

## Do You Understand?

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### The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 8:1-21

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#### **Introduction:**

Today we are back in our study of the gospel of Mark, picking up in chapter 8. If you remember, approaching the turning point of this gospel. The gospel of Mark can be split almost evenly into two parts focusing on different aspects of Mark's portrait of Jesus Christ. The first part, chapters 1-8, discloses Jesus as the mighty Messiah, or King to come, as He exercises power and authority over the natural and spiritual realm. The second part, chapters 9-16, discloses Jesus as the mild, suffering servant Isaiah spoke of, as He sets His face towards Jerusalem to suffer and die for His people. Alongside this portrait of Jesus as mighty and mild, we see an emphasis on true discipleship as we compare the crowds lack of understanding, Jewish leaders' rejection, and the surprising faith of unlikely people. What is interesting is how the apostles are often portrayed closer to the crowds, who lack understanding, than to those who exercise great faith. Mark often details the apostle's consistent inability to understand things quickly and Jesus' patience through continual instruction. Chapters 6-8 highlight this as stories in chapter 8 run parallel to what we have seen in Mark 6 and 7. Danny Akin captures these parallels in his commentary, pointing out how the end of Mark 6 and beginning of Mark 8 both record Jesus feeding a large crowd followed by a trip across the sea. The beginning of chapters 7 and 8 both relay a confrontation with the Pharisees, and the middle of each chapter has a conversation about bread. And the end of chapters 7 and 8 detail miraculous healings and significant confessions about Jesus. Commentator James Brooks suggests that "Mark's probable motive for arranging his material in this manner was to show how the dullness of the disciples required that Jesus repeat his teaching and miracles before they could understand" (James A. Brooks, Mark, vol. 23, 124). These series of similar events lead to the turning point in Mark's gospel where Peter will both profess Jesus as the Christ, showing a growth of faith, and immediately after fail to understand the true purpose of Christ's coming, showing a lack of faith. The parallel stories, along with Peter's confession and misunderstanding, point to our need to truly understand both the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the only proper response to Him. And over the next two weeks, we will look at this chapter together with the goal of increasing our understanding and response of faith. Mark 8:1-21 can be broken down into 3 distinct scenes that build to an important question, do you understand? Look at the first scene with me in verse 1-11 where we discover,

#### **The Importance of a Repeated Miracle**

If you were with us when we looked at the feeding of the five thousand, several aspects of this story will sound familiar to you. This has caused some critics to suggest this is not an actual event, but a retelling of the first feeding with theological purpose. However, when we look closely, we will see significant differences that show they are separate miracles. Look at the beginning of the story with me in verses 1-4, "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?'" We see the similarities with the feeding of the five thousand, a crowd has gathered, Jesus has compassion, people have come from a far distance, and his disciples wonder how they can feed people in a desolate place. Yet, notice the important differences. While the location isn't specifically mentioned, Mark contextually places this in the region of the Decapolis, a significantly Gentile region, saying "in those days." He also points to a crowd gathering "again." In the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples initiate the conversation and provision, but here Jesus initiates things. In the first miracle, Jesus' compassion was because the crowd "were like sheep without a shepherd," here His compassion is because they have been with him for 3 days and have no food. We should note how Mark uses a rare word when Jesus says the crowd has "been with" Him that points to a special, and even intimate commitment to Jesus (F. Hauck, "menō," TDNT Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 4.579).

