The Servant’s Warning  
Mark 8:14-21

Introduction

In Mark 8 the chapter begins with compassion as Jesus feeds the multitudes (vv.1-9). It continues with concern as Jesus is confronted by the religious leaders and Jesus and His disciples make a quick exit to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. In the rush the disciples forget to pack a lunch. Jesus will use the disciples forgetfulness as a teaching moment.

Life is filled with teachable moments; opportunities for instruction. In the chapter we have learned about the Servant’s provision (vv.1-10); and the Servant’s provocation (vv.11-13) and now the patience of the Servant (vv.14-21).

Caution: You Are About To Enter The No Spin Zone (v.14)

Mark 8:14 (NKJV) 14Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat.

The disciples suddenly realize they have left on an adventure without provision! We might find excuse. After all--they probably expected to stay longer and not leave so soon! There was not ample opportunity to obtain provisions. Jesus will use the disciples forgetfulness as an opportunity to teach some much needed lessons on the immediate challenges and dangers for the disciples!

Henry Brooks Adams wrote; “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” James told his readers, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1 NIV).

One TV Host begins his broadcast with “Caution, You are about to enter the no Spin Zone.” That’s nonsense. Nicolas Johnson said, “All television is educational television. The only question is, what is it teaching?”

Ruth Vaughn was right when she said, “Teaching is a partnership with God. You are not molding iron or chiseling marble; you are working with the Creator of the universe in shaping human character and determining destiny.”

Confusion: The Disciples Are Already In The Spin Zone (vv. 15-16)

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

Jesus “charged them” (diestelleto-imperfect tense--indicating repetition)

“Take heed” translates the word “horate” which means to see or behold or discern. The idea is to understand through observation and experience. Two important characteristics are necessary
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for a person to take heed; active thought and a discerning mind. The Servant Jesus issues a warning; when Jesus warns he invites us to look carefully, to think thru and exercise discernment. In this verse the charge is in the present imperative—which means the disciple was to take heed beginning right now!

The word translated “beware” is the word “blepete” which also means to see, or perceive or grasp or understand in order to take appropriate caution or care—it means to keep a watchful eye, in order to guard or protect something or someone. Once again it is in the present imperative; begin now, be careful right now; continue to watch; be aware of the danger.

Leaven is yeast. When placed in bread it causes the bread to rise. Leaven is a type or symbol of evil (but not always). It is not visible to the naked eye, it spreads quickly and invades and inhabits its host. Leaven spreads slowly, quietly and effects everything it touches. The leaven of the Pharisees incorporates everything wrong with the religious leaders; hypocrisy, empty ritual, rote religion, self-righteousness and bigotry.

In Matthew’s gospel (22:15-17) the religious leaders plot how they might entangle Jesus in his talk “and they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do you care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

Most of the Herodians (followers of Herod) were Sadducees. The leaven of both Pharisees and Sadducees or Herodians was their doctrine and their teaching but also the way they lived their lives; like leaven they fermented and soured and infected everyone and everything!

In a sense—the Pharisees were the religious and political conservatives. In a sense—the Sadducees were the religious and political liberals.

The Pharisees did have an orthodox view of God and the Bible; they believed in a personal God and the Bible as the Word of God. They added rules and regulations, rituals and ceremonies, and would put man made limitations and restrictions and prohibitions, so that everyone acted in a way consistent with their theology.

The Herodians were for the most part Sadducees; who cooperated with Rome, who saw involvement with Rome as an opportunity to make money and spread the wealth. They embraced the first five books of Moses, but for the most part rejected the supernatural, miracles, and the idea of Heaven, Hell, the resurrection from the dead, and angels and demons. Their leaven—their false teaching was that they denied God’s Word; took away from God’s Word; they were free thinkers, rationalists, secular, practical, and material. They worked with Rome in promoting and advancing Greek philosophical ideas and instituting and embracing Roman and Greek culture. For those reasons the Romans put the Sadducee elements in charge. The
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Sadducees or Herodians were looking for opportunities to promote wealth building, worldly materialism, secular philosophy, and liberal theology.

What was the leaven of the Pharisees? It may have included hypocrisy, empty ritualism, and self-righteousness and bigotry! What was the leaven of the Herodians? It may have included skepticism, cynicism, immorality, compromise, and worldliness.

What was the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians?

If I were to cram into one word all the lies and wickedness and sin of the Pharisees and Herodians it would be the word “unbelief”. Horatius Bonar said, “In all unbelief there are these two things; a good opinion of one’s self and a bad opinion of God.” Bonar added; “All unbelief is the belief of a lie”.

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

The disciples began and continued a discussion (dielogizonto pros allelous-imperfect tense--indicating the discussion might have lasted some time).

The fact that they reasoned among themselves indicates a willingness to share blame. Judas you have the money bag. Why didn’t you remind us to buy bread? Peter might have said, “I’m the captain of this vessel. I’m in charge of the boat and its supplies. I can’t be everywhere doing everything.” If something goes wrong, why does it always have to be my fault?

