Lesson Nine

The Disciples: Slow to Get It

Focal Text
Mark 6:45-52; 8:1-21

Background
Mark 4:35-41; 6:6b-13, 30-52; 8:1-21

Main Idea
In spite of the many ways in which Jesus demonstrated who he was, the disciples were slow to understand.

Questions to Explore
Why do we not yet understand who Jesus is? How can we?

Quick Read
When we remember what Jesus has done for us, we are encouraged to trust him for our present needs and future fears.

Commentary
Jamie Lash is a beloved professor at Dallas Baptist University and a friend of many years. One of the wise observations he teaches his students is this insight: Every sin we commit results from a mistaken belief about God. I’m convinced he’s right. When we see God as less than omniscient, we commit private sins; when we view God as less than omnipotent, we become self-dependent; when we understand God as less than holy, we offer worship and service that are not our best.
As we observed in lesson seven, Jesus’ hometown did not understand or accept his divinity, so that “he was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:6). They were not the only people to underestimate our Lord. As we will see this week, Jesus’ own disciples often did not understand or value his true nature. Their failings are recorded in Scripture to warn us lest we repeat them.

As you teach this week’s biblical truth, ask yourself and your class: What sins did you most recently commit? What do they say about your understanding of Jesus? How will you correct your theology and your life this week?

**Trust your present problems to God (6:45-52)**

In the episodes previous to our first text, we find our Lord sending his disciples into ministry (6:6-13) and feeding 5,000 families (6:30-44), with an interlude devoted to the courage and martyrdom of John the Baptist (6:14-29). Our text begins: “Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd” (6:45). As soon as the 5,000 families had been fed, Jesus “made” (enankasen, or compelled, forced) his disciples to get into a boat and cross the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida “while he dismissed the crowd.”

Mark’s Greek syntax makes it clear that Jesus forced his disciples to do this. Why would he make them go ahead while he dealt with the multitude? One option is that he knew the people would try to make him their political Messiah, and he did not want his disciples to become involved in their attempt. In John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000 we read, “After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (John 6:14-15).

The crowd’s messianic fervor may also help explain what came next: “After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray” (Mark 6:46). Perhaps Jesus retreated to his Father so he could reaffirm his calling to be a Suffering Servant or to keep the crowds from acting on their misguided faith. Once again we find our Lord in solitude with his Father, finding in such intimacy the guidance and strength he would need for what lay ahead.

Jesus continued such solitude through the rest of the day, so that “when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land” (6:47). The Sea of Galilee is only seven miles at its widest point, and so Jesus could see the disciples in their boat even though they were far from shore.

More specifically, “he saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them” (6:48a). “Straining” translates basanizomenous, or torturing, tormenting,
experiencing anguish. Their struggles continued for several hours: “About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake” (Mark 6:48b). “The fourth watch of the night” fell between 3 and 6 AM. Jesus had spent this time in communion with his Father while his disciples spent it in a strenuous battle with the elements.

Then Jesus “went out to them, walking on the lake.” We are familiar with such omnipotence, so that this miracle does not astound us as it should. Imagine that you were flying on an airplane caught in a terrifying storm when you looked out the window and saw your pastor flying alongside you, steadying the plane in the winds. Such an experience would be no less miraculous than this event.

Now we come to a troubling part of the story: “He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost” (6:48c-49a). Why would Jesus “pass by” his disciples in their storm? Such a description seems to indicate a lack of compassion out of keeping with Jesus’ character. A good solution is to translate the phrase as he was about to pass in view of them. Given the ferocity of the wind and waves, he could easily have walked around them without being seen, but chose instead to walk where they would be sure to see him.

Another option is that Mark intends us to see this event as a theophany, a revelation of God to humans similar to the experiences of Moses (Exodus 13:19-22) or Elijah (1 Kings 19:11). In both cases, the Lord “passed by” his servants to reassure them of his presence in difficult circumstances.

Whatever the explanation for Jesus’ action, his disciples’ response was disappointing: “when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost” (Mark 6:49a). “Ghost” translates phantasma, meaning apparition. One of the sailors’ superstitions of the day was that when a person was about to drown, the ghosts of those who had drowned at the same spot on the lake would appear to escort the person to the afterlife. In the disciples’ defense, they had never seen a person walking on stormy seas. I wonder whether we would be any less shocked than they were. However, they had witnessed firsthand Jesus’ miraculous powers on numerous occasions. And the extensive time Jesus had spent in teaching them was more than enough to have led them beyond the superstitions of their culture.

