Signs and Understanding

Mark 8:11-21

Well, please turn in your Bibles to Mark 8: 11-21 as we continue on in our series on the gospel of Mark. And when you find your place there in your scriptures, please rise for the reading of the word.

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. He 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 and 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 of five for the five thousand? How many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And 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?

This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated.

Well, spiritual blindness is not just a failure to see what God has done. It's not just a missing out or a kind of spiritual FOMO where you weren't in the right place at the right time. It's a failure to understand and to receive and to trust what God has revealed in Jesus Christ. I think we often assume that our faith would be easier if we could just see him do something right. Just just see him do a thing in front of us. Just Google signs of Jesus and you'll find, you know, a toast that was burned in just such a way that it maybe had the face of Jesus on. It just shows you, you know, people are desperate, you know, a pickle that has the shape of a cross engraved across the front of it. People are looking for any kind of sign to strengthen their faith. If God would just give us another sign. Answer another prayer. Demonstrate his presence more dramatically. More powerfully. More obviously. Surely our faith would grow stronger. And yet, Mark. Mark offers us a more complicated picture. He says it's not always that way. The Pharisees have witnessed Jesus remarkable ministry. They've seen his miracles. They've heard about them from people they trust, their own spies, their own allies. And yet here they demand another sign. The disciples have participated in his miraculous feeding of the thousands. We've already talked about two of them. And yet again, the problem of bread comes up in this passage. In both cases, the problem is not a lack of evidence, but it's a failure to see. And it's a failure to discern. And it's a failure to remember.

So I want to talk about those three things,

- refusing to see just because you're hardened against it.

- Secondly, discerning what is right from what is wrong.
- And then thirdly, remembering what the Lord has done.

These are all causes for spiritual blindness. They're all proximal causes that lead to our spiritual blindness.

So let's start first of all with refusing to see verses eleven through thirteen. We see the Pharisees, and here they are, and they're there. They're pressing Jesus even more. They're saying, give us a sign from heaven. You probably want to see something that can't be excused away as some kind of farce or some kind of sleight of hand. They want to see something up there, up there in the skies, so that when we see it, we can know he couldn't have had any power over that unless it was the power of God itself. And yet I think we have to recognize even at this point that they're not actually looking for more evidence. Jesus responds with that sigh again that sang so helpfully talked to us about that sigh. Here it is again. They're asking for a sign. And yet, as Jesus always does with his interlocutors, he knows their hearts already. It would be an interesting study to look at how Jesus talks with different kinds of people, how he interacts with different people. How does he talk about people when he's alone with them? How does he talk about them when he's in public? How does he talk about them when he knows that their questions actually belie a lack of faith and a hardness of heart? He sighs, and he refuses their demand. Now, he's not refusing their demand out of obstinance. He's recognizing that it doesn't matter if he shows them a sign. Doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if the sky goes dark. It doesn't matter if the tombs in Jerusalem sprout open in the middle of the night, and bodies of people who were known to be dead are seen walking the streets. It doesn't matter if he rises from the dead again. You remember the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man says, just send Lazarus back. Let him rise from the dead, so that my brothers will see that he's risen from the dead. And they can warn him. He can warn them about this place. And what does Abraham tell the rich man? He says, even if a man rises from the dead, they will not believe. If they have not already discerned in the prophets and in the law and in the writings, the person of Jesus, it doesn't matter if he shows them another sign, another amazing act. It will not change the state of their heart. Now we know that this isn't new with the Pharisees. This has been a problem for Israel ever since her founding. We can go back to Exodus seventeen and the wandering. When they come to Messiah and they test the Lord. We can read about it in Psalm ninety five. As the psalmist weeps about and prays fervently about the hardness of the people's heart. We can even see the passage that Jesus will later cite here, Isaiah six, when he's receiving his calling. And he says, what, O Lord, should you have me say? And he says, preach that having eyes they won't see, and having hearts they won't hear. And they're their heart. Excuse me. Having ears. They won't hear. Their hearts will be hardened. And what Isaiah is to do by preaching judgment in Isaiah six, Jesus seizes already the response of the Pharisees here. Interestingly, in the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus says, you will have a sign, the sign of Jonah, and he's talking about his own resurrection. And he says, but even when you see it, you won't believe. Think about what he's saying there. He's saying the sign of Jonah, that the Assyrians believe those dirty Gentiles who repented and therefore were saved from the coming judgment. In forty days. They believed when they heard the prophet. But Israel will not believe even when they see the sign of Jonah, a greater sign of Jonah and the

