



A BANQUET FOR ALL PEOPLES

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Mark 8:1-21

22nd Message

Brian Morgan

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Throughout my life I have experienced the reality of major aspects of spirituality long before I learned the theory behind them. This has certain advantages. For one thing it makes learning very rewarding. Another advantage is that one is driven by passion, not intellect. This is exactly how Mark describes the training of the twelve disciples. Jesus thrusts them into the sea of experience so that they might learn to swim in deep waters. Then, as they emerge and shake the water off themselves, he observes them to see if anything has stuck. Usually, nothing did. But Jesus doesn't quit on them. Undeterred, he puts them right back into the sea of experience. This is how Christian discipleship ought to occur. Some of the most crucial lessons in life are too radical to be taught in a lecture; they must be first caught through experience.

This morning we pick up the story of the disciples once again. They are by the shores of Galilee, and they have just seen two amazing signs of healing, incidents which displayed the dawning of the Messianic Age among the gentiles on the eastern side of the lake. First, Jesus cleansed the demon-possessed daughter of a Syrophenician woman, and then he opened up the ears of a deaf mute. Mark splices these two miracles together to foreshadow the cleansing which the Messiah would bring to the Gentile nations, and their miraculous obedience (*hearing*) which would result from "hearing" God's word. The good news of those two miracles spread like wildfire in this predominantly gentile area of the Decapolis, and a large multitude gathered to be taught by the itinerant rabbi.

I. A Banquet for All Peoples (8:1-10)

A. Hunger in the Wilderness (8:1-4)

In those days again, when there was a great multitude and they had nothing to eat, He summoned His disciples and said to them, "I feel compassion for the multitude because they have remained with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away fasting to their home, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance." And His disciples answered Him, "Where will anyone be able to satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" (NASB)

These were the same people who formerly had rejected the ministry of Jesus (Mark 5:17). But now, after the Gerasene demoniac had shared his story of healing far and wide, the crowds eagerly gather to hear Jesus' teaching. Such a reception must have deeply touched our Lord. Bargil Pixner fills out the picture for us:

For three days they remained with this prophet from Israel, eating of the provisions in their baskets which they had brought with them and drinking water from the lake. As it was now high summer they could easily

spend the nights out in the open. Some of them may have fished for so-called "Kinneret sardines" which one can still find in abundance today near the shore of Tel Hadar.¹

After three days, food is in short supply, so Jesus takes the initiative and brings up the topic of bread with the disciples and his concern for the hungry crowd. One cannot help but hear the repetition of themes from the first miraculous feeding. It is so obvious it is almost humorous. Once again a great multitude assembles in the desert; again they have run out of food following a lengthy teaching session ("three days" is perhaps a clue pointing to things to come); and, as before, Jesus is filled with compassion for them (cf. Ezek 34:12), longing to feed them. The situation is more critical than the previous feeding. Jesus adds that if he sends them away hungry, they "will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a distance." As Pixner points out, "Though Tabgha, where the first feeding took place was also uninhabited, it was at least surrounded by villages. The hill on the eastern bank was far away from any inhabited places."² But the distance is more than geographical; it is also symbolic of the spiritual condition of these people who have truly come a long way to eat at this banquet table.

But our Lord's concern, although well stocked with carefully chosen clues from the feeding of the five thousand, falls upon deaf ears. The disciples respond, "Where will anyone be able to satisfy these men with bread here in a desolate place?" Had they so quickly forgotten how five thousand were "satisfied" with five loaves in the wilderness? Were they blind to Isaiah's new Exodus which their own eyes had beheld?

So it's back to square one. Jesus again directs the disciples to act out in symbol (bread) what he has just done in reality (imparting the word).

B. The Disciples Become Waiters (8:5-9)

And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and began giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the multitude. They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. And about four thousand were there; and He sent them away.

Again, as before, Jesus takes what is at hand, this time seven loaves. The multitude is directed to sit down and, as before, Jesus recites the Hebrew blessing, thanking God for the gift of bread. The disciples take on the role of wait-

ers serving the gentile guests at this banquet. A few small fish are produced and, once again in the hands of Jesus, multiply to feed the crowds until everyone is fully “satisfied” (a key word linking this text with the previous ones). And as before, there was plenty of bread left over—seven large baskets full. The similarities are so obvious scholars have debated whether there was only one feeding which is being repeated here by the evangelist. But more careful scholarship, sensitive to text and style, and which does not presume that repetition is the invention of the Biblical writers, observes a number of dissimilarities in this second feeding that, under careful scrutiny, prove very significant.

