

When Skepticism becomes Absurd

Mark 8:11-13

Halifax: 8 December 2019

Introduction

This morning we will continue our sermon series from Mark.

- You can turn to Mark 8. We will be looking at Mark 8:11-13 this morning.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen Jesus in Gentile territory.

- He was warmly received and ended up doing many miracles of mercy among them, including the feeding of 4000 people who spent three days with Him even though they had run out of food.

The simplicity of their faith was beautiful.

- By simplicity I do not mean that they were gullible or simple minded.
 - I mean rather that they accepted the obvious when Israel's Messiah came among them and did miracles.
 - They recognised that He was full of mercy and did all things well.
 - They saw the immense value of sitting at His feet and learning of Him, and soon found Him to be not only Israel's Saviour, but also their own Saviour.

Their warm believing response to Jesus stands in stark contrast to the way Jesus was treated in Galilee by His own covenant people.

- Yes, many of them had come to Him for healing, but far from saying that He had done all things well, they criticised Him and were disappointed with Him.
 - Instead of sitting at His feet to learn of Him, they wanted to direct Him.

In our reading today, we see what happens when Jesus crosses the lake and returns to Jewish territory.

- I will begin in verse 10, adding the word "Jesus" since He is the subject of the sentence from the previous verse...
 - Here is the word of God.
 - Please give careful attention—beginning in Mark 8:10:

Mark 8:10-13: [Jesus] immediately got into a boat with His disciples, and came to the region of Dalmanutha. ¹¹ Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. 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." ¹³ And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy word.

To this day, there have always been many skeptics about Jesus.

- They often appear to be cautious, wise people who just have a few questions that keep them from being able to believe.

Of course there is wisdom in skepticism when it is kept in its proper place.

- Nobody should believe every person who comes along and claims to be the Messiah, just as it would be foolish for you to believe every salesman who makes claims about their products, or every minister who claims to have instruction from heaven.
 - There is such a thing as healthy skepticism.

But skepticism can become absurd as well.

- It is absurd when it becomes a tool to avoid believing something you don't want to believe even though it is obviously true.
 - To use a silly example, if a chap wants the light to be green, but it is red and a transport truck is also speeding toward the intersection, the skeptic can begin to question if the red light and the truck are really there—it is *possible* that the light just looks red and the truck is just a mirage.
 - Even though there are many things that show that it is red and that the truck is coming, he decides that there is no way to be certain and proceeds on into the intersection because He just does not want to believe that that light is red—and there is always a possibility that it is not.
 - I am sure you would all agree that that is skepticism that has become absurd.

In the words I just read to you in Mark 8, we have an example of skepticism among the Pharisees about Jesus that had become absurd—because they did not want to believe.

I. Look at how Jesus exposes the absurdity of the skepticism of the Pharisees in our text.

- A. These Pharisees came out to Him upon His arrival in Galilee, asking Him for a sign from heaven (see verse 11).
 - 1. The request suggests that although Jesus had done many earthly signs, He had not done any signs from heaven...
 - Such as Moses did in causing the sky to darken or hail to come down...
 - Or to have the manna come down rather than just multiplying bread on earth.
 - And there was Joshua who made the sun stand still, and Elijah who called fire down from heaven.
 - 2. If Jesus really wanted to establish that He was sent by God, He needed to do a sign like that.
 - These Pharisees present themselves as wise and discerning men who would certainly believe if the evidence was there, but alas... there's just not enough.
 - How could they possibly believe if He only did earthly miracles....
 - They had not seen Him calming the storm at sea.
 - And of course there will all the problems like eating with tax collectors, eating with defiled hands, and healing on the Sabbath... and besides, wasn't He born in Nazareth? Everyone knew that the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem.
- B. Jesus exposes the absurdity of their skeptical request with a “why” question.
 - 1. “Why” questions are challenges.
 - They force you to account for why you have done something—in this case, why they have asked Him for a sign.
 - He says, in verse 12,
 - **“Why does this generation seek a sign?”**
 - 2. This question exposes how absurd it was for *this generation*—of all generations—to ask for a sign at this point in Jesus' ministry.

