

September 7, 2025

HARD-HEARTED UNBELIEF AND THE KINDNESS OF OUR LORD

Mark 8:1-26

(18 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

I think our text this morning, Mark 8:1-26, works like one of those television shows where the series begins with multiple, different, seemingly unconnected storylines, but by the end you realize that they're all weaving together to form different parts of one over-arching storyline. As you first look at the text, it feels like we've pulled together four, somewhat unrelated stories. In 8:1-10, Jesus feeds another group of thousands of people using only a few loaves of bread, as we've seen him do before. In verses 11-13, Jesus has another showdown with the Pharisees, but it's quite brief and seemingly not a big deal. In verses 14-21, Jesus has a conversation with his disciples while they were in a boat together, as the disciples were anxious about having enough bread and Jesus warns them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod. And, finally, in verses 22-26, Jesus heals a blind man, but he does so in a fashion we've not seen before—healing him in two stages. Those are the four stories, and as I mentioned, they can feel somewhat unrelated, especially at first glance. However, once you begin working through the stories, you'll soon discover that they are all four related.

Therefore, what I want to do is walk through these four stories, and eventually, as we work through them, I want to show you how they're related. But I don't just want to walk through the stories, I want to stop and make two points of application along the way. I'll make the first after working through the first three episodes in our text, and I'll make the second after we get through the fourth. So, let's start where the text begins, with Jesus feeding the four thousand.

As our text opens, we realize just how popular Jesus has become. We're told that a great crowd had gathered around Jesus, and Mark mentions that this was happening "again" (v. 1). This is nothing new. However, there is one element we find out that shows how dedicated the crowds are to following Jesus. We're told in verse 2 that they've been with Jesus for three days and have nothing to eat, while many of them have come from a good way away (v. 3). They're so eager to be around Jesus that they're even putting their health at risk. And because they've been so long without food and some are so far from home, Jesus is afraid that if he were to send them away to get food, some would faint along the way (v. 3). Therefore, in his compassion, Jesus shares with his disciples his desire to feed them.

And here's where things get interesting. You'd think that after the feeding the 5,000 earlier,¹ that the disciples would say, "Jesus, you're going to do one of your amazing miracles again and feed these thousands of people, right? I mean, we saw what you did earlier in nearly these exact circumstances." But, perhaps amazingly, that isn't their response. Rather, they react as if they've

¹ Which, again, was actually more like 15,000-20,00 when you account for women and children.

never seen Jesus do such a thing, asking Jesus, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” (v. 4).

This response is so odd to us, having read of the feeding of the 5,000 a few chapters earlier, that some commentators have suggested that there’s only one feeding miracle that Mark tells twice. Otherwise, why wouldn’t the disciples have anticipated this upcoming miracle? But the suggestion that this is merely a retelling of the same miracle doesn’t work for many reasons, one being that Jesus will have a conversation with his disciples in verses 14-21 in which he’ll refer to both feeding miracles. So why such an odd response? Well, we don’t actually get that answer until the third episode of our text, so let’s keep pressing on.

Jesus asks the disciples how many loaves of bread they have, they answer, “Seven,” and he has the crowd sit down (vv. 5-6). The disciples may not know what Jesus is about to do, but we sure do, don’t we? Well, sure enough, Jesus gives thanks, breaks the loaves, multiplies them, and has the disciples distribute enough to the crowd that they all eat and are satisfied while the disciples fill up seven baskets full of leftover pieces. And, so, once more, Jesus miraculously feeds the crowd.

There’s little to say about what Jesus does here that we haven’t said already as he fed the 5,000. But, that’s okay because, actually, I think the main figures Mark wants us to consider are the disciples. After all, their puzzling response shows something is wrong in how they’re thinking. They’re just not putting the obvious puzzle pieces together. Again, we’ll so why shortly.

In the next scene, Jesus and the disciples have come to the district of Dalmanutha where the Pharisees arrive in order to argue with Jesus. Mark tells us that they were seeking from Jesus a sign from heaven to test him. But Jesus responds, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation” (v. 12).

Now, let’s take a few seconds to parse this out a bit. First, the Pharisees, we’re told, were seeking a sign “to test him.” That is, they weren’t interested in believing and obeying Jesus, simply looking for confirmation that he is the Messiah. They had hearts that didn’t believe, wouldn’t believe, and wanted to discredit Jesus. For such a group, Jesus wasn’t going to meet their demands and provide another sign. So, this text shouldn’t be used to argue that we should never ask the Lord to confirm whether we’re rightly understanding his will in some situation. It’s quite a different ordeal to approach the Lord, saying, “I’m eager to obey you; I just want to make sure I’m doing the right thing” than what the Pharisees were doing here. That’s why Jesus twice refers to them as “this generation,” a term that is so often used in the OT to designate a rebellious people. So, Jesus dismisses their demands, and we move right on. In fact, it’s so quick that we’re probably asking why Mark included this interaction, but that’ll become clear in the third story as things come into focus for us.

