

HEALING INSIGHTS FROM *THE GOSPEL OF MARK*

LESSON 5 – CHAPTERS 7 TO 9

A. Laws, Tradition, and Defilement (Mark 7:1-22)

1. The general context of this incident focuses on the amazing works and teachings of Jesus. The Great Master has taught the masses in parables (Mark 4) and then performed a series of miracles in the two succeeding chapters, including stilling a tempest, walking on water, feeding the 5000, healing the multitudes, and even raising the dead.
 - a. How could the religious leaders *not* have been drawn to such an Individual?
 - b. Many have concluded that the continued focus of the religious leaders, namely, to find fault in Jesus, indicates they were stifling the conviction that Jesus—at a minimum—was someone sent from God.
 - c. Regarding the encounter that occurs at the beginning of Mark 7, *The Desire of Ages* offers the following background: “Whenever the message of truth comes home to souls with special power, Satan stirs up his agents to start a dispute over some minor question. Thus he seeks to attract attention from the real issue. Whenever a good work is begun, there are cavilers ready to enter into dispute over forms or technicalities, to draw minds away from the living realities. When it appears that God is about to work in a special manner for His people, let them not be enticed into a controversy that will work only ruin of souls. The questions that most concern us are, Do I believe with saving faith on the Son of God? Is my life in harmony with the divine law? ‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life.’ ‘And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.’ John 3:36; 1 John 2:3.” (Page 396.)
2. The immediate context of Mark 7 is perhaps even more remarkable. Chapter 6 of Mark’s gospel is bounded by two stories dealing with the essentiality of faith. As the chapter opens, Jesus can do little in the way of miracles due to the lack of faith of the citizens of Nazareth. The chapter closes with mighty miracles being performed along the Northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee—where the people trust in His healing power. In fact, the whole chapter of Mark 6 centers on faith. The disciples trust in Jesus’ word and have a fruitful missionary journey without making any alimentary or financial provisions; they doubt His word and question how to feed the multitudes, etc. If anyone had been following the events of Jesus’ ministry as described in Mark 6 they would have seen a call to faith.
3. In Mark 7, the Pharisees and scribes continue to refuse to surrender to the evidence that calls all to trust in Jesus. In contrast, they oppose the Master because His disciples are eating with unwashed/“defiled” hands. The word translated “defiled” (from the Greek *koinos*) literally means *common*. In other words, the dialogue is not discussing hygiene

but rather a neglect to practice spiritual cleansing rituals which were traditions handed down from the elders (vs. 3, 5) as opposed to instructions from God found in the books of Moses. Clearly, “ceremonial defilement” based on human tradition is the focus of the dialogue.

4. The ancient historian, Josephus, comments on these practices of the Pharisees: “What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude of their side...” (Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. 1987. *Antiquities* 13: 297-8. From *The works of Josephus: Complete and unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson.)
5. A further insight from *The Desire of Ages* provides additional perspective:

“Among the observances most strenuously enforced [by the scribes and Pharisees] was that of ceremonial purification. A neglect of the forms to be observed before eating was accounted a heinous sin, to be punished both in this world and in the next; and it was regarded as a virtue to destroy the transgressor.

“The rules in regard to purification were numberless. The period of a lifetime was scarcely sufficient for one to learn them all. The life of those who tried to observe the rabbinical requirements was one long struggle against ceremonial defilement, an endless round of washings and purifications. While the people were occupied with trifling distinctions, and observances which God had not required, their attention was turned away from the great principles of His law.” (Pages 395-6)
6. Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders in v. 6-13. Their hypocrisy really centers on their having more faith in their own proclamations than in God’s revelations. The key passage in His argument is as follows (v. 9-13): “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God) — then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”
 - a. In other words, the Jews had developed a system of human laws that undermined the very intent of God’s commandments. Whereas God through Moses had given commandment to provide for one’s parents, a person could designate any or all of his holdings as “Corban.” This indicated something “which has been set aside as a gift to be given later to God, but which is still at the disposal of the owner.” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* [electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.]. New York: United Bible

