

Are We Getting It Yet?

Mark 8:1-21 *In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, ² "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ "And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar."*

⁴ *Then His disciples answered Him, "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?" ⁵ He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven."*

⁶ *So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude. ⁷ They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them.*

⁸ *So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. ⁹ Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away, ¹⁰ immediately got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha.*

¹¹ *Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. ¹² But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."*

¹³ *And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. ¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." ¹⁶ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread." ¹⁷ But 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? ¹⁸ "Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ "When 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." ²¹ So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?"*

When I was in Grade 2, a friend and I enjoyed making fun of a certain tape which our teacher played nearly every day. On one occasion, she was so fed up with our satire, that she told both of us that we would certainly fail Grade 2. I was paralysed with fear, because I couldn't think of anything worse than repeating grade 2, while all my friends went on. It didn't bother my friend, who the next day was inviting me to continue with our joking.

Worse things can happen to you than failing a grade. Most of us know what it is to have to re-take an exam, or repeat a course, or perhaps repeat a year - be it at school, or college or some other training. None of us enjoys repeating a course or a test. We'd prefer to get it right and move on.

When you do repeat a course, or even when you read a book a second or third time, you often tend to notice things you didn't see the first time. You sometimes even ask, was this here before? And ideally, this time you get it, you learn the lesson, and don't need to do it again.

If that's true with Maths and Economics and all other kinds of academic subjects, you can be sure it is true of God's school of life. When God wants His children to learn particular lessons in the life of faith, He will often have us repeat particular subjects. He will take us back to a very similar situation, until we get the lesson. Repetition is meant to break through our inattention, and drive through the lesson.

In the book of Judges, there is a cycle. When Israel became complacent because of their wealth, they forgot God. When they forgot God, their enemies came to rule them cruelly, so Israel returned

to God, God delivered them, and they came back to a place of prosperity. But once in that prosperity, they became complacent and the cycle began again. As you read the book of Judges, you are hoping that the repetition will help the Israelites break out of the cycle, and not have to come back again to misery.

When you get into the book of Kings and Chronicles, you see this repetition again. Good king leads Israel well, God protects and blesses the nation, evil kings brings idolatry, which leads to defeat and God's chastening. And the cycle repeats, and you are hoping for someone to stop the cycle and say – we need only good kings and every good king must make sure he raises his sons to become good kings. But human ears respond differently to repetition.

This passage is all about God repeating certain lessons and how people responded to it. The sign was very similar to a previous one. The Pharisees show one kind of response to repetition – wilful blindness. The disciples show another kind of repetition – neglectful blindness. Both are kinds we need to avoid.

Sometimes we find that our lives seem to be returning to the same point, repeating the same lesson. If so, we can learn how not to respond to repetition from both the Pharisees and the disciples.

I. The Repetition of a Sign vv1 -10

Some critics of the Bible have said that this is nothing more than a duplication of the feeding of the 5000. Although this feeding seems very similar, there are several details that shows us it was different. We have different numbers. The one is feeding 5000 men, here we are told it was four thousand. Then there were five loaves, here there were seven. Then they took up twelve baskets of fragments, here, seven, and the word for basket is different. Not only so, but the place, season and audience was different. The feeding of the 5000 took place on the west side of the lake of Galilee, close to Passover time, when the grass was green, to a mainly Jewish audience. Here it takes place on the east side, over six months later, and the crowd is either Gentile, or a mixed group.

At the same time, there are enough similarities to show us that this was, in some ways, a repetition of a previous lesson. Here is a crowd that has been seeking Jesus Christ and they were more than casual seekers – they remained with Jesus for three days. Picture a teaching seminar of three days, with Messiah teaching for hours on end. These were a people hungry for God's Word, so much so that they had not brought provisions. They had come to hear Jesus and were going to stay and hear Him as long as He taught there.

The Bible has a promise for such people. Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount that if people seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all these things will be added unto them. What things? The things that Gentiles seek after – food and clothing. Jesus said, prioritise God and His Word, and you will be provided for.

God keeps His promises. God is faithful. The same Lord who made that promise is going to make good on it with these people. He knows that if He simply dismisses them now, the distance they will have to travel to get back to their homes will sap them of energy. They will faint, by the hundreds. And so, just as in the feeding of the 5000, Jesus had compassion on the crowd. He was moved within, He felt a deep yearning for the well-being of the people, felt a longing for them to not faint physically, after such a spiritual feast.

And just like in the feeding of the 5000, the disciples ask, “How is that possible?” Although, I can't

help wonder if they perhaps had slightly more faith. Here they ask, "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?" When last did God bring bread in the wilderness? Manna in the desert? Maybe the disciples don't want to presume too much, maybe they are hinting; maybe that are simply not able to believe that Jesus will do it again.

