

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: STEP AFTER STEP TO PERCEPTION

MARK 8.1-21

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Last time that we saw Jesus he healed the deaf-mute in the gentile region of Decapolis. It is likely that Jesus is still there in the gentile Decapolis as we pick up with our next story, in which Jesus again multiplies loaves and fish to feed the crowds, this time numbering 4,000. This means that, combined with the previous two stories, we now have a third instance of Jesus ministering to and providing for gentiles. Just as Jesus provided a Jewish miracle of loaves, Jesus apparently now provides a gentile miracle of loaves. This fits well with the concept of Jesus declaring all foods clean with the result that all sorts of people become clean, that is, open for evangelism without any concern that the evangelist might contract their ceremonial impurity. Consider the following quotes:

"...the present pericope has been understood by most commentators as recording an incident in the primarily non-Jewish territory of the eastern shore, and thus as continuing the theme of Jesus' ministry among Gentiles."

"Given a gentile location, however, the second feeding miracle fits well into Mark's **plan, as the third of a set of miracles...which extend the mission of the Messiah of Israel for the benefit also of neighboring peoples.** The narrative thus fills out Jesus' discussion with the Syrophenician woman about allowing the dogs a share in the children's bread, and in this incident the bread is quite literally shared."

And with that continuing theme of purity and gentile-evangelization comes another theme which has been dealt with before, namely, perception of Jesus' identity, or the lack thereof. In fact, this theme runs through all of chapter 8. In 1-10 Jesus performs another feeding miracle in order to further reveal his identity. In 10-13 Jesus argues with the Pharisees who demand a sign in order to validate and

reveal his identity. In 22-26 Jesus heals a blind man by gradual steps as a picture of his gradual opening of his disciple's spiritual eyes to his identity. In 27-30 Jesus raises the question of his identity and Peter rightly perceives and speaks about his identity. And in 31-38 Jesus rebukes Peter concerning the issue of his identity and its implications for his future ministry and the experience of his followers.

Today we'll examine three parts of this continuing narrative, from 1-21.

TEXT

We begin in v1 with Mark relating that, once again, Jesus finds himself in a deserted place with a hungry crowd, and that he is now afraid they won't be able to reach their homes before they faint with hunger. We are immediately struck by the strange question of the disciples about where Jesus will get enough bread to feed what turns out to be 4,000 people.

Now how can the disciples ask this question? It wasn't long ago they witnessed Jesus multiplying enough food for 5,000 people. Don't they know Jesus is able to handle this situation? Of course we should allow for the fact that perhaps they don't expect Jesus to work a miracle every time something difficult arises; maybe multiplying food is not something people should casually ask for. But I think there is a better reason for this question, given the context.

In this chapter we are headed for Jesus' rebuke of his disciples specifically for their lack of understanding about the provision of bread, what it means, and how they should respond to it. Therefore, given that rebuke, this question from the disciples is exactly appropriate to the story. It reveals their spiritual hardness and heart with failure to understand, and even their unbelief. If correct, this means we should not see the disciples' question as an entirely innocent one. They ought by now to perceive more deeply into the person and mission of Jesus than they do.

This is all the more evident when we notice how similarly this event proceeds as compared with the last feeding miracle. Again Jesus asks how many loaves and the

disciples report back. Again Jesus directs the people to be seated and gives thanks for the meal.

V8 tells us everyone was satisfied, like last time, and the disciples recover the left-over's, amounting to 7 large baskets-full. This time Mark tells us there were 4,000, not 5,000.

After sending the crowds away Jesus returns over the lake and encounters the Pharisees, possibly on the northwest shore. The encounter is exceedingly hostile; these Pharisees have not come to discuss but to debate and argue. Nor is their request for a sign innocent, but rather it reveals aggressive unbelief.

We have a hard time understanding how they could demand a sign when Jesus has already performed a truck load of signs. However, the word Mark has typically used thus far for Jesus' miracles, *dunamis*, is not the word used here by the Pharisees, *semeion*. The Pharisees' word speaks more specifically of some event which will validate Jesus just as the prophets of old were validated by signs. Of course their request is still inexcusable since Jesus' miracles have thus far functioned sufficiently as signs of his person and mission. Jesus' response reveals that what they are really testing is his patience.

In v12, Jesus' sigh "indicates his distress...over the unresponsiveness of this generation revealed in the demand for a semeion (sign) when so many miracles have already testified to his unique authority."

The word for sigh is very strong, and can speak of people succumbing to despair; perhaps in this instance it would be similar to our "groan", issuing from weariness and frustration.

And we find it isn't just the Pharisees Jesus is frustrated with:

"Such accusations directed against the present generation as a whole...suggest that...the eager response of the earlier chapters has not been generally sustained,

and the people as a whole share the skepticism of the Pharisees. It is against this background that Jesus will now focus his attention more directly on the limited group of his committed disciples."

Jesus' insistence that no sign will be given is also strong, similar to the imprecation formula often used in the OT which, in this case, might run thus: "May God kill me if I give you a sign!" Jesus escapes the Pharisees by again resorting to boat and moving to another side of the lake.

