



Rev. Frank Wang
Mark 8:1-21

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English Standard Version

Loaves and Leaven

The 20th Sermon in a Series on The Gospel of Mark entitled
“The King and His Cross”

1. Welcome

- a. Good morning! Welcome to Potomac Hills Presbyterian Church! My name is Frank Wang, and I'm one of the pastors here. If you're new, please join us for lunch in the cafeteria after the service. We'd love the chance to get to know you better, plus it's a free meal for you! But now, let's turn our attention to the Word of God. Please turn with me to Mark 8. We'll be reading verses 1-21.¹

2. Read passage

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?” 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. 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.

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?”

¹ The background and exposition of this text is adapted from the commentaries Mark by R. Kent Hughes, pp. 181-187; The Gospel of Mark by William L. Lane, pp. 269-283, Mark by R.C. Sproul, pp. 183-189; The Gospel of Mark by R.T. France, pp. 305-319; The Message of Mark by Donald English, pp. 152-156.

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.

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. 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.” And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

3. Pray

4. Introduction – Where are my keys?

- a. Have you ever missed something that’s directly in front of you? For instance, I often go looking for my keys. I look everywhere. They’re not on the key hook. Not in the kitchen. Not on the chair just inside the door. Not in my bedroom. Not in the pants I wore yesterday. And finally, I ask my wife where my keys are. “They’re hanging out of your coat pocket that you’re wearing.” It’s either that or they’re in my hands. I mean, seriously. I swear that I’m sometimes blind to things that are obvious to just about everyone else.
- b. And that’s how we feel when we read our passage this morning. The Pharisees and the Disciples seem to miss things that are right in front of their faces. But thankfully, Jesus doesn’t leave them in their blindness.

5. Roadmap: So this morning, we’re going to be taking things a bit backward. We’re going to start with verses 11-21 to talk about blindness and then heading back to verses 1-10 to talk about bread.

6. Blindness

- a. So both the Pharisees and the Disciples are kind of blind. Let’s start with the Pharisees in verse 11. They were asking for a sign from Jesus. And my first reaction was, “What did they think he’d been doing? I mean, Jesus is a walking, talking, miracle machine. Everywhere he goes he’s healing people, casting out demons, and raising people from the dead. And he had literally just finished feeding 4000 people from a few loaves and fishes. What more do they want?” But I think that we should go a little deeper. You see, the miracles that are recorded in Mark aren’t treated like signs. Back in those days, there was a technical definition for a sign. A sign was a very specific kind of miracle. It was a prophecy that would then be fulfilled in a very specific way. Think about Gideon asking God to verify his call by having the fleece be wet the next morning but the ground be dry. That’s a sign. All the things Jesus had been doing aren’t signs because he hadn’t been calling his shot so to speak. And so the Pharisees are simply asking Jesus to prove himself to them with a sign that displays clearly where his power is coming from. It was an accepted practice to determine someone’s authenticity. To them, the wonders and miracles beg the question of where the power is coming from. And so they want to use their categories to understand Jesus. Sounds reasonable enough.

