithful, or is it who he is? This thread now goes not only through the disciples—it now goes to these who pursued Jesus, beginning in verse 11. After these throngs of people have been fed and sent on their way, Jesus demonstrating who he is, not just what he does, we now have the Pharisees who have come and again argue with him. They’ve heard of his actions. They continue, as Mark as demonstrated over and over again, they seek him. And it says “seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.” And verse 12, here’s this phrase again that appeared just in the previous circumstance: “He sighed deeply in his spirit.” That sighing deeply is he recognizes that the hard-heartedness of those who he’s come to save, those he’s come to pronounce the kingdom of God is at hand, are not hearing and they are not seeing. He is burdened, not necessarily by their unbelief—he is burdened because he recognizes what he’s going to need to do.

And so he sighs deeply in his spirit and he says, “Why does this generation seek a sign?” Why is Jesus sighing deeply? Yes, it is because he recognizes what he’s going to do. It is also because of the reality that signs would not be enough. Jesus knows this. Do we know this? Because staring us in the face is a group of people who have been traveling with Jesus. They’ve seen his miraculous healings. They’ve seen

demonstrated the power of the kingdom of God to have compassion on the five thousand and now the four thousand to see them fed. But the signs in and of themselves do not bring us to belief.

You see, the generation seeks a sign just as our generation seeks proof. You see, this isn't just the fact that these are ancient, uneducated people. They want something that is profoundly the thing we want to race after. If I can first and foremost have enough signs, then I can build my reason and base it on a historical sign—then that will be enough. You see, this idea of having our reason as the basis of faith—there's nothing wrong with reason, but if we begin there and say, "If I can have my mind, my logic, satisfied with signs, that will be a significant enough reason for me to believe." But the reality is signs are often smoke screens to avoid Jesus. It's an appeal to reason, most certainly, but it is an avoidance of the heart. Let me explain.

It is never faith in your faith. We do not have faith because of a particular fact, and therefore we base our faith on it. You see, signs and the desire for signs can become a code that becomes the foundation upon which, "See, I'm right?" And we believe that our righteousness, our truths, are based on something which is objective, and we can point to it. There's nothing wrong with objective facts and historical events. But those historical events do not themselves answer the most difficult questions. As one writer says, for example, thinking about Jesus' resurrection—this writer says, "The historical arguments for Jesus' bodily resurrection are truly strong." The historical evidence. "We must never suppose that they will do more than bring people to the questions faced by Thomas, Paul, and Peter. The greater question is not whether there will be a sign or there is a sign, or historical arguments. The question is: how do we answer the following questions? If those are true, how do we answer the questions of faith, hope, and love?"

I can have my reason satisfied, but my heart can be a long way away. To say that Jesus is historical is a completely different reality than saying he is historical and real, therefore I want him to be the Lord of my life. It isn't that Jesus hadn't demonstrated enough signs. It's because, inherently, we know that if I claim for myself that Jesus is true in all that he is, then the next step has to happen. Then I have to acknowledge, then, he is my Lord. To do that is to then open my circumstances, open my life, to someone who is in authority other than myself. The most difficult questions Christianity will ever ask is not whether Jesus is historical, his death and resurrection, his teaching, the Bible's voracity. Those are right and appropriate questions. But the most central ones are, "Okay, but now what? Do you love me, Peter? Where is your hope? Are you willing to call me Lord?" These are the things that come up out of, "Why does this generation seek a sign?" Jesus understands the issue's not the sign. You're seeing, but never perceiving. You're hearing but never understanding. Which is why Jesus then says, "There will not be a sign for this generation." And he left them, got into the boat, again, and went to the other side.

But please do not leave this room thinking that I don't believe that it is important to have historical, verifiable facts about who Jesus is and what the Bible claims. But I have sat on a plane with a person next to me who at that point had read the Bible more than I had, who even saw it as truthful and what it said, but absolutely refused to bow the knee and to believe and to love Jesus. I have seen people with their well-ordered theologies even lead in debate, fall away from the faith. Because while their theological categories were well-constructed, in their hearts they had not loved him and acknowledged him as Lord. And when the moment came between what the Lord said and what they wanted did not agree, they demonstrated that a well-ordered theology did not equate to actual belief. The question is, how do we answer faith, hope, and love in Jesus?

So his disciples with him, they got into the boat. And by the way, if you want to look for voracity of what the Scriptures say, if you were going to make this stuff up, you would never include any of this. Particularly what gets ready to happen. So they get in the boat. They've just seen Jesus feed the four thousand with seven loafs, and now they're in the boat. And now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. They're arguing, "How are we going to have enough to eat?" If you were going to make this up, why would you get the people close to Jesus seem so clueless? It's

because you can have a birthday card that points to a prime number and not get it. You can have Jesus in the boat and one loaf, and be afraid that you're not going to have enough. It's because we're profoundly human. And in our lives, we're so profoundly self-centered. We can only see what we see, and we try to add it all up, and we forget who's behind it. And so Jesus, in hearing their argument, says in verse 15, "Watch out. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

What does that mean? It's because leaven yeast will go through the entire loaf. And it was used as an analogy for evil—that you allow leaven in, and it will corrupt all that it touches, including those who eat it. And if we understand how leaven works, many of us now understand how gluten works. It's everywhere. And those of you who have a severe allergy to gluten recognize that you have to be extremely careful, aware of the ingredients. Because if not, you can end up with a very serious hospitalization. It's analogous to what Jesus is saying.

