

Watching Over the Heart

Mark 8:14-21

4/25/2021

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Let's turn then as we consider these elements and qualities of a disciple. And so this is one of those weeks where as I was in the throws of trying to get over sickness and care for my family and trying to recover from really challenging travel, I realized I wished that I had given just a few more verses to our team to include this morning. This morning, I'm going to include just a few verses before the primary text, which we're going to be looking at in Mark 8.

But this morning's quality of discipleship, we're moving out of dependent prayer, and now we're going to specifically be looking at the call to watch over the heart. Now, it is similar to what we've covered with regard to trusting and surrendering, but it actually deserves its own specification as a quality of a disciple because it is an ongoing action in the life of the believer who would follow Jesus in the walk of discipleship. So before we go any further, let's remind ourselves of what discipleship is. It is being a student of a teacher. But student not by way of didactic interaction, meaning where we learn some information and we translate that into head knowledge. Discipleship is actually learning the way that our teacher lives. It's not just what he says, but how he gives the example of it in his life.

But the beauty of being a disciple of Christ is we don't merely have one who is an exemplar of one who is faithful and true. We actually have one who meets us in the place where we are, regardless of where we are. Whether you are in a place where you reject Jesus as savior and as teacher, or if you claim Christ as your redeemer, where are you in regard to your discipleship? Where are you in regard to following Him and His ways? Jesus meets you there.

In this season of Easter, we continue to celebrate the resurrection appearances of Jesus to His disciples. If one was going to cook up the New Testament, you wouldn't include passages like what we're going to read this morning. Not just before Jesus's death and resurrection, but even afterward, they continued to demonstrate they didn't quite get what Jesus was about. But the beauty of it is Jesus, although He is an exemplar of what it is to be faithful, He meets us in our faithlessness. He meets us as people who are and who have a great capacity to be blind to His lordship at the fundamental seat of who we are as people. And that is our hearts. How, I want to ask you, are you and I, how are we watching over our hearts?

This morning, we look together in Mark 8. The text which will be before you shows verse 14. But if you have your Bibles, you can activate them. Same chapter. I'm going to begin reading in verse 11. And here, Jesus is having a confrontation with the Pharisees directly after one of His large miraculous feedings. And the Pharisees are now coming to Him asking Him for a sign. Then it'll bleed right into what our text is today.

Mark 8 verses 11 and following.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they began discussing with

one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" [ESV]

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Lord, in the quietness of this moment, we want to acknowledge to you that we bring our lives before you, but we do not do a good job of watching over our hearts. And often in the quietest moments in the recesses of our lives, we also fear to have you watch over our hearts. But this you have told us is a quality of following in your way. So help us to see Jesus, the one who watches over our heart, the one who turns towards us and loves us and invites us to Himself. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This morning as we consider watching over the heart, we're going to look at three elements. First, the question of authority. Secondly, the condition of the heart. Finally, the invitation to go deeper. The question of authority, the condition of the heart, and the invitation to go deeper.

I've done a ton of reading over the last couple of weeks, partly because of travel and just grateful for the things that the Lord is putting in my life. So I can't remember who said this because I've read too many people to remember. But it's not original to me. The quote is this. "It is extremely difficult to incarnate the truth." "It is extremely difficult to incarnate the truth." We can know it. We may even perceive it. But it is entirely another thing to actually live it out. Amen?

But this is what Jesus is calling His disciples to do. But what happens in these interactions are important for us to see the drama of what's happening because we have two sets of people. We have those who are the Pharisees, and we have the disciples. These are two radically different groups, both of whom find themselves in relationship to Jesus in very different ways, but it is instructive for us to understand how and in what ways both groups seriously question the authority of Jesus. I want you to see this with me as we consider, first, how the Pharisees question Jesus's authority.

The way in which they question His authority is this. The Pharisees reject Jesus's authority precisely because they ask Him to give a sign that He actually has authority. You see, they've been witnesses to Jesus's signs and His actions. They've heard of the miraculous feedings. But here in verse 11 of chapter 8 of Mark, what we hear are these words when they say to Him, "Okay. We want you to give a sign that indeed we believe that you have authority that you claim that you have. Show us this authority from heaven." And here, again, we see Jesus responding both in His body but also in His spirit. He deeply sighs. He has frustration. He's having a frustration, and I would say a righteous frustration, because the frustration is not the fact that they're asking for a sign, but because He sees what's behind the question. What's behind the question is not a sincere desire to see authority validated, but what's behind the question and desire for a sign is actually the motivation to trap Him. Because they would've been aware that they were operating under the category that the Pharisees would've understood which was the law. And one of the categories of the law, we hear in Deuteronomy 13.

