

NCBC Youth Group
January 5, 2020

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS
MARK 8:1-26

Introduction

We will see two groups of people in our study: Those who have permanent spiritual blindness and those whose spiritual blindness is only temporary. Our text today is longer than usual, but we will go through four narratives to understand spiritual blindness. We will study the narratives first, and then we will discuss spiritual blindness as we draw from the four narratives. With expectation, we begin Mark chapter 8.

Four Thousand Fed

The chapter opens by setting the scene: There was a large crowd gathered around Jesus, and they had nothing to eat. They didn't just miss a meal; they missed several meals. Verse 2 tells us that the crowd had been with Him for three days (2). Seeing that they were in a desolate place (4), it's likely that they didn't eat much, if anything at all, for three days.

They were drawn to Him by the many miracles He performed (Matt. 15:29-31), and they stayed around with Him. Seeing that they remained with Him for three days, Jesus felt compassion for them (2). Some of them came a long distance to see Him, and making the journey back without food would have been very difficult (3). In fact, the wording in verse 3 says, "If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way."

So, Jesus didn't just send them away hungry. He is going to feed them before sending them home. I want to point out that Jesus didn't have to do this. They were the ones that came to see Him. No one was forced to remain with Him three days without food. They were free to come and go, but our God is a compassionate and caring God, and feeling compassion for them, He chose to feed them.

Now, this is an impossible task. We see later, in verse 9, that there were 4,000 men in the crowd. Matthew's account adds that there were 4,000 men besides women and children (15:38), which means that there are probably more than 15,000 people in the crowd if add the women and children. Even by today's standards, feeding 15,000 people is a difficult task; back then, in a desolate area, feeding 15,000 people is impossible.

The disciples responded in verse 4: "Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?" I don't think the disciples were doubting that Jesus could do this. Back in Mark 6:33-44, Jesus fed a crowd that is even larger, and

the disciples witnessed it. They knew He could create enough food to feed the crowd. I think they asked this question as a way of suggesting that accomplishing this task requires a miracle, a repeat of what happened earlier.

This time, they had seven loaves of bread and a few small fish (6-7). Remember that a loaf of bread is a piece of flatbread, not the kind of loaves we find in grocery stores today. And just like the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus directed the people to sit down on the ground, gave thanks for the food, broke it, and gave it to His disciples to serve the people (6-7). Miraculously, He created enough food for everyone. We really don't know how the food was created, and even if it was recorded, we probably can't comprehend it because there is no natural explanation. Science, as we understand it, certainly cannot explain what happened.

There was enough food for everyone to eat, and they were all satisfied (8). In other words, they were full, because there was more than enough food for everyone. They picked up seven large baskets¹ full of the leftover pieces (8). Jesus sent the crowd away (9), and "He entered the boat with His disciples and came to the district of Dalmanutha."²

Dalmanutha is in Galilee, and their return to Galilee concludes Jesus' trip in Gentile territory. He left for Gentile regions in Mark 7:24. He and His disciples traveled to Tyre, Sidon, and to the region of the Decapolis, where the miracle of feeding the four thousand took place.

The account of Jesus traveling through Gentile territory is significant because Jews didn't associate with Gentiles, who were considered unclean. In fact, it was forbidden for Jews to eat with Gentiles, which made this miracle more difficult for the disciples to accept. It is one thing for Jesus to have compassion on the Jews, but to do all this for the Gentiles might have been hard for some to accept. Jesus, however, was demonstrating to them that the gospel was to go out to all the people, including Gentiles. Gentiles, who were typically scorned, were recipients of the compassion of Jesus.

¹ In this account, the word "large basket" is used. This is a different word from the Mark 6:33-41 account, where a different word for basket is used. This "large basket" is big enough to fit a person in (Acts 9:25), whereas the basket in Mark 6:33-41 is a small basket. The two words distinguish the two miracles. Jesus refers to the different baskets when He recalls the two miracles to His disciples (Mark 8:18-20). Some people say that these two miracles are the same one, but that is very unlikely given the notable differences: 5,000 vs. 4,000 men, Bethsaida vs. Decapolis, Jews vs. Gentiles, one day vs. three days, and five loaves vs. seven loaves.

² Matthew records the place as "the region of Magadan." This is not a contradiction. Both names reference the same place between Capernaum and Magdala.

The lesson for the disciples came at this time because the cross was less than a year away. Soon, they will be taking the gospel to Jews and Gentiles.

The Pharisees Test Jesus

When they returned to Galilee, Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him (11). Matthew tells us that the Sadducees were there too,³ which is interesting because Pharisees and Sadducees were rivals. But in this moment, they were united in their hatred and rejection of Jesus.

They wanted a “sign from heaven, to test Him” (11). Haven’t they seen miracles from Jesus? After all, we are in chapter 8 of Mark, half-way through. Jesus has performed miracles since chapter 1, and there is at least one miracle recorded in each chapter leading up to this point. The Pharisees were present for many of the miracles, but they still rejected Him. Never at any point did they deny His miracles. There was no denying it. Instead, they attributed Jesus’ power as the power of demons (Mark 3:22).

They didn’t ask to see a sign from heaven because they truly wanted to believe in Jesus. They did it, as verse 11 states, “to test Him.” They were hoping He would somehow fail, and they could discredit Him. They had already made up their minds about Him. In Mark 3:6, the Pharisees and Herodians were conspiring to destroy Jesus. Again, Pharisees and Herodians were rivals as well, so this unlikely alliance among the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians tells you how much they hated Jesus and how desperate they were to destroy Him.