- b. But just one of the problems is that they've already made up their minds. Remember back to Mark 3. There, the scribes from Jerusalem had seen his great works and attributed Jesus' power to Satan. Jesus seemingly put that accusation to bed. But now the Pharisees have taken it up. They want him to prove himself according to their own categories of proof. They wanted him to make clear who he was on **their** terms. And really, this kind of public display of power on their terms to authenticate his identity is the same kind of temptation that Jesus faces in Matthew 4. There, the devil took him to the top of the Temple and challenged him to jump to prove his divinity. In a way, the devil was asking Jesus to perform a sign.
 - c. But Jesus knew better. And this is why he doesn't give a sign. He's not here **to prove** to you, to me, to the Pharisees who he is. He's here **to save** you, me, and maybe a couple Pharisees. His works aren't proofs. They're acts of love. As we've said over and over again when discussing his miracles, the power he displays is always in the service of caring for people around him.
 - d. And as we think about what's motivating the Pharisees quest for proof, we see that they're trying to figure out what they're up against. They're scouting out the competition for power, hoping for a weakness that they can exploit. And so this quest isn't really about Jesus at all. It's about them, their position, and their authority. Everything that the Pharisees do is all about them. They want to understand on their terms who Jesus is because they want to know how it will impact them. Do you see how wildly insecure they feel?
 - e. This is sad because they would have gotten everything they wanted if they had just come to Jesus for Jesus. In Christ, they would have found everything that they could have wanted. Security, a spiritual power beyond compare, and an eternal authority for us, as Christians, will rule with Christ after the final judgment.
 - f. Jesus isn't out to **prove** himself to you and to me. Proving oneself is always a self-motivated endeavor. No, Jesus is radically humble in that he doesn't think about himself much. He's all in on his quest for you. And interestingly, while he's out to **saving** you and me, he reveals who he is. While he goes about being all about others, he proves what he can do and who he is.
 - g. And so the issue in the end is the Pharisee's self-centeredness. It's the attitude of needing God to make sense in my own categories before believing. Of needing put Jesus in **my** box. Do you see the fundamental arrogance of testing God? Do you see the arrogance of demanding that Jesus prove himself on our terms? And that's the leaven that Jesus is talking about. There's a foundational unbelief that has pervaded the religious leaders from back before the Exile. They weren't really concerned with God at all. They were much more concerned with their own power and control. And in this case, control is controlling how God reveals Himself to them and how they come to Him. This preoccupation with themselves makes them blind. This is how they become so blind that they miss the person of Jesus in the midst of figuring out the details of what he has done.
7. Transition: But they're not the only ones that seem to be blind to who Jesus is and how his person radically changes everything
- a. The disciples aren't much better at seeing Jesus for who he is either. I mean come on! They're worried that Jesus will be angry with them for forgetting to pack literal, physical bread. I mean, how were they supposed to feed all 13 of them from a single

loaf when Jesus had just fed the 4000? Matthew 15 tells us that the 4000 were only the men, so the crowd size would have been several times larger when accounting for women and children. Maybe Jesus would have been all breaded out. Seriously though, the disciples have seen Jesus multiply bread and fish **twice now** for **thousands** of people each time. How could they possibly think that Jesus is admonishing them for forgetting bread, as if that were actually a problem? There's a prolific bread-maker in the boat with them! And besides that, weren't they listening?! Didn't they hear the specific mention about the Pharisees and Herod?! How could they not put together that Jesus is instructing them about the conflict with the Pharisees, about the Pharisaical attitude of unbelief that they should be wary of?! It's almost like they're just sort of there, but not really paying attention and meditating on what's happening. They're absorbed with the physical and temporal concerns facing them. And sure, those are important. But they seem to completely miss the spiritual component of what Jesus is doing and what that points to. In some ways, it's like they're taking Jesus for granted at this point. They're excited to be with him, to be counted among the inner circle of this great man who does great things. They're excited at all the popularity that he's gaining through his miracles, and they're simply happy to be in his presence. But that's as far as it seems to go.

- b. And don't get me wrong, simply being in Jesus' presence is a great thing. But while they are **with** him, they don't actually **get** him. They don't really understand who he is, and so in that sense, they're not his friends, they're his entourage. But Jesus rightly should expect for them, at the very least, to be paying attention and making normal connections. And that's why Jesus gets after them pretty good starting in verse 18.
 - i. *“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.” And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”*
 - c. The disciples know what happened. They're quick and precise in the details, but their knowledge is a superficial one. They haven't reflected on the meaning of the loaves. In fact, it doesn't seem to have even occurred to them that reflecting on the events of the day would have been a good idea. That's a true blindness. It's not just that you **don't** see, but that you **can't** see, that seeing is a completely foreign concept. And so, they're blind to the **meaning** of Jesus' teaching and work. They haven't thought through what Jesus's works says about Jesus's identity.
8. Transition: And all of this really points to just how hopeless the situation was. No one seems to be getting it. Even the people that should get it don't. But there's hope. We see it in 2 places.
9. **Bread**
- a. **First, we can see it in the fact that the Lord fed people abundantly.** Jesus is probably aware of the fact that the disciples are pretty dense. Just because he wants them to have discerned the deeper meaning doesn't mean that he thinks that they will.

