



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## What If It's Not About the Bread?

Mark 8.1-21

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### *How Could They Ask That?*

In a way, it seems odd. Some Pharisees approach Jesus “seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him” (Mark 8.11). Since they would not have tested him unless they were quite familiar with him and what he was doing, we wonder why they felt the need to ask for yet another sign. Even if they had not been personally present when Jesus fed the 4,000 (8.1-10), it is hard to believe that news of that feat would have escaped their attention, especially since he had previously fed the 5,000 (6.30-44). We also know that, after one of the first signs Mark reported, some Pharisees “went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, to destroy him” (Mark 3.6). Even if the Pharisees in Mark 8 consisted of a different group of men from those involved in the plot in Mark 3, it is hard to see how they would have not known about Jesus’ signs.

So, what are they up to in chapter 8? How does their action prompt Jesus’ saying about “leaven” (8.15)? How does that lead to his dialogue with the disciples and the open ended question with which he concludes: “Do you not yet understand” (8.21)? What should they have understood? What should we learn?

### *Some Important Things for Us to Know<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Two things about how Mark tells Jesus’ story*

1. Mark characteristically emphasized “the secretive and mysterious nature of Jesus’ message (cf. 4:10-13, 33-34; 6:52)” (Hurtado, 128). But he also reported that his requests for secrecy usually resulted in proclamation. It is evident that he wanted his deeds to be known, especially to his disciples. The deeds were integral to his kingdom mission (see 1.14-15). When we think about that, and also note Jesus’ exasperation with his disciples over their inability to understand, we realize that the point of the secrecy requests is less about keeping his works quiet than about coming to see the deeper meaning, the “secret” that those who were maturing would come to know.
2. Mark made frequent allusions to Old Testament language that drew attention to the promises and themes Jesus was fulfilling. So, his record of the feeding of the 5,000 (6.30-44) would have reminded his readers of the way God provided bread for Israel in the wilderness and the number twelve would have suggested a “symbolic association of

twelve with Israel" (Hurtado, 123). In his account of the feeding of the 4,000, they would have probably recalled that the word translated "far away" (μακρόθεν, *makrothen*) (8.3) was "frequently used in the Greek OT to describe foreign (gentile [sic]) areas and in OT promises of a future ingathering of the people of God from such distant lands (e.g., Isa. 60:4, 9; Jer. 46:27; and passages found only in the Greek version of Jeremiah, 26:27; 38:10)" (Hurtado, 122). They would have also likely recalled that the number seven (and seventy) was commonly associated with Gentiles. In sum, the feeding of the 5,000 pointed to something about Jesus' mission to Israel; the feeding of the 4,000, appearing immediately after his work among the Gentiles in 7.24-37, reinforced the point that there would also be a mission to Gentiles.

### *Israel's history of resisting the divine message*

It is important to recall that 8.11-13 is not the first time Mark has reported hostility from Pharisees. They resisted the healing of the man brought to Jesus by his four friends (2.6-12), criticized him for eating with tax collectors and sinners (2.16-17), challenged him when his disciples were plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath (2.23-28), reacted with anger and plotting when he healed the man with the withered hand (3.1-6), and challenged him over his failure to hold his disciples accountable to keep the tradition of the elders (7.1-23). Their dispute with Jesus in 8:11-13 continued a pattern of consistent and willful resistance.

In addition, the terms Mark used to describe them place the Pharisees in the company of the worst of their rebellious ancestors. They were "testing," or "tempting" (πειράζω, *peirazō*), Jesus (Mark 8.11; cf. 1.13; 10.2; 12.15), a practice that echoes Old Testament passages that speak of Israel

"tempting" God by doubting his previously demonstrated works and demanding new ones (Pss. 95:9-10; 78:17-20, 40-43, 56; 106:13-14; Num. 14:1-10, 20-25). Jesus' reply, a refusal of their demand for a sign, is also an allusion to OT passages such as we have just mentioned. The term **generation** alludes to OT passages such as Deuteronomy 1:35; Psalm 95:10, where the rebellious Israelites who demanded further signs of God's powers are called an "evil generation."

In short, Mark uses this vocabulary to depict the Pharisees' request for further proof of Jesus' authority as an act of disobedience like the disobedience of Israel in the wilderness, in the time of Moses (Hurtado, 124-125).

### *It's About More Than Bread*

All this helps us see the lesson found in the climax of our text (vv. 14-21) where "leaven" (v. 15) is the most important word. Originating with the ban on leaven at the first Passover, (see Exod 12.14-20), "leaven" was a symbol among Jews and Christians for evil (1 Cor 5.6-8), false teaching (Gal 5.9; Matt 16.12), and hypocrisy (Luke 12.1). Its use here takes us to the heart of Jesus' point. Notice two things.

1. First, Jesus' miracles are designed to show more than a mighty wonder-worker. We have seen this before (e.g. Mark 6.30-52); here the idea is expanded. The disciples were worried about bread loaves, their thinking perilously close to those in John who followed only for the loaves (John 6.26). Jesus wanted them to see that his reign involved much more. He called them to a deeper level of understanding and commitment.

2. Second, the lesson to be learned from the sign of the bread was about complete openness to the true teaching of God. In verse 18, Jesus supports his explanation of the leaven statement (v. 15) with a quotation of Jeremiah 5.21, part of a stern rebuke (in 5.20-31) of "Israel for failing to acknowledge the Lord God" (Hurtado, 126). Three things stand out.
  - a. They were a hard-hearted people who refused to listen to the LORD or respect his authority (vv. 20-24);
  - b. Their leaders made the problem worse (vv. 26-31);
  - c. Their religion was more about how they "love[d] to have" things than compliance with the will of God (v. 31).

They illustrate the truth that the test of whether we are obeying God is not whether we do what we agree with or like, but whether we comply when we don't agree or like the command.

In Mark 8.18, Jesus was saying that the Pharisees who asked for the sign were just like the leaders in Jeremiah! Although they were dedicated to knowing the law, generally interpreted it correctly (see Matt 23.3), and were diligent in its practice, they could not get past their customary ways to accept God's way in Jesus. In contrast to the Gentiles who received Jesus in 7.24-37, they "refus[ed] to see what they [did] not want to acknowledge" (Hurtado, 126). That is what Jesus had in mind when he warned about "the leaven of the Pharisees."

His concern for his disciples was that the same hardness of heart would befall them (8.17). That is the lesson of this text for us. Jesus would have us reject the example of the Pharisees and go beyond the easier grasping of shallow, surface level teachings. Instead, we should cultivate a practice that allows us to experience a deeper understanding of the things of God. He calls us to never base what we will accept or do on how we "love to have" things, to never be so attached to our customary and comfortable ways that we close ourselves off from following the will of God into new ventures of faith and obedience.

Jesus' first disciples would soon learn that following Jesus that way would lead to the ultimate price of a cross (8.31-34). Have you and I learned that essential truth?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following ideas are drawn from the discussion in Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1983, 1989), 121-132.