Mark simply ends this encounter in verse 12 by saying Jesus didn’t give them a sign. Matthew, however, includes a lengthier response from Jesus (Mt. 16:2-4): “[2] But He replied to them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” [3] And in the morning, “There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? [4] An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.’”

You may have heard of the saying, “Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.” Well, these Pharisees knew how to read the sky and predict the weather, but they didn’t recognize the coming of the Messiah. These are leading religious men, and they proved to be more useful as weathermen than theologians. Now,

³ Matt. 16:1

Matthew also tells us that Jesus didn't give them a sign, but there is an additional detail: "A sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah" (Mt. 16:4).

Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish,⁴ so Jesus will be resurrected three days after His crucifixion. Trust me, they remembered this because after Jesus was crucified, the Pharisees went to Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again'" (Mt. 27:63). And when Jesus rose from the dead, they bribed the guards to lie about His resurrection (Mt. 28:11-15).

That's why Jesus refused to give them a sign. No matter how many signs and miracles they see, they will not believe. John 12:37 says, "But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him." So, not giving them a sign, Jesus left them. They rejected the Light, and now the Light is gone; that is very tragic.

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Jesus left with His disciples, and His disciples forgot to take bread with them (14). They had one loaf of bread with them (14). Just as they were thinking about food, Jesus tells them in verse 15, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Matthew adds the leaven of the Sadducees as well (Mt. 16:6). The disciples thought Jesus was talking about food. They heard the word "leaven" and immediately thought about food, but that's not the point.

Jesus said to them in verses 17-18, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? [18] Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?" They were still fixated on physical things—food. Jesus was talking about spiritual things, and they failed to understand what Jesus was really talking about.

Jesus jogs their memories in verses 19-20. They saw Jesus feed 5,000 with five loaves, and they ended up with twelve baskets full of broken pieces. They just saw Jesus feed 4,000 with seven loaves, and they picked up seven large baskets full of broken pieces. The last thing they need to worry about is not having food with them.

So, what is Jesus talking about? Leaven is like yeast. It makes the dough rise. Leaven is used by Jesus as an illustration of influence. In this case, bad influence. He was instructing His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herod. In

⁴ Matt. 12:39-40

Matthew 16:12, the disciples understood that Jesus didn't mean to beware of the "leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Just like a small amount of yeast or leaven can have an effect on a lot of dough, so also, the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees can have a large influence.

Primarily, Jesus was warning them about the doctrinal errors that were taught and the personal hypocrisy. Beware of their teaching and how they live their lives.

If you go back to Mark 8:12, you will see Jesus saying, "Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." He uses the word "generation" to point to more than just the Pharisees and Sadducees. He is referring to all the people who have been led astray by their hypocritical teaching. This is the leaven of the Pharisees at work.

Healing of the Blind Man

They arrived at their destination in verse 22. They came to Bethsaida, which is on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is also the site of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6. There, a blind man was brought to Jesus, and they asked Jesus to heal him (22). Verse 23: Jesus led him out of the village, "and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, 'Do you see anything?'" Jesus used spit because this man is blind, so the spit is a way for him to feel what Jesus was about to do.

Interestingly enough, the man isn't fully healed. He could see, but not clearly. Verse 24, "I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around." Did Jesus only partially heal this man? Some of the modern faith healers like to think so, but Jesus never does anything without fully accomplishing His purpose. This man's vision was fully restored in verse 25, and he was commanded not to enter the village (26).

Spiritual Blindness

We covered a lot verses today, but there is a common theme that I want you to notice: spiritual sight. After seeing all of the miracles Jesus performed, many people remained spiritually blind. This text points out to us two spiritual conditions: permanent spiritual blindness and temporary spiritual blindness.

The Pharisees were perhaps the most hostile toward Jesus, and their rejection and hatred of Jesus are blatant. Their spiritual blindness was permanent. Their hearts were hardened. Instead of believing Jesus to be the Son of God, they claimed that He was demon possessed. Instead of believing He was the Messiah, they sought to destroy Him.

Many people who came to see Jesus were also permanently spiritually blind. They weren't openly hostile toward Jesus like the Pharisees, but they also never believed Jesus as the Son of God, their Savior. They were amazed and astonished at His teachings and miracles, but most people never made it past intrigue.

However, there were a group of people who only had temporary spiritual blindness. The disciples, for example, were blind, but Jesus opened their eyes and gave them eyes of faith. In the following passage, Mark 8:27-30, Peter acknowledged Jesus as "the Christ." They were blind, but now they see.

The healing of the blind man is the perfect illustration of temporary spiritual blindness. Remember that he saw men like trees walking around. His sight was partially restored; it was fuzzy and blurry. I think Jesus did this to show the disciples their condition. They heard "leaven" and immediately thought about physical sustenance. They are not blind like the Pharisees, yet they also did not see clearly. They, too, were like that man who saw men like trees walking around. Jesus didn't heal incompletely; He did it to show them their condition.

Only Jesus can remove our spiritual blindness. The Pharisees rejected Jesus and remained in permanent spiritual blindness. Many people today still reject Jesus and remain in the same condition. It is tragic to hear God's Word taught at church—and maybe even at home—only to turn away from God.

For Christians, let us resolve to diligently read His Word, so we can live in a way that honors and glorifies Him. Let us be diligent also in prayer, asking God to help us to understand His truth, so that we may see His truth clearly and live it out.