In Deuteronomy 13:2-5, we hear these words.

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he

says, "Let us go after other gods which you have not known; let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or the dreamer of dreams shall be put to death because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, redeemed you, and out of the house of the land of slavery to make you leave the way of the Lord. [ESV]

You see, they had already accused Jesus of having power and authority that wasn't from God Himself but from Satan. So to ask Jesus under the guise that "we really just want to see you validate that you actually have authority" is just a trap because they want it to be served as a validation that they are right, and that Jesus is calling them to follow a false God. This is why Jesus deeply sighs. He's not surprised at all by their unbelief, but He's yet caught them in their false motives. Because really, they're just rejecting His authority.

On the flip side, we have the disciples. And before we get into the little bit of back and forth, and actually very funny drama that we find, there is also a question of Jesus's authority. But that authority is not quite as piercing as an open rejection or a confrontation. Rather, what we see in the hearts of the disciples is a dullness to the authority of Jesus, a blindness. This is far more frightening to me because the dullness and the blindness of the disciples to the authority of Jesus should not be so because it comes from a group of people who are not only external, or on the outside, watching Jesus perform these things. Rather, they have been on the inside actually benefitting from the work and authority of Jesus.

You see, they've actually been brought into the actual demonstration of the power of God because they have come to Jesus saying, "Hey, how are we going to feed all these people?" And He says, "Well, bring it to me." And in their hands, He multiplies the bread and the fish. You see, He actually turns their hands and their feet into servants of God and servants of Jesus to feed those who are hungry. They have not just benefitted. They've been deeply interwoven into the power of God. And yet, they're still blind and dull to the authority of Jesus.

And here is the issue. What is on display in the mighty power of Jesus is not His power. It's not how He can suddenly show up in the power of God and demonstrate the beauty that our God, though He might not be visible to our eyes, is able to do great and incredible things. But it is the fact that God has the authority to do what He wills how He wills when He wills. It is not about the power. It is about the authority that is behind the power. Because power is power. Power can bring self-acclimation. Power can bring, well, power where I can build myself up and have you and manipulate you to do what I want you to do, or blind you to what I want to blind you to. But if that is guided by an authority that is deeply embedded into the character, mercy, and grace, and love of God, then that power takes on a whole new light. It is about Jesus's authority.

Deep in the heart of the quality of a disciple is that when it calls us to watch over our hearts, the guiding question beyond whether you believe Jesus is who He says He is, beyond whether you're ready to ask for forgiveness of sins, something starts further in and further up. Who actually has the authority, you or God? This is what is at stake. It is the question of the authority of Jesus.

And this is a much deeper level of questioning of authority than perhaps we are actually comfortable with. It is certainly a lot more uncomfortable for the disciples if we're willing to look there. And the deeper level of this question is that the disciples are failing to recognize and accept that Jesus's

authority is present in and around them. And do they see in their hearts how dull and blind they are to it, and how they and the Pharisees are simply two sides of the same coin? We want our authority, not yours.

And this is much of the reality of the world in which we live. The world yearns for the power, the righteousness, the justice, the love of God and His kingdom, but we don't want God. We want His kingdom, but not His lordship. And how has much of the church in the west desired to want Jesus as savior, but not really expected much from His kingdom being made known? If we do not believe that the authority of Jesus is the authority of our very lives, up and in, deeper than motivations, deeper than desires, deeper than self-willed and self-dependence, then we might as well close up our books and go home and have a good nap and save ourselves a lot of money and a lot of effort. What do we really think of the authority of Jesus? And what authority are you allowing Him in your heart?

Well, let's go further in. Let's go to the condition of the heart. And here, what we find in the disciples, I believe, is actually something rather humorous. But what I love about the gospels and the narrative portions of scripture is it they actually call us in our imaginations for just a minute to imagine being in that drama of relationship. Because what we find ourselves in is not a classroom. We're finding we get to peer into a dialogue between people in real life.

