

Beware of Moral & Doctrinal Leaven

Text: Mark 8:1-21

Introduction:

1. The Context: Christ has left hometown Capernaum for non-Jewish territory. “This trip marked the first time during His ministry that Jesus actually penetrated recognized pagan territory. It foreshadowed the extension of the Gospel to the Gentile world.” (Hiebert) He is now in the region of Decapolis, where He had healed the Gadarene demoniac previously. Matthew records, “And Jesus departed from thence, and came night unto the sea of Galilee; and went up into a mountain, and sat down there. And **great multitudes came unto him**, having with them those that were lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others, and cast them down at Jesus’ feet; and he healed them:” (Matt. 15:29-30).
2. The Content: Christ performs a second miracle of multiplication with the feeding of the 4,000 (plus women and children). Through this miracle, Christ now demonstrates that He is also the bread of life for the Gentiles. Following this miracle, Christ’s Messianic claims are challenged by the religious leaders which leads to Christ’s warning of the disciples concerning the danger of their teachings and practices.
3. The text naturally divides into three sections:

Consider firstly...

I. The Compassion of the Lord (Vs. 1-9)

A. The Prompting of His Compassion (Vs. 1-3)

1. “nothing to eat” = the multitude had a great need
2. “I have compassion” = Christ’s compassion highlighted a number of times by the Gospel writers but this is the only time recorded where Christ uses the word of Himself (Matt. 15:32). The word compassion is from a word that refers to “the inner parts.” The phrase “my heart goes out to them” conveys the sentiment.
3. Christ knew what it was to suffer hunger (Matt. 4:2) and so could identify with human suffering and need.
4. Note: Christ satisfied physical hunger for those who had first demonstrated spiritual hunger. This crowd had been with Christ for three days, hearing His words and watching His miracles.

B. The Proving of His Disciples (Vs. 4)

1. The Confrontation of the Disciples (Vs. 1-3)
 - a. “Jesus called his disciples unto him” = Our Lord was intent on training the twelve so He used this opportunity to test them. Christ could accomplish His work without us but He chooses to

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involve us in what He is doing that we might experience the joy and privilege of service.

- b. Christ used the previous feeding miracle to the same end John 6:5-6 *“When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? **And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.**”*

2. The Consternation of the Disciples (Vs. 4)

- a. “from whence can a man satisfy these men” = the answer is there is NO man but the Son of Man!
- b. Our first response to a challenge like this tends to be to look to ourselves to try and find the resources there to meet the need.
- c. At first glance, we find the reply of the disciples incredulous given the fact they had only recently witnessed the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. However, if we pause for a moment, we will see ourselves mirrored in the behaviour of the Apostles. How often do we see God move mightily on our behalf only to doubt Him again when confronted with the next challenge.
- d. Hiebert: “It is a common observation that believers frequently forget God’s amazing dealings with them in the past when confronted with some new crisis.”

C. The Performing of His Miracle (Vs. 5-9)

1. The materials for the miracle (Vs. 5)

- a. “how many loaves have ye?” = Christ turns their attention to the resources they had. Rather than creating something out of nothing, our Lord chose to take the little the disciples had and use that for His miracle.
- b. This is often the way God works and He does it for our benefit and for His glory. We have the privilege of being “labourers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9)
- c. Challenge: Place the little you have at God’s disposal!

2. The method of the miracle (Vs. 6-7)

- a. The preparation of faith – he had them sit down.
- b. The participation of faith – he involved the disciples. They did no miracle but they had the privilege of being vessels to receive bread at the hands of Christ and pass it on to needy souls.

3. The marvel of the miracle (Vs. 8)

- a. There was satisfaction – Christ can satisfy physical hunger but most importantly, He can satisfy spiritual hunger. *“And Jesus said unto them, **I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.**”* (John 6:35)
- b. There was a surplus – “When God is in it, you will notice, there is always a surplus.” (McGee)

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Consider secondly...

II. The Contention with the Lord (Vs. 10-13)

A. The Request of the Religious Leaders (Vs. 11)

1. Matthew's account (Matt. 16:1-4) includes the Sadducees as part of the delegation. It is possible the Herodians were also involved as in Mark's account Christ also warns of the "leaven of Herod" (See also Mark 3:6). These three groups were rivals and often bitter enemies (e.g. the Pharisees and Sadducees) but they quickly united in their opposition to Christ. "Extremes of error combined from hatred of the truth." (Matthew B. Riddle)
2. "began to question with him" = they put our Lord under cross examination
3. "seeking of him a sign from heaven" = they wanted Christ to authenticate his claims. They were not prepared to accept the abundant evidence they had already been provided with. Unbelief is a choice and these men were willingly ignorant (See 2 Peter 3:5).
4. "tempting him" = reveals the request of the religious leaders did not come from a seeking heart but from a hardened heart, a heart already decided in rebellion against the truth. They were not coming to validate Christ's claims but to try and discredit His claims. They were not looking for reasons **TO believe** but for reasons **NOT to believe**. Their question came from a corrupt and sinful motive.