- Societies.) Apparently, a person could use these items or funds as they pleased during their lifetime with them reverting to the temple upon their death. They held this absolved them from helping others—even their own family—with those resources.
- b. Do we ever use our own “devotion to God” as an excuse for not caring for our own family?
5. In this passage was Jesus proclaiming an end to the Bible’s system of “clean” and “unclean” foods?
- a. Pastor and Weimar College Greek Teacher, Skip Dodson, believes the sense of the original language in Mark 7:18-19 is best conveyed as follows: “whatever goes into a person from outside of him has absolutely no way to make him common or defiled because it does not enter into his heart, rather it enters into the gut—resulting in the cleansing of all the foods.” In other words, no one can become morally defiled by eating with hands that are not ceremonially washed; the intestinal system takes care of any aspect of our food that might be considered “unclean.”
 - b. However, many commentators and translators favor a different reading of the passage. They seem to base their preference on the fact that Greek nouns and verbs have genders (i.e., masculine, feminine, or neuter). In this passage (v. 19) both *heart* and *stomach* are feminine while the verb *cleanses* is in a masculine form. For this reason, many commentators do not believe that Jesus is attributing a cleansing function to the stomach or intestinal system. They suggest the grammar implies that the last portion of the phrase is Mark’s comment on Jesus’ words rather than a continuation of a quote from the Master; i.e., “[Thus] He [Jesus] cleanses [ritually] all foods.”
 - c. Regardless of which position one takes, the context of this passage, and indeed, the whole of the Bible, seems to make it clear that Jesus is not specifically addressing the distinctions of clean and unclean foods/creatures first mentioned in Genesis 7 and then expanded upon in Leviticus 11 (and again in Dt 14). Consider the following:
 - i. In these Old Testament texts, the Hebrew word *clean* has a far different sense than the terminology for *clean* in Mark 7. The Genesis term comes from Hebrew root *tahor*, which has a connotation of purity as well as “cleanliness.” The word for *unclean* is derived from Hebrew *tameh* which could be translated unclean, defiled or polluted.
 - ii. Biblically, “clean” and “unclean” distinctions were not merely ceremonial, but date back to at least the time of the flood before there was a Jew. The point seems to be that God never intended we eat certain foods.
 - iii. The context of Mark (and the gospels as a whole) offers no evidence that Jesus intended to abolish laws God gave through Moses: “Think not that I am

come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (Matthew 5:17–19, KJV).

- However, this very text in Matthew indicates Jesus did fulfill some of the Old Testament practices (commonly called the ceremonial law), rendering their provisions unnecessary in the Christian era.
 - Additionally, as we are seeing here in Mark 7, Jesus also set aside the human rules that were undermining the very teaching God gave through Moses.
- d. Do biblical health distinctions first described in Genesis fall into either the category of ceremonial restrictions or human laws? I would argue they do not. I’ve already alluded to some of my rationale. A full description of this topic is beyond the scope of these lessons. However, another point is worth considering: because God is ultimately interested in our eternal salvation, He has sometimes even deemphasized true principles of health and hygiene if they were interfering with a saving relationship with Him.
- i. This is true of the practice of circumcision which had both ceremonial significance as well as health benefits (e.g., throughout history, cancer of the cervix in women was dramatically decreased if their male partner was circumcised as an infant; boys circumcised in infancy have almost no risk of developing cancer of the male reproductive organ). However, God set aside this practice in the early New Testament, when the Jews had mistakenly elevated it to a level of spiritual merit.
 - ii. Note: even in this context, if you were to circumcise your male infant today because of your devotion to God and desire to have your boy experience the best health to serve his Creator, this would be a “matter of the heart” of which Jesus spoke. In essence, to not engage in a practice that you believe could undermine health and thus impair service for Christ would show a lack of heart regard for God’s principles and could thus, in a sense, be morally “defiling.”
- e. Long after Jesus’ ministry, two texts in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church shed further light on the fact that how we eat and drink can have moral implications. In other words, Jesus was not saying we could eat whatever we wanted without any fear of moral implications. Paul addresses the subject in both positive and negative ways.
- i. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul states the principle positively: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

- ii. However, the context of 1 Corinthians 10 is similar to that of 1 Corinthians 8 in that it is dealing with misunderstandings of ceremonial practices. It is in chapter 8 that Paul addresses from a negative perspective the same basic principle (i.e., when choices regarding eating and drinking violate heart convictions they becoming morally defiling). Listen to Paul’s words: “...some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” (1 Cor 8:7, ESV). In other words (although in this example the believer is in error) eating can defile a person if she makes dietary choices contrary to what she believes God wants her to do. Of interest, the word in 1 Cor 8 for “defiled” is from a different Greek word than that found in Mark 7. Here the word is derived from the Greek root, *moluno*, which literally has the connotation “to soil” or “to smear” with dirt and was used, for example, to apply to pigs. It was also used often to connote sexual defilement. (See *Vol. 4: Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964. G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed. electronic edition, 736–737. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.) By the way, it is this *moluno* defilement from which the 144,000 are free (Revelation 14:4).
 - iii. All of this further illuminates the book of Daniel—an Old Testament prophetic book which we have seen (and will further observe as we continue our journey through Mark’s Gospel) was especially significant to Jesus. In Daniel 1:8, Daniel resolves to not “defile” himself “with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank” (ESV). In the context of our discussion, Daniel appears to have been thinking about more than mere ceremonial defilement. He knew what God required of him when it came to caring for his body and mind, and would not venture onto forbidden ground.
6. Summarizing the lessons from Mark 7:1-23...
- a. Jesus is calling the religious leaders to focus on matters of the heart. If our heart is right with God we will follow His instructions, and will not try to establish our own righteousness. As *Desire of Ages* expressed it: “To the multitude, and afterward more fully to His disciples, Jesus explained that defilement comes not from without, but from within. Purity and impurity pertain to the soul. It is the evil deed, the evil word, the evil thought, the transgression of the law of God, not the neglect of external, man-made ceremonies, that defiles a man.” (Page 397.)
 - b. This in no way neglects the importance of healthful living. However, although God is clear in both the NT and OT that we should care for our bodies as an act of devotion, Jesus underscores a biblical theme: caring for our bodies is secondary to caring for our souls. At times, like here in Mark 7, Jesus may appear to set aside health principles, because they are less important from the perspective of eternity, than matters of the spirit.”
 - c. **If any of this is confusing...** Consider this biblical theme: follow the clearest light you have. Do not get bogged down in that which is uncertain.

