

Do You Understand?

Mark 8:1-21

We are continuing in our series on the Gospel of Mark, and today we come to a passage that seems almost a repeat of an earlier passage. Back in Mark 6 we studied the feeding of the five thousand, and now we come to a very similar miracle, the feeding of the four thousand. And you may wonder, why did Jesus do this miracle twice, and why did God choose to have Mark record both of them? If the whole point was that Jesus is able to feed many people with just a few loaves of bread, didn't he already make that point with the five thousand? And besides, although feeding four thousand is pretty good, it's not quite as impressive as feeding five thousand. Four thousand seems almost anti-climactic compared to five thousand. So what's the point? Those are some of the questions we will be exploring as we study this passage today.

We have already seen in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus performs many miracles. He heals sick people; He casts out evil spirits; He calms the storm and walks on water. What was the purpose of these miracles? Why did Jesus use His miraculous powers? Was it so He could draw attention to Himself? Certainly not. Jesus did not do it to show off. In fact, we have seen Jesus repeatedly instructing people not to tell others about His miracles. Jesus also never used His miracles to benefit Himself. Not once! He refused to make bread for Himself when He was hungry in the wilderness, and He refused to call on God's angels to rescue Him at the cross.

Jesus did do miracles in order to help people. Jesus did miracles out of love and compassion for people. In fact in our passage today Jesus says, "**I have compassion on the multitude.**" Jesus cares about people. He cares about our needs. He cares about our hurts. He feels our pain.

And although that is a great reason for Jesus' miracles, and certainly a reason supported by the evidence in the gospel accounts, was that the only reason? I believe that Jesus' miracles also have a deeper meaning. First, they were meant to demonstrate that He was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. And second I believe they were meant to teach people spiritual truths. Jesus healed the deaf, but He also spoke about hearing and believing God's word. Jesus healed the blind, but He also spoke about being spiritually blind and seeing the truth. Jesus cleansed lepers, but He also spoke about spiritual cleansing. Jesus raised people from the dead, but He also spoke about His own resurrection and the gift of eternal life.

And so when we look at a miracle like the feeding of the four thousand, yes, we want to be amazed at Jesus' awesome power to perform such a miracle. We want to appreciate His great compassion and the way He cares about us. But we also want to look for the deeper meaning that Jesus is trying to teach us through this miracle. So let's take a closer look at this passage today.

I. Jesus feeds a great crowd – again! (verses 1-10)

We begin with verses 1-10 where we find Jesus feeding a great crowd – again!

1 In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them,

2 "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat.

- 3 And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar."
- 4 Then His disciples answered Him, "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?"
- 5 He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven."
- 6 So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude.
- 7 They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them.
- 8 So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments.
- 9 Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away,
- 10 immediately got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha.

When we read about this feeding just two chapters after reading about the feeding of the five thousand, we might be tempted to just rush past this miracle thinking, "I've heard this before. I didn't know God did re-runs!" Yes, God does do re-runs, and praise God he does re-runs! God can do the same miracle as many times as He wants, and that's a good thing.

But you're right. This passage is very similar to the first feeding, and Mark brings that out for us in the very first verse when he says, "**In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat.**" (Mark 8:1) The last time a large crowd gathered was at the feeding of the five thousand, and so Mark wants us to think back to that incident. In fact, Mark purposely structures his telling of this incident to show how similar it was to the first. Jesus is teaching; a great crowd gathers; they are hungry and in a remote place; Jesus has compassion on them; He talks with the disciples about feeding them; they only have a small amount of food; Jesus instructs the crowd to sit down; He gives thanks for the food; the disciples distribute the food; everyone eats and is satisfied; and there are leftovers.

And so we can learn many of the same lessons from this miracle as we did from the first:

1. Jesus cares about people's needs, He has compassion for people;
2. By ourselves we are insufficient to meet people's needs, but God can greatly use insufficient people like us to do great things.
3. God has no limits; Christ is not confined by our lack of resources.
4. Christ's sufficiency always satisfies.

But we already learned all that from the first miracle. Why did Jesus do this miracle twice, and what was he trying to teach the disciples and us in the process?

