

Mystery in the Kingdom: The Yeast of Unbelief

Mark 8:1-21

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It was the end of grade 10 when my French teacher sat me down and said “Dan, you’re sitting at 49% and you’ve failed French. And it’s not because you didn’t get enough 1 on 1 attention. There were only 4 kids in the class. And it’s not because I didn’t try to communicate in a way you could understand. I did everything I could. But you refuse to study. You refuse to remember what I’ve taught. And you’ve failed.

But I’m going to give you a choice. You can either take summer school and try again, or I’ll give you 51% if you promise me that you won’t sign up to take French 11.

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If you’ve been with us for the last couple months you know that we’ve been in a series titled “Mystery in the Kingdom.” And in this section we’ve been digging into the way Jesus defined Himself and His kingdom. And the way He did this was so different from what anyone expected.

So in spite of having the power to perform miracles and the authority to teach in a life-altering way, Jesus systematically refused to prove Himself or His kingdom. He gave signs, but never proof. He presented truth but never removed doubt from the table.

And as we’ve seen, the reason He did this was that He wasn’t trying to convince people to follow Him. What He wanted was for people to have faith in Him. And that’s not the same thing. It’s not faith to join the team when Superman shows up with his cape. Anyone would do that. But Jesus wants us to choose to trust Him even when things aren’t working out the way we imagine they should.

Well in today’s text we finish off this section with one final story. But it’s not the neat and tidy ending we want because even with all the one-on-one attention Jesus has given, people still refuse to accept Him and His kingdom. But here He tells us why.

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So please open your Bibles to Mark 8 starting in verse 1. And would you stand with me as we come before God’s word asking Him to give us eyes to see and the humility to learn? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 8:1-21]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

So there are two sections in this text. First we get another feeding where Jesus satiates the real hunger of a crowd. And in the second section Jesus shows us the real reason we get Him wrong and the real medicine we need to counteract this.¹

¹ Outline adapted from John Lin <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/do-you-still-not-understand-west-2/> (Accessed July 7, 2021)

So first, the real hunger. Now if it feels a bit like I'm recycling sermons its because this text is incredibly similar to one we encountered back in chapter 6 where Jesus fed 5000. So it's not me it's Jesus.

But here we have a group of 4000 who have just spent three days with Jesus and now are out of food so much so that in verse 3 Jesus is concerned some will collapse on the way home.

Now this is a bit of a mind bender. Why are 4000 people who knew they needed food to survive out in desert, risking their lives, to listen to Jesus? Why are they there?

And the answer is that He enraptured them. So the very last verse before our text today says:

They were completely amazed and said again and again, "Everything He does is wonderful. He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who cannot speak." (Mark 7:37)

So their hunger for Jesus was greater than their hunger for food. What He was offering was the real food they knew they had been searching for. And this wasn't a rare occurrence with Jesus.

Jesus was constantly saying things like "Follow Me" to guys like Peter, and they would throw down their fishing nets and do it. Once people had tasted Jesus they didn't want to go back to the way they had been living before.

It's like it was for me with steak. So my mom is a great cook but growing up one thing that never turned out awesome in her kitchen was steak. Maybe it was overdone or maybe it was the cut of beef we bought – I'm not sure. But regardless I never understood what the big deal was about with steak – it was just meat.

And then when Nikki and I were approaching our second anniversary our friend Dom gave us a \$150 gift certificate for Gotham's Steak House in Vancouver. Now at this point in our lives our car wasn't worth much more than \$150 so this was an exorbitant amount of money to spend on a single meal. But when I pulled out my butter knife and easily cut through my 9oz premium quality fillet mignon, cooked rare, I was blown away. Who knew, I did like steak. It's shoe leather that I'm not a huge fan of.

Here's the point. When people encountered Jesus they got a taste of what they had been created for. And they wanted more. This is why in Colossians Paul writes:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through Him God created everything...

Everything was created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1:15-16)

To be created *through* Christ means He is our author. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and at the deepest level of our souls we resonate with Him.

And then to be created *for* Him means that we were never intended to live for ourselves, we were created to live for His glory. And so, when we center our lives around Christ, we taste life the way it was designed to be cooked. Life with Jesus is real life. Jesus feeds our real hunger.

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And to those of us who believe this makes sense – at least intellectually – but here’s the human reality. Adam and Eve could live in the Garden, in perfect community with their Creator – they believed! And yet they were tempted by the deceitful promise of more. And similarly we all have the tendency to look for meaning in other places even when intuitively we know they aren’t going to satisfy; they are going to leave us with less.

So I spend a decent amount of time at the gym and I know proper nutrition is important. But even so I’ve never sat down to watch a movie and then at the end said “Oh my goodness, I disgust myself. I just ate a whole head of lettuce without knowing it.” Never happens! But a Costco bag of Chicago mix? That can disappear even though at the end I know I’m going to feel miserable. Am I the only person this happens to?

