

Christianity is increasingly unwelcome in our pluralistic public square. It's OK to believe in God but Jesus is an awkward topic. If movies provide a window into the soul of our culture you might think there aren't many Jesus followers. But Mark Joseph, a Hollywood producer, referring to an ABC poll that reported 83 percent of those surveyed self-identified as Christians, asks, "If half of all Americans go to church, why are so few TV and film characters seen in church or allowed to have normal religious practices portrayed as their other activities are?" (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 7/2/15). He went on to list several examples of secular censorship as far back as...

- I Love Lucy - an Irish woman married to a Cuban man, probably Catholic, yet they were never attending mass or talking to a priest.

- Leave It To Beaver, Ozzie and Harriett, Brady Bunch, Andy Griffith – wholesome shows that rarely depicted a religious setting. One curious fact about Mayberry is that everyone was single! The only married man I can recall was Otis and he was drunk half the time!

- In 1993, many of us were excited to see *Shadowlands*, the C.S. Lewis biography starring Anthony Hopkins barely referenced the faith of one of the most articulate Christian spokesmen in a hundred years.

- In the 2006 movie *United 93*, and in the TV movie *Flight 93*, there is no mention of Jesus in spite of the fact that Todd Beamer was overheard by a telephone operator saying: "Help me God, help me Jesus ... let's roll."

- The latest example of secular censorship is *Unbroken*, the incredible true story of World War II torture survivor Louis Zamperini. He returned home a bitter man until he attended a Billy Graham crusade. An encounter with Jesus transformed his life. The central plot point of Laura Hellenbrand's book was reduced to a few lines thrown on the screen as an afterthought. Even some nonreligious film critics were left scratching their heads at "a movie full of suffering but devoid of redemption."

Even movies labeled as "faith-based" are usually made by fans of Jesus and not followers. Jesus fans admire Jesus as a person but they get a little timid when it comes to His miraculous deeds and claims to divinity. I doubt Jesus is bothered by being left out of the movies. He cares little about being in pictures but He cares deeply about you and I keeping Him in the picture. It is a challenge to do that when our vision is blurry. A clear vision of Jesus is essential to an effective ministry. **A follower of Jesus interprets all of life through a growing understanding of who Jesus is.** Have you had your vision checked lately?

This past week I had my driver’s license renewed. I had to go to the DPS office and take a vision test. In our passage this morning Jesus gives His disciples a vision test. Mark records how a group of twelve average people gained their spiritual sight over time. Mark 8:1-10...

Does this miracle sound familiar? In chapter 6 Jesus fed 5,000. Here He feeds 4,000. Surely this must be a mistake. Whoever compiled these stories must have stuttered and recorded the same story twice. There are some interesting differences between the two stories. The first group of 5,000 is mostly Jews. The second group is mostly Gentiles. That may explain why the first group has 12 baskets, a Jewish number, and the second group 7, a number favored by Gentiles. But what is more important about the repeating of this miracle is the response of the Pharisees and Jesus’ own disciples.

Mark 8:11-13. After this second miracle of a miraculous feeding the Pharisees ask for a sign. All they got was a sigh. (v. 12). How many miracles must He perform before these guys stop asking for a sign. **But the Pharisees aren’t the only ones who are blind and deaf and a little bit dumb.** The disciples are in the same boat with the Pharisees – the wrong boat. 14-15. They get in a boat with Jesus and He warns them, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod.” “Leaven” is often used as a metaphor for our human nature. In this case it is the nature of the Pharisees and Herod to reject the truth and harden their hearts to Jesus. The response of the disciples is almost humorous...v. 16. They completely missed the point. Jesus lays into them with eight questions in vv. 17-21. (“Are your hearts hardened?” is literally, “Hardened, do you have your heart?”).

