

Mark 8:14-15

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Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 0 0] I'd like you now to turn back to the second passage of Scripture which we read in Mark's gospel, Mark chapter 8, and looking particularly at verse 14. Mark 8 and the 14th verse, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.

Be careful, Jesus warned them, watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. Be careful, watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.

Now when people today think of the Pharisees, perhaps one of the last associations that occurs to us is that there may be a link between the Pharisees of the Gospels and the new atheists of today.

You might ask, what on earth do the Pharisees and the new atheists have in common? Well, surprisingly, they have a great deal in common. For both insist that religious claims are invalid unless verified by sense perception.

That is the common denominator of the religious Pharisees and the irreligious new atheists of today.

[1 : 2 7] They both insist that any religious claim must be verified by sense perception. We must be able to see it. We must be able to prove it.

The Pharisees, for example, refused to believe in Jesus because he declined to provide proof, or at least what they considered proof, in the form of a dramatic, dazzling, supernatural sign.

And today, the atheists reject belief in God because his existence cannot be confirmed scientifically, because you cannot write God in a page and then write QED below it.

That God is not subject to scientific verification. Therefore, God does not exist. God is a myth. So there's a sense in which both demand a sign.

But Jesus said to the Pharisees, as indeed I believe he says to the new atheists today, no sign shall be given to such a generation.

[2 : 3 3] Because that is not how the gospel works. Such attitudes of demanding a physical sign, far from nurturing faith, destroy it.

And that is why Jesus warns his disciples, and through them he warns us, against the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. Herod Antipas had a similar mindset.

He also wanted to meet Jesus so that Jesus could perform some supernatural miracle for him. Yeast, in the thinking of the time among the Jews, symbolized the potential for evil to spread and infect others.

And here, Jesus is using yeast as a metaphor of unbelief, a refusal to believe in him, a refusal to trust in him.

The Pharisees are denying the validity of the claims of Jesus. They demand a super miracle. They lived in an age when many of their contemporaries expected that when the Messiah would come, he would cleave apart the waters of the Jordan and cross dry shod.

[3 : 44] Or he would go to a walled city and command the walls to fall flat. And they would. That was the kind of sign that the Pharisees were demanding of Jesus.

The new atheists today similarly demanding something which the gospel does not promise. New atheism in many ways is a reaction against the surge of new interest in spirituality in Western culture today.

Often a spirituality which is centered on the self rather than centered on God, but it is a non-scientific approach to life. And the new atheists are alarmed.

That's why they've become so aggressive. That's why they have become so arrogant. That's why in the Today program, they were described as making the Taliban look tame by John Humphreys.

Now, Jesus performed many miracles, but he never performed miracles to impress. In the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, he rejected exhibitionism as a means of persuasion.

[5 : 01] His miracles were indeed signs, but they were motivated by compassion, not flamboyance or exhibitionism, and by a desire to communicate, not a desire to amaze.

And so we have these two elements of compassion on the one hand and communication on the other, which help us to understand the purpose of Jesus' miracles.

And this is seen very clearly in the miracle that precedes the question that the Pharisees put to Jesus, the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000. This is a miracle that Jesus performed.

It was in addition to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. And Jesus, of course, as Mark tells us, he is demonstrating his compassion. Jesus is here demonstrating that he cares for the physical well-being of people and that he is concerned that we also should help our neighbor and that we should be the good Samaritan.

But Jesus was doing more than demonstrating compassion. He was also communicating something. He was teaching his disciples. And if we look at verses 17 to 21 of this chapter, Jesus makes it clear there that he was teaching them through the number of baskets that were collected after each of these miracles.

[6 : 33] And he tells them that there were 12 baskets from the feeding of the 5,000. There were seven baskets from the feeding of the 4,000. Now, Jesus then challenges them to work out for themselves what the significance of that symbolism is.

He doesn't spoon-feed them. He doesn't give them everything on a plate. He asks them to use their minds and to discover the truth that he is communicating to them.

And so Jesus often did not spell out the message. He did not explain the meaning of this sign.

He asked his disciples to infer this for themselves. Jesus, of course, there were occasions in his ministry when he did teach plainly or openly, as we discover in verse 32 of this chapter, where Jesus is speaking about his death.