- i. However, do not neglect to follow God’s instructions under a false guise of “none of the experts agree” or “I’m not smart enough to understand all the ramifications.” James put it this way regarding moral light: “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth *it* not, to him it is sin.” (James 4:17). Jesus Himself made a similar point at the end of John 9: “Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.” (v. 41).
- ii. Perhaps these summary concepts will help:
 - Merely eating the wrong food cannot make your body “common.” For example, if you conscientiously try to eat to God’s glory, and someone inadvertently put some pork (a biblically “unclean” meat) in your food, you would not become morally defiled. However, you still may get trichinosis (a disease transmitted by pig flesh).
 - However, if you willfully eat food that will hurt you—or engage in any practice that is harmful, you are showing disrespect for the body God gave you. This would actually come under some of the categories Jesus mentioned as defiling in Mark 7:21-22, theft [eating in such a way that potentially robs God of years of service He desires from you], [self] murder, pride, and foolishness.

B. Healing a Gentile’s Daughter (Mark 7:24-30)

1. **Why such a long journey?** The events in the first part of Mark 7, along with the conclusion of Mark 6, occurred in the region of Genneseret and neighboring Capernaum (see Mark 6:53 and Matthew 14:34). These towns were located on the Northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. In this account, we now find Jesus in Tyre, a Gentile city, some 40 miles distant. Why did God lead His Son to make such a journey? (Regarding the fact that Jesus did not choose His own itinerary see John 5:30, John 8:28-30.)
 - a. Apparently one reason for Jesus’ trip was the mistreatment He received at the hands of His own people, particularly the Jewish leaders. He is now in the final year of His earthly ministry, and Jesus’ stern words to the religious leaders in Mark 7:6-23 evidenced He knew their thoughts. Many of the very things Jesus condemned the religious leaders harbored in their hearts toward Him: “evil thoughts... murders... wickedness, deceit... pride, foolishness” (v. 21-22, KJV). It is likely Jesus realized His life was in danger. The context indicates part of His motivation for departing to the region of Tyre was respite: “he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden” (v. 24, ESV).
 - b. It could also be argued that Jesus was merely retracing the steps of probably both Jew and Gentile seekers who had come to listen to His teaching earlier in His ministry:

“And from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things He [Jesus] did, came unto Him” (Mark 3:8).

- c. The *Desire of Ages* adds this perspective: “The work before Him [Jesus] now was to prepare His disciples for their mission. In coming to this region He hoped to find the retirement He had failed to secure at Bethsaida. Yet this was not His only purpose in taking this journey... Christ knew this woman's situation. He knew that she was longing to see Him, and He placed Himself in her path. By ministering to her sorrow, He could give a living representation of the lesson He designed to teach. For this He had brought His disciples into this region. He desired them to see the ignorance existing in cities and villages close to the land of Israel... The partition wall which Jewish pride had erected, shut even the disciples from sympathy with the heathen world. But these barriers were to be broken down... He wished to lead them from their Jewish exclusiveness to be interested in working for others besides their own people.” (Pages 399-402.)
2. It appears Jesus in His ministry was largely following the same pattern that He later commissioned His disciples to follow: “ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8, KJV). He had first been seeking to minister to those of His own people, the Jews. But as they rejected Him, Jesus turned His attention more and more to the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations. Later, this same pattern in the ministry plays out in the life of the Apostle Paul. See, for example, Acts 13:46-48.
3. Why such apparently harsh treatment? If Jesus was seeking to demonstrate compassion toward the “heathen,” why did He seem to treat this Syrophenician woman so harshly?
 - a. Matthew’s account of this event is more detailed, with Jesus apparently ignoring the woman initially (see Matt 15:23). Then things seem to get worse as Jesus compares her to a “dog.” However, we must step back to truly understand the significance of the term “dog.” In ancient Greek there were at least two words for *dog*.
 - i. The first is *kuon* (e.g., used in Matt. 7:6) which is defined as follows: “ ‘Dog,’ esp. the annoying and despised eastern dog of the streets... Although there are Jews who speak of the faithfulness of the dog, in the main it is regarded as ‘the most despicable, insolent and miserable of creatures’ (Str.-B., I, 722). Comparison with a dog [*kuon*] is insulting and dishonouring (1 S. 17:43). ” (*Vol. 3: Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964. G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed. electronic ed. 1101-4. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