David Brooks wrote in an article in the New York Times a few years back about the frustrations that he had when he was a professor of how hard it was to actually teach moral rectitude, moral norms, moral rights and wrongs in the setting of a classroom, and he wrote that he received an email from a veterinarian Dave Jolly. And Dave Jolly wrote these words to David Brooks. He says,

"The heart cannot be taught in a classroom intellectually, to students mechanically taking notes. Good wise hearts are obtained through lifetimes of diligent effort to dig deeply within and heal lifetimes of scars. You cannot teach it or email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one's own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it and not before."

In this drama which we're about to see, Jesus is asking the disciples, are you ready to go deeper? Are you really ready to look at the condition? Because here's what happens. They had forgotten to bring bread. Problem number one. What have they just done? They've just been a part of the miracle of Jesus feeding the 4,000, and it would've been more than that. They had leftovers, but somebody forgot to bring the baggy into the boat. And so Jesus, it seems, is not addressing first and foremost the fact that they lack bread. But He's continuing to teach them about something which He has seen demonstrated in the hearts of the Pharisees and Herod. And so He says to them, continuing to teach what He's just done by responding to the Pharisees, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod," which is watch out for the fact that you're questioning my authority because you're looking for a sign. If you're looking for a sign, you don't know that my authority is in your midst, because I'm with you.

That's what He's doing. But that's not where the hearts of the disciples are. So hearing Him say this, they then respond, "Hold up. Now we have a problem." And they begin discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. So here, Jesus is trying to continue to teach them about what He's just seen in the hearts of the Pharisees. They hear that as a critique of the fact that they forgot bread. And so now the kids are arguing in the back of the station wagon. Well, I don't know why dad's mad at me. He's mad at you. You forgot it at the gas station, not me. You know, somebody's just left the Coca-Cola on top of the car, and you've pulled away, and it's now spilled on the pavement behind. Dad's not turning the car around to go back and get a new one. And now you're arguing over who left it. No, he did it. I don't know. He did it.

That's what's happening. These are children defensively arguing over who's at fault. Because if they can establish who's at fault, they can establish who's in the right, and who is not needing to hear the challenging words of Jesus. Jesus, hearing the fact that they're not hearing Him, rightly says, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?" In essence, "Is that why you think I'm talking to you? I mean, really? I mean, really?" Imagine that, Jesus.

Now, I know we get frustrated if you're a parent. I know we might get frustrated with the fact that our children don't hear us. But this is the Son of God who has just put bread in the hands of His disciples, watched it multiply, and they be part of that work to feed 4,000 plus people. And now they're wondering, "I don't know what we're going to do because we left it at the rest stop behind. What are we going to do, Jesus?" Now, imagine how easy it would be to be frustrated.

But isn't this so human? This is why I'm so glad it's here. If you're going to pick a bunch of people to come and follow you and demonstrate the qualities of a disciple, why did you pick this crew? This is great hope for us, y'all, because I don't know how you think about your discipleship, but man, oh man. Grace be, mercy be. Because I don't know how hardheaded you get, but I know this is a hard noggin. How many times and in the same ways does God have to tell me, "Randy, would you just get out of the way?" And I've had that argument with the Lord I don't know how many times, and I'll tell you who wins. But I still end up at the same intersection in different parts of my life.

It's so profoundly human. This is the heart of discipleship. Hold up. You find yourself in the middle of a pandemic, and yet we profess that Jesus is Lord, and we wonder, does God have this? We wonder how is God going to provide? Will people come back to church? How will we look like the church afterward? What are we going to do, Lord? How have the arguments gone? How are we going to preach the gospel if we're going livestream? Maybe you've asked that question. Maybe you've asked that question of me. Why has pastor Lovelace encouraged us to stay home for these weeks? I get it. I didn't like it either. But guess what? I've gotten emails from people who have never set foot in the doors of this church, and yet they've heard the gospel go forth. And yet now we're back.

But here's the reality. The reality is the world is not waiting for us to come up with an answer of whether we believe Jesus to have authority or not, but we must live it out. Do we believe that Jesus has authority with us in our lives, in the crevices and details of our lives, to say, "Lord, I'm wondering where is the bread? And you tell me you're the bread of life." Let's have that conversation with the Lord because that is the conversation Jesus is having with His disciples.