But just like in the last feeding, Jesus asks them what they have available. Seven loaves are brought to Him and a few small fishes. He gives thanks, then gives them to the disciples, who give them to the seated crowd. Again, we don't know how this took place. Maybe Jesus simply kept breaking and breaking and dividing bread and fish and handing them to the disciples who took them to groups of people in baskets. Maybe, once Jesus had broken and blessed them, the disciples found that the small piles of wafers and fish never seemed to diminish as they handed them out.

The people ate and ate, until they were filled. The word for filled means gorged, filled to the full. When you have a crowd of thousands that eat to where they cannot eat any more, and you still take up seven baskets full of fragments, you know this was a lot of food.

And again, just as in the feeding of the 5000, Jesus quickly dismisses the crowd and gets into a boat with His disciples. He will not let this scene turn into mass-hysteria.

There are a lot of similarities between the two miracles. So much so, that we need to pinch ourselves to remind ourselves that the feeding of the four thousand was an astounding miracle. While we're busy comparing the two, let's not miss what we're comparing! Two unprecedented, unheard of demonstrations of power; demonstrations of sovereign control over creation; demonstrations of being able to meet man's need - of compassion, of supplying what people need for ministry. Only in the life of the Messiah of Israel could we be comparing something staggering like the feeding of the 5000 with something amazing such as the feeding of the 4000!

But if you had been one of the twelve getting into the boat that day, what should some of your responses have been? What should have been going through your mind? He did it again! Different area, different season, different group of people, but the same unbounded, overflowing power! The same compassion on seekers! The same faithful provision for those who serve Him! The differences and the similarities should have been like a thick black marker underlining the sentence: Christ is powerfully able to meet the needs of His people.

But there was another group of people who had heard about both feedings, and their reaction was very different.

II. The Repetition of Rejection

¹ Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. ¹² But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."

The Pharisees come out to Jesus, and we find a different kind of repetition. These men repeat what they have done before: argue with Jesus and try to discredit Him. They put Him on trial, as it were, and demand that He show them a sign that would prove to them He is Messiah.

To give you an idea of the kind of sign they meant, this comes from the Talmud, "Rabbi Eliezer, when his teaching was challenged, successively appealed to certain 'signs':

First, a locust-tree moved at his bidding one hundred or, (according to some), four hundred cubits. Next, the channels of water were made to flow backwards; then the walls of the Academy leaned forward, and were only arrested at the bidding of another Rabbi."

These men did not want a sign as Jesus did miracles to help and heal and deliver. They wanted obscure, on-the-spot tinkering with creation for no other reason than to satisfy their demands. Now think about it: what signs had the Pharisees already seen up to this point? They had seen signs He had done in Jerusalem, because Nicodemus said that 'No man can do these signs unless He comes from God.' They were in the house, when Jesus healed a paralysed man lowered down from the ceiling. They were in the synagogue when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. They were in Jerusalem when Jesus healed a paralysed man on the Sabbath. They were there when He delivered a demon-possessed man that was mute. Besides all that, they saw the healed people. They met the people who told them about His feeding of thousands.

What would it do to repeat one more sign for these men? How would another sign help them believe? It would not. For the heart that is rejecting, every sign can be explained away, dismissed, or rejected altogether. They had already done that. What they were asking for was not more proof. They wanted Jesus to submit to them. They wanted Him to produce signs at their convenience in ways that would please them. They got to call the tune, and then judge the performance. If Jesus responded to this, it would be as if He were applying for accreditation at the rabbinic school. It was they who needed to submit to Christ, not the other way around.

This is why Jesus groans deeply in His Spirit. He knows these men are in such profound rejection, such hostility to the gospel, that no sign will convince them. Repetition will only indict them more, it will add to their charge sheet, it will make them even more culpable.

John 9:41 ⁴¹ *Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.*

According to Matthew's Gospel, they would be left with only one sign - the resurrection, the empty tomb, and its results. The growth of the Christian church would stand as a living sign against Pharisaic Judaism.

This is the kind of hardness we see in Pharaoh, who had the same lesson over ten times. But each lesson only led to a more entrenched hardness.

We must beware that in our hearts we do not have something that we utterly refuse to give over to God. Beware of saying in your heart, I don't know what this lesson means, but it can't mean *that*! I refuse to even consider that possibility! This is what we do when there is a cherished idol we have, which God is calling on us to give up – a sinful habit, a questionable entertainment, a compromising relationship, and we as it were block our ears and say, "Even if I come here a thousand times, I won't give this up!" This is what we do when there is a step of faith which God is calling us to take – maybe you, your son, your father, your husband is being called to ministry, or to missions, or to a place of sacrificial service and we say, "This lesson cannot mean that".

Don't do that.

Romans 14:7-8 ⁷ *For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*

You are never safer than when totally surrendered to the will of God. Nothing He asks you to give up and nothing He asks you to bear, will ultimately harm you or rob you; it will only bless you.