Well, on the most basic level, one reason Jesus did the miracle twice is that **there was a real need on the part of the people twice**. People were hungry and needed to be fed. At the same time, **Jesus was trying build the faith of the disciples**. Does anyone else think it strange that the disciples were wondering what to do in this situation when they had just been through it a short time before with the crowd of five thousand? Jesus calls his disciples together and explains the problem to them just as before, and they answer: **“How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?”**

We shouldn't be too hard on the disciples here. How many times has God provided for us in the past, and we still have trouble trusting him for whatever we going through in the present?

The obvious answer to the disciples' question is, “No one, at least no human being, can provide bread for a multitude in the wilderness; only God can. But that's what Mark's gospel is all about – demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And so Jesus, the Son of God, does what only God can do.

At times like that we need to remember that God can do the same miracles twice, and that He who provided in the past can also provide in the present.

I think it's important to remind you that the feeding of the five thousand occurred on the north shore of Galilee in the region of Galilee near the town of Bethsaida. The crowd there was probably mostly Jewish. In fact John tells us that after Jesus fed the 5000 that the Jews wanted to make Him king by force.

Now in chapter 8 Jesus is not in that familiar part of Galilee. He is still on the shore but down at the far south-east end in a region known as Decapolis, named for the ten cities that made up that region which was under the rule of Syria.

Jesus has been in Gentile territory for quite some time. Up in Tyre and Sidon Jesus had healed a Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. And in doing so He began to hint at the fact that He came not only to save Israel, but all people. Now He has come to the largely Gentile area of the Decapolis. And a great crowd gathers. Matthew tells us He again healed them all. Jesus says the people have been with Him for three days with nothing to eat.

This is compelling. These people have never seen or heard anyone like Jesus. And so they don't go anywhere. They're so overwhelmed by what is going on, they put their hunger aside. But our Lord knew they would get hungry as soon as they started travel back toward their homes.

So in verse 3 He says, **“if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.”**

So maybe the disciples' question is really asking, “Are You going to do it again, for these people?” They're simply saying, “Lord, look, You're worried about this crowd and we just need to remind You that we don't have any human resources here.” I think they've already learned that He can supply if He chooses to supply. They're simply affirming that that's the only way it's going to happen. Which then raises the question, “But would you do it for Gentiles? Would you do it for these people?”

Jesus of course answers their questioning minds by doing it again. He does it for these people almost the same way He did it the first time. He takes their meager resources, a few loaves and some little fish; He gives thanks; He has them sit; He has the disciples distribute the food; everyone is satisfied; the disciples pick up the leftovers. I will say more about that in a few minutes.

II. The Pharisees ask for a sign (verses 11-16)

Next, let's move on to verses 11-16 where the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign.

11 Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him.

12 But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."

13 And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side.

14 Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat.

15 Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

16 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread."

So here is Jesus doing all these miracles, and the Pharisees come to Him and ask for a sign from heaven to authenticate His words. I guess some people are never satisfied! In one sense all of Jesus' miracles were signs. They were signs that the kingdom of God had drawn near in His person and that God had sent Jesus and was indeed working through Him. That is the main point of all the miracles. But some people will never be satisfied no matter how many signs God gives them. Earlier on the Pharisees attributed Jesus' miracles to the power of Satan. Now here they were asking for some direct sign from God in heaven, but they were asking in rebellion and unbelief. Jesus refused to give it to them. Jesus sighed deeply and said, **"Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."** (Mark 8:12)

Jesus and the disciples get back into the boat, and Mark tells us the disciples forgot to bring bread for the journey. They only had one loaf between them. Meanwhile Jesus was trying to teach them. **"Take heed,"** Jesus warned them, **"beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."** (Mark 8:15) Well, the disciples are so confused. They have no idea what Jesus is talking about, and they assume it must have something to do with the fact that they forgot to bring bread.

But Jesus isn't talking about literal bread here. When Jesus talks about **"the leaven of the Pharisees,"** he is talking symbolically. Yeast is almost always used negatively in the Bible as a symbol of evil or sin.

