

Mark

Chapter Eight

Introduction

The disciples had eyes, but they didn't see; they had ears, but they didn't hear.

This was Jesus' diagnosis of their spiritual condition. Their eyes and ears were fine physically; it was in the realm of spiritual perception that they were having difficulty. They had *sight*, but not *insight*; they *heard*, but they didn't *heed*.

The best word to describe their spiritual condition is *dull*. They were spiritually dull disciples.

"Dull" is a Bible word. It is used in both the Old and the New Testaments to describe a regression from insight to ignorance, and from discernment to disregarding. Isaiah said,

Isaiah 6:10 "Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed."

This verse from Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament, in Matthew and Acts. In both of those quotes the Holy Spirit says,

"For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed..."¹

You can "grow dull"; you can become dull; you can regress as a disciple. You read something similar in Hebrews 5:11,

Hebrews 5:11 ... you have become dull of hearing.

¹Matthew 13:15 & Acts 28:27

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, you don't want to regress and become spiritually dull! You want to make progress and *overcome* spiritual dullness.

The spiritual dullness of the disciples and others in Mark Eight can help you determine how you can become spiritually dull and regress, *and* how you can overcome spiritual dullness and make progress.

#1 You Can Become Spiritually Dull And Regress In Your Discipleship (8:1-33)

There are five distinct episodes in these first thirty-three verses. In four of them, the disciples display their dullness to spiritual things. In the other episode, it is the Pharisees who are spiritually dull. Each episode warns you of a way in which you can become spiritually dull.

You can become spiritually dull by living under your circumstances:

Mark 8:1 In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them,

Mark 8:2 "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat.

Mark 8:3 "And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar."

Mark 8:4 Then His disciples answered Him, "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?"

Mark 8:5 He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven."

Mark 8:6 So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude.

Mark 8:7 They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them.

Mark 8:8 So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments.

Mark 8:9 Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away,

Mark 8:10 immediately got into the boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha.

Jesus had miraculously fed a Jewish crowd of 5,000 plus. Now He is in Gentile territory, teaching His disciples that the blessings of the kingdom of God are meant for Jews and Gentiles alike. A Gentile

crowd of 4,000 plus has been with Him for portions of three days without food. They are hungry...What do you think Jesus will do?

This is what we would call a no-brainer. It is so much like the previous feeding of the 5,000 that the disciples couldn't have missed the point. But they did! They were spiritually dull to what Jesus intended to do.

The only clue to their incredible dullness is their own statement, "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?" The stark, desert surroundings that they called "wilderness" overcame their faith in Jesus. They thought nothing could be done because of the adversity of their circumstances. They thought that nothing could be done under the circumstances.

"Under the circumstances" is a very descriptive phrase. When you begin to live *under* your circumstances, you become spiritually dull. You are to live *above* your circumstances! You have been raised with Jesus and are said to be already seated in heavenly places with Him. Spiritually speaking, you are above any and every circumstance that God sovereignly allows to come your way.

You can become spiritually dull by longing after signs:

Mark 8:11 Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him.

Mark 8:12 But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."

Jesus had just miraculously fed 4,000 plus people. He had earlier fed 5,000 plus people. He healed the sick; He cast out demons; He raised the dead. Signs and wonders followed His teaching...Yet the Pharisees ask Him to perform a sign for them, at their request. The Lord refused. He was not the one that needed testing; they needed testing! And they were failing God's test by failing to recognize that Jesus was their prophesied Messiah.

The Pharisees were not disciples, but many times disciples make this same mistake. They begin to long after signs. One way you do this is to look for immediate external manifestations of God's

power. Did everyone speak in tongues? Was anyone slain in the Spirit? Did anyone get saved? Did the preacher sweat and scream?

When you begin to long after signs, you actually become spiritually dull. You go from one exciting event to the next - but, in-between, you have difficulty living the Christian life. You fail to recognize the still, small voice of the internal witness of the Spirit. Don't long after signs; let them follow after you as you serve the Lord.

You can become spiritually dull by looking on the surface:

Jesus wants His disciples to learn an important spiritual principle. The events and encounters of their life can have a deeper, spiritual meaning if they'll only look below the surface. He's going to use everything they have just been through to show them how to look below the surface to discover spiritual lessons.

Mark 8:13 And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side.

Mark 8:14 Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat.