Once in the boat, and crossing the lake, the disciples discover in v14 they have not brought enough bread for everyone. This material concern causes them to misunderstand Jesus' warning in v15 about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod.

Now whatever Jesus means here, it is obvious this is a warning against the Pharisees and Herod as enemies of both Jesus and the disciples, as both of those named pose an actual physical threat to the disciples' safety. Matthew and Luke have Jesus speaking of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, respectively, so those factors also should be seen in Jesus' warning.

Unfortunately, the disciples are not firing on all cylinders, in terms of spiritual understanding of the situation. They are only concerned with the lack of bread on hand.

Jesus notices they are preoccupied with bread and responds with a long and detailed rebuke, which takes aim both at the unimportance of the disciples' concern and also their neglect of the more important issue at hand. Jesus piles up question after question which indicate, among other things, that they lack spiritual perception and have hard hearts. In v18 Jesus even asks questions which are taken from Isaiah 6, the classic text on God hardening the hearts of wicked Israel. Recall that this language was used earlier by Jesus in chapter 4 to describe outsiders who were not granted the mystery of the kingdom and who suffered from spiritual

dullness. What is so shocking here is that such language is being applied to Jesus' disciples, who of all people should be considered insiders, people in the know.

In v19-20 Jesus even demands that they relate the details of how many baskets of food they picked up from each time Jesus performed a feeding miracle, and they answer correctly; this seems to function as evidence for Jesus' expectation that they should not be worried about bread at this stage of the game, nor for any material provision, so long as Jesus is with them. Now this point is similar to 6.52 where Mark comments that the disciples' hearts were hardened, and gives the cause as their failure to grasp the significance of the first feeding miracle. Combined with our present story we can say Jesus expects his disciples to receive some special insight into Jesus and his mission, and the nature of the kingdom, from the feeding miracles. This insight should at least bring them to the place where they are unconcerned about whether they have enough bread, and far more concerned about the spiritual dangers posed by the Pharisees and Herod.

At this point we also need to notice how this story of the second feeding miracle, with the Pharisees' challenge and Jesus' subsequent rebuke of his disciples for their spiritual dullness is framed between two stories of miraculous healing in terms of literal perception, namely the healing of the deaf man and the healing of the blind man. Attention is even drawn in the succeeding story to the gradual process of bringing the blind man to full clear sight; after this story then comes Peter's success of insight when he rightly identifies Jesus. All of this helps us perceive that the central issue in today's story is the spiritual perception (or lack thereof) of the disciples.

THEOLOGY

1. The basic assumption is that this crowd was gentile. If so, we have an excellent demonstration of Jesus' provision of bread to the little dogs; Jesus' mission is not only for the Jews even if they come first in order. However, it is possible that the crowd is mixed Jew and gentile. If so, far from nullifying the theme in question, we

now have the picture of Jew and gentile sharing table fellowship together, probably an even stronger expression of the removal of the dividing wall than if there were only gentiles. Recall that this very issue will become a stumbling block to the early church as reported in the book of Galatians, when Peter and Barnabas and other Jews began refusing table fellowship with the gentiles in Antioch, thus violating the very principle we are taught by Jesus' actions. Additionally, this issue of the need for unity between Jew and gentile is a repeated theme throughout the NT. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor gentile, which is not to say that actual differences disappear, nor that they should, but that the fundamental divide between men now has nothing to do with race or nationality. The category of greatest significance cuts across race and nationality, being the issue of whether or not a man is justified before God. The justified gentile is a true Jew. The unjustified Jew is a true gentile. Race and nationality are now irrelevant to belonging to the people of God, and this should be expressed in Christian churches which are open in terms of race and nationality, and which only make fundamental distinction along the boundary of justification.

2. Second, in terms of Theology, and by far the more central issue in this text and entire chapter, is the issue of spiritual perception. I have already outlined above how this theme runs through the entire chapter. We have only here to deal with the specific aspects of spiritual perception which we see in verses 1-21. First, we learn that Jesus' second miracle of feeding, like the first, functions primarily as a sign pointing to the identity of Jesus, as well as the nature of his mission and the kingdom of God. Of course Jesus fed this crowd because he had compassion on them; however, it is a fact this crowd ended up hungry again, probably before bed time. In other words, wonderful as this free meal was, it is not satisfying enough to last a lifetime. But the same cannot be said for the Meal which is Jesus himself, which men feed on when, through supernaturally granted insight, they trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, responding to him with repentance and obedience. The soul that eats this Bread isn't hungry again before bed time; it is never hungry

again. All this to support the point that the primary function of this miracle, and every miracle, is to give men spiritual insight leading to salvation.