He spoke plainly about this. There's no symbolism. There was no teaching in code here, as there often was in his parables. You notice in the parables of Jesus, very seldom does Jesus explain the meaning of the parable.

[7 : 56] Very seldom does he explain the significance of the sign that is performed in a miracle. And we might ask ourselves the question, why does Jesus do this?

Well, perhaps the writer to the Hebrews helps us to discover the answer. He tells us in Hebrews 11, verse 6, Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

What the writer to the Hebrews is saying is that true faith is not merely a mental, intellectual affirmation on the existence of God. It is seeking him.

It is actively seeking and looking for him. And that's what Jesus, I think, was encouraging his disciples and his hearers in general to do.

He left them without explanation of his parables and miracles to encourage them to discover for themselves the significance of these signs and these stories, and through this to seek him in order to trust him.

[9 : 07] And so Jesus is stimulating faith here. Now, when you do a scientific equation and you write QED or something like that at the end, you're not, you're making an intellectual affirmation.

You're not expressing faith. You're not making a commitment. And the kind of faith that Jesus is encouraging us to have is a faith which involves commitment to him, a commitment of all that we are and all that we have.

He's not asking us simply to nod our heads. He's asking us to open our hearts. And that's what I think the Pharisees failed to discover.

And that's what the atheists of today are also denying. And so Jesus is demonstrating here his love and his mercy.

He's drawing near to us. And he is helping his disciples. He's encouraging his disciples to seek and to find, to understand, and to know the gospel and thus come to faith.

[10 : 16] He's encouraging them. He's stimulating faith on their part. And so what Jesus is offering his disciples and what he's offering us is not so much verification as affection.

God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. It is love that God demonstrates to us.

He's not offering us a formula. He's not offering us a scientific theory. He's offering us his son. He's offering us his own love. And so the miracles of Jesus are described as signs.

They were, if you like, teaching models that help his disciples and help us all to grasp his message. And in the case of the miracle, the fourth feeding of the 4,000, Jesus takes his disciples to task for missing the significance of these two miracles.

The underlying significance of the bread and the feeding of the miracles was missed by them. And so he says to them, with a measure perhaps of exasperation, do you still not see or understand?

[11 : 38] Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear, but you do not see and you cannot understand? Now perhaps Jesus is asking that same question of us this evening.

For we, like the disciples, are slow learners. Their spiritual dullness is less or was less reprehensible than ours, for at the point where we encounter them here, they were on the other side of the cross from us and the other side of the empty tomb.

There was so much that they had yet to discover and there was so much that Jesus had yet to do. And for those of us who live on this side of Calvary and this side of the empty tomb and this side of the ascension, then we have much less reason not to believe and not to commit ourselves to Christ.

And so again let me emphasize that Jesus does not explain in detail the meaning, the significance of these two miracles, but he gives them a clue.

And we might say that Jesus, what Jesus gives us in his miracles is not so much proofs as clues. Clues to his identity, clues to his destiny, clues as to the mission that God his Father had sent him into the world to fulfill.

[13 : 12] And so he tells him that the number of the baskets of leftovers was significant in each case. What would they have made of this? What do we make of it?

Well, we, of course, have a much fuller revelation than the disciples had at this particular point of time. And we know that the number 12, for example, and they knew this too, symbolized the people of Israel, the 12 tribes of Israel.

And we know also that 7 and 70 were associated in Jewish thinking with the other nations, with the Gentile nations, the non-Jewish nations of the world.

And so Jesus here seems to be making a distinction between the Jews on the one hand, the feeding of the 5,000, and they were largely Jews that were fed in there.

And on the other hand, the feeding of the 4,000, which took place in a largely Gentile area in the Decapolis, the area of the 10 cities, which was largely Gentile.

[14 : 22] And the seven baskets in the providence of God, there were 12 in one case, seven in the other, symbolized that He had come to save not only the Jews, but He'd come to save the world.

He'd come to save all the nations. The Messiah would redeem Israel, yes, but the Messiah would also be the Savior of the world.

