

Learning to Understand

Mark 8:1-26

Pastor Bryan Clark

Who is Jesus? That's the question we have been wrestling with since September, as we've been working our way through the Gospel of Mark. I realize those people on the clip we just viewed think they are kind of funny and clever. But the sobering reality is if they do not come to understand who Jesus is, they have no hope. It reminds us that this mission that we have is *very* important. It is eternally significant.

We are now at chapter 8 in the Book of Mark. Jesus is now inside of a year until His crucifixion, and the majority of His intention is being poured out into His leadership team—His disciples—preparing them for the mission to come. Certainly that is the case again here in chapter 8.

In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples and said to them, “I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance.” (vs. 1-3, *NASB)

It's interesting just to note the appeal of Jesus. Think about this. This is a huge crowd, probably in the neighborhood of six thousand people, and they've been there for three days. All they are doing is listening to Jesus teach. They have no food, and they still don't leave! Can you imagine that? Three days of solid preaching with no food, and still the preacher has to say, “You people need to go home. We're done here!” I mean, we go over five minutes here and people think they're gonna' die! But it was the message of the person of Jesus that was so compelling to these people.

It is worth noting that this is the only time in the Gospel where Jesus identifies His own compassion for people. Oftentimes the Gospel writers will say, “Jesus had compassion...” But here Jesus says it Himself—about Himself—that He had this compassion. It is a Greek word that meant not only to be concerned about people, but it is a concern that compels one into action. Jesus was concerned about the fact that these people were hungry and needed something to eat.

It is a picture of Jesus we need to remember—that Jesus cares about the everyday stuff of our lives. He cares about that math test. He cares about that roommate. He cares about the ordinary everyday stuff of life. I think sometimes we imagine Jesus as more like a corporate CEO, and we think, *I really shouldn't bother Him unless it's really important.* But Jesus Himself identifies His compassion for people in the ordinary everyday stuff of life.

It's important to understand that if we are truly going to be Christ followers, we need to, like Jesus, genuinely care about people. I think historically the churches on the liberal side of theology have been much better at concerning themselves with the physical needs and the social needs of people. Oftentimes embracing what we refer to as a social gospel, they have dialed in very well on the needs of people—but they've failed to embrace the truth. But I think the evangelical fundamentalist churches have swung way too far to the other side. We are so dialed in sometimes on the truth and getting conversions that we don't stop and care for people. True religion is caring for widows and orphans in need. It is caring for people in every aspect of life. And we need to understand, as Christ followers, that we have to genuinely, authentically care

about the people we work with, the people that live next door, the people in our lives—just as Jesus did.

Verse 4:

And His disciples answered Him, “Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?” And He was asking them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven.” (vs. 4-5)

Now this should sound vaguely familiar. We’ve had a story of the feeding of the five thousand. It’s similar enough that some commentators think Mark is just telling the same story twice. But when you look at the two stories, the differences are greater than the similarities, and Jesus Himself, as we go farther into the text, referred to both miracles. There’s no question that it happened twice. It may have even happened more times; we just know about these two occasions. The feeding of the five thousand was to a Jewish audience; this is to a Gentile audience.

Some of the commentators, when they read verse 4, are very hard on these disciples. They get the impression that the disciples were kind of clueless and think, *Well, He fed five thousand with a few loaves and fish; they ought to understand!* But I think if you read the text carefully, that is not the case.

Remember when Jesus fed the five thousand, His interaction with the disciples was fairly sharp. They said, “We need to send these people away; we don’t have food!” And Jesus looked at them and said, “No, you do it!” They got kind of sarcastic and responded back, “What are we supposed to do, get a whole bunch of money and buy a bunch of bread?” Jesus said, “I want you to go find out how much bread we have.” And it is as if they just stood there and stared at Him, thinking, *What in the world are You talking about?*—because it’s followed by a verb where Jesus said, “Go!” It’s as if He almost had to push them out to do that.

In this particular case Jesus identifies the need, and they just make the realistic statement that they don’t have the resources. But then Jesus asks the question, “How much bread do we have?” And they know. They’ve already done inventory; they’re ready. “Seven. We’ve got seven.” And they’re going to let Jesus do His thing. This is growth. This is progress.