- ii. The second is *kunarion* which the same standard lexicon explains is a diminutive derived from *kuon* which refers to “the ‘house dog’ as distinct from the ‘yard dog’ or the ‘dog of the streets.’” This source goes on to connect this word with the passage in question: “In the NT *kunarion* occurs only in the figurative saying of Jesus at Mt. 15:26; Mk. 7:27. It... brings the claims of children and house dogs into comparison. The choice of *kunarion* shows that Jesus has in mind little dogs which could be tolerated in the house.”
 - b. In other words, it seems Jesus is not referring to this woman as a despicable dog, but rather as a “household pet” which, although beloved, does not have equal privileges with the family members. But doesn’t this demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles are not on the same level? Since the *Desire of Ages* made some claims about Jesus’ motives, let’s consider its description of the dialogue; “...it was a pitying Saviour to whom the woman made her plea... [Jesus] apparently reject[ed] her entreaties, according to the unfeeling prejudice of the Jews... Beneath the apparent refusal of Jesus, she saw a compassion that He could not hide... Here Christ meets one of an unfortunate and despised race, that has not been favored with the light of God’s word; yet she yields at once to the divine influence of Christ, and has implicit faith in His ability to grant the favor she asks... The Saviour is satisfied. He has tested her faith in Him. By His dealings with her, He has shown that she who has been regarded as an outcast from Israel is no longer an alien, but a child in God’s household. As a child it is her privilege to share in the Father’s gifts.” (Pages 400-401.)
 - c. An oft-cited Bible commentary posits an additional explanation for Jesus’ apparently insensitive initial treatment of this woman: “If His [Jesus’] labors for the chosen people [the Jews] were to meet with any measure of success, it was necessary that He should, outwardly at least, comply with custom to the extent that the Jewish leaders should have no occasion to accuse Him of breaking down the barriers they had erected against the Gentiles, wrong as those barriers were in many respects... Otherwise, He would have destroyed His influence with the very people for whom He had come to labor. Today, Christian workers are to consider all men their equals before God, and to remember that ‘God is no respecter of persons’ (Acts 10:34)” [*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 5*. 1980. F. D. Nichol, Ed. p. 420. Review and Herald Publishing Association].
- 4. Consider some additional positive lessons from this story.
 - a. This Gentile woman demonstrated great humility. Her example provides a stark contrast to the attitude demonstrated by the Jewish religious leaders. “If she may have the privilege of a dog, she is willing to be regarded as a dog. She has no national or religious prejudice or pride to influence her course, and she immediately acknowledges Jesus as the Redeemer, and as being able to do all that she asks of Him.” *Desire of Ages*, page 401.

- b. Jesus honored this woman’s faith with one of His more remarkable miracles.
 - i. Some of Jesus’ greatest miracles were reserved for those who the Jews regarded as outcasts. The people of Tyre and Sidon were Canaanites, descendants of Ham, the “wicked” son of Noah (see Genesis 10:6, 16-18), and were consequently despised by those Jews. Additionally, those living in Tyre and Sidon were idolaters—living in violation of the plain commandments of God. However, Jesus still ministered to this woman’s needs—and remarkably healed this woman’s daughter although she was some distance away.
 - ii. Who else was healed at a distance? In Luke 7:1-10 we read of another Gentile, this time a Roman centurion’s servant, who was also healed at a distance. Like this Syrophenician woman, the Gentile Roman commander was commended for his faith. However, no Jews were healed from a distance.
- c. Jesus powerfully demonstrates our need to minister to people regardless of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds.
 - i. How should we deal with those who are violating God’s principles? Don’t you think the Holy Spirit would motivate us to show the same compassion?
 - ii. Reflect on this insight into Jesus’ mysterious dialogue “When He said, ‘I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel,’ He stated the truth, and in His work for the Canaanite woman He was fulfilling His commission. This woman was one of the lost sheep that Israel should have rescued. It was their appointed work, the work which they had neglected, that Christ was doing.”
Desire of Ages, p. 402