Similarly it’s easy for us to fall into looking to other gods to satisfy our need for meaning. And we do this with good things: our job or our spouse or our kids. We say to these things “Feed me. Give me meaning. Give me comfort. Make me happy. Be my ultimate reason for living.”

But every other god we center our lives around lets us down and leaves us with less. And the reason is that your soul wasn’t built in the image of your job or your spouse or your children. And it’s not just Christians who are noticing this.

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Author Naomi Wolf wrote an article in The New York Times a few years back called “The Porn Myth.” It’s a case study about what happens when we try to feed our soul’s deepest needs with sex. So Wolf writes:

“Sex, pornography and sexual imagery has become the wallpaper of our culture – it’s everywhere.... But does all this sexual imagery in the air mean that sex has been liberated? Or is it the case that the relationship between the... porn industry, compulsiveness, and sexual appetite has become like the relationship between processed foods, supersized portions and obesity. If your appetite is stimulated and fed by poor quality material it takes more junk to fill you up.”²

She is saying that even though there is a smorgasbord of sex out there it’s less satisfying than ever. And she’s not a Christian, but she recognizes that trying to find the meaning of life in sex is a dead-end road.

² Naomi Wolf https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/trends/n_9437/ (Accessed July 9, 2021)

And Jesus says the reason is not because sex or money or power or family – or any of the other gods we serve are bad – they aren't – but your soul wasn't built to image any of these things. Your soul was built to image God. And so nothing else will satisfy.

Jesus says “Your soul resonates with Me, not with sex, not with your children, not with power. And until you realize this you will always be eating apples in the Garden and finding yourself exposed and having less than you started with.

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There is a real hunger and only Jesus satisfies it. But as it turns out, hunger is not the real problem, there is another. So in verse 14 Jesus and His disciples are back in a boat, crossing Galilee, and we read:

But the disciples had forgotten to bring any food. They had only one loaf of bread with them in the boat. As they were crossing the lake, Jesus warned them, “Watch out! Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.” (Mark 8:14-15)

Now Jesus was constantly saying strange things and so the disciples look at each other and think He is chastising them for not packing snacks. But He's actually warning them about the real danger that threatens them and threatens us.

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So yeast is a fungus. It multiplies itself one cell at a time through the fermentation process. And it works itself through bread slowly changing its character. Now we love yeast. We've learned to appreciate it. But in the first century yeast was bad. It was a corruption of the bread. It was a cancer. And so Jesus says watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod.

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Now the Pharisees and Herod were Jesus' enemies. He called the Pharisees a brood of vipers and Herod a sly fox. But what's their “yeast” that could infect the disciples? Look at verse 11. Jesus has just fed another crowd, 4000 people, and then immediately we read:

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test Him, they asked Him for a sign from heaven. (Mark 8:11)

The food was nice Jesus, but give us some proof. We need more if we are going to believe in You. The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod was unbelief.

Now remember last week we said every miracle Jesus performed and every teaching He gave was done in such a way that still required faith to understand. Jesus never removed doubt from the equation. He never made following Him a simple matter of logic. So it has always required a leap to believe. But we aren't talking about doubt here, we are talking about unbelief.

You see the Pharisees aren't trying to understand Jesus. They are trying not to. They don't need just a little more evidence. They are trying to undermine Him. That's unbelief, and that's the yeast or cancer that Jesus warns His disciples about. Don't let unbelief ferment in you. Root it out.

But when Jesus says this we see that the cancer has already taken root because they look at Him just like I looked at my French teacher – just blank stares. They think they've got a bread problem, but Jesus thinks they've got a belief problem. They will not remember what He has done and what He has taught them.

So have you ever had a belief problem? Are you in danger of letting unbelief ferment in your life? Here's how it happens: We believe in Jesus, but we try to trade our belief for Him playing our games. But Jesus won't play our games. When the Pharisees ask for a sign Jesus sends them packing – He will not prove Himself to them or us.

And so when something comes into our lives and we pray "Jesus, take this away. Heal this. Restore this relationship. Change this trajectory." Sometimes He does and sometimes He doesn't. And when He doesn't perform at our command our faith can falter and we are at risk of feeding unbelief.

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This week I spoke with a friend who lost his dad a few years back – and his dad was a passionate Jesus-loving man. And my friend told me he was so sure Jesus was going to heal his dad that when he died his faith was shattered.

In spite of all the awesome things Jesus had done in his dad's life, when Jesus didn't heal him everything else was forgotten.

And this is where the yeast of the Pharisees creeps in. When we ask Jesus to perform, and He will not, instead of trusting that He is God, and may have different plans than we have, we focus on the problem in front of us and feed our unbelief.

And friends, this is a real danger for Jesus-followers. Jesus said this was the real danger His disciples faced. And this is the danger we face too. Instead of feeding our faith when Jesus doesn't perform we allow unbelief to ferment in our hearts.