And in fact, it's interesting that the very baskets that were used were different baskets. The baskets that were used in the first miracle, the feeding of the 4,000, were small baskets which the Jews took with them when they would go on a journey.

They would carry their food in these baskets. Whereas the baskets that were used in the feeding of the 4,000 were baskets that Gentiles used. They were big hampers. They were big enough for Paul to escape from the city of Damascus, lowered down by ropes.

That was the kind of basket. It was the baskets of the Gentile. They were Gentile baskets. But the other baskets were Jewish baskets. And the disciples should have seen that.

[15 : 32] They should have perhaps twigged, as we might say today, but they failed to do so. But Jesus does not spoon-feed them. He challenges them. And He says, this is something that you should be able to understand.

This is something that you must seek to understand. And He's doing this in order to stimulate their faith, in order to deepen their commitment to Him, in order that they might discover the meaning of the gospel.

Now, the disciples throughout the gospel, throughout the large part of Jesus' ministry, were indeed slow learners. But after the death and resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, they quickly got the message.

And these disciples who were dull in faith, who found it difficult to understand, and would say the wrong thing, and do the wrong thing, that would embarrass Jesus.

And Jesus even called them a generation. And that was the word which was used in the Old Testament of the people of God in the wilderness, the unbelieving 40 years.

[16 : 42] But when we see them responding to the death and the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus, these men are transformed. And we find Peter, for example, speaking to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, in Acts chapter 4.

And he declares to them unequivocally that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.

And so we find Peter, who was confused, who was dull, becoming someone who is transformed, someone who is a clear understanding of the gospel.

And obviously, the encouragement that the Lord gave him to believe, in fact, took effect. and he became one of the pillars of the New Testament church.

And today, we are called similarly to declare an unambiguous gospel to the world. I wonder whether we really do that and whether we grasp that with sufficient urgency and clarity today to tell the world that Jesus and Jesus alone can save.

[18 : 00] Now, living in a pluralistic and politically correct society, it takes courage to say that. It requires boldness to say that. We live in a society where increasingly all religions are regarded as somehow or other equal.

Whether it's Christianity or Islam or Buddhism, Confucianism, animism, whatever they are, they're all sort of paths to God. Now, Peter is totally contradicting that.

And Jesus himself contradicts it. He said, no one comes to the Father except by me. And what he's saying is that, or what we, what we interpret from that is that other faiths like Islam, like Buddhism, like Confucianism and so on, are cul-de-sacs.

They are not ways to God. They are ways away from God. And it's so important for us to realize that today when we want to share the gospel with people who follow other faiths.

When we say that they're cul-de-sacs, we're not saying that there is no truth in any of these religions. there is a general revelation in nature which God gives.

[19 : 18] And a religion like Islam has borrowed a considerable amount of its teaching from the Old Testament, from the Bible. And in fact, Islam is claiming to be the fulfillment of Christianity.

There's a controversy at the moment, I understand, in Australia where Muslims have erected large billboards which declare Jesus dash prophet of Islam.

Now, of course, in the free society, Muslims are free to say that. But so also are we to say that Jesus is the only way to God. And that is, I think, what Jesus is encouraging us to do through His ministry to the apostles and through His ministry by the Holy Spirit today.

But why? Why did Jesus refuse to give the Pharisees the sign that they asked for? He did say, after all, that His miracles were signs. Why then did He not give them this super sign?

This, this, this, this, this, why did He not supply a miracle on demand? The Pharisees, of course, came to test Him.

[20 : 34] Mark makes that quite clear. They didn't come to learn. They came to trip Him up. To test Him, we read, they asked Him, that is Jesus, for a sign from heaven.

That's, the sign from heaven is a dramatic sign, supernatural sign, which the whole world would be, would be impressed and amazed and would stagger in front of.

And we read that Jesus sighed deeply. He received the emotional life of Jesus. He's so sad with the unbelief of these Pharisees who were His enemies, but He loved His enemies.

And He says, why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly, I tell you, no sign will be given to it. had Jesus acquiesced with the Pharisees in their request, no doubt they would have been amazed.

They would have been overawed. They would have been stunned. But Jesus knew that they would not have believed. Because, had Jesus performed such a dramatic miracle, there would be no room for faith.