Mark 8:15 Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

Jesus had taught the multitudes for three days, then multiplied seven loaves of bread to feed them. After encountering the Pharisees, He wanted to warn His disciples about the corrupting influence and effect of the Pharisee's false teaching. He speaks to His disciples about leaven. *Leaven*, or yeast, makes bread rise. Bread was made both with leaven, and without leaven. According to Unger's Bible Dictionary, the bread Jesus miraculously multiplied was unleavened bread. Jesus is using the common distinction between unleavened and leavened bread to make a spiritual point. In the spiritual realm, *leaven* was universally understood by the Jews to be a symbol of spiritual corruption. Thus, leavened bread was seen as corrupt; unleavened bread was seen as pure. Jesus is comparing the influence and effect of His own teaching to that of the Pharisees. The bread of the Pharisees - their teaching - was leavened and corrupt. The bread of Jesus - His teaching - was unleavened and pure. Now you see the deeper, below-the-surface meaning of Jesus' reference to leaven.

The disciples were dull because they did not look below the surface:

Mark 8:16 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread."

Even though Jesus had provided seven large baskets of leftovers for them, they had forgotten to bring any food along with them. They thought He was warning them not to accept leavened bread from the Pharisees or the Herodians. Herodians, by the way, were Jews who were supportive of Herod's rule over Palestine. But you know that Jesus wasn't talking about bread at all! He was talking about the corrupting influence and effect of false teaching.

Mark 8:17 But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?"

Mark 8:18 "Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?"

Mark 8:19 "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, "Twelve."

Mark 8:20 "Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?" And they said, "Seven."

Mark 8:21 So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?"

The disciples did not discern the deeper lesson. By calling attention to their intact physical senses, Jesus put His finger on the real problem. They had no spiritual sense of what was going on below the surface. Just as there was bread leftover from the miracles, there was blessing leftover for them to discover, if they would only try to discern the deeper meaning.

I don't want to get too mystical, or suggest that every event or encounter of your life has a deeper, hidden, spiritual meaning. But many things that God allows in your life *do* have a deeper, secondary, below-the-surface spiritual lesson for you! Sometimes the lesson is corrective; sometimes it is instructive.

Look below the surface! Otherwise you become spiritually dull.

In the middle of the chapter Jesus heals a blind man, and He heals him in a most unusual way:

Mark 8:22 Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him.

Mark 8:23 So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything.

Mark 8:24 And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking."

Mark 8:25 Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.

Mark 8:26 Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town."

Jesus can touch you and heal you any way He wants! You can't put God in a box, or restrict Him to any particular method.

The interesting thing here is that this is a gradual healing - very unlike the other healings you read about in the gospels. If you consider it in its context it might make more sense to you. Jesus has just been telling His disciples they are growing more and more dull. They ought to be growing more and more discerning. To illustrate, He heals a man's blindness gradually. The disciples should have been more like this blind man: As they spent more and more time with Jesus, their spiritual eyes should have gradually been more and more opened! Instead, they were gradually getting duller and duller.

There's an interesting bit of humor in this healing. Jesus took the blind man out of town. Only His dull disciples were around when the man looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking." Those men he saw were the twelve disciples! They were alive and growing, like trees; but, also like trees, they were set in their ways, rooted down, rigid, thick-skinned.

Look below the surface; grow more and more discerning.

You can become spiritually dull by listening to speculation:

Mark 8:27 Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, "Who do men say that I am?"

Mark 8:28 So they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."

Mark 8:29 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ."

Mark 8:30 Then He strictly warned them that they should tell no one about Him.

This is Peter's great confession. Jesus is the Christ - the Anointed Messiah, promised and prophesied in the Old Testament. Anything less lessens the person and work of your Savior.

There was other speculation as to who Jesus was - John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets...Although each of these were great servants of the Lord, John the Baptist's own words were "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."²

I want to suggest to you that it is still possible for disciples to speculate about Jesus. You do it whenever you introduce unbiblical, secular methods and teachings into your walk with the Lord. Take, for example, the fairly recent influence of psychology on the Church. For about nineteen centuries,

"the nurture of the Scriptures, the wonder and power of prayer, fellowship with other believers...the obedience of self-denial, the longing to see our Lord, to hasten His return, and that joy inexpressible and glorious no matter the circumstances because we are His - all these...have been...cherished [by] every true believer across the generations."³

Today, however, words like "disease," "addiction," "victimization," "co-dependency," and "dysfunctional" fill our Christian vocabulary. Christians seek after "inner healing," "healing of memories"; they submit themselves to "regression therapy." While we are becoming experts at understanding these words, great words like "justification," and "sanctification" are seen as outdated.

Beloved, psychology is a form of speculation as to Who Jesus really is that reduces Him to Someone less than He really is! Speculation cause you to become spiritually dull. Don't do it; let Jesus be your sufficient Savior - as He has been for all those saints who have for centuries preceded you to glory.