resurrection of Jesus Christ. Have you ever had this experience with someone? It's probably not looking for signs and miracles, though. People do sometimes look for those kinds of things. Or maybe they're coming with philosophical problems about the gospel, and they think they found the contradiction. They found the thing in Scripture that that doesn't hold up under scrutiny. And they think, well, if I can just, you know, get, get you to, to recognize that the Bible is wrong, then I can, I can crush your beliefs. And then and having the conversation with them, you show them how they're not actually right. And you resolve the contradiction, or you give them several options of what could be happening. Because almost all of these contradictions are relatively easy to dismantle. All of most of these historical complaints or archaeological concerns are relatively easy to deal with. But have you ever been in that situation where you just keep answering the questions, you keep answering the questions, you keep answering the questions, and they keep coming up with more and more things. At some point, you realize that it's not about the questions. I'm even convinced of this in apologetics most of the time. In apologetics, it is not about the intellectual debate. I would encourage you, when you're having those debates with your friends or with your family members, or even perhaps with yourself, recognize at the end of the day, it's not about the intellectual debate. It's about the state of the heart. That also will take the pressure off of you in the apologetic conversation. It's not up to you to save them. God can crush the proudest heart with his spirit. That's why you see throughout the scriptures people who believe, who have no reason to believe, and people who have every reason to believe will never believe. Think of the disciples, many of whom are just sitting around, and Jesus walks by and says, follow me. And instantly they follow him. They have no good reason to believe. They don't even know him. His reputation hasn't spread across the countryside yet, and yet they just hear the shepherd's voice and they follow. And yet there are others, like those in John sixty six. Excuse me, six sixty six, where Jesus is talking about this John chapter six, where Jesus has already done multiple miracles. People are watching, they've seen him do things, and then he preaches a sermon about how they have to receive him in order to be saved, and they all abandon him. And the disciples say, what happened? And Jesus says this. They could see the Son of Man fly, right? They could see the Son of Man ascending and descending to heaven. That's what it means. And they wouldn't believe unless the spirit awakens that belief within them. We have to remember this ourselves, because I think we often bargain with God. If you'll just give me one more sign, Lord, if you'll just answer this one more prayer, just make this one part of my life. Okay. Then I can really trust you. But notice what Jesus is saying here. He's saying you have the greatest sign you could possibly ask for the risen Christ. The gospel being offered to you feed on him, the spirit indwelling you. Put your trust in that. You have the greatest sign you could possibly imagine. And yet the Pharisees we see here and the Herodians, because they're not here, but Jesus will mention them later. They are both already set against belief.

I may have told this story before in the sanctuary. I know I've told it in a Sunday school, so forgive me if you've heard this before, but I've done a good bit of work in North Africa and the Middle East. I remember talking to a missionary about the Muslim dream, and some of you may have heard about the Muslim dream before, and I don't want to get into the theology of the Muslim dream, but there is a very real let's just call it a The sociological phenomenon out there, which is that there are hundreds of thousands, if not more, Muslims having dreams

