The Compassion of Christ

Mark 8:1-21

kv 2: “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.”

Today’s passage is a fairly well-known passage from Mark’s gospel where Jesus feeds four thousand people. If this sounds familiar its probably because in chapter 6 we read nearly an identical story of Jesus feeding five thousand. We may be tempted to gloss over this passage as it hits all the same beats as the first time around: Jesus’ compassion, the disciple’s cluelessness, the crowds, etc. But there are some very good reasons to study this, beyond the fact that it’s the next chapter in the Mark gospel sequence we have been discussing. Second, Jesus after this miracle warns the disciples about “the yeast of the pharisees and Harod” which is much more cryptic and deserves some explanation. The commonality between these two stories is the compassion of Jesus- the compassion Jesus has for the crowd, and the compassion Jesus has for his disciples. Accordingly, this message is titled “The Compassion of Christ”.

Let’s turn to the passage:

*During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said,****2****“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.****3****If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”*

***4****His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”*

***5****“How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked.*

*“Seven,” they replied.*

***6****He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so.****7****They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.****8****The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.****9****About four thousand were present. After he had sent them away,****10****he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.*

In verses one through ten we have nearly an identical story as Mark 6. Jesus has compassion on the people, and told his disciples he needs to feed them. In verse 3, he says if he doesn’t give the crowd food they will collapse. The implication here is they would likely die or at least cause an issue because they would need carried back to the city. Again, as in Mark 6, the disciples are confused as to how he is going to get food. What is funny here is they already saw him do this. You would think they would have learned but again the disciples don’t understand that Jesus can just make more bread. Jesus then instructs them to break the bread and miraculously feeds them all with seven loaves. This story is almost exactly identical to Mark 6, but there is a very critical, and easily overlooked difference. In Mark 6 the text says

*By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late.****36****Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”*

Contrast this to Mark 8

*“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.****3****If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”*

In both cases the people are hungry. But in Mark 8, Jesus takes responsibility for their well being in an indirect way. He acknowledges what will happen if he sends them away and takes responsibility for their well being based on the result of his action. In Mark 6, the well being of the crowd is directly considered by the disciples. Even as clueless as they are they clearly see something needs done. This contrast seems minor but it’s enormous. This principle is directly taught in Romans: “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” To be clearer, when you consider the well being of others you must foresee and discern the consequences of your actions. This might not seem controversial, but I tell you it’s very common. We would never turn away anyone from our church. But I have seen churches where a person was treated as an outcast and then they left the church. They might not want to be but they share some blame. I am sure if you pressed the members of that church, they would say something like “Well it wasn’t my choice they left. That was their choice.” It took me a long time to learn this. I recall when I studied Jesus’ trial with Paul. I remember telling Paul “You know Pilate didn’t really do anything wrong. Given his political situation, and the fact that he had no obligation to Jesus, and he didn’t actually do anything- I don’t see why he can be blamed.” I remember Paul’s response clearly. He said “The Apostle’s Creed says Jesus ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate’”. “Oh” I thought, “Guess I got that wrong.” But the principle is that to love your neighbor and to be like Jesus, we can’t take an easy way out and just say “Well not my problem.” We must have the eyes of Jesus; we must discern the consequences of our actions for we have a moral and spiritual responsibility for them. And of course, this responsibility is not boundless. While we are to consider the needs of others we are not responsible for their response. In John 6:25-66 recounts that after feeding the five thousand Jesus explained that he himself was the bread of life. Upon hearing this many grumbled and Jesus defiantly asks “Does this offend you?... The Spirit gives life the flesh counts for nothing.” And in verse 66 “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