Second, we see from the dullness of the disciples that spiritual blindness is an exceedingly tenacious problem. If it were not so, how could these 12 men fail to perceive the identity of Christ by now? How many miracles do they need? In this respect, it's hard to understand how many in the crowds could fail to perceive Jesus, let alone the disciples with their spiritual privileges. But the spiritual blindness inherited from Adam is no small matter, and cannot be overcome without an even greater miracle than the feeding of the 4,000. For this reason the disciples act as if they were not even present at the first feeding miracle; then in the boat, after having witnessed Jesus provide enough miracle bread to feed a small city, they preoccupy themselves with their unfortunate lack of bread! The severity and detail of Jesus' rebuke is not hard to understand. We are just like the blind man whom Jesus will heal in the next story. Even after Jesus has acted on us we only succeed in seeing men like trees, walking. It takes direct and constant divine activity, with considerable power, to give us clear sight. Even for those with the most dramatic conversion experiences it is often or always the case that they testify to an ongoing process of enlightening their eyes to the truth of who Jesus is, even after their conversion.

Third, evil men are guilty and malicious in their spiritual blindness; they are not innocent. Witness the Pharisees who demand from Jesus a special sign as if it were his fault that they cannot perceive his identity! In fact, wicked men use their spiritual blindness like a club to bash Christ over the head with; they insist that if they cannot see it is because there is nothing to be seen, that Jesus is not persuasive enough, not in his power or in his word, which is manifest nonsense. It is true that we have inherited this blindness from Adam and so we feel pity for men who remain in such an evil state. But this is where spiritual blindness diverges from physical blindness: the physically blind man cannot see because he does not have the faculties of sight, his eyes being defective; the spiritually blind man cannot see

because he has his eyes tightly shut, and will rather kill or die than open them upon the truth. This man wills to stay in dark blindness; he desires to remain ignorant lest he should know the truth and have to depart from his sin. Likewise he is deaf because his fingers are in his ears and he is screaming loudly so as not to hear. The physically blind man cannot see because he cannot. The spiritually blind man cannot see because he will not.

Fourth, the spiritual insight which Jesus gives (and expects) moves a man's focus from strictly material concerns to spiritual concerns; this is part of the problem of the disciples' behavior in the boat. Their minds were fixed on material issues but what they had witnessed so far should have made them somewhat unconcerned with whether or not they had enough bread. I don't say entirely unconcerned, since it would have been best if someone had remembered to bring enough bread. But, having forgotten, the proper course would have been to say, "Well, Oh well. If it comes to it, Jesus is with us, and he can multiply bread, so no worries." And their attention should have been piqued by Jesus' warning about something that was really dangerous; not hunger, nor lacking bread, but the dangerous teaching, unbelief and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Herod. This is what they should have focused on, perhaps to the neglect of their bread situation. Does anyone reckon Jesus was very concerned about bread at the moment?! No; simply, Jesus is too spiritual for that kind of illegitimate worry. And the will of Jesus is that all his followers, through proper spiritual perception, should also grow past such unspirituality, such worldliness, as to be overly concerned with lesser concerns when greater ones loom on the horizon.

Fifth, let God's people never feel proud or boast over their greater spiritual insight as compared with the lost. Do you notice how Jesus applies the condemnation of Isaiah even to his disciples?! Are we Christians any different from the world when it comes to our native understanding? I mean the understanding we have by nature, before God ever intervenes to enlighten and teach us. Have we clung to Jesus because we are smarter or more perceptive than the world? Maybe we're

made of better stuff than they? If so, how could Jesus use the standard "spiritual blindness" accusation against his disciples? What this accusation does is remind us we are not one whit different from the world in terms of spiritual intelligence or perception. The only difference whatsoever is that God has taken trouble with us which he has not taken with them. Imagine two vicious street urchins on the streets of Houston. Now imagine one of them is adopted by a rich and righteous man who himself undertakes the urchin's education and reformation, despite the years of pain and toil which that will entail. If the reformed urchin, now clean and well-dressed, educated and well-mannered should decades later happen upon his old urchin-friend slobbering drunk in the gutter, should the reformed urchin say, "What's the matter with you, drunk?! Get yourself together and have yourself a bath! Disgusting! I can smell you from here! Quit begging for spare change and get to work!" But the reformed urchin is only reformed because some great benefactor, wholly without cause, took years of trouble to open the reformed urchin's eyes to the misery of his condition, and the way to improvement. So also the Christian. If you see light, it is because Someone took great pains to open your eyes and teach you about light, at great cost to Himself. This does not make us better; it makes us obligated. We are obligated to seek the spiritual instruction of other street urchins, if they will listen.

Sixth, if you want to gain insight into the person and work of God, it would be hard to do better than meditate on all his wonderful works of old. Jesus draws his disciples' attention to the recent history of his mighty works in the two feeding miracles. The OT saints loved to meditate on God's mighty works in creation and exodus, with his continuing might exhibited in the time of the Judges. What men see when they engage in this meditation is the utter glory and power of God, the beautiful and fitting sufficiency he possesses to meet every situation we encounter. Think slowly through the Creation story. Dwell on the events of the Exodus. Consider the might of God displayed in Jesus' miracles, words, and death, and resurrection. Think of his coming exhibition of power in raising the dead,

condemning the wicked, saving the righteous, remaking the world, and bringing in everlasting joy. These are the lovely, reputable, true, excellent things which Paul would have us meditate on.