After the brief encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus gets back into the boat with his disciples, and Mark gives us this interesting detail that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, by which he means that they’d forgotten to bring a sufficient amount of bread to feed everyone for any

amount of time. They just had one loaf with them. This detail is needed for us as readers of this text because it helps us see why they end up missing what Jesus says to them next.

We're told in verse 15 that Jesus cautioned his disciples, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." This, I think, is the main point of these first three stories. But what does Jesus mean by the "leaven of the Pharisees and Herod?" Well, the disciples will show they didn't know either, but I think we can put it together.

First, Jesus says this because of that showdown we just read about in verses 11-13. Second, we should recognize that "leaven" is often used figuratively to refer to sinful beliefs or practices in Scripture. And, third, this "leaven" is exhibited by both the Pharisees and Herod, according to Jesus. So, what do the Pharisees and Herod have in common? Well, very little, except one thing. They both exhibit hard-hearted unbelief when they encounter Jesus. And I think that's exactly what Jesus was warning the disciples to beware of. He wants them to be on guard against hard-hearted unbelief taking root their own hearts.

Now, the disciples miss the metaphor and think Jesus is literally talking about leaven—that ingredient put into dough that spreads throughout, causing it to rise. Therefore, they think Jesus is giving them a hard time for not having brought a sufficient amount of bread with them. Thus, we're told that in response to Jesus' warning, "They began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread" (v. 16). They're completely missing the point, but by missing the point, they're actually exposing why Jesus' warning is so dire.

As Jesus hears their arguing, he begins asking them questions. After all, there are two problems with their response to Jesus' warning. First, they have clearly missed what Jesus was actually telling them they needed to beware of—hard-hearted unbelief, as demonstrated by the Pharisees and Herod. And, second, even with their misunderstanding, why would they be concerned about bread anyway, when Jesus had just miraculously fed thousands for a second time? That's why Jesus asks them a series of questions. We see this in verses 17-20 as Mark writes, "And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' They said to him, 'Twelve.' 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' And he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'"

Now, at this point, we can see how the first three stories relate. We see why the disciples respond so oddly in the first story and why we needed to get a glimpse of the hard-hearted unbelief of the Pharisees in the second story. It was because, to use Jesus' words, the disciples may have had eyes, but they still didn't see. They hadn't really been learning the lessons that they should have been learning as Jesus did these things. They didn't understand really who he was or how powerful he was. Jesus' miracles weren't producing greater faith in them to see

clearly who he was. There was enough hard-hearted unbelief that they didn't realize that worrying about a lack of bread on the boat was the silliest thing in the world.

You see, their problem was two-fold, and I want to make sure we see both elements of this. First, they were concerned about something they shouldn't have been concerned about. And, second, they were blinded to a problem that they should have been concerned about but felt no concern whatsoever. Here's what I mean. They were concerned that they didn't have enough bread. And Jesus' questions show how silly that concern was. Twice he'd provided so much food out of a few loaves of bread that baskets full of bread had been collected after feeding thousands. Now, they were concerned that one loaf wasn't enough for them. That response shows an element of unbelief in their hearts—unbelief that can even look a bit like the Pharisees. That's their second problem. They actually had something they should've been concerned about in their hearts, and they were oblivious to it. And Jesus was warning them about this because if hard-hearted unbelief isn't addressed, it can act like leaven in that it starts out as seemingly inconsequential, but then it infiltrates everything, spreads, and affects everything.

If they had faith, they would have handled Jesus' interactions about feeding the 4,000 differently. They would have said, "Of course you can do this, Jesus. We've seen it before." Similarly, if they had faith, they wouldn't have been anxious about only having one loaf of bread on their journey. They would have known that Jesus is willing and capable to care for them just as he had the crowds. But a heart characterized by unbelief can live through miracle after miracle and then act as if there's no hope when faced with the same circumstances only moments later.

My guess is that most of us hear that and we're nodding in our hearts, but just in case you don't resonate this, let me spell out how this might happen in our lives. Imagine that you've walked through a series of events in life, seeing the Lord miraculously provide for your needs. You didn't know how you'd pay for college, so you cried out to the Lord, and money was provided that you never saw coming. Your car was breaking down, you prayed again, and the Lord brought someone along who provided the parts and labor for your repairs. You had a medical procedure, thought you'd pay for it the rest of your life, asked the Lord to provide for you, and he raised up someone who covered your bill anonymously in its entirety. And now, you're in a place where it looks like next month's utility bill is going to exceed how much you have in your checking account.

What should be a reasonable response? Well, like we'd anticipate the disciples responding in verses 1-10, a reasonable response would be to say, "I've witnessed my Lord graciously and faithfully provide for me before, and so I won't be anxious, but I'll trust him." But how do we so often respond? We're wrecked with anxiety, asking, "How in the world am I going to be able to pay my utility bill?" In other words, if the stories of our lives were written down like the disciples' interactions with Jesus are recorded here, readers of our life stories would be saying, "Their response makes no sense. Are they blind to what the Lord has so faithfully done for them?"