And here's the crazy thing, before you know it, you can actually be sitting in a boat with Jesus, having just witnessed Him show up in power in your life, but if you allow the yeast of the Pharisees to fester then you can totally miss everything. Look at the disciples:

At this they began to argue with each other because they hadn't brought any bread. (Mark 8:16)

Just moments after 4000 had eaten lunch, and with Jesus still speaking, the disciples can descend into arguments and despair. All they can see is the problem right in front of them – and it's not even a big problem! Just no snacks! But unbelief is growing in their hearts.

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So if you've ever been in a spot like this where you started noticing your faith faltering it can be a really scary place. So how do we avoid feeding the yeast of unbelief. How do we root it out of our livers? We get two answers. First, we need to ingest Jesus' medicine, and second, we need to understand His heart.

So first Jesus' medicine. Look at verse 19. How does Jesus respond when the disciples can't see past the problems they are immediately facing? Jesus says:

When I fed the 5,000 with five loaves of bread, how many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward?"

"Twelve," they said.

"And when I fed the 4,000 with seven loaves, how many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?"

"Seven," they said.

"Don't you understand yet?" He asked them. (Mark 8:19-21)

Oh they understood, but they didn't understand. They knew the answers – 12 and 7 – but they weren't thinking about how Jesus had faithfully taken care of them. All they saw was the new need in front of their noses. And this is such a classic human trick.

Hasn't Jesus shown up a thousand times in your life and fed you with real food? And yet isn't it your experience that in a dark moment it can feel like He's never been there at all? I've felt that! And it feels real. But the feeling is a lie. It's the yeast of unbelief.

Now yes, it's true Jesus hasn't performed on cue. Yes, He hasn't answered every prayer the way I've wanted. But that's because He is God not me, and He has His own agenda. It's like C.S. Lewis says: "He's not a tame lion. But He's good."

And so the answer to rooting out the cancer of unbelief from our hearts is to remind ourselves of what God has done.

And this is where Jesus leads the disciples: "Remember the 5000? Remember the 4000? What happened?" He recounts stories of His faithfulness. And this is the medicine that heals unbelief – intentional remembering. But you have to take it for it to work.

Friends, chemo doesn't kill cancer if you know about it, you have to take it into your system. And it's the same with faith.

In a few minutes we are going to take communion together and this is what communion is all about. We take the bread and wine into our systems again and again as a way of reminding our forgetful bodies about the faithfulness of Jesus.

So are you in the practice of remembering to remember? Are you intentional about reminding yourself about God's faithfulness?

Friends, this isn't a joke. Cancer is on the line. Spiritual death is on the line. Jesus thought it could happen to His disciples and it can happen to us. So take the medicine. Just two practical ideas here. First, when you pray resist the temptation to simply pray for what you need. "God please heal my dad. God give me a safe trip. God bless this Chicago Mix to my body's use."

Don't just pray for what you want, spend time remembering what God has done. How has He been faithful today? Where have you seen His provision this week? Use prayer before your meal to do this. Don't just say "thank you for the food" actually thank Him for something. Don't let the little moments where He shows up be forgotten – remember them in prayer – because thankfulness for His faithfulness heals unbelief.

One more idea – surround yourself with Jesus lovers who can remind you about His faithfulness. And this isn't a legalistic thing. If you're going camping this summer and are going to miss church that's fine. But don't make a practice out of it. Nobody chooses to get cancer, it just sneaks in and that's the way the yeast of unbelief works. We have to continually feed our faith if it's going to flourish. So take Jesus' medicine, practice remembering.

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And finally, see Jesus. Look at Jesus. He is so much more compassionate than we would ever imagine. Remember last week how Jesus did sign language with the deaf-mute to show him how he was going to be healed? He related to him. And then He gave a deep sigh as He felt the man's pain and counted the cost it was going to take to heal him.

Well Jesus does the same thing here with the Pharisees. In verse 11 they come, full of unbelief, to ask for another sign. And in verse 12 we get Jesus' response:

When He heard this, He sighed deeply in His spirit (Mark 8:12)

The world of unbelief we are surrounded by isn't the one Jesus created us to live in – and He mourns this. Jesus even mourns the unbelief of the Pharisees on their behalf. He knows He is what they need and He's so sad they can't believe.

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And at the same time He looks forward to the cross where the last thing He will do is to let out a deep cry "My God why have You forsaken Me?" He will enter the depths of hell on their behalf and ours. He will taste the sting of doubt in order to heal our unbelief. He will face exile from the Father so that we can become sons and daughters.

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So I did end up taking the 51% and refused to remember what my French teacher had taught. And it's worked out fine. But with Jesus it's different. Jesus says: "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees." It's not a matter of not having enough evidence. It's not about needing proof. Refusing to remember what I've done is cancer. It will kill you.

So friends, don't let unbelief grab hold of you. Root it out. And feast your soul on Jesus; remember His faithfulness. And let Him be your Saviour and lead you into the abundant life He designed you to enjoy.