about Jesus, and as a result, waking up saying, well, the Prophet Muhammad never came to me in a dream, so I'm going to believe in Jesus. There was a time when I taught in a seminary, and for ten years or so, every person in that seminary was like, oh yeah, I had the dream. They talked about it like it was the most normal thing in the world, because they had all had it from northern Iraq down to South Africa. What's interesting actually, as they lived in communities where churches developed and opportunities to meet Christians sort of grew as it became more Christianized, as the gospel spread forth. It was interesting. We stopped seeing as many people have the dreams, and many of them would come and say, oh, I'm a Christian because my friend shared the gospel with me. And some in our group thought, well, does that mean the Spirit's not at work anymore? He said, no, no, the spirit's at work. This is the normal, regular way in which the spirit is at work. It's through the proclamation of the gospel, through the people around you. How can they believe if they have not heard? I will say this about the Muslim dream. I've never talked to someone who's had the dream, who did not know previously about Jesus, whether they had read about him in the Quran, that he was a great prophet who would rise into heaven, will come again in judgment. Or they heard about him on Christian apologetics websites where they were going to debate or something like that, or whether they talked to a friend. They had all heard about Jesus and found themselves drawn to it. However, the reason why I bring this up, here's something a lot of people don't know. People have the dream and don't become Christians. As a matter of fact, one missionary was telling me he was in a city. I won't say where he's been kicked out of the city since, but he said there was a businessman there who one day called him and said, we've got to meet. And he went down and he met with the guy. And the guy knew that he was a Christian. He was an American. So he was he was okay. He could be a Christian. And the guy sat down at the coffee shop. He said, I've got to tell you, I had this dream last night and. And there were these two hills, and one hill was barren and wasted, and I was there, and so was all of my family and everyone I knew. And there was trash there and nothing could grow on it. And it was in an everlasting shade. And then I looked across the valley and there was another hill, and it was green and verdant with grass. And I saw Jesus there, and you were there too. And Jesus said, come over to my hill. And the man looked at my friend and said, what do you think that means? And by the time my friend got kicked out of the country, the guy still didn't believe. So it makes it has this question what? What's happening in these hearts? There are hearts that even when they have every reason to believe, people saw Jesus raise people from the dead. He saw Jesus. People saw Jesus cast demons out of folks, and they still didn't believe. People saw Jesus resurrected and they still didn't believe there was a refusal to see. And when you run into that, you pray, Lord, I don't know what you're doing, but I know that even those who refuse to seek and have their blind eyes opened. And I know that this is all a part of your sovereign plan. But I don't know what the sovereign plan is, so I'm appealing to you. It would seem good to me if my brother, my sister, my friend, my mother, my father, my child, if they believed, open their blind eyes. So that's one thing. It's the refusal to believe.

But then secondly, you notice Jesus goes on from there. Now he leaves the Pharisees frustrated. They're frustrated. He leaves. After sighing, he gets in the boat and he goes to the other side, presumably with the disciples. So now he's alone with the disciples, and he still has this conversation he's just had with the Pharisees on his mind. And they're Meanwhile, they've