You see, what He's saying to them is do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? It's not about a question of power. It's like, if I'm in your midst, if I am with you, who can be against you? If I and my spirit and my word have been revealed to you, who or what can separate you from my love? But the beauty of this drama is that we find at the intersection of our questioning Jesus's authority and Jesus demonstrating that we are dull to His authority, He actually loves us enough to ask us, why so dull? Why so hardened?

You see, I would suggest what's on order here is that the disciples are having to wrestle with something which you and I are wrestling with if we're really wrestling with the lordship of Jesus, which is am I going to be more about self-dependence? Or am I going to bring my self-dependence in confession that Jesus is Lord, and not me, of my life? That is profoundly human. That stretches across generations. It stretches across every nation, every culture. Who is having authority in this moment? My understanding, my wisdom, my ways, or His?

Fundamentally, what Jesus is demonstrating in this condition in asking the disciples to look at their hearts is the problem of our hearts is that we have disordered loves. We want to love ourselves, our

ways and our wisdom, until it doesn't work for us anymore, and then we turn to Jesus asking Him to help us wondering whether He actually will. When really, He's not as concerned about actually helping us. He just wants us to say we were never meant to depend on ourselves to begin with. That's the wrestling of discipleship.

Christian philosopher David Naugle says, "Problems don't arise because we need things or because we love things. Problems arise when we fail to grasp the nature of the objects that we need and that we love, and the expectations we have regarding the outcome of our love." The problem isn't that we need jobs, or we need for, or that we need significance and value and worth. The problem isn't that we desire love and forgiveness and mercy. The question is where are we turning to in order to find the answer to those questions? What gives me my value? What gives me my worth? What gives me my dignity? Is it my own achievement? What threatens it, my own failure? Do I define who I am, or do you define who I am? Who is the Lord of the heart? And yet the beauty of it is not that we need things or that we love things. The question is what do we love most? And what is the outcome of that love? Do our achievements actually give us the love we most want? Do our achievements really give us a dignity, value, and worth that is eternal and cannot be ripped from us in the space of a few months because of a pandemic?

No, it is Jesus who invites us to go deeper. And this is the third point. He invites us to go deeper to consider the fact that disordered loves lead to disordered lives. The dullness and hardness of the disciples' hearts are an example of the fact that they have not truly come to the place to wrestle with the question, are you actually the Lord of my heart? Do you have the authority? And so He invites them through this discussion, through these questions, to which He knows they know the answers, to go deeper.

And for this, I want us to come to this point. Are we really ready to go deeper? All of us individually, what do we really want from our Christian faith? What do we really want from a life of Christian profession? What do we really want from our Christian community, the church? What do we really want from our ministers and our elders and our deacons? What do we want from all of our Christian books and sermons and seminars and our Christian music? What do we want from all of this life?

Dallas Willard, in writing most of his life on the reality and the challenge of discipleship, said this, "We need more than a gospel of sin avoidance." If what we want or what we believe Christianity to be is merely a prescription for Christian version of sin avoidance or behavior modification, I just simply want to invite you to please sincerely ask yourself that question. If that's what we're really wanting, then I would suggest to you that we do need to just call the service to a close and just go home. Because that is not the gospel.

If what we want is merely a two-chapter gospel where the Bible only says to us that we're sinners who fall short of the glory of God, and I receive forgiveness through Jesus and am good, I would say we're selling the gospel short. Because what is on order here, what is on offer to the disciples is what is on offer to us as we hear this drama play out. The deeper invitation is to heart transformation, actually changed attitudes, actually changed habits, habits that go from where I'm trusting in self, and I'm bringing that, and I'm wrestling with Jesus in prayer and before His word, and I'm confessing, "Lord, I trust myself for my career and not you because I actually think if I get what I want, you're really just going to take it out from under me." "Jesus, what I really want is my children to obey me and to do well in school, go to college, and provide for themselves, and give me some grandkids."

We do want that, right? But if that's what we want, if that's what we want, we're going to come to a real solid conclusion that maybe, thanks be to God, neither one of those things is examples as what

Jesus wants only. Jesus, as one writer says, doesn't just save us. He heals us. He binds up our wounds. Jesus's first sermon was to bind up broken hearts and set captives free. We tend to see the gospel as, "Jesus died for my sins, and I ask Him into my life, and then I try to be a better and good person until I go to heaven." He's not telling the disciples, who are in the back of the wagon, going, "Hey, zip it up back there. Get your act together. Don't make me come back there." No. He is actually in the boat with them at this crucial moment. And He's looking at the pathetic reality of what it is to be human as our God who is both human and divine, and He's watching His disciples argue over who didn't bring the bread.