It’s also unfair to think every time there was a problem that Jesus did a miracle. I would guess every single day these disciples had to deal with organizational and administrative details, with the thousands of people that were following Jesus. And I don’t imagine every single day He performed a miracle to solve the problem. So they weren’t presuming upon Jesus; they were simply doing their part. And in this case, they gave inventory that they had seven loaves.

And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the people. They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. (vs. 6-8)

Notice a couple of things here. One is that it’s interesting how well this passage correlates with what we talked about last week from II Corinthians 9, where it says God loves to give us what we need in abundance—that we might take that abundance and share it with others. In both the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand, not only did the people eat

until they were satisfied, but there were leftovers that I'm sure were shared with others that needed it.

When he talks about the baskets here, this is a different basket than the feeding of the five thousand. There are two different Greek words. In the feeding of the five thousand, it was more like a little mesh pouch that any Jew who was out traveling would take with him. But this is a large wicker basket. This is so big that they actually put the apostle Paul in a basket like this and lowered him over the wall in Acts 9. When it says here seven baskets, these are *huge* baskets, so there were a lot of leftovers here.

It says: “...and about four thousand were there.” Remember, that is just counting men. So when you add in women and children, it was easily over six thousand people.

About four thousand were there; and He sent them away. And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples and came to the district of Dalmanutha. (vs. 9-10)

If you are just joining us for this study of Mark, one of Mark's favorite words is the word “immediately.” You get the impression through the whole book that he is in a hurry; there is a sense of urgency. *Immediately* this happens... and *immediately* that happens. They jump in a boat and off they go. Verse 11:

The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him.

Once again, here's an encounter with the Pharisees—the religious crowd, the experts in the Old Testament Scripture. Mark is careful to tell us they didn't come out to listen. They didn't come out to learn. They weren't seekers. They came out to argue. They wanted a sign from heaven—not so they would believe, but so they could test Him. In other words, they wanted to discredit Him. They wanted somehow to stop His movement. In essence what is being said is that their hearts weren't right. They weren't really coming to pursue Jesus. They were coming to argue and to entrap Him and to discredit Him.

Well, Jesus knows that and He responds.

Sighing deeply in His spirit [which means He was grieved and saddened], He said, “Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” (vs. 12)

Jesus knows the hearts of these Pharisees. He knows that no matter what He does, they will not believe, because their hearts are hard. Jesus had done plenty of miracles. The evidence was on the table for those who really wanted to know who Jesus is. The evidence was there, but that's not really what these Pharisees were pursuing.

It reminds me of a quote that I read from the atheist Voltaire. He said:

“Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.”

Voltaire, quoted in *Commentary on the New Testament* by R.C.H. Lenski, p. 322, Hendrickson Publishers

That's a very honest statement. He is saying, “I don't care what you tell me; I don't care what God does before me and a thousand witnesses. I'm telling you now I will not believe it.” That is not an intellectual problem. That is a heart problem. And that is where many skeptics are stuck.

It's not a problem of their intellect. They simply do not have the intellectual honesty to pursue what is really true. They are determined not to believe.

In our culture people will read a book like *The DaVinci Code* and they will believe everything in it—when, with the slightest bit of effort, it can be easily discredited, full of historical errors. And those same people will turn around and dismiss the Bible—which, with a little bit of effort, can be determined to be historically accurate. It is simply because they do not want to believe.

There may be some of you who are on this seeker path and you are wanting to know what is true. I might give you a couple of suggestions that would help you. All through this series in Mark we're offering a book called *The Case for Christ*. You can obtain it out at the Publications Center for \$5. It will give you strong, credible evidence to know why what we believe is true.

The second option is a class called "Christianity Under Fire," which is being offered on Sundays during the 11:00 hour beginning this week. It is a great class to walk through the basis beliefs—why we know that they're true and what the evidence is. Let's put it on the table. If someone is pursuing with an honest intellectual pursuit of truth, both of these resources lay the evidence out. You can decide for yourself.

It is also important to note that these Pharisees were not atheists. They were highly religious people, but they were so entrenched in their religion, so entrenched in their self-righteousness, so entrenched in their ways, that they were simply unwilling to even consider that Jesus might be the Savior of the world. No matter what Jesus did in front of them, they simply would not believe.

I have fairly regular discussions with people who are highly religious, and one of the things that always impresses me is how many of these people simply don't care what is true. They have no interest in pursuing whether their religious traditions and beliefs are true or not. That is just what they believe, and they have no desire to determine if that is true or not. They are just like these Pharisees—they are stuck. You can show them what the Bible says, and it is as if it is irrelevant.