moved on to more practical matters. They're fumbling around in the boat and you can imagine Peter's going, John, I thought you brought the bread. And Judas, of course, is probably like, I've got some bread, but I'm not going to give it to him, you know? All right. They're all fumbling around. They're doing the math. They're trying to figure out, okay, how are we going to eat? We don't have any bread. And Jesus hears them talking about bread. Now his mind is still back on what was going on with the Pharisees. And so he brings up this topic of discernment. Look at what he says. Watch out, keep guard, keep guard. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. Okay. Watch out. Be able to discern the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. Now, now, commentators are, you know, not quite in agreement. Is he responding to what he knows is already bubbling up within them, and that they are not trusting in him, but that they're worrying about the bread yet again. Is that what's going on, or is he using the conversation they're having that he'll address later as sort of a jumping off point? Jesus, we'll do this. At times someone will say a thing, they'll do a thing, and he'll use that as a jumping off point for a teaching. But what seems to be happening is this he's taking this idea of the bread, which requires leaven to rise, and he uses that leaven as an analogy for unbelief. But notice the question here, the topic at hand. The salient information is not that leaven exists, but rather that we keep guard about the leaven. Now, during the pandemic, I picked up two new hobbies being stuck at home up in Washington, D.C., which was under quite a bit of lockdown. And one of those hobbies was smoking brisket. Okay. It was a good, healthy, manly hobby. They say you reach a point in life where you either start playing golf, smoking meats, or getting an unusually interested in World War II. Okay, I can't play any golf. All right. I don't know anything about World War II. So I took the smoking meats route. All right. And so, you know, we were smoking meats. But then Charlotte and I, my middle daughter, started baking sourdough bread too. And we had some friends who had some really old, starter. And so we got that in and we started playing around with that. And it's kind of amazing here as a modern who's aware of all this technology out there to just kind of marvel and how much I marveled at this very ancient technology of leaven, right? Even got me into this whole research thing. Like, how did we discover leaven? How did we discover yeast? How did we discover what it could do? It's kind of amazing, right? You take just a little bit and you put it into that flour and that water mixture, and you need it for a while. And then you set it in a dark, cool place. And it's incredible how it spreads throughout the whole loaf. It's like magic. You imagine the first people who discovered it must have been like discovering fire. Like what? This is great. Look at how the gluten stretches and makes bubbles. And you get all this texture. And you can take something that's inedible, that is flour, and you can turn it into something imminently edible.

But notice Jesus is using it to talk about how unbelief can spread through a community. The unbelief he's mostly concerned about is that of the Pharisees and Herod. Now, what's interesting about this is that the Pharisees inherit are two different parties. These are two totally different groups. The Pharisees leaven. They would have been marked by a kind of religious pride, right? They don't accept Jesus as Messiah. They don't accept his teachings on grace and faith, right? They hold to a very particular religious viewpoint. But here's the thing I think we often miss because the Pharisees are often presented as kind of stodgy, mean, stern religious leaders. What's interesting about the Pharisees is that that's not really who they were. That was probably more the Sadducees. Okay. They were the stodgy leaders who were back at

the temple. The Pharisees taught a different kind of theology. Theirs was kind of an everyman theology. They believed that you didn't have to go to temple to meet God, because if you just put Torah in your heart, then God would reside in your heart. There you can meet him in Torah. That's where his name is, right? That's where we find the name Asher. I am that I am Yahweh. We find it here and where God's name is. Remember from the Ten Commandments series, right where God's name is. There he is. And so I have it here. If I memorize it and I put it in my heart, then God is in my heart. If you had met the Pharisees, they would have quoted Bible verses to you off the top of their head. You would have thought of them as actually quite, quite impressive religious individuals. They would have been out amongst the everyday people. They wouldn't have been around the rich, you know, Romans hanging out in Jerusalem. They would have been out amongst the hoi polloi. They were kind of blue collar. So it's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus says, beware of that leaven. Beware of their religiosity. Beware of their arrogance and their pride. The biggest wicked that the wickedness that the Pharisees commit ultimately is not that they don't know Scripture well enough, but that they don't use it to properly discern the person of Christ. Now, Herod, of course, is a different story. Herod is a is a different kind of leaven. He's attached to power. But again, we often think of them as being corrupt and evil. And that's true. But we need to be careful about overly villainizing them. Herod would have been seen as this one of the last political bulwarks against this Western Roman Empire that's impressing its values and its cultural structures onto Judea. And yes, I would have said, sure, he's a bit corrupt, but he's effective. Right? He's keeping Rome at bay. Okay. And yes, he's acting like a rich, you know, snobby king or doing all the things that he does. But notice how he's keeping them back. He's giving us a little bit of leeway so we can do the things that we need to do. He's totally worldly. And yet at the same time, he has a kind of political value for them. So you can see how people would say, well, is it so bad to, to, to be sort of pro Herod, to let Herod in? That's how the leaven of Herod would spread through the people. But what's interesting is that we already saw earlier on in the gospel that the Herodians and the Pharisees, two very different people, the, the, the common everyday religious leaders and the political, you know, rich, enfranchised authorities are so, so joined together in their hatred of Jesus that they're actually willing to work together against him.