- *This generation* had the benefits of all the prophets of the Old Testament who had told of the coming of the Son of David.
 - Centuries before they had told how John would come to baptise, as a voice in the wilderness announcing the good news and calling for repentance because the kingdom was at hand... and that had happened.
 - Centuries before, they had been told of the time that the Messiah would come, and it was indeed at this time that they rightly expected Him.
 - Centuries before, they had been told of the miracles that He would do among them when He came.
 - Isaiah had said: Isa 35:5-6: **Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing.**
 - He had also said that the poor would have the gospel preached to them.
 - And it was before the eyes of this generation that Jesus had done an abundance of such miracles—so many that they could not be denied.
 - The Gentiles were certainly impressed—but the Jews of this generation—Jesus’ own people—of all generations—are *looking* for a sign.
 - Jesus said that if the mighty works He had done in Galilee had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:21) and Sodom would have never been destroyed.
3. Why would the generation that was privileged to have Jesus visit them and go about doing miracles among them be the one asking for a sign?
- How could they walk by all the signs He had done and come asking for a sign?
 - Was this not skepticism that had become absurd?
 - Instead of repenting, they were driving along as if there was no red light and no transport truck because the evidence they had was not enough and might have a different explanation.
- Their folly was to exaggerate a few uncertainties they had and to dismiss what was plain and obvious.
- Was this not skepticism that had become absurd?
- C. We could ask similar questions of our modern skeptics.
- They can seem so sophisticated in their skepticism, but in fact their skepticism is as absurd as that of the Pharisees in our text.
1. What about modern atheists and agnostics?
- It is absurd for them to claim that they do not have enough evidence to believe in the existence of God.
 - God’s eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen by the things that He has made...
 - The evidence of His existence is the whole creation.
 - It is absurd to have a world of such marvellous design and to latch on to the possibility that it might just possibly have generated itself!
 - It is always possible that the red light and the truck are a mirage.
 - You can spend the rest of your life trying to prove that self-creation is possible.

- More and more, modern atheists and agnostics are starting to latch onto to new theories—such as that aliens planted life here.
 - Well then, let's either worship the one who made the aliens or recognise that the alien in view is the eternal God who alone was able to create.
 - It's completely absurd to have a creation without a creator.
 - Things of such complex design do not form by themselves. That is completely obvious.
 - To question it because there might possibly be another explanation is more absurd than to run the red light... because there is a possibility that it just looked red.
2. And what about those who reject Christ today?
- It is absurd to reject the testimony that God has given concerning His Son.
 - a. God has made it clear to all people in this world, even those who have never heard of Christ, that we are sinners who need to be saved from our sin.
 - His wrath is revealed from heaven against our ungodliness and unrighteousness—
 - by the fact that we all die,
 - by our consciences that accuse us and testify that we are not right with God,
 - by the troubles He has sent into world (from famines to birth defects to devastating storms).
 - We even have the great flood, found in the ancient history of multiple nations from all over the world.
 - We don't need a Bible to know that we are sinners who need forgiveness from our God.
 - We need a new heart to accept it, but we don't more evidence!
 - Before we have ever seen a Bible, we should all be seeking the salvation that only Jesus can provide...
 - The problem is not with a lack of evidence, but with our refusal to accept what is clearly shown to us by God.
 - b. But God has also given to those who have had the privilege of exposure to it, the Bible—the Bible in which He testifies to our sin and our need of a saviour.
 - All the ceremonies of the Old Testament present people as those who are defiled by sin apart from the cleansing that God promises.
 - The prophets give plain declarations of how desperately wicked we are and that the imagination of our hearts is only evil continually—
 - They tell us that none are righteous, no not one... that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.
 - The cross of Christ itself testifies to our wickedness, showing that the Son of God had to atone for our sins.
 - Anyone with an honest conscience exposed to God's testimony about us in scripture would have to confess that we are sinners who need to be saved by God.
 - There is plenty of evidence leaving no legitimate excuse for skepticism.

- c. And then on top of all of that revelation to us about our sin that makes us in need of salvation from both nature and scripture, God has testified that Jesus Christ is the one who alone is able to save us from our sin.
 - He was promised of old through the prophets centuries before He came as the Son of Abraham and the Son of David.
 - And so He was, even though the house of David had fallen into decay when He came, which made the fulfillment all the more impressive.
 - He was also sent at the time appointed by the prophets.
 - All the Jews were looking for Him at the time He came because Daniel had specified the time of His coming.
 - As we saw already, He came as foretold with John as His forerunner, and He came and did signs and wonders among us.
 - But above all, He did what none expected but all could clearly see was prophesied after it was done—He went to cross to atone for our sin.
 - God bore witness that He accepted His sacrifice by raising Him from the dead with the promise of forgiveness to all who believe.
 - Over five hundred saw Him as raised from the dead.
 - This is all the more impressive because those who bore witness of Him received no worldly benefits, but rather were executed for testifying that He was the risen Lord (when they had no motive to testify to the point of death unless it was true).
 - And then He ascended to sit at God's right hand as the prophets foretold.
 - And even more remarkable, the prophets had foretold that people from the nations would come to God through Him after He ascended—and they did!
 - The prophets prophesied this when Israel was despised and going into captivity, and Jesus continued to prophesy this even when His own nation was delivering Him up to be crucified and when the nations had scarcely yet heard of Him and when His disciples were a weak and timid band.
- So you see that there is an abundance of evidence for anyone who wants it.
 - So much evidence that it is absurd to be skeptical
- 3. But let me stress that the most powerful thing about God's testimony is not all of the historical evidence (of which there is plenty),
 - but the story itself of what God's Son did to save sinners.
 - Anyone who is honest with what God has shown every person about our sin and of His wrath upon us, as soon as they hear the story of what God did in sending His Son to atone for our sins—
 - immediately recognises that here is the only true way of salvation.
 - Once the story is told, there is no way to miss that Christ is what we need.
 - Anyone who would reject Him as Saviour has to deny the obvious.