The disciples miss the point. The disciples completely misunderstand the words of Jesus. The disciples thought Jesus was rebuking them for their careless, forgetful, faux pas. Perhaps they reasoned that Jesus was warning them not to eat bread with the religious leaders or the world leaders. The Pharisees were very strict about the kind of leaven they would allow to be used in the bread they consumed. The Pharisees used the rule governing leaven in order to stress ceremonial cleanness.

What was Jesus saying? Don’t sit down with spiritual and political leaders (fellowship) and eat their “leaven” bread? This has something to do with food--right? Wrong. Some people are like blotters--they soak up everything but get it backwards!

Clarification: The Dangers In Our World (vv.17-21)

Jesus proceeds to issue a series of questions in rapid succession. The first five questions Jesus rebukes his disciples for their thick-headed obtuseness. The next four he rebukes them for their focus on physical food instead of spiritual nourishment. Why in the world would they worry about physical provisions in a small boat--when Jesus was right there with them?
The Danger Of Spiritual Blindness And Hardness Of Heart (vv.17-18)

17But 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?

Beware of a rubber conscience and a concrete heart.

The disciples are quick to divide blame! The Lord Jesus appeals to the brain! Do you still not get it? Do you still not understand?

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

Jesus incorporates the language of Ezekiel (12:2). The questions of Jesus point to the failure of His disciples to grasp spiritual reality. Look at the questions; “why do you reason” (v.17) why do you fail to perceive (v.17); fail to understand (v.17); fail to have soft hearts (v.17); fail to see (v.18); fail to hear (v.18); fail to remember (v.18).

Do you accept the authority of Jesus in your lives? Then you must accept the authority of His words!

Charles Allen writes; “With infinite love and compassion our Lord understood the human predicament. He had deep empathy with people; he saw their needs, their weaknesses, their desires, and their hurt. He understood and was concerned for people. Every word he spoke was uttered because he saw a need for that word in some human life. His concern was always to uplift and never tear down, to heal and never hurt, to save and not condemn.”

Jesus rebukes our preoccupation with earthly matters. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “O ye of little faith”(Matt. 16:8).

But even the rebuke of Jesus is kindness! Kindness is the language that the deaf can hear and the dumb can understand.

Let me be a little kinder, let me be a little blinder
To the faults of those about me; let me praise a little more.
Let me be a little meeker with the brother that is weaker;
Let me think more of my neighbor and a little less of me.

The Danger Of Failing To Understand The Lord’s Provision (vv. 19-20)

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19When 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.”

The disciples were eye-witness to two great miracles. A crowd of people hungering for God’s Word and God’s provision had just gone three days without food. The Lord fed them with just seven loaves. Do the math. If Jesus can feed five thousand, four thousand, can Jesus feed one boat load of men with just one piece of bread?

The disciples had failed to make the connection that Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life. World leaders and religious leaders could never and will never satisfy the deep longing in the soul.

The Danger Of Grieving The Lord’s Heart (v.21)

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

“Memory and understanding go together in discerning spiritual Truth” (McKenna p.171)

“God does not ask that we understand Truth without evidence. Our problem is that we forget so quickly” (McKenna p.172).

We grieve the heart of Jesus. Jesus grieves over our spiritual blindness, our hard heart, our material and carnal minds, our failure to see and understand his provision.

In Luke’s Gospel after the resurrection on the Emmaus road Jesus says, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25).

How is it that we fail to understand that Jesus is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe?

It reminds me of the Sunday School poem;

Said the robin to the sparrow,  
“I would surely like to know Why these anxious human beings  
Fret about and worry so!”

Said the sparrow to the robin,  
“I imagine it must be
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That they have no heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me!”

John Calvin said, “There is no greater darkness than ignorance of God.” The French Philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote; “He who hates not in himself his self-love and that instinct which leads him to make himself a God, is indeed blind”. Blind. Not Blonde. Augustus Hopkins Strong told his students; “Ignorance is the mother of superstition, not of devotion.”

Do we face the same threat? Do we face the same danger? Are we spiritually blind? Are our hearts hard? Do we face the temptation to believe that Jesus is not really capable of meeting our needs?

Are we in danger of looking to religious institutions or political promises to meet our needs? Are we attached to this world, its things, its possessions, its pleasures?

Has the god of this world (the devil) blinded the minds of men so they are unable to see the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4)?

The leaven of false religious leaders and the leaven of political leaders are a threat to the Bible believing Christian.

Conclusion

How would you describe your service to the Lord? Whole hearted? Half-hearted? Half-heartedness consists of serving God in such a way as not to offend the devil.

What feeds your soul? The stale leaven of man made philosophies? What feeds your soul? Stale manna--kept two days too long? Has the human philosophy started to ferment and sicken and sour your soul? Human wisdom will ruin your health and poison your mind. The teaching of the Pharisees and Herodians will prevent clear thinking about God and Jesus and Grace and Forgiveness and Eternal life.

Jesus never criticized or condemned the laws of Moses or the Word of God. Jesus condemned the religious leaders false interpretation and application of God’s Word.

Love and not Law is the invisible yeast; the leaven we are called to spread.

What has God done for you in the past? Doesn’t it make sense that God will help in the present and in the future?