

God's Servant Warns

Mark 8:1-21

People are drawn to churches for lots of different reasons. Some are looking for a church with a specific kind of music program. Others prioritize a children's ministry that makes their kids get excited to come to church. Others want a church that focuses on world missions or on evangelism. Others want a church that helps the poor through food pantries and such. Well, there are many very appropriate differences within Jesus' church.

But in the midst of all the differences, there is one priority that Jesus makes supreme. Jesus' priority for His church is the making of disciples . . . followers of Jesus who grow to become more like Jesus in our obedience, character, affections, mission, wisdom, relationships and priorities.

Paul captures the focus of Jesus for the church in Colossians 1:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." (Colossians 1:28-29 [ESV](#))

If you are part of Bethany, you have seen our tagline in our church lobby in big, bold letters. **"Following Jesus Together"**. We want every member and visitor to know this priority about our church from the moment we walk in to our building. We are a church that labors to simply follow Jesus . . . and we do that not in isolation from one another, but in family bond with one another. We do not want our members or our ministries to be isolated, separated, divided or in conflict with each other. We believe that God is honored when we walk together in unity as disciples of Jesus.

The question that our tagline begs is, "What does it mean to "Follow Jesus"?" If you are part of Bethany for very long, you will see three words that capture our definition of the discipleship path. Jesus does not leave us uninformed . . . both through His teaching and the teaching of His apostles, He has laid out a path by which He defines discipleship. Those three words that we use to communicate Jesus' path are "Believe. Belong. Become."

These three words are purposely stated in this order. We believe it is impossible to "Belong" to Jesus' family or to "Become" more like Jesus apart from

first “believing” in Him as your Savior and Lord. I ask you to think for yourself, “Where am I on this path that Jesus has identified for me to follow Him and receive the gift of eternal life?” Have you yet believed in Him? If you have not, the only question that is important in your life is the question, “Will I choose to believe in Him as MY Savior and MY Lord?” No eternal blessing will come to you from God unless you first believe.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”” (Mark 1:14-15 [ESV](#))

If you have repented and believed in Jesus, the next question to ask is, “**Do I meaningfully BELONG to His family?**” The next step in discipleship after believing is committing to His family through baptism and through meaningful membership in His church.

If you do believe and you do believe, the last question to ask is, “**Am I becoming more like Jesus in my affections, my obedience, my relationships, my priorities, my mission in life?**”

All this is to argue that Jesus’ chief goal for us is to make us more like Himself . . . to make us disciples who follow Him together. I believe the whole of the Book of Mark carries this theme forward. As we open our Bibles this morning to Mark 8, the main idea that we track is that . . .

Main Idea: Jesus labors to make us disciples. We are not alone on this path, but He walks with us . . . teaching us, strengthening us and helping us to make progress day by day in our journey to become more like Him.

Jesus labors for us in so many ways, but the story today highlights three labors of Jesus to help us make progress in our growth as disciples.

Labor #1: Jesus abundantly provides for His own.

Jesus returns to the Gentile region of the Ten Cities. He again reveals that He is Messiah, not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles too!

While in the Decapolis, a group of friends bring a deaf and mute man to Jesus, begging Jesus to heal him. Jesus puts His fingers in this Gentile man’s ears. He then Jesus spits and touches the man’s tongue. With great compassion for this poor guy, Jesus looks up into heaven and sighs with empathy and kindness.

He looks deeply into the man's and says, "Be opened." Immediately this man's ears hear and his tongue is free to speak. He shouts with joy over this miracle and he cannot stop talking and talking and talking! He has so much to say! Everyone is amazed!

Jesus looks at the crowd, *"Hey guys. Please do not tell anyone about this. I do not want it known just yet."*

But they do not follow His urging. Instead, they cannot stop sharing what they saw! They tell everyone they know, *"This Jesus . . . He does everything well! He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!"*

Well, you can imagine that the people in the Ten Cities begin to flock out in droves to hear Jesus. They want to know more about him. Jesus finds a nice place in the remote countryside to stop and begin teaching. He teaches all day and people want to know more. So Jesus stays and He teaches them the second day. And again, the people did not leave because they want more. So Jesus teaches the third day . . . all day . . . Jesus unfolds the Good News of the Messiah and the Kingdom that He offered all who come to Him in faith. At the end of the third day, Jesus looks out over the huge crowd . . . over 4000 people . . . men, women and children who had stayed with them all three days with no lunch breaks, no snacks, no food at all! Jesus feels the hunger in His own body, but instead of thinking, *"Hey . . . I have been teaching for 3 days without anything to eat."* Jesus thinks, *"These people have been listening to me for three days without anything to eat."*

Inside, Jesus' heart moves with compassion for these people that He had only met a few days earlier. He feels for them like they are His own family . . . His own mom, brothers, sisters.