Perhaps you have noticed the last couple of weekends there were articles in the newspaper talking about a church in town studying a book dealing with what we call "universalism"—which advocates that in the end, because God is a God of grace and love, everybody goes to heaven—whether it's Hitler, Stalin or anybody else. There is only one way you can believe that, and that is if you totally discard the Bible. That is a very emotional belief. All of us want to believe that, but the reality is we can either believe that regardless of the truth, or we can be intellectually honest enough to pursue what is true.

Jesus, understanding that these Pharisees had a hard heart and didn't want to know the truth, wasn't going to play that game and give them another sign. So what did He do? Well, He determined to stay there for a month and argue with them, knowing eventually they would come around. No, that's *not* what it says.

Leaving them [He is going for better soil] , He again embarked and went away to the other side. And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." (vs. 13-15)

They get on the boat and they start noticing that nobody remembered the bread. "I thought you were gonna' bring the bread!" "You were supposed to bring the bread!" They are in a little bit

of a panic. “We’ve only got one loaf of bread!” Now really, given what had just transpired, what is the problem? It’s kind of like a non-issue. But they are all hung up on this.

In the meantime, Jesus is taking advantage of this teaching moment. The disciples are in this boat. The crowds aren’t around them. This is a chance to pour teaching into these leaders, so He is going to warn them. The language here is very strong. It is Mark’s way of saying this was very, very important.

Now, I’m guessing Jesus taught quite a bit on this, and in Mark’s typical fashion he just tells us the summary. It was a warning of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. In the Bible, leaven is almost always evil, and it’s the idea of being like yeast—that if it gets in the dough it immediately permeates. So whatever this warning is, it is saying, “Be careful, because if it gets into your life it quickly takes over.”

What is the leaven of the Pharisees? We know from the previous encounter, and especially from chapter 7, that the leaven of the Pharisees is this belief that they can perform their religious performances for God and ultimately can make themselves self-righteous. They can make themselves right before God by their ability to keep the rules. They hold to the traditions of man over the truth of God. They believe that if you keep all the rules you will eventually have a right heart.

Jesus comes back and says it doesn’t work that way—that’s backwards. The only way to be righteous is if Jesus changes your heart, and the outflow of a changed heart is obedience and right living. Jesus came down to the fact that the issue is an issue of the heart, and the Pharisees don’t understand that.

If you were to ask me what is the number one concern of the writers of the New Testament for us as believers, this would be it. It’s the leaven of the Pharisees. Almost every New Testament writer talks about it in very strong language. The thing that the writers are most concerned about that will derail us in our Christian walk is that we would drift away from a loving, intimate, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ and we would get stuck in dead, rule-oriented, self-righteous religion. And that is what Jesus is saying: “Beware! Watch out!” Because He knows of the risk.

But what is the leaven of Herod? It was interesting to read some of the commentators on this; they just went all over the board. But I think the best way to understand this is to just understand what we know about Herod from the Gospel of Mark—because that is all the first readers would have had to go on. If we go back to chapter 6 we are reminded that Herod had a place in his heart for John the Baptist. He feared him. He believed he was a righteous man. As a matter of fact, David says that when John would teach, Herod was perplexed (verse 20). But he used to enjoy listening to him.

What is the leaven of Herod? The leaven of Herod is that Herod had some level of appreciation for John the Baptist and who he was. And when John would speak the truth, Herod was both perplexed by it and he enjoyed it. It is as if it was a form of entertainment. But at the end of the day, Herod had absolutely no intention to surrender his life, to bow his knees at the feet of Jesus and acknowledge Jesus as Savior.

There are thousands upon thousands of people in our culture who, to them, church is a form of entertainment. There is some soft spot in their heart towards God and God stuff, and they are kind of perplexed and entertained by the Bible. But when it is all said and done, they have no

intention of giving up their lives and surrendering to Jesus Christ as their Savior. That's the leaven of Herod.

Well, this is a pretty strong message. The warning is very strong. Jesus is saying to them, "Men, you've got to understand there is a huge risk that you are going to turn this into a rule-oriented religion, that this is almost going to become a form of entertainment for you. And you're going to lose the intimacy of the love relationship that must drive a Christ follower."

