

JESUS: THE SERVANT AT WORK

VOLUME TWO

STUDY TEN

Argumentative Pharisees . . . Dull Disciples

Mark 8:11–21

We walk along life's journey frequently encountering the hand of God, but it's easy to miss it. Easy to rush on past it. It's easy to say with overfamiliarity, "What I need today is another miracle."

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WE miss a velvet sky full of stars when we're staring at the ground. Perhaps we don't look up because we've seen it all before. When our minds are preoccupied, our eyes don't behold God's spectacular, star-studded tapestry, and the celestial wonders that reveal their Creator's fingerprints go unnoticed.

Similarly, we hear sermons every week, memorize passages of Scripture, and sing timeless truths, yet a haze of familiarity can cover our spiritual eyes. We sometimes fail to see the greatness of God's power, behold the beauty of His grace, and capture the wisdom of His truths.

Perhaps the same haze covered the disciples' eyes. They routinely witnessed Jesus doing the extraordinary. On one day, they saw Him give hearing to a deaf man. On another day, He helped a disabled man walk again. On one day, He fed more than five thousand people with a sackful of bread and fish; on another day, He fed a crowd of more than four thousand (Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–9). They witnessed the miracles again and again, but they missed the point. They saw but didn't see with understanding.

Experienced educators know that some students are just slow to learn. Because their minds wander, they *can't* comprehend what the teacher is saying. This was the disciples' problem. Then there are people who just *won't* hear. Their minds are made up. There's no convincing them otherwise, so they plug their ears and refuse to listen. That was the Pharisees' problem.

In the passage for this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, both types of learners appear—those who can't hear and those who won't. We'll see how Jesus addresses them and corrects them, and we'll let the Holy Spirit search our hearts for any hardness or dullness. The Spirit can help us marvel at the wonder of our Master and see Him for who He truly is.



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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you turn to the gospel of Mark, open your heart to see and understand the eternal truths that will bring true transformation to your life.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Mark 8 sits at the midpoint of Mark's sixteen-chapter gospel account and signals a significant transition. Up to this point, Jesus' popularity had grown steadily. Through His teaching and miracles, He was presenting Himself as the long-awaited Messiah. Many people flocked to see Him—some out of curiosity and some out of faith.

Jesus' closest followers believed in Him and loved Him, but they struggled to understand Him. Their infant faith was still forming. The Pharisees, on the other hand, rejected Him outright. They were jealous of His popularity and were determined to put Him to death (Mark 3:6).

In Mark 8, the tide of popularity that drew crowds began to turn against Jesus. In 8:11–21, the Pharisees stir up storm clouds while the disciples remain oblivious to the danger. Mark showcases both groups: *the argumentative Pharisees and the dull disciples*. Observe carefully how Jesus responds to each of them. He sees what's going on, and He tries to prepare the disciples for trouble brewing on the horizon.



Observation: The Pharisees and Jesus' Disciples

Begin your observation of [Mark 8:11–21](#) by reading it and paying close attention to the details.¹

Sense the Pharisees' not-so-subtle aggression and notice the disciples' cluelessness. Feel Jesus' emotions in His words to both groups. A lot is happening inside Jesus. Can you sense His inner turmoil?

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The Pharisees' Problem—Mark 8:11–13

Jesus and the disciples arrived at “the region of Dalmanutha” (Mark 8:10), which was likely along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Magdala. Find the general location on your Bible maps or on the map “[Ministry of Jesus](#)” at insight.org. According to Mark 8:11, why did the Pharisees approach Jesus?

They're there to argue. They're not there to learn and to believe. In fact, if you look at the last two words in that eleventh verse, they're there “to test.”
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees in 8:12–13? What emotions in Jesus did Mark convey?

The Disciples' Problem—Mark 8:14–21

Now picture the next scene: in Mark 8:13, Jesus and His disciples launched their boat. Perhaps, before they stepped into the boat, the Twelve had been munching on the bread from the seven baskets they gathered earlier (Mark 8:1–9). As they crossed the lake, what did Jesus warn them about?

