

## **Don't Miss It**

**Mark 8:11-21**

**By Rev. Billy Dempsey**

Before we read God's Word, let's go to Him in prayer.

*Father, we thank You that You have spoken and You've spoken in a language that we understand. You've spoken about life; You've spoken about faith and sin. You've spoken about death and resurrection; You've spoken with authority about all that touches us in this world and the next. Now Father, we confess our need, our need of a prophet. Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to teach us, to speak to us, to declare to us the will of our Father. Make our hearts soft. Root out every stray thought, every wandering notion now, because here is life, here is life, and we need the Word of God. Hear us. Father, we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. And all God's people said, amen.*

Let's give our attention to the reading of God's Word from Mark chapter 8, beginning with verse 11. We catch the narrative kind of in mid-stream. Jesus has just fed the four thousand and He has departed from the region of the Sea of Galilee in which He did that to the western side to the region of Dalmanutha. That's where we pick up the narrative. Beginning with verse 11:

“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 will be given to this generation.’ And He left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And He cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.’ And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? 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?’”

All men are like grass and all their glory like the flowers of the field. The grass withers,

the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

One of the things that I remember about my daddy — I remember lots of things about my daddy, a lot of them I can't say from the pulpit — but I remember this and I can say it from the pulpit. He would have a way of telling my mother and anyone else who would listen to him about me, Willy, Willy's what he called me — that doesn't mean you have to call me Willy, don't get any ideas! He said, "Willy wakes up in a brand new world every day!" And I heard that for years without ever — you know, everybody chuckled and to be polite I kind of chuckled and I was like, "What does he really mean by that?" I never wanted to ask him. I'm sorry that he was gone when I was raising children because I had numerous opportunities to call him and say, "Papa, I know exactly what you were talking about. My children are just like me! They wake up in a new world every day! There's no carry over. There's no carry over from one day to the next where we slog through and learn and the thought we had yesterday is just gone today! We've got to start all over!"

As I read this account and think about it, I see in the disciples the same "no carry over." I see the same "a brand new world every day." We'll walk through that, we'll give them some slack at the appropriate places, understanding that some unusual things were happening to them, but my father's prognosis of me really applies right here. This is a brand new world for them. There's no carry over. They've got to make some transitions. They've got to carry some things with them from one day to the next. I really want to pay attention to verses 14 and following. Jesus has one more encounter in verses 11 and 12 with the Pharisees and we're familiar with those encounters. We'll talk more about that later. But their demand for a sign as we understand it is a demand spoken from unbelief. There had been plenty of signs, hadn't there? They may not have seen from the earlier part of the chapter the feeding of the four thousand, but they saw plenty of other things, didn't they? They saw plenty of other healings; they heard plenty of other teaching. The Pharisees were a network and they all shared their information together. As one would encounter Jesus here in this place teaching and another would encounter Jesus in this place healing and driving demons out of folks, they'd compare notes. They had all the information they needed. He recognized their demand for a sign as one more symptom of their unbelief.

And that's why He begins, as He and His disciples get into the boat and begin to cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, He feels urgently imposed upon to give them a crucial warning. That's why He becomes so agitated later on because He is giving them a crucial warning. "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod!" Matthew 15 is the parallel in the gospels to this event and there Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Sadducees." It's not really a conflict because Herod and the Sadducees were all allies together — to consider the Sadducees was to consider Herod; to consider Herod, in the disciples' mind, was no different from considering the Sadducees, so there's an alliance there. There's no conflict. To speak of one is to also speak of the other, in terms of matters of faith and belief.