And how did the disciples respond? They were so impressed with this, they were so moved in their spirit, they were so overwhelmed by this warning that they just paused and meditated for an hour. No, that's not what it says. They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread! Jesus gets done with this very powerful warning, and when He's done they look at each other and say, "I thought *you* brought the bread!" You can just picture the scene. While Jesus is looking at them and talking, they're shaking their heads and nodding—like you sometimes do in class when you're not listening. But as soon as Jesus turns away, they're glancing at one another, shooting daggers like: "You were supposed to bring it! I can't believe this!"

This particular area of the Sea of Galilee was very barren. There were no bread stands on the bank. They were going to be hungry and they were ticked off about it. And because of that, they did not hear a word Jesus had just said.

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 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 you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven." And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (vs. 17-21)

We would say, "C'mon men! Get a clue! If I can feed over ten thousand people with a few loaves and fish, I can deal with one loaf for thirteen people. Stop worrying about the bread and listen to Me."

This is a common message in the New Testament. Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, said, "Hey, if you're going to follow Me, don't worry about what you're going to eat. Don't worry about what you're going to wear. Don't worry about a roof over your head. I will take care of all those things." Well then, what are we supposed to think about all day? "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things I will take care of for you."

The writer of Hebrews said, "If you're going to run this race and you're going to win it, you can't get tangled up in all the stuff of this world. Get your eyes fixed on Jesus." When Paul wrote to Timothy in II Timothy 2, he said, "You know, a good soldier doesn't get entangled in the stuff of everyday life; he can't afford to. He has got to get dialed into the mission." If you're a soldier today in Baghdad, you better not be distracted with 101 things. You better be paying attention to what you are doing, or you will die. That is what Paul was saying to Timothy. It's a common message that God has promised: "I'll take care of the stuff of everyday life; just trust Me. I would like you to think about this purpose, this mission, and focus on what you need to do for Me today."

How much time do we spend in any given day worrying about the “bread issues” in our life, distracted by 101 things—so that at the end of the day that’s really all we’ve thought about, and we’ve given little thought about what God wanted to do through us that day?

We sang some magnificent truths about God in our worship this morning. The only question is: Do we believe them? If we believe them, then can we believe Jesus when He says, “Hey, I’ll take care of all that stuff. Let Me concern Myself with that. You concern yourself with the mission today.”

Statistics show that only eight percent of what we worry about even comes to pass. That means 92% of that is just wasted energy. But even of the eight percent, what did you really change by worrying about it? How did that affect anything?

Last night I was talking with a young lady out in the hall. She is probably in her early 20s. Three years ago she went through a very serious bout with cancer. Today the cancer is in remission, but she lives with the reality that she doesn’t know about tomorrow. She doesn’t know about the next day. But she chooses to trust God with that; otherwise that is all she would think about.

I understand that. When I got my new heart valve, my question was, “How long will this last?” And the answer was, “We don’t know.” It may pop out tomorrow, but I can’t change that. That’s God’s business. No amount of worrying affects that one way or the other. Jesus has promised, “Let Me take care of that stuff. I promise I’ll take care of you. You are free to think about that which lasts forever. Dial in on the mission.”

You know, if I’m going into surgery, I do not want a surgeon who has just had a fight with his wife (or her husband, whichever the case might be). I don’t want him in there distracted and all upset, slashing the scalpel around saying, “And another thing…” I want a surgeon, when he is cutting me open, who is dialed in and focused, thinking about what we’re doing here.

What characterizes a great athlete is the ability to focus and remove distraction. That is exactly what Jesus is trying to say to His disciples. We get so hung up on so much stuff. On any given day, yes, there are 100 things we could worry about, and we can’t change a single one of them by worrying about it. So leave them to Jesus and trust Him—so that we can hear what He has to say and we can be busy about His business and accomplish what He has given us to do.

The end of this particular text has an interesting miracle story that I think can’t really be understood without the context of what we have just discussed.

And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.” Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” (vs. 22-26)

It was interesting again where some commentators went on this particular text. Some of them said that the reason Jesus had to touch him twice was that He was kind of “low on power.” It’s like He needed his batteries recharged or something, which of course is silly. Some of them said, “Well, maybe the man didn’t have enough faith and it took a couple tries.” But faith hasn’t been a prerequisite for healing throughout the Gospel.