One of the best works which unlocks the meaning of this text has been done by the English scholar, John Drury. He observes many dissimilarities. First, he says:

...the eaters are different. Instead of the flock of 6:34 they are just a large crowd, *polus ochlus*—heterogeneous too, since some of them are ‘from far away.’ When they sit, it is not in the previous ancient order of hundreds and fifties. They just flop to the ground where they are at his command. The fish they get are not two *ichthuai* but an unspecified number of *ichthudia*, which means little fish or few fish. This diminutive recalls the little dogs invoked by the Syrophenician woman.³

Other scholars have also noted that the baskets used to collect the remaining bread are different both in kind and in number. These baskets (*kophinoy*) were not the typical round baskets carried by the Jews (*spyridas*), which were large enough to carry a man (Acts 9:25). These were smaller and came in the shape of a mat with handles. When the handles were brought together they formed a container which could carry provisions. “We find them in the floor mosaics of Kursi” (Pixner, 83). And the number of baskets used to collect the remaining fragments is different. After the first feeding, twelve baskets were left over, indicating that Jesus was inaugurating the Messianic feast (Ezek 34:15) for the “New Israel” which he was now reconstituting around himself in the wilderness. At the second feeding, seven baskets are collected. Pixner suggests that “the number seven was to indicate the seven heathen peoples (Deut 7:1b...cf. Acts 13:19), who had once inhabited the land but after its conquest had gradually disappeared or been driven out...One of the Biblical tribes who had been driven out, the Gergashites, had settled in this area.”⁴

So what is the significance of the event that has just occurred? This itinerant rabbi has just inaugurated the Messianic feast for all nations (Isa 25:6), which opened the door to the consummation of history, when Jew and Gentile would be equal heirs in the kingdom of God. This was the day that Isaiah longed for when, after the exile, Israel in her sorrow for so many lost children looked at the number of little ones at the Messianic feast and exclaimed:

**“Who has begotten these for me,
Since I have been bereaved of my children,
And am barren, an exile and a wanderer?
And who has reared these?
Behold, I was left alone?
From where did these come?”**

And God responds:

**“Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations,
and set up My standard to the peoples;
And they will bring yours sons in their bosom,**

And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders...

**And you will know that I am the Lord;
Those who hopefully wait for me will not be put to shame.” (Isa 49:21-23)**

Here is the feast for which Israel had been waiting. And the twelve disciples have not only become eyewitnesses to the event, they have been set apart as privileged waiters to serve at the feast. What a joy! What a privilege! One would think they would be ecstatic, dancing with a joy greater than David’s before the ark (2 Sam 6:14). But sadly, it is all lost on them. They leave in haste, oblivious to heaven’s scent. The story beckons us to ask: How many times have we been similarly oblivious to heaven’s feast?

II. Leaven in the Loaf (8:10-13)

And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples, and came to the district of Dalmanutha.

And the Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. And sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, “Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.” And leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side.

As was the case earlier, this feast also is followed by a boat trip which ends in confrontation on the shore. If the disciples have dampened Jesus’ joy, the Pharisees obliterate it. Once again they appear, this time demanding that Jesus show them a sign from heaven. How ironic! Requesting a sign from heaven when they refuse to see the signs on earth! After two miraculous feedings, demons cast into the dark abyss, and the healing of the deaf, they have the gall to ask for a sign. This would be like asking Moses for a sign after he had led Israel safely through the Red Sea, routing the Egyptians, the greatest nation on the face of the earth. Matthew adds that no sign would be given except the sign of Jonah, that reluctant prophet who ministered to the gentiles and received a far better reception from the Ninevites than he did from unrepentant Israel (Matt 12:39-41). The demand deeply grieves Jesus, and he takes leave of them. Never will he submit to the agendas of others when they are done in the vein of unbelief. He never argues or competes. He will not even enter into the discussion. We would do well to learn from his example.

III. Cleansing the Leaven (8:14-21)

A. A Warning Misunderstood (8:14-16)

And they had forgotten to take bread; and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” And they began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread.

Taking leave of his opponents for calmer waters, Jesus utters one of his emphatic warnings: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” Hearing the word “leaven,” we can surmise that the disciples instantly began to think, “Oh, the bread! Darn! (although fishermen likely would use a more earthy exclamation!) We forgot the bread. Peter, what were you thinking? We left seven

baskets of bread on the shore. Who's in charge anyway? Is this all we have, one measly loaf?" If Mark had attributed hard heartedness to the disciples following the first feeding, it's now apparent that they are blind. Preoccupied with their little world, they fail to see the larger picture. "If the Pharisees are demanding a special display of divine pyrotechnics in the heavens to convince them, the disciples have not yet got their eyes off ground level! The one group is demanding far too much: the other expecting far too little."⁵

By mentioning the word "leaven," Jesus does not mean they should be careful of physical leaven (he had just declared all foods clean). Rather, he is referring to certain kinds of *teachings*, in this case, those of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Beware of insidious teachings which ever so silently and secretly seek to invade this banquet. Beware of vile teachings which, like leaven, will spread and permeate everything, until in the end this miraculous feast will be spoiled beyond recognition.

The leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians are two sides of the same coin. "The Pharisees...saw Israel's redemption in the struggle against Rome, while the Herodian dynasty offered the hope that friendship with Rome would result in peace and contentment."⁶ In principle, both were using power politics to achieve their aims for the kingdom of God on earth. The one hoped for revolution under a hypocritical guise of piety (Luke 12:1);⁷ the other compromised integrity to maintain the political status quo, based solely on their materialistic motives. Compromise with Rome was fine so long as Jerusalem's stock was rising. To such, money was more important than morals.

Jesus hated these methods. He spares no words to make sure his disciples know how demonic and destructive such ways are to this feast. But it's obvious that they don't get it. And neither do we at times. It's easy to condemn such methods from afar and label them as a plague, as in the Inquisition or the Crusades. But it's more difficult to spot the leaven in ourselves and thoroughly cleanse the church of all power politics when we allow our brothers to form political factions and lobbies and then have the gall to label what they are doing "Christian." I so appreciate our elders who throughout our history have faithfully maintained clear boundaries in this regard. They have never permitted money making schemes masquerading under the guise of Christianity or allowed the endorsement of any political candidates or party line from either pulpit or patio.

To help the disciples penetrate beyond their physical senses now, Jesus engages them in a question and answer session.

B. A Lesson in Math and Memory (8:17-21)

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 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 you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." "And when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven." And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

Jesus is saying, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? There is but one loaf in the boat (8:14). What more do you need?" Can't they see that the loaf is Jesus? Then he reiterates Isaiah's pronouncement which he spoke in the parables: "Are you going to be like Israel's leadership, condemned to blindness and hard heartedness? (Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2; Isa 6:9-10). Will you become like the idols they worshipped, having eyes but not seeing, and having ears but not hearing? Do you not remember?" For the fifth time in Mark's gospel Jesus rebukes the disciples for their slowness to understand (4:13, 40; 6:52, 7:18). It seems as if everything has been wasted on them.

John Drury captures Jesus' frustration:

With the miraculous meals so replete with major significance, the controlled fury of Jesus' interrogation...is understandable and apt. He is desperate. They missed so much. The argument in the cornfield and the Davidic precedent, the lively exchange with the Greek woman and the miraculous meals before and after it – all have been lost on them. More than that, they have lost track of the holy and divine, which, in this long train of coded events associated with bread, has shifted from its accustomed setting into a new place: from old tradition into Christ's life and body and the new community which will be nourished by it.⁸

But Jesus will not give up on them. And he doesn't give up on us, either. To help them he gives a basic lesson in arithmetic: "Let's go back to the very beginning. When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Twelve." "Very good," says Jesus. "Now how many baskets full did you pick up when I broke seven loaves for the four thousand?" "Seven," they replied. Listen to Jesus' cryptic answer: "Do you not yet understand?" That statement is for us as well. But I must admit that every time I read it, my answer is, No, I do not understand.

John Drury points out that the key is found in the context. Mark has already left adequate clues in his wake, things that only the attentive will understand. The key that unlocks the mystery is found in the story of David, Israel's first Messianic king. In 1 Samuel 21, to which Mark has already alluded (Mark 2:25-26), David is fleeing from Saul into the wilderness. Ravenous by the time he arrives at Nob, he asks the high priest, "Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found" (1 Sam 21:3). But only the consecrated bread was available from the twelve loaves of bread of the Presence. The priest responds that David can have that bread if his mission is holy. David replies that his mission is indeed a "holy" one. The reader knows how "holy" David's mission really is, for once David nourishes this little army of rebels they will form the nucleus of the "new" Israel which will overthrow Saul.

This corresponds to the miracles of the feedings. When we sum up the number of loaves, it corresponds to the number of loaves in Israel's shew bread. Five plus seven equals twelve. This keeps the twelve loaves of Israel's holy bread intact, and becomes symbolic of the ONE loaf, which is Christ himself. Out of that one loaf there has been served a Messianic banquet for all Israel (five) and now the Gentiles (seven). What a banquet, when Jew and Gentile sit as one family to partake of the one feast! That is when members of every nation look at each other with tears in

their eyes and say, “Take and eat the body of Christ broken for you.” What God has joined let no man separate.