[21 : 46] There would be no space for faith. They didn't trust Jesus. They sought to trip Him up. And they were beginning to engineer His death and trumped up charges.

And Jesus identifies their unbelief with the unbelief of Israel in the wilderness. And the Lord solemnly swore, no one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors except Caleb, the son of Jephunneh.

And that refusal of God to allow them to enter into God's rest, into God's the land of promises, what we sung about in Psalm 95. Where we read in Psalm 95 for 40 years, the Lord says, I was angry with that generation.

I said, there are people whose hearts go astray and they have not known my ways. The problem with the Pharisees was that they did not want to believe.

And I think it's important for us when we speak to new atheists and people who are influenced by them today to recognize that no way will a sign be given to them.

[23 : 06] And it's very important, I think, for us to realize that. That just as Jesus said to the Pharisees, no sign. He says, truly I tell you.

He's speaking there, you know, as he sometimes says, verily, verily, I say to you. He's saying this as a solemn saying, no sign will be given to it, to this request for that kind of proof, because that kind of proof leaves no room for faith.

God. The disciples basically didn't want to trust Jesus. That was the problem, and that was the crunch, and that's what Jesus really brings to the surface here in his interaction with them.

And similarly, that is the case with the new atheists that confront us today. What the Bible tells us, I believe, is that it's simply impossible to prove the existence of God in a scientific sense, because God is infinite and uncontainable within the criteria of mathematics, physics, philosophy, or whatever.

God is too big to be the subject of an experiment, and therefore no such sign will be given.

[24 : 29] Jesus makes that quite clear to the Pharisees, and I believe that through them he's making that clear. to the new atheists. But assuming for a moment that it might be possible, and assuming that Professor John Lennox, who's one of Oxford University, is one of the leading theists today, an outstanding Christian mind, assuming that John Lennox could offer Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, and others verifiable scientific evidence for the existence of God with a QED stamped in big letters upon it, there's no guarantee they would believe.

In fact, many of them don't believe in God because they don't want to. And some of them have acknowledged this in the past. Aldous Huxley, an atheist of the first half of the last century, wrote, most ignorance is invincible ignorance, he said.

We don't know because we don't want to know. it is our will that decides upon what subjects we shall use, what subjects we shall use our intelligence.

Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless. Now, there's an atheist frankly acknowledging that it suited him to say the world is meaningless.

William James, who was a well-known American philosopher of an earlier generation, made a very significant point. He said, there are significant truths in life, many of them practical in nature, which cannot be seen or understood until one believes.

[26 : 14] Now, William James, as far as I know, was not an evangelical Christian, but he's saying that there are certain truths that cannot be seen or understood until one believes.

many of the scientific theories that are taken as fact today have a basis of faith. A theory is proposed as an act of faith on the part of a scientist and they seek to prove that theory, but the foundation is a theoretical construct, which is, if you like, an act of faith.

faith. And so, no such sign will be given to us. And I think it's very important for us to recognize that as we meet with people and as we mix with them who are influenced by the new atheism.

You see, Jesus creates space for faith. By telling his parables and performing his miracles, often without explanation, Jesus creates this space for us to engage with what he is saying and so search for the message he wants us to discover and in doing so learn to trust him.

You see, faith is trusting, trusting a person, not trusting a formula, but trusting a person. We must diligently seek him if we are to find him.

[27 : 47] Now, Jesus, of course, did speak plainly as we already noticed, and we read that section at the end of chapter 8 of Mark's gospel, when Jesus is talking about the nature of his discipleship and the kind of faith that he considers and indeed is demanding of his disciples and of his hearers there, illustrates what faith is.

Then he called the crowd, we read in verse 34, he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up their cross and follow me.

Now, had we been there when Jesus said that, and he said it not only to the disciples but to the crowd, the crowd would have heard the crowd gasp. But Jesus is here saying, if you're going to be my disciple, if you're going to be my follower, if you're going to come with me, then you must be prepared to take up your cross.

You must be prepared to die. That's what Jesus is saying here. The kind of faith that he is asking of us, he's inviting us to exercise in him, is the faith that is willing to die for him.