Jesus is giving them a crucial warning, I think two crucial warnings. One is the nature of false teaching. He uses that word, "leaven." Of course that's what throws them. By now you would think they might be a little bit accustomed to Jesus using figurative language every now and then, illustrative language to make His point. But they somehow missed this one and they begin to wander off and talk about bread. He's telling them something about the nature of false teaching, that it is not static, it does not remain isolated, it does not stand alone in heart or mind; it grows and it festers and it affects its entire environment just like yeast in dough. You don't put a little yeast in a lump of dough and come back and find that little section affected by the yeast and the rest of the lump unaffected. The whole lump is involved. The whole lump is percolating like crazy because the yeast saturates. That's the point that Jesus is making about teaching. False teaching saturates. It doesn't remain compartmentalized. It doesn't stay in its little box because false teaching appeals to the worst side of our hearts. False teaching appeals to all our vain ideas about ourselves, all our wrong ideas about God, all our crooked ideas about life in His world. False teaching flies to those things and augments them, strengthens them, and they begin to affect other places. And Jesus is telling them you can't monkey around with this stuff. You can't play footsy with false teaching. I don't believe Jesus was saying you can't examine ideas. I don't believe Jesus was saying you can't read books. You know the Scriptures tell us that we subject everything to the Word of God. We learn everything in light of what God has said and we compare everything with where God has spoken. That's how we learn. That's how we understand the value of some ideas and the worthlessness of others. It's not that we don't look at them, it's not that we don't think about them, it's not that we don't study them, but we study them in the light of what God has said and we reject what's worthless and we hold what's valuable. Jesus isn't afraid of ideas; He's afraid, not even afraid, He's warning them about the fact that false teaching doesn't just sit there. It infects everything. He's saying, "Be careful."

There's another warning here. This has to do with kind of the newness of what's happening with them, the culture that they grew up in and that their fathers grew up in and their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers. Who were the great teachers? They were the Pharisees or the Sadducees if you were inclined towards that party. And here's Jesus saying, "Stay away from these people. Don't listen to these people. They're not telling you the truth." That's why that warning is crucial because with that warning He's got to cut across the grain of their entire culture. The Pharisees were the ones who believed God's Word or said they did. The Pharisees were the ones that held to God's Word. The Sadducees and the Herods, they were secularists. "There's nothing transcendent about God, there's nothing that God has said that's binding on us. We're just getting by here. We're going to get by the best way we can and we're going to decorate our getting by with a little religious service here and a little religious service there and it's going to be nice, it's what we do, it's our culture, but there's nothing binding, there's nothing eternal here." Because you remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were allied with the Herods because the Herods were the root of their power as they saw it. It wasn't what God had said was the root of their position. They didn't have an Aaronic priesthood anymore. So you see, the Herods and the Sadducees are secularists. It's all right here. It's all right

here. It's all what you can see. Beyond that, who knows! The Pharisees are the ones saying, "We believe the Bible! We believe that God has spoken and He's spoken definitively and He's spoken about life." The Pharisees were the ones saying, "Look in God's Word." But in the years since their creation, the Pharisees had gone astray and the religion they taught in Jesus' day was not the religion of the Exodus. It was not the religion of Sinai. It was not the religion of their fathers.

Go back and read Matthew chapter 23, the seven woes, and see the kinds of things — I think the seven woes that Jesus gives is a real sample of what the Pharisees were teaching. "Oh, you can swear by the altar; you can't swear by the offering on the altar. You can swear by the gold on the temple but you can't swear by the temple. Be sure to tithe, by the way, your mint and your dill and your cumin that come up voluntarily in your garden; you give ten percent of that." You see, when Jesus came and began to teach repeatedly, especially in Mark's gospel you find that when you hear that word, "The people were amazed because He taught as one who had authority," or "He taught with authority." What does that mean? Does that mean He was yelling at them and all angry with them? No, it means that He was bringing the Word of God to bear on life, He was bringing the Word of God to bear on attitudes, on practices, on beliefs, on behavior. He's bringing the Word of God to bear in life every day, while the Pharisees are out there in your garden measuring your mint and your dill and your cumin to see how much you need to be tithing.

In Matthew 23 Jesus says, "You should not neglect these things but you've totally neglected justice and mercy and faithfulness." That's Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees. The religion that they teach is empty. It's a religion of loopholes. It's a religion of "Do this and it's your loophole to doing that." That's why Jesus was so radical when He said, "Hey, how about letting your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'? Don't swear by anything." That's why He was so radical and why He was so hated. That's why it's so important that He's warning His disciples, "Be careful," because everything He was saying and doing was diametrically opposed to what they had fashioned religion to be. It wasn't the religion of the fathers. That's why He's extending them this crucial message, this crucial warning, "Be careful, watch out, beware of the false teaching. It will ruin you. It will wreck your faith. It will not bring you to good." False teaching always does that. False teaching always does that. We just finished reading in our morning worship of the letters to the seven churches. Go back and read the two churches — the letter to the church at Thyatira and the letter to the church at Pergamum, I believe, those two, where there are good things happening and Jesus commends the churches for the things that are happening, but He says, "Look, I have this against you. You're allowing this false teaching to circulate in your congregation. You're tolerating false teaching." One church, the church of Thyatira, it had come to the point that they'd ensconced it. A woman had described herself as a prophetess and was discipling folks in her false teaching. And it was tolerated. It wasn't challenged. She wasn't put out of the church. And Jesus said, "You can't do that!" Why? Because false teaching ruins its environment, always, always. Let me say it one more time, always! It ruins its environment.