Even so, rather than call to Jesus in faith, they called out in fear: “They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid’” (6:49b-50). “It is I” translates ego eimi, literally I am. Jesus’ words were likely intended to remind these men of God’s most holy name (Exodus 3:14) and transcendent nature. “Don’t be afraid” is literally, stop being afraid. It is an imperative, a command from Jesus. Rather than sympathizing with their fear, Jesus rebuked them for it and called them to faith.
After speaking to them from the water, “then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed” (Mark 6:51). “Completely amazed” translates ἐπεισόδιον, ἀποκατάστασις (exceedingly, abundantly) existantū (astounded, to lose one’s mind, to be out of one’s senses). Mark explains their reaction: “for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened” (6:52). As they had not comprehended Jesus’ power in feeding the 5,000 families, so they still did not understand his power here.

“Their hearts were hardened” brings to mind the descriptions of Pharaoh’s “hardened heart” in Exodus. We read that “the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exod. 9:12), but we also read that Pharaoh’s heart “became hard” (Exod. 7:13, 22) and that he “hardened his heart” (Exod. 8:15, 32). Without entering into an extended discussion of sovereignty and freedom, I would suggest that these descriptions should be taken together. When we choose to turn from God, we force God to turn from us, and our sin drives us still further from him.

In the same way, the disciples’ lack of faith in Jesus’ omnipotence caused their hearts to be “hardened” and unresponsive to his Spirit or ministry. It has been noted that sin will always take us further than we wanted to go, keep us longer than we wanted to stay, and cost us more than we wanted to pay.

What storms are you fighting today? What oars are you pulling? What boat are you trusting? If you have not given your problem or pain fully to God’s power and grace, why not? Self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. God cannot do for us what we try to do for ourselves.

In what way do you need to trust the omnipotence of God today?

Remember the past provision of God (8:1-9)
Mark’s Gospel next tells the story of Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities (Mark 7:1-23, studied in lesson eight) and ministry to the daughter of Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30). He then healed a deaf and mute man in the Decapolis (7:31-37), further demonstrating his compassion for Gentiles as well as Jews.

As Jesus was ministering in the Decapolis (ten cities on the eastern side of the Jordan River, home to a large Gentile population), “during those days another large crowd gathered” (8:1a). The size of the crowd indicates both Jesus’ compassion for non-Jews and their interest in his message. Gentiles were typically as antagonistic to Jews as Jews were to them. For this Jewish rabbi to gain such a following was extremely unusual in their culture.
Jesus was concerned for their spiritual condition, but also for their physical needs: "Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat'" (Mark 8:1b-2). “Compassion” translates splanchnizomai, meaning to have pity or sympathy. Mark used the term to describe Jesus’ concern for the Jewish crowd he fed earlier (6:34); here he felt the same concern for these Gentiles.

The fact that the people had been with Jesus “three days” indicates the level of their interest in his teaching and ministry. People in his culture typically brought some food with them as they traveled the region, since they did not know how long they might be gone from home. After three days, however, their supplies were gone, and they had nothing left to eat.

Jesus knew that “if I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance” (8:3). His knowledge of their home towns is further indication of both his omniscience and his compassion. He knows our needs just as well as he knew theirs.

Once again we find the disciples incredulous: “His disciples answered, ‘But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?’” (8:4). “Remote” translates eremias, or desert, lonely place. Given the sizable population in the region, it would not have been difficult for the disciples to find bread for the crowd. The problem was likely that they were Jews in a Gentile area; they neither knew the region nor cared to ask its residents for help.

So Jesus turned once again to their resources as instruments of his omnipotence: “‘How many loaves do you have?’ Jesus asked. ‘Seven,’ they replied” (8:5). Among the twelve men, they had seven “loaves” of bread left after three days of travels. “Loaves” describes bread hard-baked into balls approximately the size of a man’s fist. One would scarcely be enough for a single person; seven could not begin to feed 4,000 families (8:9a).

Nonetheless, “he told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so” (8:6). “Given thanks” translates eucharistesas, from which we get the word eucharist. The word does not imply that this was a precursor to the Lord’s Supper, however; there was no wine present, and neither did Jesus teach here the symbolic significance of the elements.