C. Healing a Deaf Man (Mark 7:31-37)

1. “they brought to him [Jesus] a man... and they begged him [Jesus] to lay his hand on him [the deaf man].” Here is another account highlighting social intervention (friends *brought* him to Jesus) on behalf of someone in need of healing. Mark seems to place special emphasis on these accounts (recall the paralytic in Mark 2, Jairus’s daughter in Mark 5, the account of the Syrophenician woman just examined, or even the conclusion of Mark 6 where “people... ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he [Jesus] was”; v54-55, ESV).
2. Note, too, the events of Mark 7 are bounded by Jesus’ spontaneous intervention on behalf of others. Toward the conclusion of Mark 6—and at the outset of Mark 8, Jesus miraculously intervenes to feed the multitude.

- a. Realize no one asked Jesus to perform either of these miraculous meals.
 - b. In this context, these connections help us see at least two things:
 - i. God longs for us to cooperate with Him in meeting the world's needs, sometimes we have to come to Jesus—or bring others to Him. This gives us the privilege of sharing, to some extent, in Jesus' healing work. It also affords an opportunity to strengthen our own faith—and the faith of others—by bringing it into exercise.
 - ii. However, if we do not cooperate with God, His compassion is unbounded and He will sometimes spontaneously act on behalf of those in need.
3. Don't miss the venue for the healing of the deaf man... Mark 7:31 reveals that this miraculous healing occurred in "the region of the Decapolis." Where have we seen this place before?
- a. This was the area where the healed demoniac gave his testimony—somewhat unwittingly (see Mark 5:18-20). Remember, his preference was to follow Jesus and remain physically present with the Master. However, Jesus denied His prayer and commissioned this new believer to follow Him—not physically—but in service.
 - b. Mark 8:1-2 makes it clear that these Gentiles thronged Jesus for three days. All this points to the incredible impact the healed demoniac had for God's kingdom.
 - c. How about you? Could God have said "no" to your best desires? Maybe you are giving your testimony to a dull people, but you will not see the harvest for some time...
4. A medical insight... How treatments are delivered can be as much a part of the healing process as actually rendering the treatment. The wise physician has mastered "the art of medicine." For example, if a patient feels a certain food bothers him, even if the physician can find no scientific explanation for such an intolerance, she can tell her patient to avoid this food as part of the healing program. In other words, meeting the patient "where he is at" is powerful in building rapport and instilling confidence (not to mention the fact that the physician herself may not see the significance of every nuance of the patient's history).
- a. We have seen that sometimes Jesus healed from a distance, other times He spoke in someone's presence and healed them, in other instances—as we see here—Jesus engaged in what appears to be elaborate physical measures. His other miracles reveal it was not necessary for Jesus to spit or touch a man's ears and tongue in order to restore these faculties.
 - b. Jesus' activities in this setting, including "looking up to heaven" (v. 34) and the use of saliva seem to be concessions to this heathen people. The use of saliva apparently met these heathen-background people "where they were at" for "ancient literature preserves numerous examples of the use of saliva by physicians and wonder-workers

who believed it able to communicate healing from their bodies to those of their patients, and thus to have curative properties...” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Volume 5. 1980. F. D. Nichol, Ed. Page 627). However, despite this healing connection that would point to the healer’s own powers, Jesus’ gaze His toward heaven demonstrated His confidence was in the Father’s healing power rather than in His own inherent abilities.

- c. Note later in Mark 8:22-26 Jesus again uses saliva, this time in healing a blind man. Of note, this miracle also took place outside of both Judea and Galilee. (The location in Mark 8 appears to be the town known as Bethsaida Julius, which was just East of Galilee, across the Jordan River on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.) In other words, Jesus was dealing again with a population that had significant non-Jewish/Gentile blood lines. (Realize even Galilee where Jesus conducted a large portion of His ministry was “Galilee of the Gentiles” [Matthew 4:15].)

D. Feeding the Four Thousand (Mark 8:1-10)

1. Jesus again is confronted with a multitude who have no food. In this incident we again see the love of Jesus: “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away.”
2. However, when Jesus presents the need to His disciples they seem totally unmindful of Jesus’ power: “And his disciples answered him, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?’”
3. Why didn’t the disciples express their faith in Jesus miraculous power? Had the forgotten how Jesus fed the 5000?
4. There is an important ingredient that we can easily overlook.
 - a. The 5000 who Jesus fed were predominantly Jews in the region of Bethsaida. Now Jesus is amongst Gentiles in a foreign region.
 - b. Could the disciples still be struggling with the idea that God’s miracles are only for the Jews? Perhaps they didn’t think Jesus would do such a mighty miracle for those of another race.
5. By feeding the multitude on this occasion Jesus’ shows a number of things:
 - a. His compassion for all nations.
 - i. Realize there are expressions throughout the Bible of Jesus concern for those of every land;
 - ii. For example: “mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.” (Isaiah 56:7)
 - b. Although Jesus acts in response to our faith and prayers, He sometimes answers the unspoken prayers of our hearts.
 - i. “And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.” (Isa 65:24, KJV)