Ask yourself those questions. Where are those power structures in our world today that seem to have nothing in common? And yet somehow they also joined together in opposition of one thing. And when you look hard enough, you'll often find the one thing they're in opposition to is the gospel of Jesus Christ. He's saying, be careful of the leaven. It makes sense. The Pharisees would have been we probably would have liked a lot of them. The Herodians would have been seen as sort of realpolitik. They were getting the work done. He says, be careful. It's eleven and it spreads without you even knowing it to the whole loaf. Though they were outwardly different, both resist Christ's authority. Mark three six reminds us that they were working together against Jesus. Now, one of the failures of discernment is a failure to recognize spiritual danger. The disciples hear Jesus warning, but notice they don't pick up on what he's saying. They go right back to talking about the bread. That's our first lack of discernment that we see here. They don't pause for a minute. Wait a minute, Jesus. Can you say that again? They think, oh, he's talking about leaven again. Did anybody bring the bread? But not only that, not only do they fail to discern. They fail to watch out for the leaven in their own midst. We know already that the

practical mentality of Judas is spreading. It's being strengthened in his heart. It's leading him to his ultimate betrayal of Christ. Be careful, Jesus says of the leaven. Be careful of those additions to the gospel that seep into your community.

Thirdly, it's not just about not discerning. It's about forgetting what we've already seen. Or to put it another way, failing to remember. We can fail to discern and we can fail to remember. Look what he says in verses seventeen to eighteen. He hears them talking about the bread. He hears them doing their arithmetic, saying, I don't think we have enough. And weren't you supposed to bring it? And he steps forward and says, do you not yet perceive and understand? That's the discernment and the seeing. Are your hearts hardened like the Pharisees and the Herodians? Having eyes, do you not see having ears? Do you not hear? That's Isaiah six. Do you not remember? See, being a follower of Christ, being a follower of the religion of the Bible means being a person who remembers. This ultimately is based out of the covenantal structure of the. Of the scriptures as the covenantal structure of the way in which we are saved through covenant. If you know anything about covenants in the ancient Near East, whether you're talking about Adam or you're talking about Noah or Abraham or Moses or David or Jesus, you know, this one of the most important parts of the covenant is that you are basing it, and you're recognizing that it is founded upon the past goodness and benevolence of the covenant, making God right. Every covenant begins with a historical prologue, as the theologians call it, where you are reminded of what the Lord has done in the past. Think about Abraham. Okay. Genesis fifteen, Abraham saying, how do I know you're going to give me a child? And the Lord suddenly in the middle of it all goes, am I not the Lord who brought you out of ur of the Chaldees? Right? What is he doing in. He's reminding him of what he's done. And it's on that foundation that he establishes the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis fifteen. Remember, David, am I not the Lord who brought you out of the sheep herds and made you king? Right. He's reminding David. Okay, go look at second Samuel seven, what he's done. And then he establishes on that, then the covenant with David that there will be a line forever in his name. With Jesus, we are told over and over again, most significantly in the covenant ritual that we're about to participate in. What do we do? We remember and proclaim his death because it's what happened in the past, and it's upon that foundation that we know that he will come again. Spiritual blindness results when we fail to remember what the Lord has done, we deceive ourselves. We fall into a state of spiritual. What have you done for me lately mentality. Well, Lord, I know you've done all these things in the past and yes, I can. I can go through my, my, my devotion Bible where I write down my prayer requests, which, by the way, is a great practice. If you're not doing it, start doing it right. Your prayer requests in the lines around your, you know, your Bible where you're reading your devotions because you can go back and years and years later. Okay. I love being able to do this and look back and say, look what the Lord has done. Look, I remember when I was so worried about that thing. Look at how he's resolved that. It's to help you remember, write in your Bibles, write in your journals. But most importantly, remember what he's done on the cross. Proclaim his death until he comes again. We know that we will slip away. Those memories will slip away from us because of the effects of sin in the human heart. Jeremiah seventeen nine says this the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Who can understand it? He doesn't give a resolution to that, by the way, either. He just says only God. You can't. When you look at your heart, you will

