

DO YOU NOT YET UNDERSTAND?

by Ray C. Stedman

In the section of his Gospel we have been studying, Mark is dealing with our Lord's training of the twelve disciples, as he seeks to instruct them who he is. Last time we saw how he left the nation of Israel and went into Gentile regions, into Tyre and Sidon on the coast of Palestine. In the passage we come to now there is further ministry among the Gentiles. Perhaps it is startling to realize that Jesus spent almost a third of his three-year ministry among Gentiles. This fact has been obscured by the emphasis upon his ministry among the Jews. But obviously he was seeking to impart to his disciples some sense of his mission and ministry to the Gentile world as well as to the Jews.

We begin with the account in Chapter 7 beginning with Verse 31, of his travels through the region on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee:

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, Ephphatha, that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. {Mark 7:31-35 RSV}

Mark is careful to tell us this took place in the area called the Decapolis, the ten Greek cities on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. And he points out that Jesus went into this region in a rather strange way. Instead of coming directly back into Galilee, he left Tyre and Sidon and went by a northern route through what is presently the country of Syria, and continued down the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee into the southern part of that region. It would be very much like starting out for Los Angeles from San Francisco, but going by way of Reno and Las Vegas. Many scholars feel that this journey took about eight months, so that he spent a long time in the Gentile regions ministering to those who were not Jews. We can see that, on the way, he is very much involved in teaching his disciples what he wants them to learn. Here we have another of those little incidents which represent our Lord's reminder to the twelve, and to us, of the indispensibility of faith. We must act in faith toward God. That is the thrust of the healing of this man who was deaf and dumb.

When you consider it, the condition of this man was pitiful. When I was a boy I felt that the worst thing that could happen to me would be to become blind. I felt sorry for blind people and was fearful that some accident would take my sight. But through the years since I have come to realize that much more to be pitied are those who are deaf and dumb, for they are shut off from society even more completely than the blind. This man was both deaf and dumb. He could not hear; he could not speak. Therefore he could not read, and thus was shut away from the light of God in the Scriptures. He could not hear a testimony, he could not ask any questions, he was living in a silent world of complete isolation from all those around him. Thus he represents a very difficult kind of person to reach.

This explains what our Lord did with this man: First, he took him aside privately. Those who are deaf have told me that it is embarrassing to be deaf because no one can see your difficulty. If you were blind or lame, they could see it and make allowances. But if you are deaf, no one can see it, and it is embarrassing to ask people to shout at you or repeat what they have said. So, out of consideration for this man, in the tenderness of his heart, our Lord leads him aside from the multitude to deal with him privately.

There he did some unusual things: He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spat on his fingers and touched the man's tongue. Then, looking into the heavens, he sighed -- all this before he said the wonderful word, "Be opened." I confess that it is only in this current study in the Gospel of Mark that I have begun to understand why he did this. Unquestionably it is because he is seeking to arouse and awaken this man's faith.

And in order to do so, he acts out what he wants to convey to him. He puts his fingers into his ears, to indicate to the man that he intends to heal them. He wets his fingers and touches the man's tongue to indicate that he is going to heal the tongue, and that words will flow freely from it. He looks up into heaven to indicate that the power for this must come from God. And he sighs -- not so much a sign as a breathing out -- to convey to the man that it is by the invisible agency of the power of God that he will be made well.

When Jesus could see in his eyes the response, the look of faith, the look of comprehension of what he intended to do, then he said the word: *Ephphatha*, the Aramaic word which Peter undoubtedly preserved in telling Mark of this incident. It means, "Be opened," and the man immediately began to hear and to speak. That is amazing, for those who recover their hearing after a long period of silence usually cannot speak, but must learn how. This man instantly began to speak again. This was our Lord's way of showing us, and the disciples who were watching, that faith is a necessary ingredient to receiving anything from God. Faith -- believing in the activity of an invisible God who, nevertheless, despite the fact that you cannot see him, is ready to work in your life. So he awakened this man's faith and caused him to believe in the invisible. This is the essential to all divine activity among men.