So, after Jesus feeds all the people the Pharisees show up to question Jesus. They ask Jesus for a sign from heaven. This is extremely funny because Jesus just fed four thousand people with 7 loaves of bread. What more of a sign would one need? This demonstrates a phenomenon with seekers of signs. People who demand proof, often times don’t demand proof because they want to know- they demand it because they want to discredit an enemy. Anyone who has spent time on social media has seen this. Anyone who has been a teacher has seen this. There is a way to ask a question with general humility and honest inquiry. But then you have people who come not seeking the answer, but seeking to challenge. They wish to advance an agenda, reinforce an opinion, or preach their own prejudice. The Pharisees don’t actually care about wanting to learn from Jesus. John’s gospel says they hated Jesus without reason (John 15:25). Accordingly, Jesus refuses to give them a sign, in verse 12 it says “He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.” In other gospels Jesus says no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will 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 great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'" (Matthew 12:39–40). Jesus does not entertain the intellectual dishonesty of the Pharisees and its important in our outreach efforts to identify this type of behavior. We should be on guard against these types of people, people who waste our time demanding signs that even should they be given would not believe. That said, it can be very difficult to know how God can use you in the lives of the most hardened soul. Although Jesus knew their hearts, it is difficult for us to ever know a person’s heart. The apostle Paul murdered many Christians before become a great champion of the gospel. My point here is to err on the side of caution in rejecting obstinate people, but understand that the command to preach the word in season and out of season is not a command to devote unlimited attention to those who are clearly unrepentant and divisive.

The final part of this passage depicts Jesus’ warning to his disciples about the so called “yeast of the pharisees and Herod”. After the disciples had left some of them forgot bread. Jesus cautions them “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.” Jesus was referencing the Pharisee who had just been questioning Jesus. The disciples however are clueless. They think the yeast referenced referred to the bread from before. In verse 16 they ask “It is because we have no bread.” Jesus from there asks them if their hearts are hardened. The words he uses here “Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” echo his judgment from Mark 4 ““The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “’they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven!’”. Jesus’ question is a rhetorical “Are you seriously right now?”. Matthew’s gospel includes more of the conversation in which Jesus more explicitly says “’How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Mat 16-11-12). Luke’s gospel accounts Jesus teaching his disciples that the yeast of the Pharisees is hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). In all these cases, Jesus uses the metaphor or yeast. He uses “yeast” because as he explains in Matthew 13, yeast “works its way all through the dough”. Jesus says “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Mat 13:33). So, Jesus sees the teachings of the Pharisees and Herod as teachings which will work all through the disciples if they are allowed and ruin them. These teachings can be described in broad strokes as sin itself. Be on guard against the teachings as they lead to sin. The Pharisees sin was very subtle. You couldn’t see it from the outside. Hypocrisy, envy, pride, among others were all within them. These sins led them to murder Jesus. Herod’s sin was not very subtle. He married his brother’s wife. After this he had John the Baptist beheaded. Regardless Jesus’ teaching is to not give sin a foothold in your life. People often times think its possible to sin just a little bit, or to section it off in their life. They think they all will be well if they just keep this one thing for themselves. This one sin to indulge. But the nature of sin is as yeast, it spreads all through the batch and kills and destroys all. Jesus says more directly in Matthew’s gospel that if your right hand causes you to stumble, to cut if off for its better to lose a hand than to have your whole body thrown to hell. Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter five says:

***6****Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?****7****Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.****8****Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Let me just pause there for a moment and say that again even, as I hear my own voice saying it: even a small amount of sin can have a significant impact. I have seen good well-meaning Christians who are far, far away from the gospel. Some of these people listen to the bible for hours a day. They do bible study religiously. And they are lost not because they didn’t outreach enough or attend meetings enough. They are far away because they didn’t pay attention to this warning in verse 15. “Watch out- be careful for the yeast of the Pharisees.” For when pride, pride that you are a good Christian, grows in you- it manifests as a judgement that you are able to understand the scriptures, rather being under their teachings and jurisdiction. These Christians won’t accept instruction because they believe that they are always better than you. They can be told they are in sin and their response is to point out your sin. And it’s because what they might have found as a trivial and insignificant, sin has grown in them, growing into yeast and destroying their lives. To put this another way, when people don’t follow the bible but continue on in going to church they become self righteous and become hard to correct. Their spiritual lives become stagnant. Nevertheless, the warning here is clear and serious. I encourage all of us to be on guard against all sins, small and large.

Today’s passage showed Jesus’ compassion. He helped us to learn that love means helping others even when our actions are not immediately needed. Jesus had compassion on his band of clueless disciples, teaching them to be on guard against sin and harmful teachings. In the next weeks we will see Jesus take a more direct approach with his disciples, intervening to heal, revealing his true nature and mission, and even castigating Satan himself.