Note the divine-human partnership: he blessed and broke the bread, and then his disciples distributed it. The miracle continued: “They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them” (8:7). “Gave thanks” translates
eulogesas, or praised, blessed, extolled. This is a different word than in verse 6, further indicating that the event was not intended to be an early Eucharist.

With this result: “The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over” (Mark 8:8). Try to envision this miracle as it unfolded. Jesus broke seven small loaves into pieces, which he gave to the disciples. As they broke them further or began to distribute them, the bread multiplied in their hands and before their eyes. No matter how much they gave out, there was bread to spare.

So much bread was left that the disciples “picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over” (8:8). “Basketfuls” translates spyridas, or hampers, large baskets. This is a different word for “baskets” than with the feeding of the 5,000, describing much larger baskets than were used with the earlier miracle. (The term describes the basket employed in lowering Paul over the Damascus wall; Acts 9:25.) These large baskets would not have been needed for the seven small lumps of bread with which the miracle began, but they were employed now to conserve the results of the miracle. To make sure we understand the scope of this event, Mark adds that “about four thousand men were present” (Mark 8:9a); adding their families, as many as 16,000 people or more were fed in this remarkable way.

Unfortunately, Jesus’ disciples still did not understand his previous miraculous feeding of the Jews. As a result, they were ill-prepared for this great event among the Gentiles. Because God does not change (Hebrews 13:8), anything God has done in the past God can still do in the present.

Where have you experienced God’s power personally? What sins has God forgiven? What help has God given? What miracles has God performed for you? What problems do you need to give to God’s omnipotence today?

Jesus taught us that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). If you’re not experiencing God’s power in your life, know that the problem is not God’s knowledge of your need but your obedience in trusting it to him.

**Give your future fears to the power of God (8:9-21)**

We have seen Jesus walk on stormy seas and feed hungry bodies. His present power and past provision are intended to encourage us to trust him with future fears. Our last passage begins: “And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha” (Mark 8:9b-10). Unlike the feeding of the 5,000 families, where Jesus sent away the disciples before dismissing the crowds (6:45), this time he kept his disciples with him as he “sent them away.” It is probable that these 4,000
families, composed largely of Gentiles, were less likely to force Messianic expectations on him and were thus less of a threat for his disciples.

When the crowds left, he got into a boat with his disciples and went to the area of Dalmanutha. Scholars have been unable to locate this specific city; Matthew’s version has them traveling to “the vicinity of Magadan” (Matt. 15:39), which also has not been located. If Magadan was another name for Magdala, a well-known town situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee (and hometown of Mary Magdalene), Jesus and his disciples were sailing west.

It is likely that Dalmanutha, wherever it was located, was in Galilee rather than the Decapolis, since “the Pharisees came and began to question Jesus” (Mark 8:11a). They would probably not have traveled to a Gentile area to do this. Once again we find the Pharisees challenging our Lord: “To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven” (8:11b). “Sign” translates semeion, or portent, indication, not Mark’s usual word for “miracle” (dynamis). “Heaven” was a typical synonym for God, employed by the devout so they would not have to speak the divine name. “Sign from heaven” could then be proof from God that Jesus was right with God and serving in God’s will.

Jesus’ response indicates his disappointment: “He sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it’” (8:12). “Sighed deeply” translates anastenaxas, or to groan deeply in spirit. Why would Jesus not give the Pharisees, a deeply religious sect in Judaism, the proof they sought? Because no such proof would convince those who refused to be convinced.

All relationships require a commitment that transcends the evidence and becomes self-validating. You could not prove that reading this commentary was worth your time until you read it. You could examine the evidence, checking my credentials and previous work, but you could not know for sure that this study was worthwhile before reading it. You cannot know that you’re ready to be married until you choose to be married. You cannot know that a job is right for you until you experience it. Once you take the step of faith that transcends evidence, your experience validates (or invalidates) your decision.

It is the same with relating to God: no proof can compel a commitment of faith. The Pharisees should examine the evidence; in this case, Jesus’ miracles and divine wisdom. God would even provide the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection, as Matthew’s version adds: “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah” (Matt. 16:4). The “sign of Jonah” was meant to describe Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, as in Matthew 12:39-40. Mark probably omitted this reference because he was writing for a Gentile audience that would not understand or appreciate it. But no evidence can compel commitment. We must choose to act on what God has revealed to us, taking a leap not into the dark but into the light.
The day will come when incontrovertible evidence is provided to every person. When Jesus returns, every knee will bow “in heaven and on earth and under the earth,” and every person will “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11; see Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11). By that time, however, it will be too late for unbelievers to make a free choice for Christ. C. S. Lewis was right: “When the author walks on the stage the play is over. . . . There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up.”¹ We should pray that people believe Jesus is Lord before it is proven that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees ended, Jesus “left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side” (Mark 8:13). With this episode, his public ministry in Galilee essentially ended. From this point forward, he would be pointing toward Jerusalem and his atoning sacrifice for us.

