

The Leaven of the Pharisees and Herod

Mark 8:10-21

No sign shall be given to this generation? How could Jesus say that with a straight face, after doing all those miracles since His last confrontation with the Pharisees at the beginning of chapter 7? Oh sure, when Jesus cast a demon out of a girl up near Tyre the news might not have made it back down into Judea. But the last two verses of chapter 7 make it clear that when Jesus healed a man who was deaf and mute, the news got around very quickly. Everyone was astonished at what Jesus could do. And think about the very public miracle we see in the first few verses of chapter 8 – feeding 4000 folks. How could the Pharisees not have known about that? How could they still be looking for a sign from God?

And as we have been learning over the last few weeks, it seems that these miracles were specifically designed to be signs of Jesus' power, to prove that Jesus is Who He says He is – the Holy One of Israel. Back in chapter 7 verse 6, Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites because they were ignoring the commandments of God in their zeal for their human traditions. And how did Isaiah say God would respond to this sort of hypocrisy? "I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder." And what did Jesus do in the rest of Mark 7 and 8? On His own authority and in His own power, He proceeded to do all the marvelous works and wonders that God said He would do in Isaiah 29, and in the same order.

It's pretty obvious when you think about it: In Isaiah 29:15 and 16, God condemns those who hide the truth from God, those clay pots of God's creation who set themselves up above God. Isn't that what Jesus does in the first part of Mark 7, condemning the Pharisees for their hypocrisy? Isaiah 29:17 says that God's blessings will be poured out on Lebanon, and immediately after His dressing down of the Pharisees, Jesus heads to the area around Tyre and Sidon, which is also called Lebanon, to cleanse a girl of her demons. Next, Isaiah 29:18 says that the deaf shall hear, and that's the next miracle Jesus performs in Mark chapter 7 – opening the ears and loosing the tongue of a deaf man. Next, Isaiah 29:19 says that the Holy One of Israel will bless the meek and the poor, and what could be a better fulfillment of that prophecy than the miraculous feeding of the 4000 at the beginning of Mark chapter 8?

And perhaps most ironically of all, Jesus continues to follow the same pattern in the first part of today's passage, in His second confrontation with the Pharisees. For whom does God condemn in the conclusion of Isaiah 29? The scorners, those who watch for iniquity, those who accuse a man for offending, those who lay a snare for anyone who would dare to reprove them publicly. And isn't that exactly what the Pharisees were trying to do in Mark 8:11, putting Jesus to the test? So it turns out that in their opposition to Jesus, they were participating in the drama of Isaiah 29 – they were actually helping to prove Jesus' point, that He is in fact the one Isaiah was talking about, the Lord, the Holy One of Israel!

And yet, none of these fulfilled prophecies, none of these miracles, none of these signs were sufficient for the skeptical Pharisees. No, they wanted something more – a sign from Heaven. They wanted Jesus to do some Stephen Spielberg stuff like the parting of the Red Sea in the days of Moses, or like the fire that fell from Heaven during Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. That's the sort of sign that they craved, and that's the sort of sign that Jesus said He wouldn't do.

Okay, so why didn't Jesus give in to their perennial skepticism? Why didn't He display His power so publicly, so unmistakably, so clearly that no one would have any more room for doubt? Indeed, why doesn't He do that today? Wouldn't that sort of thing lead to a world-wide revival?

Perhaps, but then again, maybe not. For come to think of it, the parting of the Red Sea didn't convince Pharaoh of the power of God, did it? In spite of the wall of water on either side of him, didn't Pharaoh charge into the Red Sea after the Israelites just the same? And the clear demonstration of God's power over the prophets of Baal didn't change Jezebel's mind either. No, she heard about how fire fell from Heaven when Elijah prayed to God, but she kept on trying to kill Elijah all the same. Pharaoh and Jezebel had hearts that were so hardened against God that they wouldn't trust Him no matter how much proof of His power they saw.

And come to think of it, didn't the Pharisees have exactly the same reaction to Jesus back in Mark chapter 3? On that occasion, Jesus went into the synagogue and healed a man who had a withered hand right before their eyes. And what was their reaction? Because Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, they instantly began plotting with the Herodians, with the Jewish allies of the Roman government, about how they might put Jesus to death.

That's why Jesus warns His disciples in verse 15 to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees – the leaven of skepticism, of legalism, of hypocrisy. For approaching Jesus with that kind of arrogance, insisting that He prove Himself to us by doing things exactly our way, can only lead to that sort of profound spiritual blindness, to that sort of hardness of heart.