Truth: Jesus always thinks deeply about His own. Always. We are constantly on His mind and heart. He not only knows our needs, but He FEELS them too!

Jesus FEELS the hunger of the people so He tells His disciples,

"I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will faint along the way. For some of them have come a long distance."" (Mark 8:2-3 [NLT-SE](#))

Though Jesus fed the 5000 people not long ago from 5 loaves and 2 fish, His disciples in forgetfulness say,

"How are we supposed to find enough food to feed them out here in the wilderness?" (Mark 8:4 [NLT-SE](#))

I think that this is where Jesus lets the air breathe with a long silence. He wants their own question to sink in to their souls. In great patience, Jesus finally answers, *"How much bread do you have?"*

They had already asked around the crowd to see if anyone brought food. They reply, *"Seven loaves. That's it. Seven small loaves of bread."*

Jesus smiles and shouts to the crowd. *"Hey, everyone! Please sit down! We are going to have supper together!"*

After they sit, He lifts up the seven loaves in His hands and prays to the Father. He thanks the Father for this daily bread! And He breaks the bread into pieces. And He keeps breaking and breaking and breaking the bread. Handing the pieces to His disciples to give to the people.

Someone in the crowd pulls one of the disciples aside and said, *"I am a bit ashamed to say this. But when we were asked the first time if we brought any food, I did not want to give up my little fish here. But now I want you to take these fish and give them to Jesus."*

When Jesus receives the fish, He again holds them high over His head and prays, *"Father, thank you for these fish! We thought we were only to eat bread, but You have given us fish too! Thank you!"*

And Jesus begins breaking the fish into pieces. Soon the whole crowd fill their stomachs full of the best tasting bread and fish that they had ever eaten. The disciples come around with huge baskets to pick up all that was not consumed. They fill seven baskets full!

Truth: If we are to grow as Jesus' disciple, we must learn to trust Him. Trust is the first lesson in what it means to follow Jesus. Trust is the most difficult lesson for us to learn. Jesus labors for us to grow our faith.

We are prone to trust ourselves . . . to trust human authorities . . . to trust in money and wealth. We are also prone to worry and to fear. When we are weak in trust, our stomachs boil with concern over the needs that we have in our lives. When we are frail in our faith, we lay awake at night turning the problems we face over and over with no peace.

But growing as a disciple of Jesus means that we learn to trust Jesus to do everything that we need Him to do.

This story is given to teach us that Jesus abundantly provides for His own. When we follow Jesus, we never need to fear running out of resources that we need. He performs miracles to supply all that we lack. And that supply attends to our physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Here Jesus provides for the physical needs of those who have come to receive truth from Him.

Mature Christians sometimes denigrate our physical needs as though they are not very important to God and should not be important to us. But they are! God creates us with frail, dependent bodies. And rather than diminishing the importance of our physical needs, Jesus places them in His work as the starting place for trust.

Notice how Jesus begins with these folks as He labors to make them disciples. At the very beginning of their faith life, Jesus knowingly places them in a situation of dire physical need. Jesus does this so that He can demonstrate His willingness to toil to meet the physical needs of His own.

Application: Has Jesus placed you in a situation of dire physical need? If so, He has done it so that we would grow as His disciples . . . learning to trust Him to supply our need for the moment.

If your physical need is a concern about a physical disease, know that Jesus has compassion upon you and will not fail you.

If your physical need is a concern about finances, know that Jesus has compassion upon you and will not fail you.

If your physical need is a concern over one of your children, know that Jesus has compassion upon you and will not fail you.

“Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17 [ESV](#))

Recently my family had a rare opportunity for all 15 of us to enjoy a vacation together. Our habit from the time my boys were young is to worship at a local church on Sundays when we are on vacation. This is not a legalistic obligation, but has been a great joy and help to us over the course of our lives. On this specific Sunday, as we worshipped together, we heard a great message on The Lord's Prayer. So when we got home, I asked my grandchildren if they had learned the The Lord's Prayer yet. They shared that they had not. So I enticed

them by offering them \$5 if they would memorize it that week. In our mornings together, in addition making pancakes for them, I would recite and explain the Lord's prayer piece by piece to them. On the final day, two of them had joyfully earned the \$5.

My 5-year-old grandson from Colorado is a very enthusiastic and energetic young man, so his recitation came with lots of flair. "Our Father, who are in heaven. Hallowed by Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done . . . on earth as it is in heaven! Give us this day our daily bread" . . . and at this, Asher stopped and with the biggest smile on his face he cried out, "And that IS MY FAVORITE PART!" 😊

Unless we become like children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. We must have faith to rejoice in Jesus' supply for our every need!

But Jesus do not stop with His labors to meet our physical needs, but He also labors to meet our emotional and spiritual needs as well.