You can become spiritually dull by loathing your suffering:

²Matthew 3:11

³Jim Owen, *Christian Psychology's War On God's Word*, p. 5-6.

Mark 8:31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Mark 8:32 He spoke this word openly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

Mark 8:33 But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Jesus begins for the first time to speak plainly to the disciples about His mission on the Cross. Peter, who had just uttered his tremendous confession, now takes Jesus aside to rebuke Him. Jesus' words, "Get behind me, Satan!" have troubled many Christians. Peter wasn't possessed by the devil; he may not even have been directly influenced by Satan at all. Jesus goes on to say, "...you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Jesus is telling Peter, and us, that there are only two kingdoms, only two ways of thinking, open to you. If you are not mindful of the things of God, you are by default mindful of the things of this world - where Satan rules.

Peter objected to the Lord's suffering. He had no concept of suffering in the will of God! He had no concept of the cross leading to the crown. So, even though he had just had a great spiritual discernment, he became spiritually dull by loathing suffering.

Suffering is an inevitable, unavoidable part of your Christian growth. To the degree you loathe suffering you will become spiritually dull to the lessons it holds for you.

We've seen some ways in which you can become spiritually dull. Now Jesus tells you how,

#2 You Can Overcome Spiritual Dullness And Progress In Your Discipleship (8:34-38)

The disciples, and other followers of Jesus, are called to a more radical discipleship. It has been said that all disciples are believers, but not all believers are disciples. I agree. Discipleship is a decision you make as a believer to leave your spiritual dullness behind.

These verses highlight several important elements of radical discipleship. They are things which are consistent with and characteristic of discipleship.

The first characteristic of discipleship is strong desire:

Mark 8:34 When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

Do you have a strong desire to follow Jesus? The word translated "desire" can also mean *to delight in, to love, and to be willing*.⁴ Take all the meanings together: Radical discipleship means you love the Lord, and you desire to follow Him, and you are willing to obey Him, and you delight in His will for you. All believers love Jesus, but some have little desire to follow Him into a deeper walk. Some believers love Jesus and desire to follow Him but are unwilling to obey in some area. Other believers love the Lord, desire to follow Him, are willing to obey - but their obedience is not a delight, it is a drudgery. Beloved, press on to your delight!

Denying self is another characteristic of discipleship:

"...Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself,

Denying self is different from self-denial. Self-denial has to do with particular areas of personal discipline...Denying self is an overall commitment to subordinate all of yourself to God's plan and will for your life. Self-denial requires discipline; denying yourself is required of disciples. If you deny yourself you will be able to practice self-denial.

Another phrase to describe denying self is "dying to self." Jesus spoke of dying to self in the context of the Cross. Deny yourself and take up your Cross. The Cross was an implement of execution. On it men were put to death. Because Jesus died on the Cross, you died there, too. The Cross enables you to put to death your self - your old self, your old nature, your sin nature.

⁴Strong's G2309

A sense of duty is characteristic of discipleship:

Mark 8:35 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

Mark 8:36 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

Mark 8:37 "Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Mark 8:38 "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Jesus says, "for My sake and the gospel's..." A disciple is a steward of the gospel and has a duty to perform. A sense of duty means you put a high priority on the things of God...

Jesus speaks of saving and losing your "life" and your "soul," using the same word each time. This can be confusing because we immediately think of either physical or eternal life. Jesus isn't talking about your physical life, and He isn't talking about your eternal life. He's not talking about death or eternal separation. He is talking about the quality of your spiritual life as a disciple, now and in eternity. "Life" is being used in the sense we sometimes use it when we say, "My *life* is great," or, "My *life* stinks." It is a description of the quality of our life.

If you want real quality of life, be a radical disciple. Lose yourself in following Jesus. If you try to find happiness in the world, you will lose the quality of life that could have been yours by following the Lord.

The world is awfully tempting, but it cannot fulfill you spiritually. If you gained the whole world, you would remain empty if you were not radically following the Lord. If you gave everything you owned, but refused to fully follow the Lord, you would remain empty. Besides, you are heading for heaven and should be looking forward to standing before the Lord's reward seat. Live now in light of that meeting, desiring to hear Jesus say to you, "Well done, My good and faithful servant."

Radical discipleship means you love the Lord, and you desire to follow Him, and you are willing to obey Him, and you delight in His will

for you. You do these things daily - by daily denying yourself, by daily dying to self, and by your daily sense of duty.

Conclusion

Believers can become spiritually dull and regress. But they can also overcome spiritual dullness and make progress.

It is a matter of discipleship. All disciples are believers, but not all believers are disciples.

Be a disciple!