Now, that is faith, as Jesus explains it here to his disciples. Discipleship, he says, might be an execution. Today, a cross is a brand, or the cross is a brand.

[29 : 14] But in these days, it was a horrendous symbol, a symbol of ignominy and shame and of suffering. The most terrible death imaginable, the most shameful social thing to happen to anyone socially, to be crucified, a faith that was reserved for runaway slaves and rebels.

And it's difficult for us because the cross has become a brand that we have dumbbed it down in a way. And we don't recognize the horrendous implications of what Jesus is saying here.

And so the symbolism of the cross is that there must be in our part of readiness to lay down our lives, to make a total trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

These are his terms of discipleship. Now, as we've seen, his own disciples did not come overnight to this degree of commitment. Mark makes it abundantly clear, especially Mark, that they were slow to deepen their faith, but after the resurrection, they were brought to that point of total commitment.

But commitment, faith involves trust, and trust involves commitment. There's the story told in the Glasgow Pattern, of a man who was caught in a burning tenement two flights up, and his friends, there was no escape, his friends came with a blanket and shouted up to him to jump.

[30 : 48] He said, no, I won't jump, if I jump you'll take the blanket away. And he said, if you put the blanket down on the ground I'll jump. Now, that has told us a joke, but there's a sense in which that's like the New Atheists.

They're saying, put the blanket down on the ground and I'll believe. Now, if the man had jumped, it's an apocryphal story, of course, if the man had jumped and the blanket was still on the ground, he wouldn't have survived.

He was refusing to have faith in his friends. And faith involves venturing. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones in Westminster Chapel used to say this again and again, faith ventures.

Faith is prepared from a human point of view to take a risk. And Jesus invites us to venture for him. You will all have heard the story of Blondin, the French tightrope walker who stretched his tightrope across the Niagara Falls towards the end, I think, of the 19th century.

And he had a wheelbarrow and he had a flange on the wheel of the wheelbarrow and he used the wheelbarrow to balance himself as he crossed the Niagara Falls.

[32 : 04] Now one false slip and of course it was total death. There was two men in the crowd who came to watch him arguing and one was saying he can't possibly do it, he's going to fall.

And another man said he's done it before and he'll do it again. And Blondin, we're told, heard them arguing and he went up to the man who was affirming his faith in him and he said, you really believe I can do it?

He said, yes, he said. He said, okay, let me wheel your cross in my barrel. And the man said, no. You see, he believed up here, but he didn't believe down here, he didn't commit, he wasn't prepared to trust, he wasn't prepared to make that commitment.

To his conclusion, let me come back to the American philosopher William James. He said, many truths in life which cannot be seen or understood, cannot be seen or understood until one believes. And he uses an illustration of a mountaineer to explain what he means here.

The mountaineer is climbing in a dangerous climb and there's a very narrow ledge and he wonders whether he should attempt to cross that ledge to get to the other side of the face.

[33 : 27] If he succeeds, he will go on in safety. But if he fails, he will fall to his death. Can that man make it?

Can the mountaineer make it? That man will never know until he actually ventures. And Jesus is inviting us to venture, to trust him.

and we have a greater basis for trusting in him than that mountaineer had. Because Jesus has promised that he will lose no one.

No one. From our point of view, from a human point of view, yes, there is a risk, yes, there is a venture, but from his point of view, there is security, there is no risk.

But he is inviting us tonight to venture, he's inviting us to take him at his word, he's inviting us to trust him. So you see, when God comes to us and invites us to believe, he's not asking us to believe a formula or even a theological statement, he's inviting us to believe in the person of Jesus Christ and to trust Jesus, to trust him as our personal savior, and to take him at his word, and to commit all that we are and all that we have to him.

[34 : 49] And we have an opportunity tonight to do that, to make that commitment or to renew that commitment, to trust in him afresh, and to say to the Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, I believe with all my heart, I believe that you can save my soul, I believe that you can keep me for all eternity.

And you can tonight, you have tonight, have the opportunity to say with the apostle Paul, I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.

But it is an act of faith, it is a venture, and he invites us to make that act now. May God grant that we may respond by doing so.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.