In love, He supplies us with comfort in our distress, with hope in our despair, with joy in our sorrows.

And most delightful of all, in love Jesus provides for our eternal soul. He forgives our sins. He reconciles us to God. He gives us the Holy Spirit to strengthen our obedience and to guide our steps. He secures us in His family so that we never need to fear being abandoned by our Father in heaven. He defends us against the evil one. And on the day we die, He leads us safely into our eternal home! This is the point of this miracle! After the feeding of the 5000, John records Jesus saying . . .

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35 [ESV](#))

Truth: Friends, let us never doubt Jesus' love to desire our good and let us never doubt His power to supply our good! In Him, we find a boundless warehouse of grace and favor and mercy. He knows what we need, when we need it and how to get it to us.

Labor #1: Jesus abundantly provides for His own.

Labor #2: Jesus openly confronts unbelief.

After gathering up seven HUGE baskets full of leftovers, Jesus leads His

disciples into a boat where they travel back across the Sea of Galilee into Jewish country. The Pharisees are fuming and they confront Jesus. They argue with Him and look for a way to trip Him up in His words so that they can condemn Him. They shout, *“If you are from God, show us a sign from heaven! Prove to us that you speak the truth! Do something that verifies Your authority. Send us fire from heaven or send us manna or something that will prove you are a prophet like Moses.”*

At this Jesus sighs with exasperation and disgust. Whoof! Jesus mourns over the unbelief in the Pharisees hearts.

““Why do these people keep demanding a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, I will not give this generation any such sign.”” (Mark 8:12 [NLT-SE](#))

And with that, Jesus tells His disciples to get back in the boat and off they go across the lake again.

Question: why did Jesus confront the unbelief of the Pharisees? Answer: Because He loves His disciples and He labors to help us learn what it means to be a disciple. Jesus wants us to know that being a disciple means to trust God instead of trusting in a sign from heaven.

Jesus has already given us all the signs we need to prove that He is the Messiah . . . the King sent by God to rule over us. When we ask for a miracle, we assert that Jesus has not already proven Himself sufficiently to us. When we demand another proof of Jesus’ power, we are inviting unbelief into our hearts.

Notice that the Pharisees were not coming to Jesus with a need that required a miracle for Him to meet the need. That would have been a good longing. But the Pharisees were coming to Jesus with more demands for Him to meet before they acknowledge Him as King. This is raw unbelief and it is a wicked thing.

Truth: The desire for another display of God’s power is not the same as a desire for Jesus. A desire for a power encounter flows not from faith, but from unbelief. Our longing for an experience with supernatural power will move us farther from Jesus and not closer to Him.

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”” (John 20:28-29 [ESV](#))

Today, there are many who teach a kind of Christianity that demands more and more spectacular signs from the LORD. **They say that pursuing such out-of-the-ordinary signs is a necessary part of being a mature disciple of Jesus.** Yet Jesus' plain words tell us the error of this false teaching.

"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."'" (Mark 8:12 [ESV](#))

Jesus labors to help us avoid unbelief in all its deceptive forms! Much of the religious world still peddles the kind of spiritual unbelief that the Pharisees were selling. Jesus confronts the Pharisees for our good to help us identify and forsake the path of supernatural signs.

Friends, Jesus is teaching us that growing as a disciple means that we take Him at His Word and are satisfied with whatever He chooses to give to us. Do not be led astray. The demand for more signs feeds unbelief in your heart.

Labor #1: Jesus abundantly provides for His own.

Labor #2: Jesus openly confronts unbelief.

Labor #3: Jesus kindly cautions His own.

When Jesus leaves the Pharisees, He leads His disciples into a boat for another long trip on the water. They start to get hungry and one asks, *"Who brought the leftovers from Jesus' miracle?"*

They soon realize that no one did. Between them all, there was only one loaf of bread and they were hungry! Well, an argument ensued about who SHOULD HAVE REMEMBERED TO bring the leftovers. Each disciple defended themselves while blaming others. **Jesus listened to them. He knows that they are arguing about a very minor problem and He decides that this is a good occasion for a spiritual lesson of eternal value.**

Jesus said, *"Watch out! Be very careful to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Herod."*

Well, the disciples are still focused on having no physical bread and they think Jesus is commenting on this problem. Jesus rolls His eyes and he asks them a series of nine questions,

"Why are you arguing about having no bread?"

*Don't you know or do you not even understand yet?
 Are your hearts too hard to take it in?
 'You have eyes—can't you see?
 You have ears—can't you hear?'
 Don't you remember anything at all?
 When I fed the 5,000 with five loaves of bread, how many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward? "Twelve." (Mark 8:17-19 [NLT-SE](#)).
 "And when I fed the 4,000 with seven loaves, how many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?" "Seven," they said.
 "Don't you understand yet?" he asked them." (Mark 8:20-21 [NLT-SE](#))*

Jesus is not berating His disciples. Jesus is laboring to help His disciples to avoid the disaster of the influence of evil in their lives.

