

Watching & Learning

Mark 7:24–8:26

Generally, Mark is regarded to be the memoirs of Peter. A first-generation eyewitness of Jesus tells what he has seen and heard to a younger author for a second-generation of believers living in Rome. The next several verses of Mark recount a variety of miracles on a variety of occasions at a variety of places. I am not in anyway dismissing the importance of each miracle in its own right. It would be both fascinating and worthwhile to examine each of them one by one. But, I want to approach these miracles collectively with a particular perspective in mind. I want to consider the education in this matter of the Kingdom of God for Peter and his fellow-Apostles, twelve fiercely Jewish men with twelve fully-developed Jewish preconceptions of the mission of their nation's long-awaited *Messiah*. They had as much to unlearn as they had to learn.

The mother of a six-year-old worked very hard to make him enthusiastic about the idea of school. She bought him new clothes, told him about the other children he would meet and got him so excited that he eagerly went off on the first day, and came home with excellent reports of what school was like. The next morning, his mother went to get him up. He asked, "What for?" She replied, "You have to go to school." He said, "What, again?" The boy just didn't get it.

Education, like any other issue of growth takes time. It is more than a one-day process. It is more than an overnight process. This is hard, cold reality, but it is a reality that by human nature we hate. I went to kindergarten graduation last Wednesday. For some time into the evening, Kiera was strutting. I got the sense that my six-year-old granddaughter really thought she had peaked.

One common obstacle for most growing Christians is self-*unawareness* about where we are in terms of growth. One root of this quirk is the tendency to mistake experiences and giftedness with maturity. This is precisely why the Corinthian believers were so obnoxious. Extremely gifted people – tongue-speakers, miracle-workers, prophesiers – each mistook his or her own gift for spiritual maturity. They were not in the same ballpark with maturity. Of course, why pick on Corinth? Spirituality complexes remain a part of the Christian landscape to this very day.

In *chapter six*, Jesus sent His Apostles throughout Galilee to preach the kingdom. He gave them power to heal the sick and to drive out demons, but from the moment they returned, we have seen them as little more than mesmerized observers of Jesus. Maybe, they returned from their tours a bit full of themselves. That would be in character, but now they are bit players, displaying nothing but doubt, skepticism and fear while Jesus feeds multitudes, walks on water and takes on the Pharisees. Should they not have returned from their miracle tours more developed? Why, at one point, does Jesus call them the equivalent of thickheaded, asking "Are you so dull?"

Ultimately, these men would lay the foundation for the Christian church, so why does the Holy Spirit make us privy to all their foibles on the way to greatness? I think we are witnesses to twelve ordinary men growing into the pillars of the early church as an encouragement to us that maturity will happen if we remain close to Jesus, and if we minister according to His bidding.

The precise kingdom lessons that the disciples were struggling with had to do with their preconceived notions of God's kingdom and of *Messiah's* mission. They expected an earthly King and Warrior. Jesus was a "do-gooder," and really nice. Jesus was certainly powerful, but they would have preferred that He wield His power in the deliverance of their nation from the Romans. This meek, gentle *Messiah* seemed to have another plan. Perhaps, the most galling difference between Jesus' vision of the kingdom and their own was that Jesus' kingdom would welcome the weak, the powerless, and especially, those despicable, rascally gentiles.

I. Two Foreign Miracles Reveal a Precious Lesson on Kingdom Grace (7:24-37)

A. Jesus' Grace Honors the Faith of an Unclean Woman verses 24-30

²⁴Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

²⁸"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Tyre was Gentile country. The woman was from "Syrian Phoenicia." Mark's Roman readers would immediately recognize that she was the local in this story and that Jesus was on her turf.

Does it seem troubling that Jesus would say such a harsh thing to this woman? Jews called the gentiles "dogs" to be derogatory, but Jesus used the diminutive form of the word, which means "little dogs" or "puppies" and, of course, tone is everything. He directed her mind's eye to a dinner table. In ancient gentile homes, little breeds of dogs were kept as pets. Jesus was reminding her of the cultural breach between Jews and Gentiles and of a special role that God had for the Jewish people, but I think we are safe to assume a twinkle in His eye and gentleness in His voice.