Immediately he begins to take steps to prevent the abuse of this miracle, Verses 36-37:

And he charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak." {Mark 7:36-37 RSV}

Notice the change in pronouns here. Jesus, up to this point, has been dealing with the man as an individual. But now he suddenly speaks to the crowd, and charges them to tell no one. The Greek verb tense indicates that he kept on telling them, repeatedly. Perhaps several times he said to them, "Do not spread this abroad." But the more he charged them, the more zealously they kept on proclaiming it. They were beginning to go out into the countryside and tell of this exciting miracle. The reason our Lord did this, as on previous occasions, was to prevent a misemphasis. He did not want to become known as a wonder worker. The faith of this crowd and the faith of the man who was healed were on two different levels. The eyes of the crowd saw no further than the actions of God. They saw the miracle. The eyes of the man who was healed were fixed upon the God who acts. That is where faith must rest. So when this crowd, with its low level of understanding, its emphasis upon the merely spectacular, started to disperse, Jesus charged them, warned them, not to tell it abroad. But he did not say that to the man, for his eyes were fixed upon the God who is ready to act. And when your faith is fixed on that -- not on what God does, but on what God is -- then it is safe to be a witness to those around you.

The account moves right on into Chapter 8. Ignore the chapter break. I do not know who put these in, but they always come at the wrong place.

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come a long way." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these men with bread here in the desert?" And he asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven." And he commanded the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish; and having blessed them, he commanded that these also should be set before them. And they ate, and were satisfied; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away; {Mark 8:1-10 RSV}

There are similarities between this account and that of the feeding of the five thousand, which came somewhat earlier and occurred in the Jewish area of Galilee. But this is another account, of feeding four thousand, and in a different part of the country. Some commentators have tried to assert that these are but two different versions of the same incident. But both Matthew and Mark are careful to tell us there were two events like this. Jesus himself, as we will see a bit later, refers to the two different events as having significance in the lives of his apostles. So here is another time of feeding the multitude.

Yet these were very similar. Bread and fish were the foods in both cases, and our Lord multiplied them when they were brought to him. Why did he repeat this miracle? Perhaps part of the answer is that he was doing with the Gentiles what he had also done among the Jews, so that these Gentiles would be taught the same spiritual lessons as the Jews and the disciples would see that this was intended for Gentiles as well.

But Mark makes clear that basically it arose from the compassion that Jesus had for these people. They had been with him for three days without any food. Now, it is without question that they came because they wanted to see the miracles he was doing. Just as he had anticipated, the spreading abroad of news of the healing of the deaf and dumb man had brought people streaming out of the cities. They were there to watch the wonder worker, the miracle man. For three days they had hung around, hoping that he would do a miracle. Probably our Lord taught them during that period. We do not know exactly what he taught -- perhaps he repeated some of his earlier messages, as any good preacher would do when he had a different crowd before him. But they were not content with that, and had lingered, hoping to see a miracle. Finally, after three days, they know they must return home. But Jesus is loathe to send them away with no food. He does not want to do any more miracles, lest they miss the real message. But he does, because of his compassionate heart. He does not want to send them back and have them faint along the way, so he decides to feed them.

As we read this account, we must ask ourselves, "What did he want these disciples to learn from this?" Because what he wanted them to learn is what he wants us to learn. This is why it is recorded for us here on these pages. Some things are very obvious. First, he wanted them to learn to begin with what they had. When you want God to act, do not wait for God to do everything, because he expects us to be involved in the work that he does. Start with what you have. When he said he was going to feed the crowd, and they asked how he was going to do it out there in the desert, his first words were, "How many loaves do you have?" They checked around, and said, "Seven." He said, "That will do. Any amount -- whatever you have. Just start with what you have."

Many of us want God to do things in our lives. We pray that he will work in various ways. And it is right that we should ask him to work. There are things he can do that we cannot do at all. We can bring the bread, but he must multiply it. We can fill the jars with water, but he must turn it into wine. But start with what you have.