Well, how about us? No, we don't doubt Jesus' identity the way the Pharisees did. But day in and day out are we really any more submissive to His divine authority than they were? Are we any more satisfied with the signs of God's power that He has already given us, the answers to prayer that we and our loved ones have received time and time again? Or do we always want something different, something more? Do we ever try to put God in a box, insisting that He meet our expectations, doing things the way we want, or the way we understand? Or when life throws us a curveball, are we truly willing to submit ourselves to the authority of God, praying as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will but Yours be done?"

But the skeptical, arrogant hypocrisy of the Pharisees isn't the only kind of leaven, the only kind of spiritual poison that Jesus warns His disciples against in verse 15. He also says they should avoid the leaven of Herod, the king whom we met back in chapter 6.

You remember that story. King Herod was completely wrapped up in the pursuit of power and prestige, totally consumed by his sexual appetites. So when his wife's very attractive daughter danced before him and his wealthy friends, he promised to give her anything she wanted. And when she asked him to kill John the Baptist, he went along with her bloodthirsty request, preferring to maintain his pride rather than to look weak by going back on his word.

Well, what could Jesus' disciples possibly have in common with a guy like Herod? They were a long way from feasting at lavish banquets – indeed in verses 14 and 16, they were fretting over the fact that they didn't have enough to eat. They were in no danger of being seduced by the trappings of wealth and power.

Or were they? You know, there's more than one way to make an idol out of material things. Sure, it's easy to put your faith in money and power when you have lots of it. But you can be just as fixated on material things, just as convinced that money and power and sex are the real keys to happiness even if you don't have any of those things. Thus, poor folks who seek to gain by taking from the rich are just as materialistic as rich folks who selfishly hoard their wealth. In other words, envy is just as much a snare as greed, and so the disciples who were scrounging around in the boat for the scraps of yesterday's lunch were just as much in danger of the idol of materialism as Herod was as he lounged luxuriously in his palace.

And so how about us? Where's the focus of our lives? What do we think is our true source of happiness and fulfillment? Like Herod, do we think power is the answer? Are we looking to the political leaders to solve our national problems, or even the problems of our county? Like the disciples, do we think just a little more money is the answer? Are we expecting our jobs or our Social Security checks or our retirement savings to provide for us? In short, is our focus on Christ and His Kingdom? Or are we like Herod focused only on the things of this world?

If so, the conclusion of Isaiah 29 should bring us up short. For verse 20 doesn't just condemn the skeptical scoffers like the Pharisees – it says that the ruthless, the tyrannical, the violent like Herod will be consumed, will cease to be. And verse 21 doesn't just speak against those like the Pharisees who try to ensnare the righteous with clever words. It also condemns those who abuse their power, who defeat justice by turning aside the just claims of the righteous.

So, how can we avoid all these different kinds of worldly thinking? How can we turn away from the leaven of both the Pharisees and of Herod, the dangers of hypocrisy and skepticism, and the equally great dangers of materialism and pride? How can we turn away from this world which is so enticing, so very real?

Well, what has Jesus been trying to show us all through chapters 7 and 8 of Mark, as He has acted out all the prophecies of Isaiah 29? He's the One that really matters, not all the material things of this world. He is the One True God – there's nothing He has created that can possibly rival Him in power or beauty. And so it just makes sense for us to turn to Him for solutions when we are in difficulty, for truth when we have questions, for direction when we don't know which way to go, for security in times of uncertainty.

And isn't that exactly what God promises in Isaiah 29:23? For how will Jacob, who represents the people of God, stop being ashamed and afraid? Not when he places his faith in the things of this world, but when he sees his children, the work of God's hands – in other words, when he sees more and more people coming to acknowledge Jesus to be the Holy One of Jacob, sanctifying His name, and standing in awe of His power and love.

And in embracing Jesus as Savior and bowing before Him as Lord, we turn away from what Isaiah 29:24 calls errors in Spirit, we turn away from murmuring against Him as the Pharisees did, we turn away from considering Him a threat to our worldly ways as Herod did. It is only those who turn away from our own experience, our own wisdom, our own reason, it is only those who accept instruction from Christ and His Word who can ever know the truth about anything.

Will we hear His voice? Will we believe His signs? Will we trust Him and follow Him? Or like the disciples, don't we yet understand?