The woman followed Jesus' lead and answered, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Dogs, then as now, scrambled for any scraps that fell to the floor. Her answer humbly acknowledged that the Jews were first in line for God's salvation, but she also trusted God's love to reach to the gentiles as well. She was right. Jesus honored her faith and assured her that she could go home and find her daughter well. It is hard to imagine what the Twelve were thinking as they watched Jesus, a potential *Messiah* for the Jews, offer grace to foreigner.

B. Jesus' Grace Restores Wholeness to an Unclean Sufferer verses 31-37

³¹Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³²There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

³³After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Ephphatha! (which means, "Be opened!"). ³⁵At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Jesus must have intended to emphasize to His men that His kingdom had room for Gentiles. Tyre was northwest of Galilee. The Decapolis, an area with ten significant Greek cities, was due east of Galilee. Jesus took a deliberate northern route around Galilee to get to the Decapolis when cutting through Galilee would have been the straightest route. Was Jesus making a point? In any event, a crowd in the Decapolis greeted Him with a needy deaf man who could barely speak.

Jesus dealt with this man on an intimate level. In a private setting, He put His fingers in the man's ears and applied His saliva to the man's tongue. It sounds gross to us, but the Greeks believed there was curative power in saliva. Jesus was alerting this man in gestures he could understand that He intended to heal him. He did not have to do all this. He just healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenecian woman from long distance. He calmed a storm on Galilee with one word. The disciples must have been touched by the attentive tenderness that their Jewish *Messiah* extended this pitiful Greek man. The Twelve could not miss this precious lesson of grace; that it is poured out for all.

II. A Food Miracle Reinforces Previous Lessons on Kingdom Greatness (8:1-21)

A. The Feeding of the 4000 verses 1-10

Read this story on your own and you will see many similarities to the earlier feeding of the 5000, but you will see differences too. Jesus teaches in this region for three days. This must have been a gripping conference for no one gets around to eating for three days. They needed to eat, but Jesus was concerned that if He simply sent them home, some wouldn't make it. Those poor disciples don't know what to say. Earlier they had declared that eight months of wages could not feed a similar crowd. To their doubt, Jesus responded with a miracle that blew them out of their sandals. They knew a miracle was possible, but they were not going to be presumptuous. Earlier, they declared, "It cannot be done." This time they asked, more cautiously, "Where would we get bread?"

Of course, another miracle did follow. After both miraculous feedings, surplus food was gathered in baskets, but the words translated "baskets" are distinctly different. On the earlier occasion, when Jesus fed 5000 Jews, twelve small baskets were gathered. These were the kind of baskets in which Jews carried their lunches. This time, seven large hamper-like baskets were gathered; like the one used to sneak the Apostle Paul out of Damascus. These were not baskets for travelers to tote around. The food was evidently sent back to the villages of the area. In a moment, we will revisit this matter of those earlier twelve lunch baskets and these seven hampers of leftovers. For now, we follow the group as they hop into a boat and return to Jewish country.

B. Beware of the Yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod verses 11-18a

When Jesus and His men arrived in a place called Dalmanutha, the Pharisees immediately picked a fight with Him. All this chatter they were hearing about Jesus as a potential *Messiah* compelled them to demand "a sign from heaven." Sure, the miracles to date were impressive, but what did they have to do with *YAHWEH* restoring Israel? What did they have to do with God destroying Israel's enemies? They wanted a sign-befitting *Messiah*. He could part the Jordan in a fashion reminiscent of Joshua. He could have the earth swallow up the nearest Roman garrison.

Jesus did not choose to endure these men on this particular occasion, so back in the boat they went. The disciples quickly discovered that they had only one tiny loaf of bread. By now, they should have been confident that they would eat anytime Jesus was near a scrap of bread. Perhaps, they were trying to affix blame for the oversight. Someone must have mentioned the bread situation for it prompted Jesus to say: "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They had no idea what He meant. "Where did that come from? Does He think we're afraid we'll go hungry even after all we've seen? You guys might be afraid. I'm not afraid."

