

43 Mark 8:14-21

Dull Disciples

Text

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." 16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. 17 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? 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? 19 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." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

The Mind of the Master

14 Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

Mark prefaces this story with the fact that the disciples had forgotten to gather enough supplies for their journey. They only had one loaf.

Jesus begins the real discussion by giving a somber warning to his disciples. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. Jesus' mind is still on the events that just happened which we looked at last week. Jesus has crossed the sea with his disciples, to Bethsaida; why is his mind still on the shore of Dalmanutha? Why is our Lord still occupied with that encounter? If you were there on that shore with the Pharisees and Jesus and his disciples and the crowd, would you have seen anything particularly troubling? The Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign, and Jesus declines, hops in a boat and leaves. So what?

We saw last week that this event was actually pretty rich, but much of that came to us through Mark's telling of the story. When he said that the Pharisees "came out" that helped us understand the hostile intent of the Pharisees. The fact that they intended to "test" Jesus was also Mark's. The Pharisees obviously did not say, "We want to trap you." So while there was much in the account from last week that we could glean, would we have picked up on much if we had simply witnessed the account?

Jesus, however, did recognize all that was going on, and he was troubled by it. He is still thinking about it while in the boat on the way to Bethsaida. He felt it important enough to bring up to the disciples as a warning to them after they landed. "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." J.C. Ryle notes, "Here, in fact, lies the great danger of false doctrine. If it approached us under its true colors, it would do little harm. The great secret of its success is its subtlety and likeness to truth."

It is precisely the innocent looking front and the unassuming nature of the exchange that was so dangerous. Very few people are going to be led astray if a doctrine came to us, as Ryle says, "under its true colors." We benefited last week from the insight of Mark, but would we have been so keen as the ones watching this exchange? The Pharisees are not going to march out in goose-step like a Nazi division. They are not going to say that they want to gain control of Christ. They are not going to say that they intend to trap him. They are not going to reveal their cleverly devised ploy.

For those who are only along for the ride this will seem like an innocent, even prudent request. "Yes Jesus, produce a sign." For those who major in superficiality, this will seem like an innocent request. "Hey, another sign, those are fun." But for those who have eyes to see, for those who have been listening closely and are intently interested, they will immediately see that something is amiss. Given the massive number of signs which have already been given, why on earth are they asking for more? You have received sign after sign, miracle after miracle. What more could you want? There is something rotten in Denmark. There is something about this request, given the history of Jesus' ministry, that smacks of insincerity.

The Dangerous Leaven

We have seen that the mind of Christ was preoccupied still with the events on the shore. He issues this warning to his disciples to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. The million dollar question is what is this leaven? We gather from the fact that this is a warning that there is something dangerous about those two parties. Jesus uses the imagery of leaven to communicate this danger. Leaven is not a monolithic image in scripture. It is used to refer to many different things. Most of the time it is negative, but on occasion it is used positively such as when Christ uses it to refer to the kingdom of God.

Leaven as an image is most often chosen for the effects that it causes in a loaf of bread. You need not a lot of it, a small amount will do. This small amount, however is worked through the whole loaf so that all of it becomes mixed in. This small amount of leaven causes great growth in the bread.

There is something of the Pharisees and of Herod that is unassuming in nature, however, it will eventually work its way through the whole loaf. It will rise and swell, and it is a thing to be on your guard against.

There was an obvious link to the previous episode and the Pharisees request for a sign. What about Herod? As it turns out, Herod also desired to see a sign from Christ (although that is not something that we learn about in Mark). Matthew's account has Pharisees and Sadducees. These, you may remember were the aristocratic. They were far more liberal than the Pharisees, and they owed quite a bit to the Herods. We know that the Pharisees and the Herodians were seeking to kill Jesus. Is this the leaven of which we should be aware? Probably not as that does not fit the imagery of leaven very well.

Luke records that the leaven is hypocrisy. Mark leaves it unmentioned, and Matthew records that it is the doctrine of the Pharisees. There is no contradiction if you read the accounts in context. Obviously if Jesus is warning about their doctrine, then it must be false doctrine. And hypocrisy by its very nature, has a false side to it. Pretending to be interested in orthodoxy and signs, they are actually setting a trap. They are hypocrites and they teach false doctrines. Some have

suggested that the doctrine of the Pharisees that we need to watch for is legalism, and the doctrine of the Herodians and Saducees is skepticism. There may be some truth to that, but I'm not sure if we will be successful in identifying exact doctrines. It is perhaps best to say that we should be on our guard against hypocrites and false teaching in whatever form it may come. Whether legalism, or skepticism, or humanism, or existentialism, or pragmatism, or naturalism, we must be on our guard!

It is again worth noting that the greatest damage to the church has come from within. So while naturalism and such must be met, it is the hypocrites, those who claim to be one of us, the wolves in sheep's clothing, the false prophets, false apostles, false Christians that we need to be wary of. And Ladies and gentlemen, this is no easy task! For while we must be on our guard, we must also, in love, think the best of people. We must not entertain baseless suspicions of them. So how are we to do it? How are we to both guard and be watchful as well as think the best of another person?