B. The Rejection of the Religious Leaders (Vs. 12-13)

1. Christ denied their request (Vs. 12)
 - a. "he sighed deeply" = a more intense form of the same word used in 7:34. It literally means "groaned upwardly" indicating that the groan welled up from the very depths of His inner being. Christ was deeply distressed by the moral perversity of these Jewish leaders. "Christ groaned sympathetically in the presence of human suffering (7:34), but obstinate sin evoked a deeper reaction from Him." (Hiebert) "The sigh seemed to come, as we say, from the bottom of His heart; the Lord's human spirit was stirred to its depths." (Swete)
 - b. Matthew records that Christ highlighted the fact they had discernment concerning natural things but no discernment in spiritual things (Matt. 16:2-3)
 - c. "why doth this generation seek...a sign" = it was unjustified since they had deliberately rejected the evidence already given. Matthew adds, "A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas..." (Matt. 16:4). The only sign that would be given was the sign of the resurrection (Matt. 12:39-40) but they still refused to believe, even bribing the guards to

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suppress their eyewitness evidence and spread a fake story (Refer Matt. 28:11-15).

2. Christ departed from them (Vs. 13)
 - a. Christ deliberately abandons these unbelieving men, refusing further discussion with them.
 - b. Challenge: To be abandoned by Christ to your hardened heart of unbelief is a sobering thing indeed!
 - c. Illustration: My dealings with Alex – “If questions A, B & C are satisfactorily answered, you will then come up with another 3 objections!”
 - d. Heb. 11:6 *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”*

Consider thirdly...

III. The Caution of the Lord (Vs. 14-21)

Our Lord’s caution as motivated by his encounter with the religious leaders described in the previous verses.

A. The Lord’s Command (Vs. 14-15)

1. “take heed, beware” = a double caution.
 - a. “take heed” = comes from Greek word ‘horao’ meaning “to see, to become acquainted with by experience.” The word is translated ‘see’ 51 times. “This word gives prominence to the discerning mind. The disciples were to use their heads!” (Wuest)
 - b. ‘beware’ = from Greek word ‘blepo’ meaning “to perceive by the use of the eyes.” Translated ‘see’ 90 times, “take heed” 12 times, ‘behold’ 10 times, ‘beware’ 7 times and “look on” 4 times. In a metaphorical sense, “to see with the mind’s eye, to discern mentally, understand, to turn the thoughts or direct the mind to a thing, to consider, to take heed.” (Wuest)
 - c. Note: The root meaning of both of these words is “to see”. Therefore, Christ is calling for the disciples to exercise spiritual perception and discernment. Christ desires this quality in His followers! (See 1 Cor. 2:15)
2. “of the leaven” (See also Matt. 16:6) Christ warns of three types of leaven
 - a. The leaven of the Pharisees – Ritualism
 - i. The doctrine of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:12)
 - ii. The lifestyle of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1). They were hypocrites, saying one thing and living another! Theirs was an external profession of godliness with no inner heart transformation.

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- b. The leaven of the Sadducees – Rationalism
- c. The leaven of Herod – Libertinism
- d. Summary: Christ warned against two categories of leaven – doctrinal leaven and moral leaven. Both have devastating effects on a church!
- e. Wuest: “The word (leaven) speaks of evil doctrine in its three-fold form of Pharisaism, externalism in religion, of Sadduceeism, scepticism as to the supernatural and as to the Scriptures, of Herodianism, worldliness.”
- f. Illustration: The church at Corinth (moral leaven) 1 Cor. 5:6
“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?”
- g. Illustration: The churches of Galatia (doctrinal leaven) Gal. 5:9
“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”
- h. Warning! Our tendency is to minimise the seriousness of leaven by making it out to be a small matter. But that is just the danger with leaven! It may be small in size but it is large in its destructive influences.

B. The Disciples Carnality (Vs. 14, 16)

- a. They failed to do what Christ had just called on them to do which was to exercise spiritual eyesight!
- b. Note: Believers living and thinking in the realm of the carnal and natural are typically not very discerning. They overlook danger and fail to heed warnings.
- c. Romans 8:6 *“For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”*
- d. Heb. 5:11-14 *“Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. 12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. 13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. 14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of **use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.**”*

C. The Lord’s Censure (Vs. 17-21)

- 1. Christ rebukes their lack of discernment (Vs. 17-18)
- 2. Christ rebukes their lack of faith (Vs. 19-21) “O ye of little faith” (Matt. 16:8) If Christ could feed 5,000 with 5 loaves and 4,000 with 7 loaves, He could certainly feed 12 disciples with one loaf (Vs. 14)!

Conclusion: How is our faith as God’s people? Are we looking to Him for the impossible situations or to ourselves? Are you seeking the Lord or hardening your heart against the evidence? Are we growing in spiritual discernment?