- ii. This reminds us that God’s answering of our prayers, and even providing for our needs is not dependent on the perfection of our prayers. Romans 8:26 (ESV): “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”
 - iii. In spite of this great truth, we cannot underestimate the importance of coming to Jesus with all our needs.
 - Jesus’ words in John 14:13-14 (ESV): “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”
 - James 4:2-3 (ESV): “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”
6. Although we have to be careful not to over-allegorize the Bible, some have seen a lesson in Jesus’ compassion for Jew and Gentile alike in the remnants collected after His two group-feeding miracles.
- a. When Jesus fed the 5000 Jews, 12 baskets were left over. Since 12 is a number associated with the church (think 12 disciples, 12 tribes of Israel), some have seen in this an evidence that Jesus power is sufficient to supply all the needs of the church.
 - b. When Jesus fed the 4000 Gentiles, 7 baskets were left over. Since 7 is a number representing perfection or totality, some have seen this as indicating Jesus power is sufficient to supply the needs of the whole world.
 - c. Regardless of how we see the significance of the left overs, this story again calls us to trust in Jesus for all our needs.
7. **A fitting contrast...**
- a. Mark 7 begins with a story about unconverted Jews who were focused on their own self-interest, criticizing Jesus while they engaged in selfish practices like the declaring of their goods “Corban.”
 - b. Mark 8 opens with a story of Jesus’ compassion—but He allows His feeding of the multitudes to be dependent on His disciples’ giving all the food they have.
 - c. In another place in *Desire of Ages* these great principles are illustrated: “Self-love, self-interest, must perish. And the law of self-sacrifice is the law of self-preservation. The husbandman preserves his grain by casting it away. So in human life. To give is to live. The life that will be preserved is the life that is freely given in service to God and man. Those who for Christ’s sake sacrifice their life in this world will keep it unto life eternal.” (Pages 623-624.)

E. Recurring Themes (Mark 8:11-26). Three more vignettes, in quick succession, build on the themes that have played out in Mark chapters 7 to 8 thus far:

1. **A Sign that is no Sign** (Mark 8:11-12). In spite of the consistent evidences of Jesus’ divinity, the religious leaders continue to hassle Him. Despite all the opportunities they have had to see God’s hand working through Jesus, they ask for yet another sign. Comparison with Matthew 16:1-4 (and Matthew 12:39-40) reveals that although Jesus would not give them a special sign, there would be a final powerful sign that would be

demonstrated by Jesus' death and resurrection three days later.

2. **Spiritual “Label Reading”** (Mark 8:13-21). Just as the religious leaders continue to falter in their experience, the disciples continue to waver in their own faith. Their struggles of faith are often painted in softer hues by Mark than Matthew. Think about it this way. The Holy Spirit did not override Mark's personality in impressing him to tell the gospel story. This man whose own faith was seriously tested (remember Mark left Paul and Barnabas during their missionary journey) less often explicitly speaks of the disciples' lack of faith—or the contrasting strong faith of those outside the inner circle (e.g., relating to this and other accounts covered in this handout, see Matt 14:31; 15:28; 16:8). In this particular passage consider how the disciples reveal their lack of faith-infused vision:
 - a. In response to Jesus' admonition, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15), the disciples reveal their spiritual myopia by thinking only concretely: “It is because we have no bread (v. 16).” As the account unfolds it is clear Jesus is speaking of the leavening “doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (Matthew 16:12).
 - b. While team teaching a class at Weimar College, my colleague Pastor Skip Dodson came up with a striking medical parallel to this account. By now most of us have been told of the importance of reading nutrition information labels. However, some among the most diligent of us occasionally let down their guard. (I was reminded of this recently while traveling. As I hurriedly ran through a grocery store, I grabbed a jar of “all natural” nut butter. It was several days later that a careful reading of the label revealed the jar contained not only nuts but “natural” cane sugar and palm oil.)
 - i. In this context, the focus is on spiritual bread. However, building on Jesus' analogy, how careful are you with the physical bread you purchase? Is all bread equal? Do you read labels?
 - ii. For example, have you ever purchased bread whose first ingredient is “enriched” flour? Such grain seems much like the doctrine of the religious leaders in Jesus' day. It appears like is offering you something more than God naturally offers. However, just as “enriched flour,” when compared to whole grain, is actually depleted in many vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, so it is with the “improvements” men make to God's Word.
 - iii. Learn the lesson from Jesus: get all the “nutritive value” of the God's Word by going directly Him for guidance. Don't accept anything less. Teachings that are not solidly based on the Scriptures don't really provide the spiritual nutrition we need.