deceive yourself over and over again unless the Lord shows it to you. okay? Don't ever forget that as we just say a corporate prayer of confession here in a few minutes. Say, Lord, show me where I need to confess to you, because I know that I will deceive myself every single time. Dostoyevsky, in his book Brothers Karamazov, is a wonderful back and forth between this righteous, faithful old monk named Elder Zosima in Fyodor Karamazov, the Scoundrelly father, who, because of shame and failure as a father, has now just kind of owned all of his wickedness and sin. He just goes about as really just a complete scoundrel about town, and he's harassing his own children. And he's withholding his inheritance from them so that they suffer. And he's brought into the room with this incredibly faithful Christian monk. And father of Oshima tells him this. He says, first of all, just stop. Stop what you're doing. Above all, don't lie to yourself. the man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect, he ceases to love. It's the perfect, perfect diagnosis of what's going on with The Father, Theodore Karamazov. We can't help but believe the lies that we're telling to ourselves. And those lies keep us and hinder us from remembering what the Lord has done. And so you can do this. Ask the Lord. Ask him. Show me my self-deception. Show me where I'm forgetting. Lead me in your everlasting way. As with the other two causes of spiritual blindness, this is a familiar pattern within Israel. It's a familiar pattern within the disciples. We see it throughout the Old Testament and the new. The disciples continue to struggle, but we're now about to arrive at the turning point in the gospel of Mark, where they finally recognize who he is, that He's Christ, that he is Messiah. But Jesus, before we get there, is reminding them. You need to remember. Is interesting how Cy Young pointed out early on. The Lord tells them what to do with the bread. In the second passage, he just shows them right. He just asks them about the bread. Notice what he does here. He just reminds them he's moving along. He shows. Then he gives opportunity and then he reminds. And what does he do? He reminds them, don't you? Don't you remember what happened with the bread in the past? Don't you remember how we had more left over than we started with? You can imagine them in the boat, fishing around in their bags. And Jesus watching them doesn't say that. He sighed, but I suspect he gave us another sigh at that point. Don't you remember? Don't you understand? You see, Jesus is more than the teacher who commands us to see and to discern and to remember. He is the one who gives us sight. Even more than that, he is the bread of life. He says, don't you know that that bread that you're yearning for. It won't feed you, but you know that water that you desire, it won't slate your thirst. I am the bread of life. I am the water of life. Feed on me. For those of you who feel as if you are struggling, as if you're thirsty, as if you're hungering and you feel like you just can't get to the place where you need to be, I want to encourage you. Have you tried asking him? Lord, help me feed on you. Show me what it means to feed on you in your gospel. Show me what it means to feed on you in your Word. Show me what it means to put all of my cares before you in prayer, to feed on you through that means of grace. This is just what the means of grace are. They are the means by which the benefits of our redemption are communicated to us in Christ word, prayer, and what we're about to do here in just a minute. Don't think this is just a ritual. This is not some kind of initiation rite that we do in the Lord's Prayer. Feed on him. He's spiritually present. This is not just about memory. He is spiritually present in this. Say, Lord, feed me. We end with this final exhortation. In verse

twenty one he says, do you not yet understand? We've heard his promises. We've seen his provision. We've. We've received his Son. Will we interpret our lives in light of what God has already revealed, our self-deception falls away. Before the cross. Stuart Townend writes, behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice. You know if you were there, you might not have been one of the ones who was weeping. You might have been one of the mocking voices. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there. And as we said this morning, it was your sin that held him there because of his love until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life. I know that it is finished. Christ does not merely command us to. Commands us to see Christ opens our blind eyes through the power of His Spirit. Let's pray that he does just that.