This may sound cliché, but I think the best way is to show love. Those of you with kids have a great example before you. For the child whom you love with your whole might, you are not going to think ill of that child. You are not going to entertain gossip-like thoughts about them. At the same time, because you love them so much you are naturally going to be looking out for their well-being. If you see them developing habits or exhibiting behaviors that are concerning you will talk to them and lovingly confront if necessary. I think that if we maintain a similar kind of God-centered, love-driven relationship with people it will be more natural to both think the best and strive for the best and in so doing remove the false doctrines from our midst.

The Agony of Superficiality

16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. 17 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? 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?"

The disciples have proven themselves to be a case-study in missing the point. Jesus mentions leaven, and the disciples realize that they only have one loaf. They begin discussing this fact. "I thought you brought the food?" "I thought Levi went to get some." "I thought that we had enough, what happened to it all?" "Where are we going to buy more?" "I don't know but Jesus says not to buy from the Pharisees or Herod."

Jesus interrupts their discussion asking, "Why are you talking about your lack of bread?" I remember one time staying up late with a friend of mine in high school. It was a warm summer night that was perfect for philosophical musings. I asked, "When you look out over this land, with all the lights and activity of the city, what do you see?" I was hoping for some commentary on the futility of life, the meaninglessness if it all without a God. People going here going there, consumed with simply being busy. Working driving, eating, watching TV, sleeping and doing it all over again in a meaningless cycle of unending business. Instead my friend said, "Uh, I dunno, trees?" Trees!? Can you not ever lift your mind from the abundantly obvious to the profound or at least contemplative?

I expect this is kind of what Christ was experiencing. He had something important to say. They won't have a lot of time together. The enemies are many, the soldiers are few. Watch out!

Beware the leaven of the Pharisees! "Hmm, we only have one loaf, that's not going to be enough." Frustrated by his followers that cannot see past the end of their nose Christ begins a series of questions. "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?"

Just as an aside, isn't it interesting how often the disciples miss the point by taking such a literal approach to Jesus? Every interpretive correction that Jesus gives to his disciples is an example of taking him too literally and not seeing the greater truth. They expect him to speak only superficially and never profoundly. They only see a bland two-dimensional picture. In fact, in Luke's account of Jesus confrontation with the Pharisees Jesus replies, "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. 32 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." Jesus is the one greater than Solomon, the one greater than Jonah. He was the rock in the wilderness. He is David's greater son. He is the true Israel, the true manna from heaven. He is the ultimate high priest, the ultimate Prophet, the King of kings. He is the Passover lamb. He is the temple. In Him all of history is infused with meaning. And beginning with Moses he showed how all of the prophets spoke of Him! So when we read scripture, when we listen to Christ, let us not miss the greater point! Let us read scripture according to its genre's, letting scripture interpret scripture, and not in a literalistic manner.

The Lesson of the Loaves - Again

And do you not remember? 19 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." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

Jesus pummels them with more questions as if to say, "Gentlemen, wake up!" Here he specifically calls their attention back to the loaves. This is the second time in Mark that the disciples are shown to have missed the lesson of the loaves. The first time was in the boat when the wind was strong and Christ came walking on the water to them. They cried out in fear when they saw him. They somehow missed the greater significance of the feeding miracle - the missed the identity of Jesus. Still their mind is on earthly things to the neglect of Jesus' point.

"I can feed you. I fed 5000 with only 5 loaves, I can feed the 12 of you with just one." "Have you not yet learned who I am?" As France observes, "what they should have grasped from the bread is not merely that they have a ready supply of food available, but something more fundamental about Jesus himself."¹

Jesus' questions, "Having eyes, do you not see, having ears, do you not hear?" seem to echo the words of God in Ezekiel 12, "Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house." Ezekiel goes on to perform some signs of his own, prophesying exile. Watts notes, "As Ezekiel's signs declared imminent exile to the rebellious house of his day, so too, Jesus' casting out of demons, because of his opponents antagonistic response implied that Israel's divided house would not stand, and his vindication would mean their destruction."² Jesus is leading a second

exodus. Just as those people died who refused to rightly interpret the signs of Moses and place the blood of the passover lamb on their door frames, so also will those who refuse to rightly interpret the signs of Jesus, who refuse to be covered in the blood of the Lamb, these too shall perish!

This is a sober warning indeed to Christ's disciples. But theirs is not a hopeless path. Jesus, after all is the good Shepherd, and he will care for his dull sheep. They may not understand, but they hear his voice and they follow. May we all press into Jesus, may we all follow our Shepherd, even if the paths we trod are unfamiliar, and even if we be dull at times, let us still follow. In our obedience, God is pleased to grow us.

1 France, 318.

2 Watts, 174.