But let's settle in here for a bit and stay with the example. In that moment of anxiety, there are two things going wrong with us. First, you're anxiously concerned about something that you

shouldn't be anxiously concerned about. Why is the utility bill shaking you to your core when the Lord has proven himself so gracious and faithful? That's problem number one. But the second problem is that because your heart is anxiously obsessed with the utility bill, it's blinding you to a concern you should have. You should feel concern that despite all of the Lord's miraculous provision, you're showing signs of hard-heartedness and unbelief. The concern of your heart, in that moment of great anxiety, should be, "Why, after all the Lord has done, do I not trust him and rest in his steadfast love and care for me instead of being gripped with anxiety?" That's reason for concern. That's what Jesus wanted the disciples to be concerned about when he told them, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And so it is with us. So, here's the first point of application for us: we must beware of and fight against unbelief stemming from our hardened hearts.

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In other words, our unbelief and refusal to rest in our Lord isn't a response just to laugh off. We must see unbelief like leaven that can grow and spread. It's why the author of Hebrews issues a strong warning in Hebrews 3:12-14, saying, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."

The fact that you're not believing what the Bible says about who Jesus is and allowing his faithfulness in your life move you to trust him more should set off alarm bells and throw you into emergency action. You must begin reminding yourself from Scripture who your Lord is and why he can be trusted. You need believing friends, who'll speak truth to you and help you fight against unbelief. You must pray and ask the Lord to soften your hardened heart.

Unbelief deceives us and hardens us as we ignore it, and it is more threatening to us than any utility bill could ever be. Our problem is that too many times we're concerned about small, inconsequential matters and blinded to and unconcerned about great threats to our souls. And so we must beware of and fight against lingering unbelief in our hearts, recognizing that it is an enemy, trying to pull us toward hell. That's the point of the first three stories. They build up to Jesus' warning he gives his disciples, and it's a warning we must hear as well.

But that's not where our story ends. There's one more section in our text where Jesus heals a blind man, and it's a bit odd when compared to prior healing stories. As Jesus and the disciples come to Bethsaida, the people bring to him a blind man, asking Jesus to touch him. Then, Jesus takes him out of the village, spits and touches the man, putting spit on his eyes. Now, though weird, it is similar to at least one prior healing episode, and so nothing really stands out, that is, until Jesus asks him a question. Oddly, Jesus asks, "Do you see anything?" (v. 23).

What's odd about this is that Jesus has never had to ask this question. He'd always healed instantaneously, and the person has been fully healed. But, as we might expect based on Jesus'

question, this man isn't healed completely. He answers that he sees men, but they look like trees walking (v. 24). That is, his sight is back but still bad enough he couldn't distinguish between trees and people. So, Jesus lays his hands on him again, and when the man opens his eyes, his sight is restored, and he sees everything clearly. Then, Jesus sends him on his way, telling him not to spread news of this, not even entering the village—as we've seen Jesus do before.

But why did Jesus do this healing in stages? What was this whole thing about? Well, I think the answer (and commentators agree) is that Jesus is actually providing a parable for the disciples and what he will do for them. Just a few verses prior, he had asked them, "Having eyes do you not see?" (v. 18). And they clearly didn't see at that time, still blinded in some unbelief. It's why Jesus had issued them the warning to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.

But now, Jesus is acting out what he would do for his disciples. In other words, Jesus is following his dire warning issued to his disciples with a picture of how he'll graciously work in them, give them eyes to see, and build their steadfast faith. Now, it would come in stages—as we see with the man's healing. In fact, we'll see this shortly as Peter's eyes are opened enough to confess that Jesus is the Christ (v. 29) but still blinded enough that he fails to see Jesus must suffer and die (vv. 31-33).

But why follow a dire warning with such an encouraging reminder of what the Lord would do for them? The answer is that Scripture often does this. Think about Philippians 2:12-13. Paul warns the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling in verse 12 only to remind them in verse 13 that the Lord will work in them to ensure this happens. And that's just one other of many such examples. And the fact that this pattern is repeated is good for us because it reminds us that what Jesus is graciously picturing that he'll do for his disciples as he restores this man's sight is what our Lord always does for his children. Our Lord builds steadfast faith in his children so that we're not overcome by unbelief. Rest in that. That's the point of this healing story.

We can trust our Lord to build steadfast faith in us, bit by bit, throughout our lives

Right now, though you may feel overwhelmed, your life is a reminder that the Lord isn't giving you over to unbelief. He loves you too much to let that happen. So, it may feel like he's simply pouring trials on you. But remember the words of James: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2-3). That's the kindness of your Heavenly Father.

Now, God's gracious sovereign work never functions in Scripture to lessen our responsibility. So, you fight against any sliver of unbelief with everything you've got. Again, fight as if it's trying to pull you into hell. But you fight with great hope, trusting that the Lord, little by little, is working to build in you steadfast faith, even as he little by little restored this blind man's sight. And does that surprise us since he's already demonstrated his love for us by living, dying, and being raised for us? Let's trust and obey. Amen.