

## **Do You Not Yet Understand?**

Westview Church | Mark 8:1-21 | Pastor Brett Toney | November 22, 2020

### **Listening in the Woods**

I spent a good amount of time in the woods the last couple weeks. It's a refreshing thing to walk through the woods, off the beaten path, and relish the quiet. It's so still and empty. But when you stop walking and sit down, things change. As you sit there in the silence, it isn't too long before recognizing it isn't so silent. Squirrels chasing and wrestling one another sound like elephants tromping around in the leaves. Birds' songs are being trumpeted. Woodpeckers sound like jackhammers. As you walk through the woods, you're not listening to all that happens. But if you'll stop to pay attention to what is going on, you discover the drama of the thicket.

A similar dynamic has been at play this year. All of our normal routines and rhythms have been upended. Our standard busyness has largely been put on pause. We've stopped walking and sat down to listen. We've been forced to wrestle with what is essential. Are we going through the motions of life, of Christianity, just because that's what we do or to keep up appearances? Do the things we were so accustomed to actually satisfy? We can be doing a lot of things, but are they things we ought to be doing? Our passage this morning issues a warning to stop walking and listen to what Jesus is saying about following him. If we don't pay attention, we'll succumb to the error of doing more that is actually opposition to Jesus and the kingdom of God.

### **Find Satisfaction in Jesus (v.1-10)**

Back in Mark 6, when Jesus miraculously fed the multitude of 5,000 men plus women and children, he did so to make the point that he is the Shepherd-King Israel has been waiting for. Mark then recorded how Jesus went to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon before coming around to the region of the Decapolis, also a non-Jewish area. And so it is “in those days” (v.1) that Jesus moves to feed a parallel multitude. He’s been teaching this Gentile crowd for three days, and they’ve run out of provisions. So, he turns to his disciples to present the problem. Revealing their persistent misunderstanding of Jesus, they turn it back on him asking, “Who can satisfy this many people in a place like this?” *Who can do this?! Who?! We ought to be confounded that they are even asking.*

And of course, Jesus acts to answer the question definitively, yet pointing all the while to the reality that not only can he alone satisfy such a crowd with bread, he alone can satisfy. Period. The Jewish Messiah-King has come to usher in the kingdom of God, and having fed Jews, the kingdom is bountiful enough and the King generous enough to feed the nations also. He will be the satisfaction their idol-factory souls have longed for. Remember this is the third in a series of interactions Jesus has with Gentiles after rebuking the Pharisees for their rejection of him in part due to the traditions of cleanliness. “You think I’m unclean for not washing a certain way? Wait until I go to the unclean Gentiles to reveal that they too will be co-heirs of the coming kingdom!”

Have a seat in the woods and listen to what Mark is capturing for us. Don't follow after Christ just to get bread, to get things that Jesus might do for you or for the sense that you're doing something good. That is perhaps *the* prevailing problem in American Christianity. It's been referred to as "moralistic therapeutic deism." People go to church because it feels right—they're neighborly and not all that bad. That's the moralism. And going to church helps them feel better about themselves—some good positive, pop therapy self-talk. And of course they thank God for being #blessed while fear has a strangle hold on their life. That's the deism.

Jesus will not share the throne with such a false religion. He will not have you to merely get some good tips for life and go on living as though you are the center of the universe. To follow Jesus is not to be satisfied by the bread he *offers* but to be satisfied by the bread that he *is*. Who can bountifully satisfy the soul of even those idol-worshiping Gentiles like us? Christ alone.

So kids, the next time you have a sandwich—some good ol' PB&J (or maybe honey, instead)—remember this story about Jesus. Does that sandwich you eat fill your belly? Yep. But do you have to eat again ... and again ... and again? Sure do. Jesus very likely fed boys and girls like you some bread so they might know a very important truth. Bread will satisfy the stomach for a little while. Jesus will satisfy your soul forever. So when you eat your sandwich, you can remember: Jesus fills me up far more.

**Understand to Believe (v.11-21)**

Departing the Decapolis, Jesus returns to Jewish territory to address bread of a different sort. Verse 11, “The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.” Jesus’ persistent opponents come at it again, this time demanding a sign somehow distinct from all the miraculous things he has done up to this point. They are wanting some verification that what he says and does is from God. Perhaps still accusing him of working by prince of demons as they did in chapter three. The fact of the matter being they are putting themselves in the position of authority, to judge for themselves what God is or is not doing. *They* are the ones in control here.

Their blatant unbelief grieves Jesus. Having declined their demand, he’s still thinking about it when he sets off on the water again with the Twelve. They are concerned about not having enough bread when Jesus’ grief overflows in an exhortation and torrent of questions. “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod ... Why are you concerned about not having bread? Don’t you perceive? Don’t you understand? Are your hearts hardened? Don’t you see? Don’t you hear?” I can imagine Bartholomew stunned in response saying, “Uh ... I was just asking what the plan was for dinner.”

Jesus’ point is that the opposition of the Pharisees is not so far removed from his very own disciples. The point of the two miraculous feasts is that Jesus is the King who satisfies all that they need. This identity is outright rejected by the Pharisees and Herodians, who have been in league since Mark 3:6 to destroy

Jesus. Such opposition is dangerous yeast that can work its way through the whole lot of those who would follow Christ.

It is a leaven of pride, rebellion, unwillingness to submit to King Jesus. It's thinking a little bit of obedience to Jesus is enough. It doesn't have to look like persecuting Christians. That's why Jesus warns of the leaven, not the loaf. The rejection of Christ by the Pharisees and Herodians starts in yeast-size quantities—just a little bit is needed. Give it some time and the right environment and the whole dough will be changed.

This is Jesus' exhortation to his closest of followers. Church, it is his exhortation for us. Stop walking and listen. Going back to my first analogy, are there squirrels of insubordination in the woods? Do you hear them? Are there deceptive bird songs leading you to refuse to turn from sin? Do you hear them in the homebound solitude of this year? Listen and beware.

The failure of the Twelve to understand Jesus underscores the reality that he must give the secret of the kingdom. He must open spiritual eyes. He must open spiritual ears. And even when he does that, beware. This caution is why we talk about our value of "gospel growth"—we must be fluent in the gospel to go on learning how to press it into the corners of life ... why we must engage in thoughtful, gospel conversations in our Community Groups ... why we must dig deep in our Discipleship Groups for the dark corners that need the light of the gospel. We can listen in the solitude of this year, but we must run to brothers and

sisters to come alongside us lest our hearts be hardened. There is a far more imminent and greater threat to us than a virus or even death.

### **Advent to the Lord's Table**

It is in this season of Advent that we join Jesus in sighing deeply, being grieved over opposition to the kingdom of God in this generation and in our own hearts. Yet such sorrow is curbed through our faith in the King who laid down his incarnate life that we would see and hear and understand and believe.