Now that we “understand,” our task is to recreate this feast wherever we go, transforming every field into a sacred hill of holiness. And the best news of all is that our role is to be the waiters. So as we close, let me give you the recipe for the Messianic Banquet. Whenever we plan a party, we need to set a time, place, and menu, and then send out the invitations.

IV. Recipe for Recreating the Feast

A. The Time

The amazing thing about the story of Jesus is that the very thing the Jews expected God to do at the end of history, he has done with Jesus in the middle of history.⁹ The time to celebrate this feast is now, and it has been “now” for two thousand years. Though we live in the “now, but not yet,” and look forward to its final consummation in a new heaven and new earth, yet the “now” is vital. And the role of the Spirit is to take the life of the age to come and fill it out in our lives while we yet live in these mortal bodies. So we don’t live our lives waiting for heaven; we live to bring heaven to earth, as the Lord taught us to pray (Matt 6:10). So this feast ought to be a daily occurrence. The church becomes then an “eschatological outpost in time” (Don Carson). Yes, we are indeed God’s eschatological people of the future. As we gather, the future comes racing into the present, time stands still, and for a moment we are caught up in that inconsolable stab of joy. That is the purpose of the feast—for the people to taste eternity.

B. The Place

Second, notice there is nothing fancy about the location of the feast: it is held in the desert. And it looks more like a barbecue than an elegant, high-brow affair. No one has to dress up, and there are no seating assignments. People merely come and sit down wherever they like. It’s all very spontaneous. And so we observe in the New Testament, and later in the history of the church, that the most sacred events have often occurred in the most ordinary, unexpected places, oftentimes outdoors.¹⁰ The lesson is obvious: Don’t wreck things by making the feast so formal that you quench the Spirit.

Last summer we were in the little town of Simeria, Romania, in a house on the top of a hill overlooking the city. Behind the house was a cornfield, half plowed, half ripe for harvest. Early on Sunday morning my friend, James Garcia, headed off into the cornfield with his guitar. “Where are you going?” I asked. “It’s Sunday. Let’s have church,” he replied. So I gathered our small team, a few children, and our hostess, Esti. Together we made the short journey into the cornfield and assembled in a circle. As James started playing and we sang it seemed as if time stood still and heaven itself descended and enveloped us.

And there we stood upon the sod
a small circle lost in time embraced
for there it was in a field of corn
that Noah’s heaven flooded our space.

Before we had breakfast, we celebrated communion. Af-

ter each one took the bread and the cup we sat in sacred silence. No one could talk. No one could eat. We had had the feast already. It was 11:30 a.m. I shared the news of our heavenly feast with my Romanian friend Ionatan. He smiled and said: “That was the field where Violeta’s father laid hands on us and prayed for us when I asked for her hand in marriage. It was also the place where angels used to gather in answer to our fervent prayers to protect us during our secret meetings in the Lord’s Army. You just walked into the field of angels.” I’ll never forget the joy of discovering that holy place, so simple, yet so profound.

C. The Menu

Third, notice the simplicity of the menu. Only two things really, the word and the bread, the word of Christ and the body of Christ. That’s all. Do not spoil it by making it more complicated, adding fancy dressings and sauces. Teach the word. If you can’t teach it, then just read it with feeling, and ask people what they think. If you’re too timid to read it, show one of those Jesus films that have led so many people to Christ. Keep the menu simple. Don’t complicate it with the teachings of men. And don’t defile it with bad leaven. Don’t dare come to this table and use it for political or economic agendas.

D. The Invitations

Finally, once you have determined the time and place, and prepared the menu, send the invitations. How is this done? The text illustrates that the best people to do the inviting are brand new believers who have a story to tell. Ask them to invite all their old friends. Notice that the list can’t be controlled or closed. It must be open. Anyone can come. I believe we are too ingrown as a church. Our fellowship groups are far too comfortable. Why don’t you break out this summer and recreate this feast by inviting non-believers into your homes? This is the purpose for which we live as pastors—to train you to recreate this feast right where you live. Let not Jesus say of us, “Do you not yet understand?”

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1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 81.

2. Pixner, 82.

3. John Drury, *Understanding the Bread: Disruption and Aggregation, Secrecy and Revelation in Mark’s Gospel*, 111.

4. Pixner, 83.

5. Donald English, *The Message of Mark* (IVP, 1992) 155.

6. Pixner, 89.

7. “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1).

8. John Drury, “Mark” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass.: HarvardUP/Belknap Press, 1987) 416.

9. Quote taken orally from Tom Wright during his lectures at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.

10. I am reminded of George Whitefield’s methods and the impact he had when many mainline churches refused him entrance to use their pulpits. He turned the fields into a pulpit, and revival was the result.