While on their way across the Sea of Galilee, “the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat” (8:14). Remember that they had collected seven large baskets of bread after the miraculous feeding of the 4,000 (8:8). The fact that they now had only a single loaf may indicate that they had given away the rest. “With them in the boat” may also suggest that this loaf had been stored in the boat before they left, further indicating that they gave away all that was left from the earlier miracle.

These men would not have been hungry after the recent feeding of the crowds; it is likely that they were worried about future needs, for they were not sure where Jesus would lead them next and what provisions they would find when they arrived. Jesus, ever the Master Teacher, seized on their concern to make a spiritual point: “‘Be careful,’ Jesus warned them. ‘Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod’” (8:15).

“Yeast” in the Bible and in first-century rabbinic literature was typically used to describe the evil character or nature of a person (see 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). The Pharisees had sought proof when they should have trusted in Jesus; Herod apparently had done the same, as he would later seek a miracle from Jesus (Luke 23:8). Such unbelief is “yeast,” a small amount that affects the entire loaf or life (see Gal. 5:9).

Yet again the disciples did not understand their Lord’s message: “They discussed this with one another and said, ‘It is because we have no bread’” (Mark 8:16). “They discussed this” indicates that they were trying to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words. And so, “aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?’” (8:17). The syntax communicates a sense of rebuke and indicates Jesus’ frustration with his disciples’ continued inability or unwillingness to grasp his meaning.
Jesus’ next question was even more pointed: “Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” (Mark 8:18a). It paraphrases Jeremiah 5:21, “Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear”; and Ezekiel 12:2, “Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.” For Jesus to liken his disciples to these sinful people was a significant rebuke.

Not only did they not understand Jesus’ promise of provision for their needs, they had forgotten the recent evidence he had provided them: “And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?’ ‘Twelve,’ they replied. ‘And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?’ They answered, ‘Seven’” (Mark 8:18b-20).

“And don’t you remember?” (Mark 8:18b) calls to mind the numerous reminders of God’s past provision reinforced throughout Exodus and Deuteronomy. Not only did they witness Jesus’ benevolence to the crowds, but they also gathered the baskets of leftover bread themselves. If Jesus would feed such great multitudes, could he not feed them? Jesus then brought his point home: “He said to them, ‘Do you still not understand?’” (8:21).

The good news was that Peter would shortly make the declaration of faith to which Jesus had been leading the disciples for so long: “You are the Christ” (8:29). The bad news was that Peter and his fellow followers would not grasp fully the implications of that affirmation until after Jesus’ resurrection.

These encounters are preserved in Scripture for our sake, lest the disciples’ spiritual ignorance become ours as well. Remember that Mark wrote his Gospel for a Roman audience; their culture emphasized actions over words and would have sought the same kind of miraculous proof that the Pharisees and disciples sought. This text is an apologetic for commitment based on relational faith, then and today.

Are you worried about “bread” for your future? If so, remember what God has done for you in the past and promises to do in the present. Claim God’s grace and expect God’s provision. And know that “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Where is this promise especially relevant to you today?

**Conclusion**

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) was one of the most remarkable missionaries in Christian history. Dedicated to ministry in China by his parents at his birth, he committed himself
to Chinese evangelism as a young man and eventually founded China Inland Mission (which continues today as Overseas Missionary Fellowship). The pressure of his work on behalf of his fellow missionaries and the Chinese people grew so great that Taylor fell into despondency.

A friend invited him to the south of England for rest. Walking there on the beach one day, he had a breakthrough: “There the Lord conquered my unbelief, and I surrendered myself to God for this service. I told him that all responsibility as to the issues and consequences must rest with him; that as his servant it was mine to obey and to follow him.” His ministry would lead hundreds of missionaries and thousands of Chinese people to follow Christ fully.

As you teach your class to remember God’s past provisions and then to trust God’s present provisions and future help, would you invite them to give God responsibility for their lives and needs? Would you make this commitment yourself? As you do, remember Hudson Taylor’s most famous statement: “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s provision.”

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