This crowd has an intentional desire to be with Jesus, which was a sign of true discipleship from Mark 3:14. The similarity of the disciples' question around the impossibility to feed this people in such a desolate place reminds us of significance of the wilderness setting in the first miracle. Though possible, this is likely not due to disciples forgetting Jesus' previous miraculous feeding, but not assuming Jesus would do the same thing. The question is almost like asking Jesus, "what are you planning to do?" If you remember, the wilderness motif in the first miracle drew our attention to specific correlations with Israel in the Wilderness in the details of that story like the grouping of people as they sat down, the blessing of Jesus, and the number of baskets taken up. Notice in verses 5-7 how many of those details are absent or different, "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." Jesus asks the disciples how many loaves they have and directs the crowd to sit down, but there is no mention of grouping. He gives thanks for both the loaves and the small fish, but James Edwards points out the use of a more Gentile-Christian term for "giving thanks" in this feeding, instead of the more Jewish term for "blessing" in the first miracle (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 231). Each of these things suggest a different purpose in this miracle. The most significant point of difference between these two miracles is in the dialogue of Jesus. In the first feeding, the dialogue by Jesus was in the third person, where this is in the first person. This places an emphasis on Jesus declaring His compassion on these people. When considering all of these differences, the region Jesus is in, and the previous interaction with the Syrophenician Gentile woman, there is a strong indication this miracle is taking place among a largely Gentile crowd, revealing a specific compassion and plan of Jesus for the Gentiles. This helps Mark's Roman readers and now us look at this story and see our savior's compassion for us. With this in mind, look at the similar results as the first miracle in verse 8-10, "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." Just as Jesus fully satisfied the largely Jewish crowd in the feeding of the five thousand, He fully satisfies the largely Gentile crowd here. As the apostles took up 12 baskets full of left over pieces in the first miracle, here they take up 7 baskets full. While we can't be sure the number seven has intended meaning, it may allude to the Gentile nations from Deuteronomy 7:1 or a full and complete provision. Church, whether that is the case or not, the main point stays the same, Jesus perfectly and fully provides for the needs of those who desire to be with Him. We will see why this repeated miracle is so important in a moment. For now, think on the compassion and care of Jesus and seek to understand what it means for you. Consider the next scene with me in verses 11-13, where we discover,

### **The Danger of Demanding a Sign**

These verses contain another confrontation with the Pharisees, possibly continued from their confrontation back in Mark 7:1-7. The point of them is easily seen without much explanation. Look at verses 11-13 with me, "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." Verse 11 makes it clear the Pharisees were not looking for a sign to help them believe as we see them argue with Jesus and seek a sign to test Him. They come in unbelief with a desire to wanted to discredit His work. When mentioning how they were seeking a "sign from heaven," Mark doesn't use the term for miracle. They weren't looking for another miracle, they had seen plenty of those, they were demanding something specific from God to validate Jesus. Jesus' response is firm and telling. Him sighing deeply in His spirit is a groan of disgust, dismay and disappointment. Jesus asks aloud why this generation demands a sign and says no sign will be given. Then he immediately departs from them. The trip to Dalmanutha was short lived because of the depth of unbelief within this confrontation. This moment reminded me of a summer I spent serving at a youth camp in college.

We had hundreds of campers in this camp but one still stands out in my mind. I remember sitting with this student after the teaching time and sharing the gospel with him. He was open and honest with me about his struggle to believe in God, and then he told me that he would not believe in God unless God showed him a specific sign by healing his mother. I foolishly told that we would keep asking for that sign together, thinking that was the best answer for him at that moment. However, this passage shows us that any demand for a sign out of unbelief is dangerous to make. If you are here and that is the position of your heart, know the danger you are in. Consider all we have been given to reveal the truth to us. We have countless records, outside of the Bible, of a real person named Jesus, living in this era, and accomplishing things like what we see in these pages. This Jesus made specific claims of who He was and how he came to die for the sins of His people. He was crucified on a Roman Cross, and He was raised from the dead vindicating all of His claims. For centuries, while not perfectly, His people have lived with a peace and hope that is unlike anything else, showing the truth of who He is and what He promises to provide. See the danger presented in this scene, don't demand a sign, but rather understand and believe. Lastly, consider the third scene in verses 14-21, where we discover,

### **The Warning of Failing to Understand and Believe**

There are several points that connect this scene with the two previous scenes. The disciples' unbelief is linked to the Pharisees, the reference to bread links to the feeding of the four thousand, which Jesus' questions confirm. These links reveal this scene to be the culmination of what we have been considering together, providing a warning of failing to understand and believe. Notice the interesting exchange between Jesus and his disciples in verses 14-16, "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." The disciples are focused on material needs, but Jesus is concerned spiritual needs. Note their completely misunderstanding of Jesus. Mark relays that they forgot to bring bread on their journey across the sea, only having one loaf for all of them to eat. Jesus begins to give them an important warning, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." They misunderstand Jesus' point and start discussing, or likely arguing, about who forgot the bread. Notice Jesus' response with me in verses 17-20 before we unpack His warning, "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.'" Jesus asks them why their focus is on a lack of bread, followed by a series of 6 questions to penetrate their hearts. The first three reflect on Jesus' teaching on the purpose of parables in Mark 4:10-12, "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" Each question is probing their hearts to see their own unbelief in His person and work. The next three questions point back to the need to remember what happened with both of the feeding miracles, revealing that remembering something from those miracles will help their hard hearts. What we need to see is how these questions are connected with Jesus' warning. Look back to the warning in verse 15, "And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.'" Leaven, or yeast, was a commonly used metaphor in both rabbinic literature and throughout the New Testament. Every baker in the room knows what leaven does, it ferments dough, causing it to rise. In rabbinic literature it was a metaphor for the intentions of our hearts, in a good or bad sense. Almost all uses of leaven in the New Testament are in the negative sense, pointing to corruption and unholiness. Notice that Jesus warns of both the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees. The corruption he is warning about is both from the secular and religious worlds of the apostles. The Pharisees and Herod have very little in common, but when we look at the stories in Mark with the Pharisees and Herod, we see one common denominator, unbelief in Jesus.