And yet in that context, the Lord continues to feed his people in the midst of their unbelief.

- b. And I love that the feeding of the 4000 comes hot on the heels of the pleas of the Syrophenician woman that we learned about last week. Back in Mark 7, Jesus encountered this Gentile woman who begged for Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. Listen to their exchange. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And those crumbs give her what she wants. Now back in Mark 8, the crowd is made up of predominately Gentiles. And so **the dogs**, Gentiles like you and me, godless and sinful, **aren’t getting crumbs. They’re getting their fill.** Mark 8:8 says that they ate and were **satisfied**. And more than that, 7 whole baskets were left over. These weren’t small baskets either. The word for “basket” here is the same word that is used to describe the basket that they put Paul in to lower him through the wall of a city in the book of Acts. This is a person-sized basket that is full of “crumbs” for the Gentiles. This is grace. This is the riches of Christ overflowing to the Gentiles to satisfy them and more.
- c. **The second place we see hope is in the small 3 letter word “yet”.** If we go back to verses 17-21, to those rapid fire questions that admonish the disciples, we see Jesus asking, “Do you not **yet** perceive or understand?” The word “yet” brings with it an expected change. There is a reality that... **will...** be... true but is not... **currently...** true. The word “yet” tells us that there will be a time when we **will** perceive and we **will** understand. The word “yet” tells us that the Lord is working toward our being able to perceive and understand.
- d. Friends, in the here and now, we’re just like the disciples and Pharisees. We don’t see who Jesus is very well. We’re so often blinded by our sin, by our own categories, by our own pride. And yet, that is not our destiny because while we cannot see Jesus, **He sees us.** Remember, he surveyed the crowd and saw their great need of bread. Not for bread that leaves you hungry, but for the Bread of Life. In John’s Gospel, chapter 6, this is what Jesus says about being the Bread of Life.
 - i. *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who **looks** on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*
- e. Did you hear that? Everyone who looks and believes in Jesus will have eternal life. He wins that life on the Cross. Jesus took all of that sin, all of the wrath that comes with it, all the blindness and arrogance, and all of the condemnation that we deserve on the cross. He took all of that into the grave and left it there when he rose again from the dead on the third day so that we might **look upon him and have eternal life.**
 - i. 1 Corinthians 13:12 tells us, “*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*”
- f. My friends, this is our hope that we are, presently, fully known in Christ, and that in the future, we will know him fully too. Do you get this? He sees us, and we too will one day clearly see the Lord Jesus in all of his glory.

10. Conclusion: Seeing Now

Slow Down 6

- a. As we wrap up this morning, I've said that one day we will see Jesus clearly, but right now we don't see him very well. Jesus knew this. He knew that it would be hard for us who are in Him to perceive and understand without something that we could see. And so he left us "visible words" as Augustine calls them. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are these "visible words". Remember how the Pharisees demanded a sign? Well, these sacraments are signs for us. In the Reformed tradition, we say that the sacraments are signs and seals of the benefits of the new covenant. As signs, they point us to the great truths of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. In a few minutes, we'll be reading from 1 Corinthians 11. There, Paul says that we ought to examine ourselves and to discern Christ and his Gospel. Christ has given us a sign. Let us not be like the disciples, undiscerning and blind. No, let us live in light of the fact that we are made new in Christ. So let us look upon him, to see the grandeur of his person and Gospel, to see our salvation in Him. And as we do so, let us come to the table in repentance, resting in faith that He has paid it all.

11. Let's pray.