Jesus uses the metaphor of leaven to identify two nefarious dangers in the life of every disciple. Leaven is the yeast used to make bread that causes the bread to rise. The Bible uses leaven as a symbol to describe the way evil works in us. There are at least **four parallels between leaven and evil that are worth noting.**

1. Like evil, leaven works quietly inside of us before it has any outward expression.
2. Like evil, leaven invades the whole of the body and not just a part.
3. Like evil, leaven cannot be removed once it is introduced.
4. Like evil, leaven begins very small and expands gradually.

Jesus warns us about the Leaven of the Pharisees and the Leaven of Herod.

These two are very distinct from each other, but they each invade the church to damage us. Each of these hinder us from "Following Jesus Together".

What is the difference between these two kinds of evil leaven?

The Leaven of the Pharisees is the life-destroying influence of externalism.

Jesus warns us against any religious expression that exalts the external forms above the internal life of God in our soul.

- This leaven makes our soul proud of our own righteousness.
- This leaven condemns others for not measuring up to our standards.
- This leaven delights to accuse others of failure.

- This leaven expands upon the law of God to include man-made moral requirements.
- This leaven justifies and minimizes the heart sins of anger, bitterness, conflict and hostility.
- This leaven enjoys a good gossip session.
- This leaven makes us feel superior to others in our community.
- This leaven breaks fellowship with the church.
- This leaven trusts in our own good intentions and efforts to please God.
- This leaven devalues joy in the Lord or love in the community.

Beware the leaven of the Pharisees! Please note that a “little” leaven of externalism will grow once it is accepted in our hearts!

The Leaven of the Pharisees is the life-destroying influence of externalism
The Leaven of Herod is the life-destroying influence of worldliness.

Jesus warns us against the acceptance of the world’s standard regarding money, power, sexual ethics, and pride.

- This leaven weakens our view of God’s holiness.
- This leaven compares our lives to others instead of to the LORD.
- This leaven compromises the integrity of our commitments.
- This leaven listens to the world’s arguments for our moral choices.
- This leaven opens doors that should be kept shut.
- This leaven invites conversations about matters that are shameful.
- This leaven values pleasure and possessions over worship.
- This leaven regards God’s Law as outdated.
- This leaven is quick to accuse others of legalism.
- This leaven denigrates the authorities that God has placed in our world for moral order . . . the authorities of government, parents and church leaders.
- This leaven pursues the best life right now with little regard for eternity.

The leaven of Herod blinds us to true righteousness. It opens the door to the disaster that sin will always bring to a life. It is a danger to godly people. We think of Noah and his drunkenness, of David and his adultery, of Solomon and his pursuit of riches and glory.

““Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”” (Mark 8:15 [ESV](#))

Truth: Jesus does not warn us about dangers that we are immune to. Jesus warns about dangers that we are relevant to our lives.

We tend to roll our eyes at warnings, thinking that we are above them. In every age, disciples who thought that they were above these two pits have fallen into them and suffered severe injury to their souls. Let us not trifle with a little externalism or a little worldly lust . . . as though the smallness of the thing makes it harmless.

Jesus labors to keep us from certain disaster in our life of discipleship. Beloved, I urge you to listen to Jesus and to ACT UPON His warning.

Do you see any present way in which your enemy is bringing the leaven of the Pharisees? Any external priority that keeps you from a sincere devotion to Him?

Do you see any present way in which your enemy is bringing the leaven of Herod? Any worldly temptation that entices you to lean in to the lusts of the flesh or the lusts of your eyes or the boastful pride of life.

Which leaven is worse? The answer you give will reveal the leaven that most endangers your soul. If you say, the leaven of Herod is worse! You likely are careless about the leaven of the Pharisees. Visa versa!

There are at least four parallels between leaven and evil that are worth noting.

1. Like evil, leaven works quietly inside of us before it has any outward expression.
2. Like evil, leaven invades the whole of the body and not just a part.
3. Like evil, leaven cannot be removed once it is introduced.
4. Like evil, leaven begins very small and expands gradually.

Conclusion: Believe. Belong. Become. Where are you on the path?

If you are on the part where it is good to focus on Becoming, be encouraged! The task is impossible, but Jesus is with you! He is working in your both to will and to do His good pleasure!

How is He working?

1. Jesus abundantly provides for His own.
2. Jesus openly confronts unbelief.
3. Jesus kindly cautions His own.

Main Idea: Jesus labors to make us disciples. We are not alone on this path, but He walks with us . . . teaching us, strengthening us and helping us to make progress day by day in our journey to become more like Him.