And so the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod had to do with their unbelieving rejection of Jesus as evidenced by their asking Jesus for a sign instead of believing on him on the basis of his teaching and miracles. (Herod hadn't actually asked for a sign yet, but he would later at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. [Luke 23:8])

People today who demand that God give them a sign to believe are in a similar situation. God already gave the most important sign of all. He sent his Son into the world who preached the kingdom of God and demonstrated the truth of His words through His miracles, especially the miracle of His own resurrection from the dead. That was the ultimate proof of Jesus' identity and mission. You don't need to ask God for a sign. He has already given it. Jesus has come into the world. Jesus died. Jesus rose from the dead. What more do you want? What more do you need?

III. Jesus points to the deeper meaning (verses 17-21)

Finally in verses 17-21, Jesus points the disciples to the deeper meaning in his miracles.

17 But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?"

18 Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?

19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, "Twelve."

20 "Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?" And they said, "Seven."

21 So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?"

Jesus asks the disciples a series of questions in this section starting with, "Why are you talking about bread?" Jesus was using the yeast analogy to warn the disciples about the opposition of the Pharisees and Herod, and all they can think about was that they didn't bring enough bread with them in the boat. Jesus is saying, "It's not about the bread!" It never was about the bread. Jesus' miracles were not miracles for miracles' sake, but they had a deeper meaning. He was saying to them, 'You don't yet get it? You don't have to worry about bread.'" In the sermon on the mount Jesus had said, **"Take no thought for what you shall eat and what you shall drink, Your Father knows you have need of these things. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."** So Jesus asks the disciples this series of questions in order to get them to probe deeper.

Jesus asks about the number of people fed in each instance and the number of leftovers. There may be a symbolic significance to the number of basketfuls of leftovers in each of the feedings. The twelve basketfuls of leftovers in the first feeding remind us of the twelve tribes of Israel. The seven basketfuls of leftovers in the second feeding may represent the fullness of the Gentiles, and so the two feedings represent the gospel going first to Israel and then to the nations. It may not be immediately obvious to us but the baskets they used for the leftovers are different in the two accounts. In the first they gathered 12 small lunch baskets. In the second, they gather 7 very large baskets, not the small Jewish lunch basket, but a large Gentile hamper-sized basket. This is the same kind of basket in Acts 9:25 in which the Apostle Paul was placed when He was lowered down the wall of Damascus.

What is the message here? The message is that salvation is for the Gentiles. The divine compassion is for the Gentiles. That the compassion of God is not

limited to Israel, that the desire of God to create whatever He needs to create to meet the needs of Gentiles is equal to the desire that He has to meet the needs of Jews.

The real point of this miracle as with all of Jesus' miracles, is that Jesus has come as the Christ, the Son of God, to save people. Jesus does what only God can do. He continues to provide bread for the people in the wilderness, just as God provided manna for the Israelites. And the disciples are worried about only having one loaf of bread?

The key word here is "remember." Jesus says, **"do you not remember?"**

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. What he has done before, He can do again. And so if Christ has saved you, if He has brought you to God and provided all that you need in the past, you do not need to worry about the future. Jesus fed the multitude twice. God provided for an entire nation in the wilderness for forty years! And God can take care of you and me.

Notice the disciples get all the facts right, but they cannot interpret them. See, faith is not about stuff. It is not about things happening or things not. It is not about a happy feeling or about what you know.

Faith is about trusting in a person. A person. Not things or emotions or events or stuff. You know, it is not coincidental that when we talk about a faithful husband or a faithful wife, that faithfulness is in the context of a relationship. If there is no relationship, there is no faith.

The Pharisees refused to have a relationship with Jesus, and so they had no faith. If you are struggling to believe this morning...perhaps the reason might be that you have no relationship with Jesus Christ. For what is faith without a relationship?

We need to take this second feeding of the multitude to heart. Remember! Remember who Jesus is and what He has done. Don't just look at the feeding of the four thousand and say, "What a neat miracle!" Don't be like the Pharisees looking for a sign when Christ has already come.

Don't be like the disciples wondering if Jesus can do it again and just focusing on the physical bread. Dig deeper, and see the deeper meaning behind the miracle. Jesus is God. He has not changed. What He has done before, He can do again. He has promised to meet your every need, and He will continue to do so. He wants a relationship with you. He wants you to trust Him. That is faith.