Well in the midst of that crucial warning, you know Jesus ought to be launching into an extended sermon here about the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Herods and the leaven of the Sadducees. It's almost like He sees a commotion there in the back of the boat. One disciple talking to another — “I told you to bring the bread.” “No, I told you I had to go to the restroom! You’re supposed to get the bread!” “What about Andrew? He got in the boat empty-handed! He could have gotten all the bread!” They’re missing the point. They’re missing the point. Here is Jesus giving them words of life and they’re missing the point because suddenly bread, loaves of bread, are so crucial. You could say, “Preacher, yeah, I want to eat. It looks to me like you like to eat too!” Absolutely, but life is not going to come from that bread the way Jesus is going to describe it to them. But He has to stop because they’re distracted, an unfortunate, silly distraction on the way to learning what Jesus has to teach them because they’re stuck and arguing about the fact that there is no bread.

How many times, as Jesus deals with us as His disciples, does He have to stop His work designed to carry us forward in faith, forward in grace, forward in life with Him, and come get our wandering souls? We’re wandering. We were talking about bread, He's talking about life. We’re talking about bread. We’re consumed with this or we're consumed with that, and He's all about our holiness. He's all about making us like Himself. He's all about introducing us to His Father in deeper and deeper ways and we're mentally, spiritually, we're wandering here, we're wandering there. He's got to stop. He'll say, “Would you please get back on the subject? Would you please get back on the subject that this life to you and you're worried about this and you're worried about that?” How many times does He have to do that with us? We see Him here with this group of disciples, and it makes us understand how often He has to stop what He is doing to gather us from where we've wandered to bring us back so He can begin again. We thank Him for His patience as these men have experienced it and we do as well.

When He gathers their attention again He does this, He makes an impassioned plea. Read the gospels. I don't think you'll find another passage where Jesus is dealing with His disciples with this level of intensity. He's patience, He's kind, but there is an intensity about these questions, there's an intensity about this moment that He wants to emblazon on their minds. This is important and they're going to miss it, they're going to miss it because of belief and unbelief. They're going to miss it because they're not carrying truth forward in their life. They're going to miss it and you can tell by the questions He's asking. They won't tolerate that. There's too much at stake. He's got to bring them to the page that He's on so they can learn. That's exactly what He does. Look at the questions. I kind of feel like when I read this, I read this while ago, it's kind of like one of those times my mother caught me either saying something or doing something or in some place that I wasn't supposed to be. You know my mother, bless her sweet heart, she just started asking questions and every answer added one more brick to the building of my guilt. You know, “Yes ma'am, you told me that. Yes ma'am, you told me that. Yes ma'am I said I'd do this. Yes ma'am.” It's kind of like that not because Jesus is vindictive but because He's intensely trying to reach into their hearts to get them to engage with everything they're seeing and everything they're hearing. His impassioned plea.

Let's begin to look at those questions there in the latter part of verse 17. "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes to you not see? Having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?" You know all of those questions are coming up to one question. Do you know what it is? "Do you believe?" Do you believe? Do you believe? Those questions remind them of all the territory they've covered with Jesus so far, all the things they've seen - the healings. Not just the isolated healings. You go back to Mark chapter 1 and Jesus, in front of Peter's house, is healing people all night long! A great multitude of people with physical complaints and demonic possession that He is freeing them from. Somebody is raised from the dead. They've seen a total of, not just nine thousand people fed — five thousand men and four thousand men — but those who were with them. A huge number of people fed out of a handful of bread and fishes. They've seen the storm calmed. They've seen an amazing, amazing amount of stupendous activity out of this one Man. In addition to all of the things they've heard Him say.