I think we have to understand this miracle in the context of the bigger picture. What had Jesus just said to His disciples? He said, “Men, you have eyes but you do not see.” And what is He trying to do? He is trying to touch them and bring sight to their blinded eyes. It is as if this miracle was a living metaphor, where Jesus, just like He’d done with His disciples, pulled this blind man aside. And He touched him and he could see—but not clearly. So Jesus touched him again that he might see clearly.

It’s a beautiful picture of what is going on in the life of these disciples. Jesus is touching them. He is teaching them. He is instructing them. He is wanting them to understand. And they’re making progress. But they still don’t see it clearly. But what’s amazing is Jesus is so remarkably patient with them. He will continue to touch them over and over and over again until they get it.

We may look at them and say, “You know, these guys are a little bit slow. They seem a little dull.” But recognize that after Jesus ascended, they understood it so clearly that every person who has trusted Jesus as Savior can trace their witness back to one of these twelve men. Did they get it? They absolutely did. But it was a process. It took the continual touching of Jesus.

There is a dramatic difference between how Jesus responded to the Pharisees and how Jesus responded to the disciples. The difference was a difference of heart. Jesus understood that these Pharisees had a hard heart. They didn’t want to know the truth. For them, religion was a form of entertainment. They were locked in their self-righteousness, and Jesus quickly moved on

But with His disciples He understood that even if they weren’t getting it, they wanted to. They wanted to know Jesus. They wanted to love Him. They wanted to walk in His ways. They wanted to accomplish His mission. They just were struggling to get it. But when Jesus knows that is the desire of our heart, He will touch us over and over and over again until we get it.

If you want to play games with God, if you want to see God and religion as kind of a form of entertainment, listen to Jesus. He says, “Beware of that.” But if the desire of your heart is that you want to know Jesus and want to surrender your life to Him, you want to have an intimate relationship, you want to follow Him, and you want to accomplish His work, you need to understand that Jesus is patient. You may have had the worst week imaginable and looked in the mirror and said, “I am the worst Christian on the face of the planet.” But if your heart’s desire is right, Jesus will touch you again and again and again. He is remarkably patient and gracious in order that one day you will “get it” and you will say, “Yes. Yes, Jesus, it is for this purpose that I will live.”

Our Father, we are thankful that Jesus is so patient and gracious. All He asks is that we have a right heart, that the desire of our hearts is to walk in obedience, to know Him and to love Him and to be about His business. Lord, may we hear the warning of Jesus of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, that we do not get wrapped up in tradition and religion and self-righteousness to where our hearts become hard and we no longer care about what’s true.

Lord, I think we all identify with the temptation everyday to get sidetracked with the issues of this world and worrying about a hundred different things that distract us from the true purpose of the day. Lord, may we learn to trust You and set our eyes on You, that we might experience Your peace, that it might reign in our hearts and set us free to focus our attention on that which lasts forever. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Study Questions
The Good News About Jesus According to Mark
Learning to Understand
Mark 8:1-26

Opening Discussion

1. As a group define who Jesus is in one sentence.
2. How would your definition be received by people in our culture?

Would they agree or disagree? Why?

Bible Study

1. Review briefly what you've learned about Jesus from Mark 4:13-7:37.
2. Read Mark 8:1-10. What do we learn about Jesus in verses 1-3?

Does Jesus care about the everyday stuff in our lives? Compare Matthew 6:25-34.

3. What lessons were the disciples to learn from the feeding of the 4,000?
4. Read Mark 8:11-13. Why does Jesus not give the Pharisees a sign?

Compare their attitude with the Syrophenician woman and the people who brought the deaf man to Jesus in Mark 7. What are the differences?

How do we distinguish between the true seekers today and the antagonists? How should we respond to both?

5. Read Mark 8:14-21. Define the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod. Be sure to stay in the Gospel of Mark to do this.

Why is this leaven a concern for Jesus?

6. What prevents the disciples from hearing Jesus' warning?

In what ways do our concerns for "bread" distract us from really hearing and following Jesus? Compare again Matthew 6:25-34 and Hebrews 12:1, 2.

7. Read Mark 8:22-26. In what way does the healing of the blind man picture what is happening in the life of the disciples?

What is the big difference between the Pharisees, Herod and the disciples?

What do we learn from this?

Application

1. What are the “bread” issues in your life that distract you from hearing Jesus and being about His work?
2. What will be necessary for you to avoid these distractions?
3. As followers of Christ how do we assure that we have eyes to see and ears to hear?

How can your LifeGroup help you with this?