

## **Slow Is Not The Same As Rejection**

### **Mark 8:1-26**

#### **Introduction - Not Always Getting It**

Does anyone here remember helping their children or grandchildren or maybe a friend with homework? A few years back I was helping Evangeline with her homework which I think was grade 5 maths. I helped Evangeline with a number of maths problems before I looked at one and said, "I'm sorry, Evie. I don't know what you're supposed to do in this problem, you'll have to speak to your teacher about it." (and this was grade 5 maths!) At this point Evangeline said, "No, this is how you work out this problem." Evangeline explained it nice and clearly to me and I understood it (and I also realised that Evie had more than enough ability to do maths ... she was just too lazy to sit down and do it until her dad was beside her!).

The next morning (the very next morning), I looked down at that maths book and to the problem which Evangeline had explained to me, and which I had understood the night before, and the maths problem made no sense to me at all. The comprehension which I had had the night before was gone. How can I be so slow of learning and have such difficulty in retaining understanding?

This morning we're going to see that the disciples were also quite slow of understanding and there was a danger that they needed to avoid in their slowness but there was also a reason for them to have hope that their slowness in understanding was not the end of the story.

#### **Setting The Scene (vv. 1-10)**

Mark 8 starts with an account of Jesus feeding 4,000 people. This is the second mass feeding of people in Mark's Gospel after the record of Jesus feeding 5,000 people in chapter 6. Now some people have held that there must have been just one time when Jesus fed such a large number and the story was later broken into two. There are two main reasons why people hold that there must have only been one

account. First, there are certain similarities between the stories: Jesus uses bread and fish in both stories, both times the disciples didn't know how such a large crowd could be fed, both stories include a giving of thanks for the food and both stories finish with travelling by water.

However, there are also a number of significant differences between the stories: the number of people being fed and the amount of available food is different, the way the crowds sit and the description of the surrounds is different and even the amount of leftovers and type of basket are different (something we don't notice in our English Bibles). The evidence would be that you certainly can't prove that there was only one feeding that has been broken into two accounts based on similarities and differences (indeed those who have studied the passing down of stories have pointed out that it is more common for two accounts to be coalesced into a single story rather than the other way around).

What then is the second main reason that people think that there couldn't have been this second feeding? Put simply, some people find it impossible to think that the disciples would be so slow as to not know where the food would come from to feed this people. I'll read the relevant sections again so we can hear the similarities and differences of the disciples responses.

**Mark 6:35-38** reads: By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'

But he answered, 'You give them something to eat.'

They said to him, 'That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?'

'How many loaves do you have?' he asked. 'Go and see.'

When they found out, they said, 'Five – and two fish.'

**Mark 8:1-5** reads: During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have

already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.’

His disciples answered, ‘But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?’

‘How many loaves do you have?’ Jesus asked.

‘Seven,’ they replied.

We note from the two readings that there are differences between the disciples’ comments. The comments in Mark 6 have a tone of exasperation whereas Mark 8 has the disciples more simply express confusion or being unsure.

Is it really unbelievable to think that the disciples needed to learn a lesson twice? Up until this point in Mark’s Gospel the disciples have repeatedly been shown to be a bit slow to comprehend what Jesus was talking about to the point where Jesus could be quite exasperated.

Not only do I think that we have in this story an account of Jesus and the disciples which is consistent with the rest of Mark’s Gospel but recognising this slowness of understanding on the part of the disciples is critical in understanding the whole of Mark 8.

### The Pharisees’ Rejection And Jesus’ Warning (vv. 11-15)

Following on from the story of the feeding of the four thousand we note that the disciples aren’t the only group to be mentioned in the story. In a very short little section, verses 11 and 12, we’re told of a conversation with the Pharisees, “The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.’”

Now the Pharisees are being presented in contrast to the disciples on this occasion and so what is the contrast which is being presented? The disciples are slow to understand Jesus and what he is doing but the Pharisees reject Jesus and what he’s doing. The Pharisees had seen lots of evidence that Jesus’ power came

from God and that Jesus was presenting himself as God's agent, the Messiah, on earth but here they are asking for a sign. This asking for a sign is not really genuine. They either wanted a sign that would be so clear as to not require any faith or they were asking for a sign that would fit their expectation as to what the Messiah was going to be and do.

We see more clearly that the Pharisees are presented as being in contrast to the disciples by Jesus warning his disciple of the yeast, that is the influence, of the Pharisees. “‘Be careful,’ Jesus warned them. ‘Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.’” What is the influence of the Pharisees and of Herod which the disciples were to watch out for? We know from the immediately preceding verses that the Pharisees were asking for a sign and in Luke 23:8 we read, “When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.” Thus the influence of the Pharisees and of Herod would have been to move the disciples to likewise demand a sign, Jesus didn't want the disciples to request a sign that would have taken away for any need of trust or a sign that would show Jesus to be the agent of God that the Jews had been looking for (probably some political or military leader who would kick out the Romans).