And this is where we need to back up and cut them a little slack and let's understand this. Jesus is everything they did not expect and nothing they did. He's turning their world upside-down. He's everything they did not expect in terms of who Messiah would be. He's nothing they expected in terms of the Messiah who would come. So everything is upside-down. But He's pushing, He's pushing them to carry the truth forward. See, all those items that I just listed that by now they have experienced with Jesus, it's as though those items are individually boxed in their minds and hearts and there's no carry over. There's no transition from one event to the next. Yes, everything Jesus does is far beyond their wildest expectations. Everything He says turns their understanding of God and God's ways on its head. But Jesus is pushing them now to understand their responsibility to learn. He's pushing them, He's pushing them to understand their responsibility to gather and glean and gain from everything they're hearing and everything they're seeing. It's not just going to sit there like a lump in head and heart. They've got to do something with it. He pushes them.

Look at what He says in verse 19. First of all He says at the end of verse 18, "Do you not remember?" He talks about just the business of feeding the five thousand and feeding the four thousand. And He's telling them, "Look, didn't you see how much was left over? Didn't you see what I did and how much was left over? And you're worried about bread when I'm telling you about things that are so much more important? Can I not make more bread if we get there hungry?" That's why I'm saying He's asking them, "Do you believe?" And maybe yes, they believe, but they've not carried that belief into this set of circumstances, they've not carried that belief — well apparently He could do just about anything! Well here's a new set of circumstances. "With one loaf, this time tomorrow we're going to be pretty hungry." They need to carry that belief forward. "I'll bet we could get more bread if He fed nine thousand plus on a few rolls, I'll bet we could get more bread. Let me stop and pay attention to what He's really trying to say." That's the transaction that needs to take place, but it doesn't take place if they're not drawing some conclusions.

And that's His plea. That's His plea. "Take your experience with Me," I believe that He's saying, "and draw some conclusions about the things that I do. Draw some conclusions, more importantly, about who I am." He's pushing them. He's pushing them to work with the raw material of what they've heard from Him and what they've seen and draw conclusions about Him that give them confidence and hope at a time of need. They're going to be hungry. They need to be confident that if necessary He'll supply the bread. What's more important is the life coming from His lips right now as He's trying to teach them something.

Let's understand this. This is, I think, at the root here — unbelief is our native soil. Unbelief is our native soil. It is our default position. When all questions are asked our normal stance is unbelief. If we're going to believe, if we're going to trust God, if we're going to move forward with God, we have to talk ourselves into it. We have to talk ourselves into it by drawing conclusions that what God has said about Himself is true, that He is good, that He will lead, that He is the Shepherd and treats us as the shepherd treats his sheep, that He has green pastures and still waters for us His sheep. And yes there are valleys. And what do we discover in the valleys? That He is with us. He promised He would be there. He promised that He does not slumber or sleep. His eyes are always upon us. He is caring for us and undertaking for us. That's His promise. And then I take that promise into my set of circumstances. "Okay great Shepherd, lead me and I will follow. Protect me and I will be in safety. Feed me and I will be satisfied." He's pushing His disciples to draw those conclusions. He pushes us to gather, gather the information from what He's told us in His Word, from our experience with Him, gather it, pull it together, and understand that tomorrow is unknown but the One who holds tomorrow is not. And I can walk into tomorrow with confidence, not because everything's going to break my way but because I'm held in love and grace by the One who holds tomorrow. He's calling us to draw conclusions about Him and about our safety and security with Him.

Think about what that means as we do business, as we carry ministry forward here. Think about what that means as we look at opportunities around us in our own community, opportunities that are maybe frightening and sometimes certainly seem daunting. What does that kind of confidence mean as we look at ways that we can reach in to right where we are in Jackson as a church? You can look for ways to reach into right where you are, where you work, where you live. All of us are surrounded by folks who need to know Jesus or who need to be encouraged in their faith in Jesus. We have opportunities to do that and sometimes we hold back because we're just not sure. "I'm going to stick my neck out Jesus, are You going to be there? I'm not so sure, so I'll play it safe. I'll keep my mouth shut and I'll just mind my own business. I'm not drawing the conclusion that He'll be there, He'll help, He'll aid, He'll give wisdom, He'll give words, He'll give an openness." We're not drawing that conclusion sometimes. And Jesus is telling us, "Do you not remember? Do you still not see or understand?"