Sadly, these Pharisees never learned that. But the twelve were not in the same category as the

Pharisees. If the Pharisees were guilty of rejection, the disciples were guilty of inattention. If the Pharisees were guilty of wilful blindness, the disciples were guilty of careless dullness.

III. The Repetition of Dullness

¹³ And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. ¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." ¹⁶ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread." ¹⁷ But 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? ¹⁸ "Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ "When 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." ²¹ So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?"

Once again, they cross to a different portion of the lake and the disciples had forgotten to make provisions. Probably they were starting to feel hungry, and feeling a bit guilty over their lack of planning, when Jesus said to them all, "Be careful, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod."

Their response to each other is to whisper between each other that Jesus has said this because they failed to bring bread along. Perhaps they thought Jesus was hinting about the lack of food in the boat, by talking about yeast. Maybe they thought that the hidden meaning behind His words was that they didn't have bread in the boat. Maybe they thought He must be thinking about food, He must be hungry and so now He is couching His hunger in spiritual terms.

However they got there, it's hard not to think of them as spiritually dull and obtuse. Then Jesus rebukes them for a lack of understanding or of spiritual perception. They have spiritual eyes, but they are not using them. They have spiritual ears, but they are not using them. They have a heart to feel rightly towards God, but it is still infested with other loves and resisting the Lordship of Christ. That they would take His statement about the teaching and unbelief of the Pharisees, and take it to mean something about physical food, was a sign of spiritual insensitivity.

Now notice what Jesus says in verse 18. Do you not remember? In other words, your spiritual dullness is a case of forgetfulness. Things have happened in the past, but you are not getting it. The lesson has been taught, but it is not penetrating. Then Jesus says, you have had this lesson twice: The five loaves for the five thousand resulted in twelve baskets of leftovers. The seven loaves for the four thousand resulted in seven baskets of leftovers. Have the disciples ever lacked food when they have been with Jesus? If crowds of several thousand, on two different occasions, did not lack what they needed, would twelve disciples in a boat lack what they needed? Would Jesus seriously be upset about their forgetfulness to bring bread, when He has now twice shown them that God supplies the needs of those seek Him? Jesus is chiding them for being so slow to learn lessons, even when they are repeated.

Look back in **Mark 6:51-52** *⁵¹ Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marvelled. ⁵² For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.*

They did not see the spiritual lesson in the physical circumstances. They did not see the spiritual meaning of Christ's words. Spiritually dull people cannot see beyond the next meal, the next event, the next activity. They are not reflective enough to think about what God is teaching them through their circumstances, what the events in their lives reveal about God, what God wants them to

understand and how He wants them to respond. That's why they find themselves coming back to the same lesson, because they cannot see what is in front of them.

But we don't blame blind people for being blind, or deaf people for being deaf. We do blame children who are sitting in a lesson, but choose not to pay attention. We do blame drivers who can see, but choose to be inattentive and distracted and cause an accident. In these cases, the problem is not that the faculties don't work, nor that the people have deliberately shut their eyes or blocked their ears. Here the people are at fault for not focussing, for not tuning in, for not refusing distractions, and seeing and hearing what is front of them.

Dullness of heart is rebuked by God because it reveals a laziness of heart, a sluggishness of thinking. We don't look for the spiritual lessons for the same reason that a child doesn't listen to his English lesson. It is hard to concentrate and easy to just let your mind wander. It takes discipline to reflect and meditate, it's easier to just keep busy. It takes thought to consider what is behind and beyond the surface events, it's easier to just live on the surface. It takes patience to reflect on what God is doing and saying, and if you are impatient with that sort of thing, you will keep on coming back to the same lesson. God will keep giving you an F on a certain area of your Christian life, and repeat the test.

We read this account, and it almost seems unbelievable. How could they not get that Jesus was warning them about the doctrine and divisiveness and unbelief of the Pharisees? How could they miss what was right in front of them?

And yet we have abundant evidence for this same thing in our own lives. How often have we looked over at another Christian and wondered how they could not see the lesson right in front of them? And no doubt, others have wondered that about us. Our own spiritual dullness is the cause.

It is the repetition that is meant to get our attention, cause us to surrender, to listen, to become diligent at changing what God wants us to change, repenting of what He wants us to repent of, embracing the promises He wants us to. I am not saying you will always perfectly understand what God is doing but let me ask you this - if you failed your driver's test for the seventh time, how would you approach that test? Wouldn't the sheer repetition make you more careful, more attentive to detail, more measured in your approach?

Then let us take that approach to our walk with God, to our Christ-likeness. Let us apply the same kind of diligence, carefulness, reflectiveness, preparation, study, meditation and discipline that we would to get through a course. Let's look for the lesson. Let's ask God to search us and confess what He shows us. Let's take the steps we need to; give up what we need to ; change what we need to. Let us not neglect the repeated lessons of God. Let us consider our ways.