TRANS> So any skepticism in the face of the gospel of Christ becomes absurd skepticism. But what drives this skepticism? There must be something that drives it.

II. Absurd skepticism is driven by a deep desire to remain unconvinced.

- A. It is obvious that the Pharisees spoken of in our text did not *want* to believe.
1. You can tell this by their refusal to accept all the signs that Jesus had given them.
 - As already mentioned, when Jesus came, it was said that: **The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them (Matt 11:5).**
 2. But you can also tell that the Pharisees simply did not want to be convinced by their initial approach to Jesus, as described in Mark 8:11...
 - where it says that they “came out and began to dispute with Him.”
 - The word “come out” is used of coming out in military rank—coming after Him as it were.
 - And you see their purpose... it was not to learn from Him, but to dispute with Him—to challenge Him.
 - It goes on to say that in asking for a sign from heaven, they were **testing Him**.
 - This word *testing* does not speak of an objective evaluation, but refers to an effort to discredit Him.
- B. But why would anyone not want to be convinced that He is the Messiah if in fact He is the Messiah?
1. It is because nobody really wants to be reconciled to God.
 - They know that if they allow themselves to be convinced that Jesus really is the Messiah, it means that they will be obliged to be reconciled to God by Him.
 2. But why not? What is wrong with that?
 - What could be worse than to be under the wrath and curse of your Maker?
 - What could be worse than to be headed for eternity in hell?
 3. The problem is the same as ever—desperate rebellion.
 - We will not have God to rule over us!
 - We don't want to be reconciled to God by Jesus because it will mean that we have to submit to God forever.
 - That is the very reason the human race fell in the first place—because we determined that we did not want God to be our God.
 - And now that we see how He punishes us for our rejection of Him, we are even less motivated to come to Him.
 - Not that we would mind escaping His judgment, but we don't like Him for sentencing us to such severe punishment.
 - All we want, because of our wicked heart, is to be free of Him so that we can live as we please.
 - We are deeply committed to the rebellion that our first parents began.
 - The very idea of coming to God is offensive to us.
 - We are so twisted and corrupt that God Himself is offensive to us.
 - 4. That's the reason that not only the Pharisees, but also the priests and the Sadducees and the Herodians—as different as they were—were all bent on seeing Jesus crucified.

- He was offensive to them because the true God was offensive to them.
 - That is why they suppressed the truth and ignored the obvious.
 - That is why they were absurd with their skepticism—always coming up with more stupid reasons not to believe.
 - They wanted to go through that red light.
5. But it is not just the Jews who hate God.
- The Bible testifies that there is no one who seeks after God.
 - We are absurd skeptics despite all of the evidence that cannot be denied because we simply do not want a real Saviour to reconcile us to the real God.
- C. Each one of us needs a new birth.
1. We don't need more evidence.
- This is clear because those who *have* had the most evidence and most signs have been no better off when it comes to believing.
 - like Israel when they were delivered out of Egypt and like the Jews when Jesus came—they are no more convinced than those who do not have these benefits.
 - The testimony of God about Jesus in the scripture is just as useful as the signs that are done right in front of people's faces.
 - Those are deceived who say that they need more evidence.
2. What we need is to be delivered from our rebellion.
- We need the Spirit of God to invade us, to cleanse us with the washing of regeneration—that is, a new birth.
 - We need to have our obstinate, stony heart taken away and replaced with a heart that loves God and responds to Him.
 - We need our corruption cleansed so that we will see the true vileness of our sin—how wrong it was that we should ever have rebelled against our glorious God...
 - That we would see that our proper place—our blessed place—is under His dominion, cheerfully doing His will like Jesus did.
 - We need to see how wicked and how inexcusable it was for us to reject Him who is so holy, so loving, so merciful and kind, so pure, so lovely and gracious.
 - We need to see how right it was for Him to judge us and to sentence us to eternal punishment—
 - We need a new heart that only God's Spirit can give us.
3. And then, when the Spirit has washed us and renewed us, then we will come to our God for mercy!
- We will be amazed at the mercy of God in Christ—that He who was so wronged by us has come to be our Saviour, even when it meant that He had to become flesh (like us) and then be rejected for our sin.
 - No longer will we be looking for reasons not to believe.
 - No longer will we be absurd skeptics who are blind and unconvinced by the plainest evidence.
 - We will come delighting in the mercy of our God!