Herod believed Jesus to be the reincarnation of John the Baptist, the Pharisees believe Him to be a servant of Satan's kingdom. And this unbelief leads them both to end up in opposition to Jesus. The questions Jesus takes his disciples through, show how the leaven of unbelief is close to capturing their hearts. As James Edwards comments, "The disciples are unaware of their actual condition. They quibble about the meaning of 'bread' without realizing that they are being infected by a deadly cancer. Their failure to comprehend can produce a hardness of heart that is tantamount to the declared opposition of the Pharisees and Herod" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 239). Church, what we see here is Jesus, in his kindness, probing their hearts and calling them to remember the proofs given to them through the two feeding miracles, so they will understand and believe. Now, pay close attention to the way Mark ends this scene in verse 21, "And he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'" This scene close with a question and no response by the disciples. Though they remained with Jesus and followed up to this point, there was still something they needed, they needed understanding. And with this question left opened, it is as though Jesus is asking us "Do you understand?" The faith we have is never a blind faith, but a faith that understands truth about Jesus. Biblical faith is never separated from understanding. It is always anchored to real and firm truths, and the more it anchors to those truths, the stronger it becomes. Truths of who Jesus is, and truths of what He came to do. . Church, there is a sad battle in the church today. Some insist on following Jesus without any need to study His Word to understand who He is. They claim that God is not concerned about our knowledge, but only a relationship. Our passage today shows that is not the right way to live in faith. Others, however, insist on only building knowledge without connecting that knowledge to a desire to be with Jesus and wholly follow Him. Our passage next week will show this is not the way to live in faith. True faith, true discipleship, combines understand and insight with a desire to be in relationship with Jesus, because true understanding fuels our affections for Christ Jesus. The feeding miracles provided the apostles with a sample of those truths as they both reveal Him as the same God who provided for Israel in the wilderness and the one who is able to fully satisfy all of our needs. Their aim was to increase the apostles faith in Christ to provide for all their needs and their desire to follow Him. And everything we read in these pages serves to strengthen the truth of Christ in our hearts to lead us to deeper understanding of Jesus Christ so our desire to be with Him and follow Him would likewise grow.

### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of extended response, let me give you a couple of questions to reflect on in response to what we have seen today. Do you understand? This first means you know who Jesus is and what He has accomplished on the cross. If you don't, seek to know Him today, confessing your sin and seeking reconciliation with God through the forgiveness He provides. This also means your understanding is consistently deepening through the study of His Word. If it isn't, press into our classes and Bible studies to know Christ more fully. Church, one of the primary purposes for us gathering together is to grow in our understanding of Jesus Christ. This is why our vision is to be a people who are passionately pursuing knowing the glory of God in Christ. Strive to understand. The second question is equally important. Is your growth in knowing Christ leading you to desire to be with Him and follow Him more closely? It is never sufficient to have knowledge alone, true understanding should always lead to greater affections for Jesus. This is why our vision is to be a people who are passionately pursuing loving the glory of God in Christ. Never be satisfied with knowledge only, plead with God for more of His presence. Seek to have your knowledge of Christ lead you to greater strength in following all He calls you to do. As always, in this time of response, if the Lord leads, you are welcome to come and kneel before Him as you respond to His grace. If you need prayer for any of these things, or other burdens, we have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you. You will find them worshipping on the front row or at the bottom of the stairs in the back.

Let's pray together as we press into God's grace together.