Years ago I read of a young Christian who was in that first glow of relationship with God. He was walking along a country road one day, and he was very hungry. He prayed that God would supply him with food. Before he finished his prayer, a bread truck passed by and a loaf fell out the back end onto the road. But rather than running over and picking it up, this young man sat down and prayed, "Lord, if you intend that bread to be for me, then cause it to come through the air to me!"

Our Lord would teach us that there are practical things we can do. Start with what you have. When you want to see something accomplished for God, begin where you are.

People often come to me and say, "How do you get a church to begin to practice Body Life and learn the secrets of the New Covenant? How do you get a church to change into a vital, alert, warm, and loving fellowship?" They want me to give them some secret formula by which you can get some very lethargic and apathetic elders suddenly to spring into action. I simply tell them to go home and start right where they are. "Start in your home. Get a group around you who feel as you do and start with them, and God will bless from that."

The second lesson our Lord clearly wanted them to learn is that the supply will always equal the demand. God will never quit giving as long as the need remains. It is wonderful the way this is put in the original Greek. Our translation says, "... he took the seven loaves, and ... broke them"; but the English is faulty. What the Greek really says is, "... he kept on breaking them" -- and the disciples kept on feeding the multitude. Jesus stood there at the front of the crowd, took the seven loaves, and began to break them. He did not build up a great pile of bread, and another pile of fish, and then say, "Now take that and distribute it." No, he just handed it out a little at a time, but it kept on going, and going, and going -- first the bread, and then the fish. They had plenty to feed everybody, but nothing visible as a resource from which to draw. God wants us to learn that is the way he acts in our lives.

Every year at PBC we close the year by adding up how much money God has sent in for the various ministries here. And every year there are about a hundred or two hundred dollars more than we actually have spent -- never any great surplus, always enough for everything that needed to be done, but no excessive supply to misdirect our faith from the God who acts, to the actions he performs.

Then he obviously wants to impart to them a very deeply needed lesson. Notice that all the Lord's miracles are always done on the physical level. But our Lord is never happy with their remaining at that level. We have seen this before, again and again. He does not want people to focus on the physical. He wants these disciples to see also that he is teaching them a far more important lesson than that he can provide bread for the body. He is driving home the lesson of the centrality of the spiritual. That is, there is a spiritual hunger in our lives as well as a physical, and there is a spiritual bread which feeds it. And without this, life would surely fail.

Jesus himself demonstrates this for us in his experience of being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Do you remember what he said? "Man shall not live by bread alone," {Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4}. That is not enough for your humanity. If all you are interested in, and all you are seeking to provide, is food and shelter and luxuries -- the visible things of life -- your humanity is going to shrivel, become weak and subject to all kinds of attacks and destructive forces. "Your spirit must be fed," Jesus said. And in the lesson of the feeding of the five thousand he made it very clear. He told them, "I am the bread sent down from heaven," {cf, John 6:41}. If you want to keep your spirit strong, so that you are able to understand what is happening to you, and cope with the problems which arise out of what is happening to you, you must learn to feed upon the Lord Jesus. You must learn to take from him the strength you need, and worship him, and rejoice in him, and be thankful to him. And you need this every day, just as you need bread for your body.

Many times I have tried to help people who were struggling with various problems in their personal life or in their marriage. As we have talked these problems through, they have come to understand that the reason they got into the mess they did was because they had lost their perspective, had begun to see things out of focus. They could not analyze or explain what was happening to them. So they reacted wrongly, and created tragedy. As we talked, they began to see this. And, in prayer and the reading of the Word, they began to understand again that they needed to forgive and heal and draw together. They themselves would often say they recognized the problem was that they had not maintained a spiritual relationship with the Lord. Then I have seen them go back and do well for a while, but then begin to fade again. And sure enough, sooner or later the phone rings, and there they are, back in the same mess. You see, you cannot keep your spirit strong if you do not feed it. This is the lesson of this whole account here, and this is what the disciples were expected to know.

