

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 8:1-21

Topic

The Pharisees rudely demand a sign,
but Jesus says that no sign will be given to them

Title

"No Sign for You"

Introduction

It's called "situational awareness."

Jason Bourne has it. In *The Bourne Identity*, there's an early scene where he is sitting in a diner, trying to figure out who he is and why he has a bunch of passports, and a gun stashed in a safety deposit box, and a bank account number written on his leg. Bourne also notices that he is aware of things that other people don't really notice. For example:

- He can recite the license plates of all six cars in the parking lot.
- He knows the waitress is left handed.
- He knows the guy at the counter weighs 215 pounds.

Maybe *Mission: Impossible* is more your speed. After their mission failed, and most of his team was killed, Ethan Hunt recognizes that the folks in the cafe he is in are a second IMF team that was also present during his mission. He goes around the room, identifying each one.

By far the most fun film example of situational awareness is a scene in the first *Men in Black*. While looking for "the best of the best of the best," in the shooting simulator, everyone else is killing the monsters that pop-up. Not Will Smith, who shoots the cardboard cutout of an eight year old girl. He explains, "I saw little Tiffany. I'm thinking, y'know, eight-year-old girl, middle of the ghetto, bunch of monsters, this time of night with quantum physics books? She's about to start something. She's about eight years old, those books are WAY too advanced for her. If you ask me, I'd say she's up to something."

He was right. He possessed a situational awareness the other candidates did not.

Jesus possessed marvelous situational awareness. Not because He was God, and therefore omniscient. While He was on the earth, Jesus voluntarily set-aside the independent use of His deity in order to be submitted to His Father and walk as a Spirit-filled man.

Jesus did sometimes receive what we would call a word of knowledge that gave Him information He could not have known as a man - like knowing a woman had touched His garment, or knowing that a woman had been married five times and was currently living in sin with a man.

Other times, however, His awareness was more a matter of His own compassionate observation.

We see an example of this in the feeding of the four thousand, when He says, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. 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 8:2-3).

Among the many, many things our passage has to teach us, one is that Jesus wants **us** to grow in situational awareness - especially spiritually - in order to better serve Him and spread the Gospel.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Become More Aware Of The Situations Of Those Around You, and #2 Become More Aware Of The Situations That Surround You.

#1 Become More Aware Of The Situations Of Those Around You

(v1-10)

Since a lot of you are military, or law enforcement, or firefighters, or other emergency services, you probably have above average to excellent situational awareness. It may come naturally to you, and your training has enhanced it.

Good for you - but we are exploring *spiritual* situational awareness, as the prerequisite to serving others by the leading and empowering of God the Holy Spirit.

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

We mostly criticize the large crowds that followed Jesus for seeking Him only for what He might do for them in terms of miracles of healings and exorcisms.

This "multitude" was with Jesus "three days," and nothing miraculous was reported. Jesus hadn't even fed them, like He had a previous multitude.

It seems He was preaching to them, teaching them, and that they were more interested in the food of the Word of God than they were in their daily bread.

Now it was hungry-time.

Spiritual situational awareness starts with compassion. We talked a great deal about compassion when we studied the feeding of the five thousand. As a summary of that teaching, I'd say that the way to be more compassionate to others is to remember the Lord's compassion towards you.

No one, in a sense, was less deserving of the Lord's help than you were. That's true, of course, of all of us. While we were yet sinners, separated from God, enemies of God, Jesus went to the Cross, and He died for our sins.

It was John Bradford, in the 1500's, who used to say, anytime he saw prisoners being led to their execution, "but for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford." We've adapted it, saying, "but for the grace of God, there go I."

Jesus' compassion for us, when properly understood, translates into compassion for others.

It didn't take omniscience, or a word of knowledge, to realize that people who hadn't eaten in three days were hungry, and that they might have a difficult journey home without eating.

When is the last time I went three days without eating, only to walk twenty or forty miles? Never, that's when. At Disneyland it's nothing to rack-up ten or so miles, walking, in a day. *It's fueled by churros and Turkey legs and Dole pineapple whip.*

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

The disciples get slammed in the commentaries for being so dull. Didn't Jesus recently feed another, larger, multitude? Had they learned nothing?

The incredible reaction of the disciples has led some commentators to the erroneous conclusion that, for some reason, this is a bad retelling of the previous story.

It isn't. Mark goes out of his way to let you know this miracle is different:

- The number of people fed is different.

- The first miracle took place in Galilee, near Bethsaida. This miracle took place near Decapolis.
- In the first miracle, Jesus started with five loaves and two fish, while here He had seven loaves “and a few fish.”
- The 5000 had been with Him one day, but the 4000 had been with him three days.
- Twelve baskets of fragments were left over after the 5000 were fed, but only seven baskets after the 4000 were fed.
- There were even two different kinds of baskets used: for the 5000, small wicker lunch baskets; for the 4000, large hampers, big enough to hold a man.

