

THREE MARKS OF MATURE CHRISTIAN FAITH

7 ³¹Then [Jesus] left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³²[There] they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment; they begged [Jesus] to lay his hand on him. ³³[Jesus] took him aside privately, apart from the crowd. He put his fingers into [the man's] ears, then he spit and touched [the man's] tongue. ³⁴Looking up to heaven, he sighed, and [then] said to him, Ephphatha, which means, Be opened. ³⁵[The man's] ears were opened and his tongue was loosened, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶[Jesus] commanded them not to tell anyone; but the more he commanded them, all the more did they speak of it. ³⁷[People] were overwhelmed with amazement, saying, He does all things well; he even makes the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.

8 During those days there was another large crowd, and they had nothing to eat. So he called his disciples to himself and said to them, ²I have compassion for these people, because they have stayed with me now for three days, and they have nothing to eat. ³If I send them away to their homes hungry, they will faint along the way; and some of them have come from a great distance. ⁴His disciples answered him, How shall anyone be able to fill these men with bread here in [this] desolate area? ⁵He asked them, How many loaves [of bread] do you have? They replied, Seven. ⁶He commanded the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks, he broke [them into pieces] and gave them to his disciples to set before [the people], and they did so. ⁷They [also] had a few small fish. He gave thanks for them, too, and instructed [his disciples] to distribute them. ⁸[The people] ate, and were filled. And they gathered up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ⁹Now they [who ate] were about four thousand. Then he sent them away.

¹⁰After this, he immediately got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. ¹¹[There] the Pharisees approached and began to question him. As a way of testing him, they requested him to perform a sign from heaven. ¹²He sighed deeply in his spirit and said, Why does this generation ask for a sign? I tell you the truth, No sign shall be given to this generation. ¹³Then he left them; and once again getting into the boat, he went to the other side [of the lake]. ¹⁴Now [the disciples] had forgotten to bring bread; they only had one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵Jesus warned them, Be careful. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. ¹⁶Then they argued among themselves, [Why is it that] we have no bread? ¹⁷Aware [of their arguing], [Jesus] asked them, Why are you arguing over the fact that you have no bread? Do you still fail to understand or comprehend? Is your heart hardened? ¹⁸Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves [into pieces] for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you gather up? They replied, Twelve. ²⁰And when [I broke] the seven [loaves] for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of broken pieces did you gather up? They replied, Seven. ²¹Then he asked them, Do you still not comprehend? (Mk. 7:31-8:21)

See the attached Appendix for the parallel passage of Matthew 15:29-16:12

Introduction

Mrs. Hokanson was a Christian lady who lived in Chicago; a Christian lady who lived by faith. She did not have very much, she was a widow and she was the sole supporter of her mentally retarded son; but she did have a very practical Christian faith.

As the years went by, Mrs. Hokanson grew feeble and declined in health; towards the end of her life she was confined to bed with chronic arthritis. People would come to visit her at her bedside and would inevitably ask, "How will you get along? What will become of your son, Arthur?"

She always gave a quiet and confident response, "The LORD will provide."

She could recall His past acts of faithfulness, and she was confident of His continued faithfulness to her and her dear son. She did not seek any special sign from heaven to assure her of the LORD's care, she had His Word and that was all she needed.

Indeed, as the years went by, Mrs. Hokanson grew more and more feeble and continued to decline in health; but all the while she was maturing in her Christian faith.

How about us? Are we maturing in our Christian faith? As we study the passage of Mark presently before us, let us consider Three Marks of Mature Christian Faith, the kind of faith the LORD desires for us to develop in our own lives.

I. Develop a Mature Christian Faith, by Appreciating Jesus' Past Works of Grace (Mk. 8:1-10,18b-20)

Suppose you were present with Jesus and His disciples in that desolate region on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. A great multitude of people (some four thousand strong) has gathered to hear the Lord Jesus and have continued with Him for three days. By now they have exhausted their food supplies, and there are not enough markets to re-supply this number of people out here in the rugged wilderness. Now they are beginning to disband and head for home. Jesus calls you and the rest of His disciples together and expresses His concern: If I send these people away in their present condition I am afraid that they will faint along the way from lack of nourishment.

Now Jesus asks you, "What should we do?" How do you reply?

Do you join the disciples in answering, "How can we satisfy all these starving people out here in the middle of the wilderness?" (vs. 4) Or do you say, "Lord Jesus, I remember the last time we were in this kind of situation. You provided for five thousand people, now I look to You with confidence that You will provide again."