And so he says—he hears them arguing, and he says, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?" And then these questions, "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?" What is Jesus saying? The leaven of the Pharisees is unbelief. They've hardened their hearts. Signs or no signs, they are rejecting Jesus. So Jesus is warning them that what he's seeing in them is this process of hardening. What is that process? Paul Tripp, in one of his many books, lays it out in very succinct ways. In many ways, it has a very verifiable process of hardening. "First, it begins with me giving way to sin in my life. I let things into my life that are outside the boundaries of what God has called me to be."

Step two: "As unbelieving creatures, we do like to cover our sin and to defend our righteousness. Rather than simple faith and rest in the accurate diagnosis of God's Word and the sufficient grace of Christ, we work to tell ourselves that we aren't really or particularly, in this situation, in trouble." In this situation, we're not sinners in need of mercy. This is okay. The first step is allowing things into our lives that are contrary to who God is, who Christ is. The second step is, once we've allowed it in, we minimize it, diminish it. The third is the hardening.

He says:

Finally, we end up with a hardened heart. What once bothered us doesn't bother us anymore. What once activated our conscience doesn't seem to anymore. What we knew to be outside of God's boundaries and therefore was functionally outside of ours we've now allowed inside the boundaries of our lives, and it doesn't matter to us anymore. It is a scary place to be. The hardened heart is a stony heart. It's not malleable anymore. It's hard and resistant to change, no longer tender and responsive to the squeezing hands of the Spirit. There is evil in our hearts and in the acts of our hands, and we're okay with it.

Could there be any more dangerous place for a believer to be? This is because Jesus sees this happening in the hearts of those who are closest to him. And because of his love, he warns them, "Be careful of the leaven of the Pharisees. You are allowing unbelief to creep in. You are allowing self-sufficiency, you're allowing pride, you're allowing your reason to lead the way. But you're sustaining it on yourselves and not based on who is before you—who I am. And in so doing, you're allowing unbelief—you're allowing the process of hardening to happen." And so he says, "Do you not yet perceive? Do you not yet understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes, you do not see. Having ears, you do not hear. Do you not remember?" And then he recounts for them the events of the feedings that he had just accomplished. And he ends in verse 21, "Do you not understand?"

So when Jesus asks them, "Are your hearts hardened?" he's warning them about the process of hardening. But ultimately, it's to get to this point. They've wanted Jesus to show up in their circumstances. He does. And yet they still do not see. The Pharisees want a sign, yet he knows it will not

be enough. It's not about signs. It's not about demonstrations of power. Their hearts have become hardened, first and foremost, to who is in their presence. What Jesus wants them to understand is not what he does; it's who he is. And he is present. So preoccupied by their circumstances, they're blinded to the fact that the Lord of glory is in their presence, and that is more valuable than any and all of the signs that Jesus has ever performed put into one. He is here.

Do you and I not know that our circumstances so often times can lead us to plead, "Lord, where are you? Are you not here?" And we begin to look at our circumstances, and we by our own understanding say, "Well, if the Lord was present, this would be the case and not this." And we begin to measure God's faithfulness and God's presence by how our circumstances are flowing or ebbing. Again, Paul Tripp says this:

There is an age-old misconception that you can measure the size and nearness of God by assessing your circumstances. Your idea of God will never be either accurate or stable if you've arrived at it by trying to figure out what he is doing in the situations of our lives. This is the mistake that Moses made at the burning bush, as well as the Israelites as they faced the nations on the other side of the Jordan River, and the army of Israel as they faced Goliath and the Philistines, and Gideon as he called to defeat the Mideonites.

—and the disciples as they hid in fear after Jesus's death, and as they argue in the boat with Jesus there—will we have enough? Between the "already" and the "not yet," it will seem that the bad guys and difficult circumstances are winning the day, and that God must lack the power or will to do anything about it. Please understand, both I and many around you, if you are in the basement of challenge and difficulty and you're asking the question, "Where is God?" many of us know what it's like to be there. But the caution to all of us, whether our circumstances are dire or our circumstances are worth celebrating, we ought not to draw a straight line and say, "Well, this must be the picture of God's faithfulness." Or in the dire situation, "This must be the picture that God is far off."

Because it is not about what our circumstances always scream out at us—whether we have enough bread—it's that he is the Lord, and he is present. And we declare where two or more are gathered, there he is also. Jesus is here. Your circumstances may be screaming at me in your mind, "No he's not, no he's not." And I will say to you, I have been in the depths of tears and anguish, and I have wondered the same thing. But someone else from a pulpit or from a word of encouragement said to me, "Oh, but he is." And I say to you in the name of Christ, by his Spirit, the Lord is present. And he loves you. And he cares for you. And he wants us to see, the Lord is here. And I'm looking out at different faces—and I won't call you out—I've heard your testimonies of when you were in those depths and when you stood before this congregation and said, "I could not see it then, yet I say now, surely the Lord was in that place."

But I will close with the testimony of God's Word, Isaiah 40:27:

Why do you say, O Jacob,

and speak, O Israel,

"My way is hidden from the Lord,

and my right is disregarded by my God"?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increases strength.  
Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;  
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
they shall walk and not faint.

[Isaiah 40:27-31, ESV]

Where is the Lord, the everlasting Lord, the Alpha and Omega, who loves us, who sent his Son to die for us? He says to us again, "I am with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Do you understand?" Let's pray.

Help us, O Lord. Whether we find ourselves in anguish and dire circumstances or we find ourselves praising, we ask that you would help our hearts to grow in faith, hope, and love—not because of what we see of you in the reflection of our circumstances, but because of who you've declared yourself to be. You are the everlasting God. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand that you are the Lord. Heal us; forgive us; strengthen us, that we might rise up on the wings of eagles and not grow faint, because you are with us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.