

Kingdom Advancement: Learning to See

Mark 8:11-21

I've been taking a break from social media so far, this year. I don't tell you that to make you think I am somehow mature and godly. In fact, just the opposite, I needed the time away to break the habit in my life and to focus on other things with my spare moments of time. But, I've picked up on a tendency in my life through my time away from social media.

Social media, Facebook, Twitter, etc. gives us all a place to respond to the events of the news or our own daily lives in front of a wider audience of people. Facebook is literally a catalogue of responses that people post regularly. I've learned about myself that I want to respond publicly to life situations, people, or events often out of pride or arrogance. There's a very natural and good urge to respond to things that happen in your own personal life and in the broader culture. But I think we are most of the time better off responding to life by having face to face conversations with people we know and love face to face or over the phone rather than through cyber space with people we haven't seen in 5 years and who live 4 states away.

I bring this up to simply make the point that we all respond to people, events, and circumstances all the time. Unfortunately, social media can give us a place to respond in anger and arrogance. But one of the things we do as human beings is to react and respond.

In our study in the book of Mark we are coming to the centerpiece of the book. Everything in chapters 1-8 flows up to this question in Mark 8:27-29 and everything in chapters 9-16 flows from this question. It's the apex and Jesus is posing this question to his disciples to demand a response.

To get to this point in the book you have read story after story of Jesus and his work. He is presented as the fulfillment of OT expectations and the arrival of God onto the scene in order to save his people.

The question is, how did people respond to Jesus and how will we respond to this portrait of him? That brings us to the final build up to that question in Mark 8:11-21. In this passage we are going to once again see the Pharisees interacting with

Jesus and then we will see a very intense interaction between Jesus and the disciples that puts them in a place of evaluation of their reaction to Jesus.

These two stories should be sobering for us. Both of these groups, the Pharisees and the disciples are failing to see the truth about Jesus at this point in the story. That's concerning for us because of their close proximity to Jesus. I think Mark intends to finish this section with a very clear call for personal reflection from the reader of His gospel. Am I like the Pharisees or the disciples at this point in the story? So, as we do that evaluation, we will see **two responses regarding Jesus that fail to embrace the good news of the kingdom.**

1. Disbelief (vv. 11-13)

If you remember from the feeding of the 4,000, Jesus and the disciples get into a boat in Gentile territory and head back to Jewish territory. Once they land back among Jews they encounter the Pharisees again. Look at verse 11.

We've come to expect opposition from the Pharisees as we've read Mark so far and that's exactly what we find here. They come in order to argue with him and notice exactly what they are wanting from Jesus, a sign.

When the Pharisees ask for a sign, they aren't just asking for Jesus to do a miracle so they can see it, although a sign certainly included a miracle. Jesus is moving around Israel teaching and claiming to speak interpret God's Word authoritatively and correctly. They were looking for authentication for his ministry. When I go to the store and use my credit card they will often ask to see my driver's license to prove I have the authority to use the card with the name Nathan T. Williams on it. The Pharisees want Jesus to somehow prove that his ministry is legit.

Now, it's not a terrible or sinful request to ask for proof that someone's ministry is from God. In fact, the OT gave the Jewish people guidelines concerning how to authenticate the ministry of a prophet. The problem here is the end of verse 11.

You test drive a car to evaluate it and see if there are any problems or to see if you truly love it. The Pharisees weren't testing to purchase. They were trying to poke holes. They were trying to find problems to expose Jesus as inadequate. Jesus's words in verse 12 tell us what he thought of their request. Why does Jesus refuse to give the Pharisees proof of his authority from God in a sign?

This brings us to the heart of the Pharisees response, disbelief. They came to argue and to test, not to learn. They came to find problems, not to rejoice in Messiah's arrival. We call this disbelief because it comes to Jesus lacking humility. Their response to Jesus is one of arrogance. They have put themselves in the seat of authority and evaluation. They will judge him. How arrogant!

This sort of disbelief is a moral issue. We've seen this described in Mark as hardened hearts. The amazing thing about hardened hearts is that one can steel itself against the most profound and obvious evidence. This sort of disbelief is described in Romans 1:18-19.

And at root, this sort of moral unbelief is a commitment, on the part of the unbeliever, to live independently of God. If you notice here the Pharisees wanted to put themselves in the place of authority. They wanted to act independently of Christ's claims to be Lord. This level of arrogance is what causes Jesus to sigh. The creator of the universe does not sit under the judgment of men. The clay pot will not evaluate the work of the potter.

I said something a minute ago that gets to the heart of all unbelief. Unbelief rejects the authority of God and desperately tries to live independently of God. It's what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve rejected their status as creatures and desired to be like God. This is what happens when we hear what God says in His Word and we refuse to obey because we put ourselves in the judge's chair.

Jesus flat out rejects this mindset. Look at verse 13. It's certainly talking about his physical movement to leave them, but there's probably a literary double meaning at play here. Jesus's physical movement away from them shows his rejection of their arrogance and unbelief.

Now, most of us in this room aren't in the raw state of unbelief the Pharisees are in. But there is a lesson here for believers in Jesus. Faith is a growth process and the old man clings tightly to our souls. At times we lapse back into the arrogant rejection of God's authority and Word. The attitude of the Pharisees here should be like a flashing warning light to not sit in the seat of judgment on God's Word, but to humble ourselves in obedience. Listen to James 1:18-21.

Follow the flow of logic here that James gives. We are born again through the Word of God in verse 18. If you look down at verse 22 he exhorts us to be doers of the Word and not only hearers. So, I think verses 19-21 are also talking about our response to God's Word. Listen to verses 19-21. How are we to receive the Word? Swift to hear, slow to speak, and with meekness.

But unbelief and arrogant evaluation is not the only faulty response to Jesus.