One final lesson our Lord was seeking to drive home to them was the sufficiency of the resource. This is implied in the fact that seven baskets of pieces were left over -- seven hampers, the term is, large baskets full of fragments. At the close of the feeding of the five thousand there were twelve baskets left over -- not the same kind of baskets, but smaller ones. As we saw in that account, twelve is the number used in Scripture to symbolize Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel. Our Lord was telling the disciples that was a truth which applied to Israel. But now he uses the number seven. Seven is the number which always implies the full manifestation of God, God in his completeness, in his fullness. This is why the number seven appears so often in the book of Revelation, because there God is manifesting himself, stepping out of the mystery of his being into full revelation before all of his creation.

What Jesus is saying here is, "If you want to know God this way, if your heart hungers as Paul's did -- "... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death," {Phil 3:10} -- the way to know him is to learn to feed upon him in daily satisfaction of your heart's need, and to reckon upon him. This involves the Word of God: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," {Matt 4:4 RSV}. And then it means believing this Word, rejoicing in the One who gives it. This is feeding upon Christ.

Did these disciples learn this lesson? Unfortunately, they didn't. They were just like us. The account tells us what happened, Verse 10:

And he sent them away; and immediately he got into the boat with his disciples, and

went to the district of Dalmanutha. {Mark 8:10 RSV}

Dalmanutha is across the lake, on the western side, near the present city of Tiberias.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation." {Mark 8:11-12 RSV}

What shall we make of this invasion of his ministry by the Pharisees again? It is obvious that they are totally blinded men. Here they come and ask him for a sign after they themselves had seen hundreds of signs he had done. But they are determined not to believe in him. And yet, to disguise this fact, by an apparent eagerness to know more of his ministry, they demand this sign. Now, it is true that the Old Testament says that any prophet must give a sign to people, to prove he is indeed a prophet. We need to know this today. When prophets speak, there ought to be some sign that they are from God. In the Old Testament the sign was that they could predict something which was going to happen in the near future, and it would be fulfilled exactly as predicted. Those whose predictions are not accurately fulfilled are giving clear evidence that they are not prophets from God.

But our Lord refused to give any sign, because he knew these men. He knew their hardened hearts, knew that they were beyond belief in a sign. Matthew says that he added the words, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," {Matt 12:39-40 RSV}. That is, the only sign that would be given them was the sign of the resurrection. Yet it is true that when the resurrection did occur, these Pharisees did not believe even this sign. So no sign would be given to them. Jesus refused to work a miracle. Leaving them in their blindness and stubborn determination to unbelief, he departed.

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

Now they [the disciples] had forgotten to bring bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and the leaven of Herod." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "We have no bread." {Mark 8:13-16 RSV}

I do not know if you can, but I cannot understand why they said, "We have no bread," when he said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians" -- except that it indicates the workings of a bad conscience. They had forgotten to buy bread, and they thought he was rebuking them for that. The moment he mentioned leaven, which is remotely connected with bread, they tied it in, due to their bad consciences, with their failure to bring enough bread for lunch. That is how dull and confused they were, how completely they failed to understand what he was saying.

It was very much like the husband who said to his wife, "Where did you get that dress?" To which she replied, "Well, it was 40% off!" There is no connection between the question and the answer, except a bad conscience. I think that was the case here.

Our Lord had intended to warn them of what produces dullness, what produces the condition they had just witnessed with the Pharisees. What in the world makes men so incredibly blind that, when One is standing before them doing all these wonderful signs and speaking these marvelous words, they should nevertheless insist upon another sign? He was warning them of what produces the condition because they were in danger of doing the same thing themselves. He put it in these graphic terms: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and the leaven of Herod." Leaven is a picture of evil doctrine or teaching. He was saying, "The reason the Pharisees are so blind is because of what they believe, what they teach. The reason Herod cannot recognize me is because of what he believes, what he teaches."

