

"THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES."
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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden
October 14, 2012, 10:30am

Texts for the Sermon: Mark 8:11-21

Introduction.

The power of very small influences is staggering when you start to think about it.

A microscopic germ can reduce a grown man to total weakness.

A microscopic dust particle can render a computer chip worthless.

A grain of sand in an eye or a pebble in a shoe can cause much pain.

One small spark can set an entire forest ablaze.

One small word can make our day or ruin our day.

A little baby completely and forever changes a couple's life.

A little leaven can swell up a whole loaf of bread.

And one small error in doctrine can eventually grow to destroy whole souls.

Jesus saw in one small argument the seeds of spiritual destruction and warned His disciples about it, but the seeds were so small the disciples didn't see them. Our text this morning is about the spiritual dangers of being deaf and blind.

Two weeks ago we considered the miraculous healing of a deaf man and next week we will consider the miraculous healing of a blind man. But in between those two miracles is the story of two groups of deaf and blind men, the Pharisees and the disciples. And of the two kinds of infirmities, physical deafness and blindness or spiritual deafness and blindness, spiritual is far more tragic and deadly, and is cause for deep sorrow and sighs.

We will look at this text in two parts, first deaf and blind Pharisees who demand signs from heaven and then deaf and blind disciples who misunderstand signs of leaven.

Mark 8:11-13, deaf and blind Pharisees demand signs of heaven.

Mark 8:11 The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.

This was an act of aggression. They came out to pick a fight, and to get something on Jesus they could use against Him. This testing was a tempting that they might discredit Him.

They saw the miracles but their hearts were hard, they weren't buying it. Moses did miracles, Satan can do miracles. They wanted a sign from heaven, like manna from heaven or fire from heaven. They wanted some visible, outward, compelling proof that Jesus was from God.

Jesus had already done hundreds of miracles of every kind showing His power and authority over evil spirits, nature, diseases, even death. Jesus' teaching was unparalleled; nothing like it had ever been heard before, brilliant, articulate and with authority.

The problem wasn't proof, there was proof everywhere. The problem was faith and hard hearts refusing to believe.

As was true then, it's true today, you have to work to miss the glory of God and silence the truth of God. It's almost like trying to avoid rain drops or political advertising in an election year.

God has given our generation more than ample reason to understand Him and His ways, but we remain dull and our dullness is a willing dullness. We don't want to know.

As Paul Simon put it many years ago, "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest" (Simon and Garfunkel, The Boxer).

It's wicked slothfulness when we are so wise in earthly and worldly matters and so ignorant concerning spiritual and eternal matters. Isn't it the height of folly to be worldly wise and heavenly foolish, to know all about this life and nothing of the life to come?

People today are always looking for signs, for evidence of sensational, spectacular things. People are always on the lookout for what's new, exciting, innovative, relevant, authentic, big.

There's a saying that goes around these days, "find where God is at work and join Him there." Meaning look for signs of sensational, God-like things, big deal happenings, revivals and the like. But the problem is God isn't always in the revivals and healings, where people are being slain in the Spirit. And second, sometimes, maybe often times, God is at work in the still small voice, in the quiet, subtle moves of the Spirit.

Another sign people today demand is more proof that God is a loving God. They will say something like if God is loving He would do this or He wouldn't do that.

As Calvin once observed, "Unbelievers ... tempt God when they grumble that they have not been given whatever they desire and accuse God of weakness" (John Calvin, *Mark, Vol. II*, p. 176); or lack of love.

God has demonstrated His love in a million ways, and the greatest demonstration is on the cross, yet they refuse to believe and they continue to put God to the test.

Jesus felt then and He feels today ***deep sorrow over unbelief***. He's deeply grieved in His spirit over the hardness of the human heart, the stubborn resistance and outright rebellion toward God. It's willful, deliberate obstinacy.

Nothing should concern us more or grieve us more deeply than sin in our own hearts and in others hearts. Hatred of sin is a grace, it comes when we are truly converted. And sorrow over sin in another is a sign of compassion. We should be moved to genuine sadness to see unbelievers in darkness, deliberately resisting and refusing the truth.

Mark 8:14-21, deaf and blind Disciples misunderstand signs of leaven.

That little encounter with the Pharisees took three verses, very brief. They wanted a sign, Jesus rebuked them, said no and left. End of matter.

But Jesus decided to make a bigger deal out of it and use it as a teaching lesson for His followers. He gave them a strong warning about the leaven of the Pharisees. “Watch out! Beware.”

Notice something here. People who listen to this and believe it and obey it, will always be accused of making a big deal out of nothing, of making a mountain out of a mole hill.

I made a big deal out of something once to an elder in my last church that seemed to another elder to be an overreaction and he accused me of shooting a mosquito with a bazooka.

People have a hard time seeing leaven or thinking that it will amount to much. “Just leave it alone, forget about it, don’t get all wrapped around the axle over little things.” But some little things left alone grow into really big things and then it will be too big to get rid of.

Having seen the poisonous, willful unbelief and doubt of the Pharisees, Jesus warns His followers of the danger. Don’t become like them, guard your heart.

What is this leaven Jesus is referring to? We know what leaven or yeast is in bread, but what is it in men?

The ***eight questions*** point to the kind of leaven that is disbelief and doubt and misunderstanding. Failure to understand and believe can lead to a hardness of heart. You can be with Jesus every day and misunderstand and not believe Him, like Judas.