I think that's why the Ebenezer concept is so important. We need Ebenezers. Ebenezer's stone of help comes from that incident with the history of Israel — Samuel is the judge and the Philistines are bearing down on them and they say to Samuel as he's

offering the sacrifice, “Don't stop talking to God for us, don't stop praying for us,” and God does an amazing thing. He turns the Philistines away. He massacres the Philistines. He terrifies them. Then the men of Israel all race out and they kill Philistines all day long. And Samuel, in response, sets up a stone and christens it “The Stone of Help — Thus far the Lord has helped us.” It's a tangible, visible reminder that in a scrape, in a disaster or what could be a disaster, what did God do? He saved us! He kept us. He helped us. We were out-manned, out-gunned, out-numbered, out-talked, could be out-thought, and what did He do? He came in and against all the odds He brought deliverance. We need those Ebenezers. We need those tangible, visible reminders. “Oh yeah, oh yeah, God helped us this day. I remember this day. I remember this day because it was so dark and so bad and finally it was like all of a sudden all of our prayers immediately were answered. There was information, there was light, there was understanding where there had been chaos and confusion, and it was like God just threw back the curtains and said, ‘Okay, I'm here — BAM!’ and it worked. I could see it!”

We need those Ebenezers because we tend to forget; we tend to wake up in a new world every day. We tend to wake up in a new world that does not include God's faithfulness, that does not include God's commitment to us, our family, our church, that does not include God's commitment to move us forward in Christ and to guard, guide, and keep us all along the way. That's why we need those tangible, visible reminders. “Oh yeah, I remember May 20 and all that God did in that dark, dark time.” We need an Ebenezer Day every now and then. We need a stone of help because it helps us gather our faith and pull our faith into everything facing us today. It may not be some momentous decision, it may not be some dark time, it may just be raising children and not forgetting why we do the things we do there. It might just be simply remembering to pray and to pray consistently and regularly and earnestly even when we don't see anything happening. How easy it is for us to give up and quit praying because we don't see any movement thinking we know the top from the bottom and the end from the beginning. We don't know all that God's doing. We need those Ebenezers to remind us to trust Him.

I was struck this morning as Ligon was talking about John Yates. Where does faith like that come from? You remember John Yates, the pastor of Falls Church. He and his congregation lost that historic facility because they would not let go of the truthfulness of God's Word even though their denomination said they had to, they wouldn't. They said they wouldn't follow another gig. They follow the Lord Himself. The denomination took their property. Remember how Ligon was describing Reverend Yates as saying, “I'm privileged to be able to pay something for the joy of knowing Christ and following Christ.” Where does faith like that come from? It doesn't come from seminary. It doesn't come from books. It doesn't come from sermons. It comes from mining what God has said and how God has worked with us in the past, carrying those truths forward into tomorrow and all that awaits us there. That's what Jesus is pushing these men to do. That's what He's pushing you and me to do. That's the joy, believe it or not, in the journey.



Let me ask you to stand and let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Lord Jesus, like the disciples we have to say that You're everything we didn't expect and nothing we did. Your ways really are above and beyond what we could aspire to ourselves. Your purposes are beyond finding out and yet You've spoken to us about Your love for us and Your desire to make us like Yourself. You've given us responsibility in that process to carry our faith forward, to draw conclusions about You and about us and about Your truth and Your faithfulness, to draw conclusions about ourselves as well. Father, forgive us for our natural hard-heartedness. Make us mindful of it so that we might work against it as You called this group of disciples to. Help us do so as well. Father, go with us into this week. Lord Jesus, be our guard and stay. Holy Spirit, bring us into memory of the truth of the Word of God day in and day out. Fashion our hearts. Make us like Christ. Hear us as we offer our prayer in His name and for His sake. Amen.*

Now look up to receive the blessing of God. Now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord Himself lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace. Amen and amen.

We conclude our service by singing stanzas five and six of hymn 296. You'll find them printed in your bulletin.

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