The Pharisees believed that God was interested only in what you do, in performance. There are a lot of people like that today in the churches. They believe that all God wants is correct performance, outward, external

obedience to certain demands, proper conduct of religious observances, and that if you supply this, it is all God is really interested in. What you are really like inside -- your attitudes, your relationships -- this makes no difference. God only wants you to do the right thing in the right way at the right time. Jesus said that if this is the way you live, if you think God is concerned only with what you have accomplished, with what your activity has been on his behalf, then you are going to dull your spirit and miss all the great lessons of life he wants you to learn. It will cause you to lose out on the excitement of faith, and you will become lethargic, apathetic, dull, and listless.

Or if, like Herod, your eyes are on man and the world around, and you are interested only in doing what makes you acceptable to others, and not what makes you acceptable to God, that too will dull your spirit. It will lead you to become blind and foolish in the way you act. This is what he was teaching them here, and he presses on in the matter -- Verse 17:

And being aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread?" {Mark 8:17a RSV}

Why do you do that?" he says. And then he asks a series of six very perceptive questions:

"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?" {Mark 8:17b-21 RSV}

In this series of questions, our Lord is suggesting for them, and for us, what to do when we get the spiritual "blahs."

This past Friday night, in Los Angeles, a young man came up to me and said, "I'm a graduate of a Bible college. I've been a Christian for a number of years. But I must tell you that I feel so blah, so empty. I've lost all interest in what God is doing, and I just don't have any desire even to get involved in a Bible study anymore. What should I do?" I had just been studying this passage, so I did what our Lord suggests in this passage, without telling this young man what I was doing.

The first thing the Lord suggests is, use your mind. "Do you not perceive or understand?" Stop and think about where you are, about what is happening to you and why it happened. Analyze it. Read what the Bible has to say about it. That is what the mind is for. Study the revelations of God to you. Use your mind.

Second, he asks, "Are your hearts hardened?" That is, analyze the state of your heart. Are you dull, or do you respond? Have you forgotten truth? Because if the heart does not respond to what the mind has understood, then it is because you have not really believed it. You may have recognized mentally that it is true, but you have not acted upon it. You do not really believe God is going to do what he has said he will do, that is the problem. This is always revealed by a dull, unresponsive heart. Truth always moves us -- when we believe it. It always grips us and excites us. And if we are not excited, if we do not feel a response of joy, it is because the mind has grasped it but the heart has not. One of the things the Word suggests we do at this point is to pray that the eyes of our heart might be enlightened.

Jesus moves on: "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" Jesus said these words again and again to the people he taught, and each time he means the same thing. Do not just look at the events you are seeing and think that is all there is to it. It is a parable, a parallel to something deeper and more important, concerning your spirit. As these men were being fed by the loaves and the fishes, he was saying to them, "Don't think of this merely as a way of getting a good, quick, free meal. Remember that I am telling you that you have a deeper need, a far more demanding need, which needs daily replenishment as well. Use your eyes to see beyond the physical to the spiritual."

And finally, "Do you not remember?" Hasn't God taught you things in the past through your circumstances?

Hasn't he led you through events which have made you understand something about your life? Do you think that the things happening to you right now, whoever and wherever you are, are just accidents? Or is God saying something to you? Do you not remember the times he said things like that in the past? Well, remember them now, and interpret these events now, and recognize that you are in the hands of a loving Father who has put you right where you are to teach you a very needed truth. Learn to lay hold of that truth, and rejoice!

This is the way to keep spiritually alive and alert, vital and functioning, as a believer. That is what Jesus taught these men. And the question now hangs over each one of us: "Do you not yet understand?"

Prayer:

Forgive us, Father, for the dullness of our hearts, for the way we reflect so frequently the attitude of the pagan worldlings around us, who see no further than the surface of events, and never think any deeper. Forgive us for living like animals, in this respect, and help us to remember that we are men and women, that we have a spirit as well as a body, and that it needs strengthening, needs upholding, and needs to be fed. Lord, help us to give ourselves every day, afresh and anew, to this One who is the bread sent down from heaven, the One who can strengthen us and keep us and establish us. We ask in his name, Amen.

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