And in inviting them, though it sounds harsh, he's actually inviting them to stop their striving. "Stop striving for who you think is right, or who did or didn't bring it. Stop striving over who you think is going to provide it. I am with you. I am with you." Stop indulging the fact that you are without. Stop indulging in your brokenness. Stop indulging in the fact, "Well, I'm just a sinner, and I can't really change. It's your fault. You made me say that. You made me do this." No. Jesus wants them to see Him and His authority and what He has come to do.

And, friends, what He has come to do is to invite us. And so I finish with these two things I want you to consider as we leave today. First, I want to encourage you to identify the habits and attitudes of our hearts that shape our behavior. What attitudes, what habits are actually shaping your behavior today? And if that is too abstract, consider this question. How are you expending energy to build your own kingdom of peace and prosperity? How are you expending energy to protect and build your own kingdom of peace and prosperity? How do you respond when you are disrupted from building your own kingdom? That's a good place to find out what habits are inhabiting your heart. How do you respond when you feel your kingdom is being threatened, your peace is being disrupted? Those emotions are a great yellow flag, and sometimes a lot of red flags, to indicate where we need the authority and presence of Jesus. So identify habits and attitudes.

Secondly, anxiety and worry often reveal areas in our lives where we have trouble believing that God is sovereign and generous. Anxiety and worry often reveal the parts of our lives where we don't believe Jesus has authority to multiply our meager supplies. What are the things and situations that you tend to be most worried or defensive about? What parts of your character, what parts of your life do you not want people to see because you're worried that they will see you have failed to achieve? Where are you not believing the love and mercy of God in your life because you know deep down that you feel guilty because you haven't achieved what you thought you would? Those are the places to invite Jesus to actually wrestle with the question, do you have authority to bring transformation to that place, to this relationship, to this circumstance? And instead of merely wallowing in our brokenness or denying or rejecting the authority of Jesus, we can begin to pray, "God, you are good, and you have authority and sovereignty over this," fill in the blank, "part of my life. Now, Lord, I commit my concerns to you and pray for your healing."

Hear it is again. "God, you are good and sovereign and have authority over this part of my life. Now I bring this concern to you. Now bring healing in this place."

And as I suggest to you, I suggest to myself. We wrestle with the Lord in prayer and under His word. And I also understand our tendency and capacity to see something of Jesus, but also not be challenged by Him. Because if the disciples can be in Jesus's presence and yet not really understand the challenge and power of His authority, then so can I. I recognize that capacity. I hope that you can. And in so doing, I think it is all right for us to acknowledge in prayer and in His word and by His Spirit that when we're finally ready to wrestle, ready to go deeper to that place of our hearts where we don't believe Jesus has authority, I believe it is there that we will meet Jesus looking back at us face to face. And His word towards us is love, power, and authority. And as we wrestle, we can drink deeply of the gospel of change.

This, friends, is what we are called to do in watching over the heart. How is your heart? Let's pray.

Come, Lord Jesus, to that place where fear and self-dependence, worry, and anxiety propel us into further striving on the treadmill of life where we're arguing with others and arguing with ourselves, "Who didn't bring the bread? And are we going to have enough?" Lord, you know that place of wrestling in each one of our hearts. You know it, and your Spirit knows it. But thanks be to God that it is Jesus, who from the cross and the power of His resurrection, and by your Spirit looks to us, and you invite us to go deeper to that place to camp out with Jesus and His authority, and say, "Lord Jesus, transform this place." I know you can do this, Lord, and I know you do this. And you are good. And you are faithful. You are powerful. You are glorious. And your vision for us is so much greater than we could ever imagine or speak. Your vision for this church and your kingdom is so massive and so utterly beautiful that we cannot even strain to imagine. And yet you call us to the foot of the cross and the empty tomb with our mind's eye and our hearts ready to receive this is our God. Lord, what can you not do? Do this, we ask, even in the smallest details of our forgotten bread and our squabbling hearts. Do this, we ask. In Jesus's name. Amen.