Notice that the disciples find themselves in the same place they were in before: the desolate region on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Furthermore, they find themselves in the same situation as before: faced with a hungry multitude and a lack of sufficient resources to meet their need. Now Jesus does the same thing that He did before: by His divine grace and power He meets their need.

Here is one mark of mature Christian faith: Remember Jesus' past works of grace, and on the basis of Hebrews 13:8 (*"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,"*) be confident of His continuing ministry of grace. Let us imitate the example of David when he was about to face the giant Goliath,

*But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, ³⁵I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. ³⁷**Jehovah who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.**" (1 Sam. 17:34-37)*

Let us be careful not to imitate the example of Old Testament Israel as it is presented to us in Psalm 78:18-22,

*They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved. ¹⁹They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert? ²⁰When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly. But can he also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?" ²¹When Jehovah heard them, he was very angry; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, ²²**for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.** (Psl. 78:18-22)*

Let us make the testimony of the Apostle Paul our statement of faith:

... the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength ... And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will deliver me out of every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:17-18)

Let us heed the counsel of 1 Chronicles 16:11-14a,

*Look to Jehovah and his strength; seek his face always. ¹²Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced, ¹³O descendants of Israel his servant, you children of Jacob, his chosen ones. ¹⁴**He is Jehovah our God.** (1 Chron. 16:11-14a)*

II. Develop a Mature Christian Faith, by Resisting the Demand for Special Signs from Jesus (Mk. 8:11-15)

When Jesus and His disciples cross the sea and return to the western shore, Jesus is again confronted by the Pharisees. The Pharisees are described as questioning (or disputing) with Him. They are raising questions concerning Jesus' identity and His claim and the origin of His power. Furthermore, they are requesting a sign from heaven.

They were not satisfied with the divine credentials He consistently displayed before them; they wanted more. They demand *"a sign from heaven."* In other words, what they wanted to see was a cataclysmic act of God, such as the kind the Psalmist describes with regard to the LORD's provision for His people as they journeyed through the wilderness:

... [Jehovah] gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens; ²⁴he rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. (Psl. 78:23-24)

The Pharisees are demanding that Jesus prove His divine credentials by performing a miraculous sign from heaven, as was the case when the LORD answered Elijah's prayer as he stood against the four hundred prophets of Baal:

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, "O Jehovah, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷Answer me, O Jehovah, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Jehovah, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."³⁸Then the fire of Jehovah fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. (1 Kg. 18:36-38)

We are told that the Pharisees were testing Him. They were assuming the role of judge and demanding that the LORD produce the type of evidence they dictated before they would accept Him as the Messiah.

What is Jesus' response to such a demand? *"He sighed deeply in his spirit."* The unbelief and opposition of these "covenant" people—in contrast to the perceptive and persistent faith of the Canaanite woman as recorded in Matthew 15:22-28—produce grief and sorrow and indignation in His spirit.

Jesus asks the question, *"Why does this generation seek a sign?"* Why do they ask for more evidence when Christ has already supplied an abundance of evidence? Why do they seek a sign? The Lord Himself supplies the answer, They seek a sign because they are *"an evil and adulterous generation"* (Matt. 16:4.)

Jesus declares, *“No sign shall be given to this generation”* (Mk. 8:12.) Matthew (16:4) elaborates by reporting that our Lord informed the unbelieving Jews that no sign would be given to them *“except the sign of Jonah.”* This was a reference to our Lord’s resurrection on the third day:

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matt. 12:39-40)

The majesty of God demands that we accept His witness, not that He meet our demands. It is His divine prerogative to test us; it is not our prerogative to test Him.

Then, following this exchange with the Pharisees, Jesus *“left them”*—and did so dramatically by crossing to the far side of the Sea of Galilee. Unbelief and the demand that Christ submit to the conditions we set results in the withdrawal of His divine presence. He is Lord, and we must accept Him on His terms, not our terms.

Here is a second mark of mature Christian faith: Resist the demand for special signs from the Lord Jesus; be content to accept His all-sufficient Word and whatever acts of grace He deems fit to give you.

Some Christians seek signs to assure them of Christ’s continuing presence and blessing. One such example is that of a young wife named Ruth:

She and her family lived in Denver and enjoyed the majestic Colorado Rockies. One day in August of 1981, her husband and three of his friends went camping in those mountains; only two returned. A lightning storm took the lives of the other two—one of whom was Ruth’s husband. During the awful days that followed, rescue workers sought to locate and recover the bodies while Ruth’s mother sought to console her daughter. It was during this time that Ruth asked her mother, *“Where is my sign from God? I thought that He would let me know if J.R. is with Him.”* (*POWER*, 8/21/83; p.6)

This Christian woman sought a special sign from God on behalf of her Christian husband, not being content with the clear assurance and promise God gives in His Word concerning the fate of believers at the time of their death: *“We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord”* (2 Cor. 5:8.)