When I was a kid I remember praying something along the lines of, “God, if you give me a new bike I'll believe in you.” I wonder if it is this kind of childish and manipulative thinking which Jesus is taking issue with here. For all the fact that the Pharisees had a remarkable grasp of the words of God's Law, they failed to receive the One to whom God's Law pointed. Despite Herod having tremendous political power he was powerless to understand the Kingdom which Jesus was bringing.

In contrast to the powerful Pharisees and Herod, we have the disciples who are presented as being slow and needing assistance to gain a correct understanding. How then do we grow and develop in our understanding of God and of Jesus but not become like the Pharisees and Herod? The next section of this story helps us to answer this question.

## The Disciples' Solution And Jesus' Solution (vv. 16-21)

We now come to a little exchange which is almost comical in nature. The disciples completely misunderstand what Jesus is talking about.

“The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. ‘Be careful,’ Jesus warned them. ‘Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.’ They discussed this with one another and said, ‘It is because we have no bread.’”

Jesus is warning the disciples of the influence of the the Pharisees and of Herod but, because he used the expression ‘yeast,’ the disciples think he’s telling them off for not bringing bread!

What do the disciples start to do? They basically start a little blame game with each other. “Why don’t we have bread with us? Where’s the roster? Who was responsible for the blankets for pig in a blanket?” (actually that probably wouldn’t be kosher but you get the idea)

In contrast to the disciples’ solution to their problem of blaming each other, let’s look at the solution that Jesus gives to them which will address the warning which he gave the disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod as well as well as the disciples immediate concern for bread.

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? 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? And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?’

‘Twelve,’ they replied.

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

They answered, ‘Seven.’

He said to them, ‘Do you still not understand?’

Notice the strong emphasis on the disciples’ slowness and their lack of understanding. Of what events does Jesus remind his disciples? The two times when

he fed large numbers of people and how much of an abundance there was leftover. What then is Jesus pointing them to? His presence? Jesus points to himself. It is as if Jesus is saying, “Who cares if you don’t have any bread with you. I’m with you and that’s enough. I can give you more than you could ever need.”

Staying close to Jesus (being in Jesus’ presence), was obviously a promise that they would have what they need but this is also the solution to the danger that Jesus was talking about when he warned them to beware of the influence of the Pharisees and Herod. Rather than demanding that Jesus provides you with a sign that brings the clarity you demand, remain close to Jesus and allow him to provide you with what you need and this will include clarity. To make the point even stronger the next miracle serves as an enacted example of this.

### An Enacted Example (vv. 22-26)

The miracle recorded in verses 22 to 26 is unique among the parables of Jesus because the healing is not immediate.

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

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

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

Why is it that this man is not completely healed immediately like Jesus’ other miracles? It’s possible that there was a lack of faith on the man’s part so that he couldn’t receive full healing until he grasped more of the power which Jesus had but, as I mentioned, I think we have here an enacted example of what Jesus has been talking about with his disciples and what will continue to be the case in the rest of Mark 8.

Jesus' presence and work is enough to bring some sight to this man who was blind (probably not blind since birth as he recognised that the people looked like trees) but it wasn't complete and so the way to complete healing wasn't for the man to start doing eye exercises or work out who to blame for losing his sight, the way to full sight was to remain in Jesus' presence and continue to receive from Jesus what he continued to need to receive full sight.

The disciples were seeing in action what Jesus had been talking to them about. My presence is enough to provide what you needs, whether that be in terms of food and nourishment or in the area of understanding and having spiritual sight.

## Conclusion

The disciples are so incredibly human ... and so are we! We also can be slow to understand and not have insight into spiritual matters. We, like the disciples can be inclined to blame others when we see a problem with ourselves or with our community, we like the disciples need to guard against the influence of people who would say that that we can demand that God make himself completely clear and we can almost bribe God for our allegiance, and we, like the disciples, need to learn lessons again and again.

The solution to the brokenness of our human condition is to remain close to Jesus and receive from him the sight that we need. As we cooperate with Jesus and trust that he can provide everything we need we experience spiritual growth and maturity.

We're going to remain seated for our next song which will help us to reflect that Christ's call to follow him will impact our lives but it all grows out of first following him. We will then have a prayer time where we can talk with Jesus about our needs but also listen to what he may want to say to us.

[Lead into responsive song followed by prayers]