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In Mark 8:16–21, what did the disciples argue about? In their hurry, maybe they left all that bread behind! Now what would they eat? Summarize Jesus' response. What question did Jesus ask in 8:21?

What's wrong? They forgot the bread! No, they really forgot that they had God in the boat! The Bread of Life who makes bread. They don't get it. Why? Overexposure. They'd been around the Miracle Worker for months.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Argumentative Pharisees and Dull Disciples

The Pharisees had rushed at Jesus like a herd of fiery-eyed bulls. Words like *argue*, *test*, and *demand* paint a picture of their aggression. Look up the Greek term *peirazo*, translated “test,” in the Greek dictionary at billmounce.com. Based on the meaning, what did the Pharisees want to do to Jesus? What do their intentions reveal about the condition of their hearts?

We noted that Jesus sighed deeply in His spirit when He heard the Pharisees in Mark 8:12–13. The Greek verb *anastenazo* conveys an agonizing groan. Look up [8:12–13](#) in the MSG translation. How would you explain Jesus' emotions toward the Pharisees' hard and unresponsive hearts? What feelings are communicated in that deep sigh?

They provoked Him. So, He's now angry, righteously angry.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Jesus warned His disciples against the yeast, or *leaven*, of the Pharisees in Mark 8:14–21. Explore the figurative meaning of *leaven* in the article “[Leaven](#)” in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* at biblegateway.com. Look up [8:11–21](#) in *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org. What does this term convey about the Pharisees? What danger was Jesus warning against? Explain the disciples’ basic problem in your own words.



Correlation: Different Reactions to Jesus

When God’s Son put on flesh and became a man, walked among men and women, preached about God’s kingdom, and went around performing great miracles, people exhibited a range of responses.

In the interview in [John 3:1–16](#), what was Nicodemus’ perception of Jesus and why? How would you contrast his perception with the Pharisees’ in [Mark 8:11–21](#), even though Nicodemus was also a Pharisee?

Nicodemus testified that he was open to this One who had presented Himself as Messiah. To Nicodemus, Jesus represented the hand of God—the person of God in human form. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Compare our passage with [Hebrews 5:11–14](#). What does the epistle to the Hebrews teach us about spiritual immaturity and exposure to God’s truths?

In many ways, the disciples were like spiritual babies, unable to eat the solid theological food of Jesus’ identity as God in the flesh. They needed to get their eyes off themselves and onto Jesus. They needed to mature.

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I'm haunted by the words, "Do you not remember?" Over the years or over the months, however long you've known Jesus, do you remember what He has done for you? Going through a test right now? Hey, that's when your memory gets short if you're not careful. I'm preaching to myself right now. I can be shortsighted. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Where Am I in This Scene?

Consider the question, "Where am I in this scene?" Invite the Holy Spirit to show you an area that might need your attention as you learn about the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples.

Pastor Chuck shares two applications for this passage. First, *steer clear of the spectacular*. The Pharisees demanded that Jesus prove Himself by putting on a miracle show. But Jesus wasn't a showman, and He didn't answer to the Pharisees. Second, *stay grateful for His grace*. Daily gratitude for Jesus' past blessings surely would have helped the disciples remember His power in their present trouble.

Which of these applications resonates most with you? Do you find yourself testing Jesus before you'll trust Him, or do you find yourself recalling His grace in your life and resting in His provision?

Perhaps you've been preoccupied with all the pressing problems in your life lately. It's so hard to see past them all! Pause for a moment as you conclude your Bible study. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in the boat with Jesus. Talk to Him about how much you long to cultivate a sensitive and teachable heart. How you long to be fully present no matter where you are. How you want to remember what He has done for you in the past. In the space below, share your heart with the Lord and receive His affirmation of your faith in Him as your Messiah, Savior, and King.

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One of the best ways is just remember. Remember the test He saw you through. Remember the healing from that illness. Remember: the same One who can provide plenty of food for thousands can provide you with a loaf of bread anytime He chooses. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You so much for Your grace. May I always remember all that You have done in my life! In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page "*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*" at insight.org.

For the 2026–2027 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2011, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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