TRANS> Oh congregation, see that none of you are infected with skepticism.

- Do not let the leaven of skepticism water down your confidence in the plain truth about our Lord and Saviour.

III. Our text shows us that Jesus is very displeased with skepticism.

A. We are told in verse 12 that **He sighed deeply in His spirit** when He saw it.

1. The word *sigh* or *groan* is a rare word that is only used here in Mark and about thirty times in all the Greek literature we possess.

- It expresses what the observant Peter noticed in our Lord Jesus at this time.
 - It refers to a very deep groaning from within.
 - It does not refer to anger, but to dismay or despair.

2. It is the response of the loving heart of our Saviour who came to seek and to save what was lost.

- Matthew Henry comments: “He is deeply grieved for the hardness of their hearts and for the little influence that His preaching and miracles had upon them.”
- J.C. Ryle says: “He could not behold them hardening themselves without sorrow.”
- John Calvin says: “By these words Mark informs us that it occasioned grief and bitter vexation to our Lord, when he saw those ungrateful men obstinately resist God. And certainly all who are desirous to promote the glory of God, and who feel concern about the salvation of men, ought to have such feelings that nothing would inflict on their hearts a deeper wound than to see unbelievers purposely blocking up against themselves the way of believing, and employing all their ingenuity in obscuring by their clouds the brightness of the word and works of God. The words, ‘in his spirit’, appear to me to be added emphatically, to inform us that this groan proceeded from the deepest affection of his heart, and that no sophist might allege that Christ resorted to outward attitudes to express a grief which he did not inwardly feel; for that holy soul, which was guided by the zeal of the Spirit, must have been moved by deep sadness at the sight of such wicked obstinacy.”
- Indeed, when we see such skepticism, it is should break our hearts.
 - To what depths our race has fallen!
 - How we need regeneration by the Spirit of God!

B. Notice that Jesus not only groans within when they ask for a sign from heaven, but also flatly refuses their request.

1. He says: v. 12: **“Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.”**

- The translation here is actually a paraphrase because it is an idiom that would not make sense to the English reader unless it was explained...
 - Literally, Jesus says, “If shall be given to the generation a sign...” and breaks off.
 - It is the beginning of an oath formula with the idea that if I give this generation a sign, may I die.
 - It is a categorical rejection of their request... an absolute refusal.

2. He knows very well that no sign will satisfy them, for no sign has.

- As discussed already, they are committed to their skepticism.
 - If one demand is satisfied, they will have another, and if that one is satisfied, yet another.
 - You have met people like that...
 - I remember a chap who told me he had one great question that kept him from believing... I was able to answer it to his satisfaction.
 - But the next time I spoke to him, he had another. I answered it.
 - The next time, he was still not sure about things and on and on it went ad infinitum.
 - Spurgeon once said that if you answer a thousand questions of a skeptic, he will still have one more.
3. Jesus was too wise and too majestic to enter into their game.
- No sign such as they were demanding would be given to them.
 - Let them believe the sure testimony that He and the Father had already given them.
 - If they were honest men, they would believe.
 - If they wanted to be reconciled to God, they would have plenty of evidence about Jesus... the story of the gospel itself would be enough!

TRANS> So look at what Jesus does with these men.

C. He leaves them.

- A terrible thing!
1. You see it in verse 13: **And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side.**
- What a powerful statement.
 - Here He had come to show mercy in this place as He had done in so many other places, but they came demanding a sign from heaven in unbelief.
 - So He simply got back into the boat from which He had just emerged and went off to the other side.
2. He left these men to themselves.
- The most dreadful of all things is to be left to yourself...what do you then have?
 - They are left to their own misery, left in their own sin, left without the mercy of Christ and without the grace of Christ, left to die and go to hell.
 - What a terrible outcome for them.
 - Forever without a Saviour.
 - Left in the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched—with no Saviour.
 - What a terrible thing to have Him so near and yet to receive no benefit from this One who alone is able to save and who is so ready to save all that come to Him.
 - He who was there, ready to save, is now gone!
 - This is what they gained by their skepticism.

3. What will you gain by yours?
- Nothing more than they did—you will be left with yourself forever.
 - You will be left without deliverance, without mercy, forever.
 - Yes, you will never have to give yourself to your Creator and to have Him as your God.
 - You can go on in your defiance forever.

Conclusion: But I show you a much more excellent way than endless skepticism:

- **Isaiah 55:6-7: Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.**