By His warning of the disciples Jesus is warning us that even those closest to Him, those who spend the most time with Him are in danger and need to be warned. Even the best fall into temptation.

I Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

There are men and women born and raised in this church who have wandered from the faith, or have made shipwreck of their faith. There are pastors in our denomination who have done the same. Don’t be foolish or naïve, the enemy is real and he’s powerful and he can work just a little leaven to a very great and disastrous effect.

This is a constant danger in Christian churches, schools and colleges, you can become inoculated to Jesus. You can spend all your time around Christians and not see and not hear.

Friends of mine at Wheaton College today are not walking with the Lord at all. Friends of mine in Young Life, have left the faith. Members of churches I have pastored have abandoned faith.

Pharisee-leaven and Sadducees-leaven are with us to this very day. The Pharisees were the old formalists and traditionalists, hanging on to old ways even though it was a dead orthodoxy, the form of godliness without any of the power of the Spirit. They were the legalists, following rules with no relationship with God or love for God.

The Sadducees were the liberals, throwing off doctrines, cozying up with the politicians and Romans, the relativists and compromisers.

They are with us today, those adding to the Gospel and those taking away, watering it down with compromise, or throwing it out as outdated and irrelevant.

Leaven takes so many forms today. TV preachers, health and wealth gospel, Joel Olsteen, cults like Mormonism, liberal churches lobbying for abortion or gay marriage in the church, in the name of Jesus; voices those tearing down and destroying the family through easy divorce, feminist theologies, and sexual immorality.

More damage has been done to the church by false doctrine from inside than will ever be done by persecutions from the outside. The tongue and the pen have done far greater harm than any sword ever could.

Leaven is an excellent *metaphor* for describing how a person or church or a denomination is led astray. It's a very small influence that creeps in slowly and imperceptibly, working its way slowly into the whole loaf. At first it's so small no one notices, or it's such a small thing no one thinks it will matter?

Christ's example calls us to warn, to name, to point out corruptions and pollutions of true doctrine. We must be wise and discerning, there is poisonous leaven all around us all the time and Satan seeks to gain a foothold wherever he can.

Watch your life and doctrine closely (Acts 20).

Notice one of the sources of the disciples confusion and misunderstanding.

They are worried yet again about bread when Jesus has just created enough bread to feed thousands, and He did it twice. The disciples are concerned about a lack of bread and Jesus is concerned about their lack of faith. They are distracted by their worldly concerns, distracted about today, about food, money, anxious about living.

Worldly concerns and possessions and money and bank accounts and retirement cause us to lose sight of Jesus' ability to take care of us and cause us to miss what's really important in this life and make our hearts start to grow hard from misunderstanding.

Once again there is a rebuke here for all of us who have experienced the power and blessing and provision and grace of Christ and then still fret and worry about the future.

The dullness of the disciples should concern us. If those who were with Jesus all the time can miss it, how much more can we miss it? This should keep us humble and watchful.

But let us also not miss the mercy of Christ in His patience with His disciples and with us when we are slow and dull and take a long time to get it. And His mercy and grace are all the greater in contrast to what happens to the Pharisees.

Jesus says no sign will be given and turns His back and walks away. This is a terrible judgment. Those who show the hardness of their hearts by demanding signs will not even see the sign He has given.

The Pharisees' deafness and blindness is about to become permanent. Jesus has shined His light as brightly as He could in Galilee, but they have mocked and denied and blasphemed Christ.

Their love of darkness is evident by their alliance with their enemies who also love darkness. And it is evident in their love for questions but not for answers.

Jesus is about head toward Jerusalem where they will finally kill Him. Jesus, who could be their Savior is about to become their Judge. They hated the light of the Gospel so they are about to pass into the darkness of eternity.

They are like Pharaoh who refused to believe or repent in the face of ten miracles by Moses.

Voltaire, the French atheist, once said, “Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.”

But, for the disciples their deafness and blindness is temporary. Jesus said to them, “Do you not yet understand?” (Mark 8:21) and Matthew adds a footnote, “they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:12).

Their eyes may be blind but their hearts are not hard. They continue to follow Him who is the light of the world, they stay in the light and gradually they come to see better and clearer and more fully, as we will see in the very interesting healing miracle next week.

Application and conclusion.

You want a sign? I’ll give you a sign, the only sign Jesus said He would give, the sign of Jonah. Jonah didn’t perform any signs or miracles. He was the sign, his life was the sign. Buried in the sea, three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, and then spit up on dry ground, he went to Nineveh with a message of repentance.

You want a sign; look at the cross, at the death, burial and the resurrection of Jesus. If the resurrection doesn’t thrill the thrill seekers then nothing will. If that doesn’t impress them, signs and wonders certainly won’t. Jesus is the sign.

With Paul I am resolved to preach one thing, and that is Christ and Christ crucified. That’s sufficient for your salvation. That’s the proof that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

You want a sign? Believe in Jesus with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Pray to Him, resolve to follow Him as He reveals Himself and His will to you in His Word. If you have Jesus you have enough. And bread will not be a problem.

Prayer: Jesus you are the light of the world and you have come to shine into our darkness. Give us eyes to see you more clearly. Remove any blindness in any heart here this morning. Let today be a day when you shine more clearly than ever for the sake of your glory and grace.