

The Lord Warns His Disciples about Leaven

Mark 8:10-21

Mark 8:10-21 – *“Immediately He got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha. ¹¹ Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. ¹² But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.”*

¹³ And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. ¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ Then He charged them, saying, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” ¹⁶ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have no bread.”

¹⁷ But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still 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 fragments did you take up?” They said to Him, “Twelve.” ²⁰ “Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?” And they said, “Seven.” ²¹ So He said to them, “How is it you do not understand?”

Background Notes

The feeding of the 4000 was on the east or southeast side of the Sea of Galilee. Afterwards the Lord and His disciples sailed over to the western side and landed in the region of Dalmanutha (called Magdala in the parallel passage in Matthew 15:39).

In verse 13, we see that after His confrontation with the Pharisees, He and the disciples once again got into the boat and sailed across the Sea of Galilee, this time to Bethsaida, on the north end of the Sea of Galilee (v22). While they were sailing, the Lord took the opportunity to warn the disciples of the dangerous influences of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Lord used figurative language to get across His point. Verse 15, *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”* He used the figure of leaven, or yeast, because it was symbolic of slowly spreading evil. Throughout the Old Testament, leaven had the connotation of sin. Remember the emphasis on unleavened bread in the Passover and unleavened grain offerings in the sacrificial system? Leaven, or yeast, had penetrating power. It would spread slowly and steadily. No wonder the Lord likened the corrupting influence of the Pharisees and the Herodians to leaven!

The disciples did not realize the Lord was using figurative language. They thought the Lord was talking about literal bread, because they had forgotten to get supplies for the trip, and they only had one loaf of bread in the boat. So they

proceeded to discuss - and apparently argue - about the bread, and the Lord had to teach them that they were slow to pick up on what He was trying to communicate to them. As to their need for literal bread, were they forgetting the miracles of the feeding of 5000 and the feeding of 4000? As the Lord took care of the needs on those occasions, could He not take care of their needs, even though they had forgotten to bring along more bread? Right now the Lord wanted them to be thinking about more important matters than just the forgotten bread!

Doctrinal Points

1. Unbelief will never be satisfied.

In verse 11, when the Pharisees asked for a sign from heaven, the Scriptures say that they were testing Him. Their basic attitude was one of unbelief. They weren't going to believe no matter what sign was given them. You may have heard the expression, "People convinced against their will are of the same opinion still." It means if you have already made up your mind, and you are unwilling to believe, you will not believe no matter how many signs are presented to you. You'll always find some other explanation.

In John 12:28 the Lord said, "*Father, glorify Your name.*" Then a voice came from heaven, saying, "*I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.*" What do you think some of the people said? "*Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered.*" The voice of God was heard from Heaven, and the people said it was thunder. God's voice was heard, and some of the people gave a naturalistic explanation!

When the Rapture takes place, do you think people are going to be able to explain it away? Of course they will! "We've been invaded by outer space." "'The Force' has finally eliminated all the hindrances of the forward movement - the New Age movement, the global unity movement." Something like that. There are bound to be naturalistic explanations for the disappearance of believers at the time of the Rapture.

Unbelief will never be satisfied. People convinced against their will are of the same opinion still. Any sign that is given to them will be explained away - and then more signs will be demanded!

Those Pharisees certainly had plenty of signs. Think of the miracles done in the towns on that western side of the Sea of Galilee. Magdala was the hometown of Mary Magdalene, where she had been healed. All these miracles were in line with Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. The Old Testament prophecies predicted that healing would be a sign that would authenticate the claims of the coming Messiah - and yet the Pharisees were not satisfied. They **would not** believe. Unbelief will never be satisfied. They wanted a sign from heaven, something that couldn't be explained in any other way. The Pharisees actually explained these earthly miracles as demonic power - they wanted a sign from heaven!

Because of such unbelief, the Lord said, “*No sign shall be given to this [unbelieving] generation*” (v12), and in verse 13, “*He left them.*” This symbolic gesture indicated that the nation had lost its chance to believe. That’s another reason why our doctrinal point is: Unbelief will never be satisfied. That is, by divine decree, unbelief will never be satisfied - then or today!

God is looking at the will. When a person is willing to believe, God will provide all kinds of confirmation. Believing faith is confirmed - but unbelief will never be satisfied.

2. Hypocrisy can characterize disciples as well as unbelievers.

What is the leaven of the Pharisees? In the context, the “leaven of the Pharisees” was **hypocrisy**: wearing the mask of a godly believer, but in essence being a proud, self-righteous, legalistic, unbeliever. The “leaven of Herod” was most likely worldly **skepticism**. The Herodians, who favored Herod and cooperated with Rome, were not especially religious. They were self-centered, worldly-minded skeptics.

Why did the Lord warn His disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod? He warned them because hypocrisy and worldly skepticism can characterize disciples as well as unbelievers. It not only characterizes the Pharisees and Herod, or the Herodians - it could actually characterize the disciples.

We may be Christians, but we can still be influenced by hypocrisy and skepticism, and these evils can gradually sneak in and corrupt us in subtle ways. The leaven of hypocrisy - proud self-righteousness - can creep in and spread through a congregation. Skepticism is contagious as well. It can hide behind a good-looking mask of “honest questions,” and can produce doubt and skepticism concerning God’s Word or the Lord’s work. Skepticism is usually associated with worldliness, because great faith and worldliness don’t go together.

Is it possible that the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod can characterize Christians in some ways? The Lord says to us, as He said to His disciples, **Beware!** Hypocrisy and worldly skepticism can creep in and gradually characterize the lives of disciples as well as unbelievers.

Practical Applications

1. Let’s not remember the facts and forget the lessons.

When the Lord asked how many baskets were left over after the two feedings of the multitudes, the disciples had the correct answer - twelve baskets in the feeding of the 5000 and seven baskets in the feeding of the 4000. They remembered well - but they never got the lesson! God had provided amply for the people’s needs then. Could He not provide for the disciples now? They had not learned the lesson of the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand. They remembered the facts - but they forgot the lessons.

Why were they so anxious and so bent out of shape because they had only one loaf of bread? They had the Bread of Heaven in the boat with them! But the disciples had not learned the lessons of the miracles. Have we? The disciples were like some of my students at Emmaus Bible College, who score well on tests, but they don't seem to gain much insight into Scripture. Thankfully they are a minority, but there are some students who score well on tests but don't seem to gain much practical insight into God's Word.

The Lord had to rebuke the disciples for their spiritual immaturity and lack of understanding. Verses 17-18: *"Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?"* And verse 21: *"How is it you do not understand?"*

The Lord will say the same to us if, when we read the Bible, we remember the facts as head knowledge, but never remember the lessons or put them into practice in our lives.

Let's not remember the facts - but forget the lessons!

2. Our experiences today are for our greater faith tomorrow.

The Lord essentially told the disciples that the reason He performed the miracles of the feeding of the 5000 the feeding of the 4000 was not only to meet the needs of the people, but also to help them grow in faith. The Lord indicated that the disciples should have had a more mature faith, simply because of these miracles.

In the same way, our experiences today are for our greater faith tomorrow. If our faith is not growing because of our past and present experiences, then the Lord will rebuke us as He did His disciples. He would say to us, *"Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? How is it you do not understand?"*

Have we experienced the Lord meeting one of our needs? Have we grown in faith as a result, or are we still discontent and complaining? Have we had the experience of the Lord graciously getting us out of a tough situation, maybe a mistake of our own making? Have we grown in faith as a result, or are we still immature? Have we had the experience of being disciplined by the Lord? Have we grown in faith as a result, or are we still babes?

Our experiences today are for our greater faith tomorrow.