2. Darkness (vv. 14-21)

In verse 13 Jesus and the disciples get into the boat and notice verses 14-15. So, the fact that they don't have enough bread to feed the group, and because of his interaction with the Pharisees Jesus teaches another parable to the disciples in verse 15.

Obviously, this is a warning, but what does he mean the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod? Well, let's start with leaven. Leaven is something that is very small, but has a massive impact on everything it touches. Bethany makes homemade pizza around once a week at our house and making the dough requires yeast, or leaven. It's so cool to see a tiny bit of yeast make the dough fluffy and soft instead of flat. Leaven is good for us, but in Scripture it's often used as a negative image of the subtle effect sin can have on the heart. It starts small and grows massive in its influences and effects.

Clearly Jesus is using it negatively here because of the warnings, but what exactly is the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod? These two would have had almost nothing in common. Herod was a womanizing, hard partying, Gentile who beheaded prophets and the Pharisees were not that. But they did have one thing in common. Let me remind you of Mark 3:6. They both rejected the ministry of Jesus in their arrogance.

One author described the leaven here as *"the evil impulse that has hardened the heart of the Pharisees and Herod and refuses to recognize and accept the truth, and unbelief reflected in one's response to Jesus."*

So, Jesus, using a parable, warns the disciples not to let their hearts follow the path to hardness that the Pharisees and Herod had cleared. How do the disciples respond? Look at verse 16. They completely miss the point. They are focused on physical bread, not the reality of the bread of life. They are so distracted by the

physical bread that they aren't even aware of their own condition. They are in darkness of mind. The boat erupts into discussion, probably arguments, over their lack of bread.

This is precisely why Jesus warns them about the leaven. This darkness can turn into something much more sinister, like the Pharisees. Missing the point of the ministry of Jesus may not be hardened unbelief, but it's the starting line. How does Jesus respond? He very graciously asks questions to help them see. They aren't hardened in unbelief yet, but they certainly aren't picking up what Jesus is putting down. Look at verses 17-18.

Now, there's a barrage of questions coming at you here, but let me highlight a couple of things. First, we'll see this in verse 21, but the issue here is perception and understanding. It's not just that they don't believe, but they cannot believe because they aren't understanding. True faith has to include right knowledge. We'll come back to that. Second, he asks them if their hearts are hardened. This has been the assessment of the Pharisees throughout the gospel of Mark. But Jesus sees that at this point in the story the disciples are distracted enough where they are trending in that direction. In fact, listen to their response to Jesus after he fed the 5,000 and walked on water in 6:51-52.

Third, look at what Jesus asks them in verse 18. We've seen this language before from Isaiah 6, but it also comes from several places in the OT and I want to show you another one of those that I think is at least one that Jesus has in mind here. Turn to Ezekiel 12 for a moment and keep your finger in Mark.

God is going to send Israel into exile for a multitude of sins that they have committed. But he's also going to have Ezekiel continue to prophesy to the people while they are in exile. So, look at 11:24-25. Now, you would think if you sinned badly enough that a foreign nation came in and literally carried you off into exile as judgment of God that you would have learned a thing or two about God and about holiness. Experiencing exile would certainly be a time of significant instruction, right? Wrong. Look at 12:1-2. The people hadn't learned and their hearts hadn't been changed.

I think Jesus asks this question in Mark 8 to the disciples because the disciples had seen incredible things and listened to the Son of God teach and yet, they are still missing the point. So, Jesus presses more specific questions in verses 19-20. He

reminds them of the details of the bread miracles. But ultimately the feeding miracles were not about physical provision. The heart of those miracles should have been teaching about Jesus Himself as the one who provides full sufficiency. Yet, they are found arguing in the boat about the fact that they have no bread.

So, Jesus concludes with a simple question intended to help them grasp the fact that they are still in darkness concerning who Jesus is. Look at verse 21. We mentioned this earlier, but notice what Jesus says here. Not, do you not yet believe? He asks, do you not yet understand? Of course, he wants them to believe, but true faith will not flourish without light.

At least one of the implications of this for us is that we cannot divorce a proper understanding of Jesus from a true faith in Jesus. Faith is not a blind leap in the darkness. Faith is not “confidence in spite of the evidence.” When we consider the Pharisees and the disciples wrong responses to Jesus we can formulate a right response of humble understanding that submits to and trusts the person and Word of Jesus. Faith is grounded in an intellectual grasp of Jesus and His work.

"Faith is conviction of the truth of God. It rests on testimony...That is why our great spiritual forefathers were pre-eminently men of one Book. They were not content till they could quote the Bible extensively and accurately, sign its psalms, expound its theology, apply its laws to daily life and solace themselves with it on their deathbeds." - Maurice Roberts

This is why we study God's Word together on Sundays. This is why I don't just give you a list of rules or a talk filled with cliché platitudes. We have to wrestle with the TRUTH of God's Word. We have to think. We have to understand. It sounds hard, but we don't understand by our own effort.

The question in verse 21 is phrased in such a way as to remind us that the disciples are not unreachable. They are bumping around in the darkness of their own distraction and lack of perception, but they are not beyond the reach of the life raft yet. They will not be able to lift the darkness of distraction on their own. It will require the illuminating power of God to give the blind sight.

And it's not accidental that right after this sequence where the disciples are still failing to see, that Mark includes this story in 8:22-26. Now, what is interesting about this story is that it takes place in stages. It's almost like his sight is not fully

there after Jesus first lays his hands on him. That's not because of anything lacking in Jesus, but it is because this story is a paradigm of what will happen to the disciples in the second half of the gospel of Mark. They will begin to see the truth about Jesus, but it won't happen all at once. But it will happen by God's power and grace and it's that same power and grace that we need to begin responding rightly to Jesus and to stay responding rightly to Jesus.