Were the disciples really that dull, to so quickly dismiss and forget the feeding of the five thousand? Maybe.

I'm that dull. No matter how many scrapes the Lord gets me out of, I wonder if He can do it again when another trial comes along.

But there is something else to factor in regarding the disciples reaction to the four thousand. Everyone agrees that this crowd consisted of primarily Gentiles. Decapolis was in Israel, but mostly Gentiles lived there.

The disciples said, "how can one satisfy **these** people," meaning non-Jews. The mission of Jesus, as stated by Him, was to bring salvation to the Jews. When Jesus sent the disciples out, He specified that he was sending them to the lost sheep of Israel.

Jesus had made His "to the Jew first" mission clear to the Syro-Phoenecian woman who came seeking a miracle (Mark 7).

True, Jesus helped her in the end, delivering her daughter from a demon from a distance; but it would be quite a leap in the disciple's thinking to suppose Jesus would perform a large-scale miracle for a crowd of mostly Gentiles.

I think the disciples knew what Jesus *could* do, but didn't think He *would* do it, not at that time, not for "these people."

If we're wanting to grow in our awareness, and be used to serve the Gospel, we need to drop an us-versus-them mindset, and see everyone as a person the Lord can serve, and save.

Next, we must stop limiting the Lord by thinking that though He could do something, He won't.

Why would we think that? In some cases, our theology limits what the Lord can do. There are those, for example, who don't believe the Lord died for everyone. They limit His atoning work on the Cross. That kind of theology eventually hinders evangelism.

Check this out. This is the only time Jesus says of Himself that He has compassion, and it is on the Gentile multitude. Not just His elect nation, but upon whosoever was in that crowd.

We can also limit God by wanting Him to keep working in the same way, through the same ministries we are comfortable with. We want Him to fit into our plan, rather than discover His.

Let us instead have an excited anticipation that the Lord can and will do something wonderful. "Why not here?, Why not now?" ought to be our heart's cry. Our part is to observe and step-up to be used.

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

When Jesus fed the five thousand, the meager food was collected from the crowd. This time, the disciples had to use their own food.

Sooner or later in your walk with Jesus, and many times over the years, you will be challenged to dip into your own resources, to help others.

I think many Christians do not grow in spiritual awareness simply because, when faced with an opportunity to help in a practical way, by using their own money or resources, they refuse.

We don't solicit your money. What you give, or do not give, is between you and the Lord.

Since we don't solicit your money, I can say what I'm going to say next with a clear conscience, knowing it isn't some trick to try to coerce you to give.

We're talking about spiritual awareness. Look around you; what do you see? You see a building, with utilities and grounds to maintain, and furnishings. Beyond those material things you see staff, missionaries, mission opportunities, and ministries.

All of that gives you opportunities to give. Do you - give? It's between you and the Lord. But if you can come here and give nothing, or very little, you're definitely not situationally aware.

Mar 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.

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

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

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

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

Observing the need of the crowd, the disciples were asked to contribute, and the Lord multiplied their giving as He saw fit.

Whether it's just you giving out a blanket to one homeless person, or God multiplying it into a national blanket ministry, isn't up to you.

Ask the Lord to help you be more aware. Then be ready to act, even sacrificially, upon what He shows you.

#2 Become More Aware Of The Situations That Surround You

(v11-21)

What do I mean by that? I mean that Jesus puts each of us in situations that are for our learning and growth, but we can miss their impact by thinking materially rather than spiritually.

With all this talk about observing the plight of others, we can forget that God is still at work in us.

We are His work in progress, and that means the situations that surround us are designed, or at least utilized, by Him to chisel and hammer away, making us more like Jesus.

You'll see what I mean when we get to the disciples, but first we see the vicious verbal attack of some Pharisees.

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

We immediately think, "Guys, Jesus has been doing tons of things that prove He is the Messiah."

True; but they were demanding a "sign from Heaven." They wanted some kind of independent verification in the heavens; maybe the sun standing still, as it did for Joshua during the conquest of the Promised Land.

I guess they had forgotten God speaking from Heaven, at Jesus' baptism, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." That was pretty dramatic, and very direct.

Seeing isn't believing. John, in his Gospel, said that if all the things Jesus did were recorded in books, the world would not be big enough to house the library that would be required.

Signs do not produce faith. They only produce a craving for more signs. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom 10:17). How does your faith grow? Not by seeing miracles, but by studying the Word.

"Testing Him" means *tempting Him*. This was similar to the devil's tempting of Jesus in the wilderness, where He asked Him to put His miraculous power on display.

In essence, they were demanding that Jesus do a sign at their command. They were looking for a Messiah who would do their bidding, using His power in the ways they could control.

They were looking for a genie who would grant them their every wish.