Their problem is not bread – the Bread is in the boat! **If you have the Bread of Life in your boat you need never go hungry.** Then what’s going on here? These guys aren’t stupid. They have seen Jesus exercise authority over nature, demons, sickness and death and feed thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Why do they still not get it? They have a heart problem. One of the symptoms of a hard heart is the failure for information to impact your life. You can be intimately familiar with details about Christ and miss the significance of Christ. It happens to us all the time. You know the story of my heart attack. God orchestrated that emergency so that all the right people were in the right places to save my life. I saw Jesus in all of it...until the medical bills started coming in. Do you suppose I said, “The same God who bore me on eagle’s wings and saved my life will pay these bills?” No, I said, “Where are we going to get the bread to pay these bills?”

Is there a solution to this problem? The key to understanding what Mark is trying to say to us is found in the miracles just before and just after the feeding of the 4,000. In 7:31-37 opens the ears of a deaf man. But let's look at the miracle just after the feeding episode...8:22-26.

This two-stage healing process is puzzling. What's going on here? Is Jesus just having an “off” day? Has He done so many miracles that He is losing a little of His healing power? What Jesus is doing here is genius. His actions with this blind man provide the perfect conclusion to the first major section of Mark's gospel. The emphasis from the beginning of this book is the identity of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist knows who He is. God the Father knows who He is. Jesus knows who He is. The demons know who He is. The desperate people on the margins of society know who He is. The only two groups who aren't sure who He is are the Pharisees and sadly, His own disciples. It is no big surprise when proud, self-sufficient people reject Jesus. It is a little surprising when those who signed up to follow Him lose sight of who He is. But the healing of this blind man is a hopeful sign for the disciples. Their vision is still a little blurry, and will continue to be. But, as we will see next week, their vision will improve over time until, after the resurrection when they will see things clearly.

So how's your vision? What do you see when you look at your current circumstances? Can you say, “For this I have Jesus,” or do you say, “What are we going to do?” If you forget about Jesus in your current circumstances then what difference is there between you and those who write Him out of the script? If you fail to see Jesus for who He is then what difference is there between you and those who do not acknowledge Him as Lord?

I don't know that I can remember a time when God's people have been more frantic than we are today. The recent Supreme Court decision has been like a spark that set fire to our fears that have been piling up for a long time. Fear of terrorism, the global economy, immigrants, the weather, the environment, crime, activist judges and passive politicians, a wheels-off sexual revolution that goes beyond just having sex to redefining sexuality – what is a “man,” “woman,” and “marriage.” What are we going to do about this? “Lord, we don't have any bread.” God will provide. He always has.

When the world was destroyed by a flood God provided a boat. When Abraham was about to take the life of his only son God provided a ram. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt God provided a lamb. When everyone did what was right in their own eyes God provided a godly woman named Deborah. When Israel was a captive in Babylon God provided a prophet. When Jesus died on a cross and the hopes of His disciples died with Him God provided a resurrection. When a pagan Roman government ruled the land and crucified Christians God provided the Holy Spirit to live in the lives of men and women who wouldn't shut up about Jesus and the gospel spread like wildfire. Rome built the roads to spread the Good News.

**Jesus will provide. He can open the eyes of the blind and open the ears of the deaf but we've got to stop being dumb.** We really do. I'm not naïve, believing in Jesus isn't going to solve any of these problems we face. They may take away our tax-free status and stop giving people deductions for their charitable giving. The government may threaten us with fines or even imprisonment for speaking out against these things. What are we going to do? I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to keep preaching. If they fine me then I'll go broke. If they send me to jail, then I'll preach there. And if they kill me then I will join that blessed band who “suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.”<sup>37</sup> They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—<sup>38</sup> of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” These people “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”<sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.<sup>15</sup>... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

As Carl Henry once said, “The early church didn't say, ‘Look what the world is coming to.’ They said, ‘Look what has come to the world.’” Every time you are tempted to shake your head in despair – look up. Every time someone says, “They're taking away our bread,” remember, when you've got the bread in your boat you won't go hungry. Which boat are you in? Are you in the same boat as the Pharisees? Get in the boat with Jesus and trust Him. Let Jesus open your eyes and ears and help you perceive how your present circumstances will work out of the greater progress of the gospel. He will do it. He always has. He always will.