3. **Healing a Blind Man (Mark 8:22-26).** Here is an account that seems strangely reminiscent of the healing of the deaf mute at the conclusion of Mark 7. Striking similarities include: friends bringing the man to Jesus, a request for Jesus to merely touch the individual, the Master removing the sufferer from the masses, and Jesus employing spittle as part of the “healing service.” However, an important and unique medical aspect to this story is often overlooked.
- a. **Unlike any of Jesus’ other healing miracles, this man’s vision was not restored instantly, it took two steps or stages.**
 - b. What possible reason could there be for this unusual method? Medical research provides a fascinating possibility: Jesus first fully healed the man’s eyes; next he healed his brain.
 - i. We now realize that vision has multiple dimensions. Two are especially noteworthy here:
 - we need functional eyes to encode visual input;
 - we need a functional occipital cortex (vision-interpreting area of the brain) to interpret that information.
 - ii. Without an optimally functioning visual cortex, scientists note that a person will have difficulty “distinguishing shapes, drawings, or images.” After years of blindness it would not be surprising for someone who had miraculously restored eyes (but a visual cortex that had atrophied due to lack of use) to say, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” (Mark 8:24)
 - c. This is not science fiction.
 - i. In 1984, Mike May made headlines as a blind paraolympian. In addition to winning three bronze medals, he set what was then the downhill speed record for a blind skier at 65 mph. Clearly, losing his vision at the age of 3 (due to a freak chemical accident), did not prevent his excelling in sports.
 - ii. May made headlines again in 2000, when, at the age of 46, his eyes regained a significant degree of visual function as a result of surgical procedures that included stem cell transplantation.
 - iii. However, even three years after his surgery, “May reported being unable to grasp three-dimensional vision and to recognize members of his family by their faces alone.” In essence, it appears May had a problem like the man who “saw” people “like trees walking.”
 - d. Unanswered questions. Every detail of every incident is not conveyed in the gospel stories. In Mark 8 all we know is that Jesus was asked to touch the blind man. Perhaps the friends explicitly asked Jesus to heal the man’s eyes. (Or was that only an entreaty implied by the request for Jesus to touch him?) Regardless, it seems Jesus first gave the blind man what he and his friends longed for; namely, healed eyes. Then later Jesus gave him something he also really needed—a healed brain.
 - e. **Lesson: Failing to pray for what we really need.** In our prayer lives is it possible we are asking for only a portion of what we really need—or perhaps the wrong things

altogether? How do we know what to ask for? For example, as we will see in our next lesson, when they asked for the highest positions in His kingdom in Mark 10:25-40, James and John were criticized for not knowing what they were asking for.

- i. Nonetheless God longs for us to pray, which includes asking Him to supply our needs. In “the Lord’s prayer” Jesus instructed us to ask, “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11, KJV)
- ii. In James 4 we read this: “You do not have, because you do not ask.” Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.” However, James returns to our point of asking amiss when he continues: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (James 4:2-3, ESV)

f. Conclusions.

- i. Let’s not only seek God for what we think we need, but rather beseech Him to help us know what to ask for. Let’s surrender our desire to have God provide what we think we must have, and ask Him simply to reveal His will to us—and pray for the power to do just that.
- ii. In this regard, the words of Paul in the book of Romans are encouraging: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26, ESV.)

F. Preventive Medicine and Hidden Risk Factors (Mark 8:27 - 9:50).

1. This section, which continues into chapter 10, appears to be a studied attempt on the part of Jesus to prepare the disciples for his pending death. Being mentally prepared for traumatic experiences has emerged as important modulator of stressful life experiences. Consider the following insights from the medical literature (Guterman PS. *Psychological Preparedness for Disaster*. The Centre for Excellence in Emergency Preparedness, 2005):
 - a. “Psychological immunization or ‘stress inoculation,’ refers to interventions that minimize the psychological impact of an impending trauma.”
 - b. “...many people comfortably believe that disasters are events that happen to others. When people are in denial of certain threats, they can become complacent and less likely to prepare.”
 - c. “Learning to successfully cope with manageable levels of stress helps build the resistance, or ‘psychological antibodies’ needed to enhance resilience and psychological readiness for disasters.”
2. Although Jesus did not involve His disciples in formal drills, He went to great lengths to help them prepare for His impending crucifixion. Consider what plays out in the material that follows:

- a. Jesus works to anchor His disciples in His true identity as the Messiah. Before speaking of His upcoming passion, Jesus brings His disciples some 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi.
 - i. **Why Caesarea Philippi?** Many believe that Jesus brought His disciples to this famed pagan city to direct their minds to how He, not Baal or Pan, was the true God of Creation. Indeed, it was here that Peter made public confession of His divinity.
 - ii. More Details... Caesarea Philippi, originally known as Paneas, had been regarded as a sacred site for centuries. The ancients apparently regarded it so because it was one of the sources for the Jordan River. Centuries before Christ, it was a seat of Baal worship (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed.* 2000. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems). One of its historic names, Paneas, reflects that this city was seen as the sanctuary for the Greek god, Pan, regarded as the god of shepherds, fields, and woods—thus connecting him, like Baal, with fertility and life. The city was later made the capital of the kingdom of Herod the Great’s most beneficent son, Philip the Tetrarch. Philip greatly beautified the city and renamed it Caesarea in honor of the emperor. (See *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. 1995. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. and *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 5*. 1980. Review and Herald Publishing Association.) The ancient connections with worship and the renaming the city for an emperor are some of the lines of evidence suggesting this also became a seat for the cult of Roman emperor worship.

- b. **Further Evidence of Jesus’ Lordship.** Even as Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for the terrible events to follow, He does it in a context in which He reveals His divinity.
 - i. In Mark 8:31-32, for example, Jesus refers to Himself as the “Son of Man.” Although this term referred, on one hand, to Jesus’ humanity, it also indicated His divinity. Apparently dating back to the revelation of Daniel 7:9-14 where Jesus is given final dominion in the context of an end-time judgment, the Jews saw this “son of man” figure as a heavenly being and last-day judge. Jesus underscored this same connection, explicitly connecting his favorite designation for Himself, namely, “Son of man,” with His identity in Daniel 7 (see Mt 24:30; 25:31; 26:64; and John 5:27).

- ii. In other words, when Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for His passion, it is not merely as a man that He speaks, but as the Divine Creator and Savior.
- c. God the Father also connects evidences of Jesus' divinity with His coming crucifixion. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the three inner disciples get a glimpse of Jesus' heavenly glory. However, this setting was not just about glory. Jesus' death was prefigured in that very context, as Luke records that Moses and Elijah spoke of Jesus' "decease" (Luke 9:31, KJV). Literally, in the Greek, they were speaking to Jesus regarding His upcoming "exodus." Such terminology would immediately cause any good Jew to reflect on the sacrifice of the Passover lamb—the very sacrifice that foreshadowed the cross (see 1 Corinthians 5:7).

3. Hidden Risk Factors: The Disciples' Selfishness Continues to Undermine Their Faith

- a. As this section of Mark progresses, we see Jesus' repeated attempts to prepare the disciples for His betrayal, mocking and death. However, each of them is focused on his own agenda. Each is seeking the highest place. It is, if you will, a hidden risk factor setting them up for severe reactive depression when Jesus will ultimately suffer and die. Their lack of faith impairs their ministry—and frustrates Jesus' plans for them. So it is with us.
- b. Jesus, soon after speaking of His impending death, tries to eradicate this deadly attitude. In Mark 8:34-38, He speaks, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."
- c. Despite Jesus' attempts, the disciples kept embracing selfishness and lack of faith, essentially "risk factors" for early spiritual death:
 - i. They again show their lack of faith when they cannot heal the demon possessed boy of Mark 9:14-29.
 - ii. They continue to bicker over who will be the greatest in what they perceive to be Christ's soon-coming kingdom. See Mark 9:33-37.

- iii. Even when it looks like the disciples have Jesus' interests in mind, we see evidence of their personal desire to be enjoying the divine kingdom. It may well be Peter's aversion to anything less than a glorious future for Jesus and His disciples that prompted his objection.

- d. Thought question: was Jesus building His church on Peter as a human or on the "rock" of Peter's confession; i.e., the recognition that He was the divine Messiah (see Matthew 16:18)? If you argue for the former how do you explain the following:
 - i. Jesus almost immediate rebuke of Peter, saying "Get behind me, Satan" (v. 23, see also Mark 8:33)

 - ii. The disciples continued bickering for the highest position. If Peter had been awarded the highest place, wouldn't the disciples have been aware of that?

 - iii. Although one could make a case for spiritual dullness afflicting the 12, no one could reasonably levy that criticism against Jesus. In view of this, if Peter was already the designated leader of the church (i.e., the "rock" on which the church was built), why Jesus simply tell James and John that the highest places in the kingdom was already reserved for Peter (see Mark 10:36-41).

 - iv. In Acts 15 why does James seem to have the role of the leader of the early church while Peter is merely a witness or delegate at the special assembly there described? (See, for example, Acts 15:7-11, 13.)