Mar 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."

"No sign" means not the kind of sign that they were asking for. He had done plenty of things, and He would do more - including raising the dead and rising from the dead.

In fact, in Matthew's account of this same dispute, he records Jesus as saying, "except the sign of the prophet Jonah," referring to His future resurrection from the dead.

God's "sign" is Jesus - His life, death, and resurrection - just as it is recorded for us in the Bible. The human race doesn't need anything else. Indeed, there is no other way to be saved - no other name but that of Jesus. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

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

Have you heard of the Jesus Boat? It's an ancient fishing vessel from the first century AD, discovered in 1986 on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel.

The remains of the boat, 27 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, first appeared during a drought, when the waters of the Sea (which is actually a great fresh-water lake) receded.

There is no evidence connecting the boat to Jesus or His disciples. He did have a boat, undoubtedly just like that one, that was pressed into service as His water taxi.

You never know how the Lord can use your stuff to serve the Gospel. When I first got saved, one of the popular Christian financial advisers coined the term, "ministering currency." Anything you owned could become a currency that ministered the Gospel. Your car could - with a bumper sticker. Your clothes could - with Christian symbols on your tie, for example.

There's a fine line between witness and weird. You've seen cars, and vans, for example, covered in stickers. Probably overkill. But why not at least have something on your car, to use it to minister? I mean, the dealership has it's advertising on your car, so it must be effective.

I wonder if they gave that boat a name? Like today - a clever name, written on the stern? See if you can come up with an appropriate name - something better than the Jesus Boat.

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

It seems that the disciples had individual, assigned duties to perform in support of their itinerant ministry. We know, for sure, that Judas kept the money bag.

There must have been some confusion about who was supposed to buy the groceries that day, so they ended up on the boat with a single loaf. They would need to buy more bread.

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

Jesus was using their everyday situation, their need to buy bread, to teach them a valuable lesson. If there were such a thing, His disciples should avoid buying bread from the bakeries of the Pharisees or the Herodians.

Of course, there were no such bakeries; this was a totally spiritual lesson.

I'm not sure how much choice there was in breads in the first century. Today, it's crazy how many different loaves there are to choose from.

Jesus compared the teachings of the Pharisees and Herod to "leaven," which is yeast. We like yeast; but in the Bible, it is a symbol of sin, in that it works secretly to corrupt what starts out pure.

The idea was that they should desire the unleavened, or pure, teaching of the Word, not the Word *plus* the teachings of these others. Added teachings puff up the Word, corrupting it.

- The leaven of the Pharisees, by the way, could all be categorized as legalism. Legalism is the belief you can be right with God by your outward performance of rites and rituals, most of which were added to the Scriptures by the interpretation of rabbis, and which took precedence over the Scripture.
- Many scholars believe that the Herodians looked to Herod as a messiah, a savior of sorts who would put the Jewish land in favor with the Roman Empire and bring blessings to them. You might compare them with those who think that government, not God, is most important.

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

They knew there was something to grasp, some lesson, but they couldn't quite get to it. Epic fail to understand Jesus.

Mar 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?"

It wasn't about the bread. It never is. It's about what we can learn *in* or *from* the situation we find ourselves in. Jesus uses material things to teach spiritual lessons.

Their hearts were not "hardened" by sin, or by disobedience. "Hardened" here means things were not penetrating their hearts because they were thinking too much about material things, and not enough about spiritual things.

Living in a material world, they were material guys.

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

I think what Jesus was trying to communicate is that you must look beyond your immediate situation, knowing God is prepping you for eternity, and listen for the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. This spiritual perception is aided by "remembering" previous lessons.

Mar 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."

Mar 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."

If they had "remembered," they could not have come to the conclusion, not in a million years, that Jesus was talking about who they should, or should not, buy bread from.

He had multiplied five loaves, then seven loaves, and they had taken up leftovers. He could certainly multiply one loaf if necessary.

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

This can be read more like, "try to understand." Now that they knew He was talking spiritually, using figurative language, they should try to understand.

Anytime you're in a struggle, stop, and "try to understand" what is going on spiritually.

We're told, in Ephesians 2:6, that God has "raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..."

The Christian is depicted as already being seated in heavenly places with Jesus. We remain on this material earth, but our perspective, at all times, should be spiritual.

The apostle Paul also said,

Col 3:1 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Col 3:2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

The words in Ephesians depict us already in Heaven, spiritually speaking, looking over our situations from above. The words in Colossians show us on the earth, materially speaking, looking upward to receive wisdom and guidance from above.

We're going to seek the Lord, right now. Are you struggling in some situation? "Try to understand" it spiritually. What response is Jesus trying to elicit from you? How is He using it to conform you into His image?

If you're not struggling in some situation, then ask the Lord to enhance your spiritual awareness, so you can see what can be done in His power.

