

Sermon follow-up

9-7-14

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“Riddles on the Sea: Leaven, Loaves, and Leftovers”

Thanks to Bill Smith, whose sermon on this passage helped bring my own thoughts on the text into better focus.

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The sermon covered the basic numerology (numerological symbolism) of the passage, but some other commentators (e.g., Farrar in his magnificent but quirky study on Mark) have suggested some additional connections. For example:

5 loaves feed 5000 in the first miracle. In the second miracle, there are 7 loaves, so we expect them to feed 7000 (which would give us 12,000 total, the perfect number to represent a new Israel). But only 4000 are fed. We're 3000 short of the expected goal. But at Pentecost, 3000 (the missing 3000!) are added, bringing the total up to 12000 and giving us the new Israel we were led to expect.

The story of David and his men eating the showbread from the temple has already been referenced by Jesus in Mark 2, where Jesus connected himself to David and linked his disciples to David's mighty men. In 1 Sam. 21:3, we find David and his men took 5 of the 12 loaves from the table, just as used Jesus used 5 loaves to feed the Jews in Mark 6. Of course, that means David left behind 7 loaves – which Jesus figuratively takes to feed the Gentiles in Mark 8. Put it all together and two things stand out: [a] The Gentiles get the same showbread, the same holy/priestly bread, the Jews got; and [b] Jesus is a new greater David, who not only feeds his own (as David did) but also the nations (going beyond anything David did).

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All of the parallels between Mark 6 and 8, the details included in the stories, etc. show that Mark's gospel is a carefully crafted literary work. His artistry is continually on display. Some have suggested that Mark was a sloppy, crude author because his Greek supposedly doesn't measure up to other ancient writers. Or they suggest that Mark was repetitive, telling garbled versions of the same story within a couple chapters of each other. But that's crazy. Mark tells two feeding stories, carefully placed with a larger narrative structure, to make a compelling point about the mission and messiahship of Jesus. The problem is not in Mark's text, but the presuppositions we bring to the text.

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Just as Jesus' meals were acts of evangelism and mission, so we should use hospitality at our own tables to advance his kingdom agenda. Hospitality ("fondness of guests") is closely related to the Great Commission.

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What is the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod? There are many ways to answer this question, but simply put it is unbelief. It is the rejection of Jesus as Messiah because he does not fit preconceived conceptions of what Messiahship entails. The Pharisees and Herodians were not usually friends; indeed they were typically enemies until their common opposition to Jesus brought them together. But their rejection of Jesus allows him to lump them together as he warns his disciples to guard against being infected by their spirit of unbelief.

To be sure the leaven of the Pharisees includes their pride, their sins of greed and sexual immorality seen elsewhere in the gospel accounts, their hypocrisy, and their disdain for the poor and social outcasts. The spirit of the Pharisees can easily infect us and spread through the church. The consumerism, hedonism, and nationalism that afflict the American church can be seen as dangerous species of Phariseeism.

The leaven of the Pharisees can also be seen as their love for the old world/old creation, centered around the temple in Jerusalem. If they don't get the old leaven out, they will miss out on the new Passover/Exodus Jesus is bringing in.

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Notice that of the two feeding miracles, the actual leftovers are greater after the Gentiles have been fed in Mark 8 (7 large baskets > 12 small baskets). This points us to Jesus giving us all we need and then some as we take the gospel to the nations. We come empty handed, but he fills our hands so we have something to give as we carry out the mission he's given us.

Note also that Jesus gives the disciples an over abundance AFTER they serve each time. The Lord rewards those who serve.

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The Pharisees asked for a sign *from heaven*. Why from heaven? Apparently, the signs Jesus has been doing are not good enough. They are "earthly" signs, or perhaps even signs "from below" (cf. Mark 3:22). Perhaps they want Jesus to call down fire from heaven like Elijah. It seems most likely their demand for a sign is a result of their ignorance and arrogance: They see themselves as a kind of messianic credentialing agency. They will establish the criteria and decide whether or not Jesus really fulfills the messianic vocation. If he's going to be messiah, he'll have to have their rubber stamp.

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Mark 8:12 uses an oath formula (cf. 2 Kings 6:31). The verse probably best reads something like this: "Amen, may God do so to me if a sign is given to this generation." Matthew's version of this story really helps explain what's going on. "Amen" typically introduces revelation Jesus received from his Father and gives the saying the force of a binding oath. Indeed, it may even be understood as a self-maledictory oath, in which Jesus says he will be cursed if a sign is given. Of course, given that a sign *was* given to that generation (the sign of Jonah; cf. Matthew's account of the same story), we may say Jesus indeed took the curse of the oath upon himself.

As I pointed out in the sermon, the oath Jesus uses connects the passage to Psalm 95, where God swears another hard hearted generation will not be given any more signs but will be left to perish in the wilderness. The Israelites were not allowed to enter the promised land; likewise, the Pharisees will not enter the glories of the new covenant.