The disciples were not quick studies. I am reminded of Shelby Metcalf, the basketball coach at Texas A&M in 1987 as he recounted what he told a player who received four F's and one D. He said, "Son, looks to me like you're spending too much time on one subject." I don't know what Aramaic sounds like, but in English, I really believe Jesus might have said something like: "Guys, forget the bread! It was just an object lesson!! Focus on the reference to 'the yeast'. Yeast is that little germ that goes into the bread dough and causes everything to go haywire."

The "yeast of the Pharisees" was their errant idea that God only cared about outward things like righteousness by ritual, a Jewish world empire and the validation of their hatred for lesser Jews and all Gentiles. Such preoccupation with the external taints everything in the world of faith and religion. The "yeast of Herod" was also the idea that success is a matter of externals: titles, position, rank, building monuments to oneself, wielding and holding onto power, steamrolling anyone who gets in your way. This taints everything that the world understands about success, contentment and meaning.

These two yeasts can still draw the attention of Jesus' disciples away from all-important spiritual values and replace them with carnal preoccupations. To Jesus, the most important things in this material world were a cup of cold water given to a thirsty man or any other acts of kindness that secured not worldly acclaim or wealth but treasure in heaven. Yeast was a symbol of pervasive evil. To call the values of the Pharisees and of Herod "yeast" was to remind the Twelve that even just a little love of this world, just a little selfish ambition or just a little self-righteousness can blind a man.

C. Jesus Bids His Disciples to Consider the Baskets of Bread verses 18b-21

Jesus asked: "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" Finally, He asked two questions they could answer.

... And don't you remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

"Twelve," they replied.

²⁰"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

They answered, "Seven."

²¹He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Again, the words describing "basketfuls" are distinct for the two miracles. After Jesus fed 5000 Galileans, twelve little lunch baskets of scraps were gathered, which was handy because twelve hungry disciples had not eaten that day. But, when 4000 gentiles were fed, seven hampers of scraps were gathered. It may be that the twelve little baskets were meant to represent God's grace to the twelve tribes of Israel while the seven hampers represented God's grace to "the seven nations of the Gentiles," a Hebrew figure of speech for the rest of the world. I cannot know that the Twelve put all that together at the time, but I trust that they caught the immediate Kingdom lesson. "Do you still not understand?" was Jesus' invitation for them to think for a change.

Matthew's account of this story confirms to us that the light finally did come on for the Twelve. They grasped that Jesus' reference to yeast was not a bread issue. It was a warning against distorted values that distract men from the things that are most important to God. These surpluses proved God's presence in Jesus' work. Kingdom people need to care about the things God cares about, the things He has always cared about, even in the days of the prophets:

⁸He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. – Micah 6:8

III. A Final Miracle Reflects a Practical Lesson on Kingdom Growth (8:22-26)

²²They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

²⁴He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

²⁵Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

This is the only miracle Jesus ever worked in stages. "To Bethsaida" means that Jesus left Dalmanutha, but remained in Galilee. Was this man's blindness so deep that Jesus required two shots at getting the healing right? No, Jesus worked this healing in a way that the Apostles could also learn from it. This miracle was a picture of "dawning sight." The disciples were discipled for three unbroken years by the best Disciple ever - and they needed every minute and of that experience.

From the Gospels, we know much about Peter, the current storyteller, and his foibles, fumbles and flaws. We see his rashness, childishness, temper and cowardice. Even after he became a great Apostle, he still occasionally stumbled on his growth journey. He personally received a commission to take the Gospel to the gentiles and saw the outpouring of the Spirit in a Roman centurion's home. He eloquently reported to his fellow Jews about God's work among the Gentiles, But, even after all that, he would continue to struggle with old racial prejudices. He withdrew from Gentile believers in Antioch. Peter did not grow up overnight. No one does.

This miracle gives hope to growing disciples. No one matures in a flash. Even if we come to a belated point of realizing that we must buckle down and apply ourselves, maturity still won't come in a flash. Still, this miracle of "dawning sight" gives me hope that when I am troubled by the fact that I am not all that I want to be or all that I ought to be in Jesus, He will continue to help me to see more clearly, to trust more fully and to love more deeply over time.

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