Some Christians seek special signs from God to guide their every movement and decision; rather than exercising confidence in the LORD’s constant watchful care: *“When you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’”* (Isa. 30:21.) Here is the assurance of the

LORD's watchful care and oversight and the promise that He will redirect His people when they are in danger of going astray or making a wrong choice—we have the assurance that He is “watching over our shoulder.” Such Christians seek for special guidance, instead of relying upon the guiding principles found in God's Word: *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path”* (Psl. 119:105.)

Some Christians seek special signs to satisfy their fascination for unique and extraordinary spiritual experiences. But such a pursuit is not a characteristic of mature Christian faith; it is rather a characteristic of unholy fascination with spiritual things:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. (Lk. 23:8)

III. Develop a Mature Christian Faith, by Looking to Jesus for Understanding (Mk. 8:14-21; Mk. 7:31-37)

When Jesus and His disciples arrive once again on the far eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, they discover to their dismay that they have forgotten to take bread—they only have one loaf for all of them.

Jesus says to them, *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.”* This warning causes the disciples to realize that they only have one loaf of bread and so they begin to argue among themselves as to who is responsible for the failure to bring sufficient bread (vs. 16.)

Aware of their arguing, Jesus rebukes them for their failure to perceive the spiritual dimension of His words—they confined their thinking only to physical bread and leaven. He also rebukes them for their failure to remember how He personally had met their needs on two previous occasions in this very place when they were perplexed as to how to obtain enough bread.

Jesus attributes the narrowness of their perception—the fact that they are only thinking about the temporal and physical dimension of life, and not taking into account the spiritual dimension—and their lack of understanding to a deficiency in their faith. Matthew 16:8 records that the Lord rebuked them with the words, *“You who have such little faith.”* Immature/deficient faith—the kind of faith that focuses on the temporal, the physical, the human, and discounts the spiritual and the divine—limits the scope and depth of our understanding; mature faith looks to Jesus for understanding.

Consider the significance of the miracle of the healing of the deaf and dumb man recorded in Mark 7:31-37. The fact that the miracle is performed in an elaborate way indicates that it has a special teaching significance; Jesus wants

His disciples to learn a spiritual truth from this miracle of physical healing and restoration. Who is the subject of this particular miracle? A man who was deaf and dumb; here was a man who had great difficulty understanding what was being communicated. By taking the man away from the crowd, putting His fingers into his ears, and issuing the command, "Be opened," Jesus is proclaiming, "I am the one who opens the ears; I am the one who gives understanding." Just as He had previously given this deaf man the ability to understand everyday human conversation, Jesus now gives His disciples spiritual understanding.

Here is the third mark of mature Christian faith: Recognizing that the Lord Jesus is the one who provides true understanding and looking to Him for understanding. Look to Jesus for enlightenment, for the ability to see beyond the temporal to the spiritual and the eternal. Look to Jesus to interpret the temporal dimension of life in light of the spiritual. Bear in mind the messianic prophecy referring to the Lord Jesus Christ: *"The Spirit of Jehovah will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Jehovah"* (Isa. 11:2)

Conclusion

To some people, Mrs. Hokanson with her confident testimony, "The LORD will provide," may appear to be nothing more than a simple and naïve old lady. But the fact is, Mrs. Hokanson was a woman who truly exhibited the marks of mature Christian faith: she could recall Christ's past acts of faithfulness, and she was confident of His continuing faithfulness; she did not seek any special sign from heaven to re-assure her of the LORD's care, she had His Word and that was all she needed; she had come to understand the spiritual dimension of life, and thus was confident that the LORD was in control and He would provide in His time and in His way.

Old Mrs. Hokanson eventually died, and in the immediate presence of Christ her faith advanced to the full level of maturity: a perfect confidence and resting in the LORD. Meanwhile, on this side of eternity her mature Christian faith also proved itself to be justified: the LORD did provide for her son, Arthur; and He did so in His own sovereign and mysterious way, a way that only mature Christian faith could appreciate:

... when friends and neighbors went home with Arthur after his mother's funeral, he proudly showed them his collection of stamps. Instead of tearing the stamps off the envelopes, he had kept the envelopes unopened, envelopes containing letters intended for his mother. Many of those envelopes contained substantial monetary gifts—enough to care for the boy for the rest of his life. (*Our Daily Bread*, 7/12/94)

Appendix: The Text of Matthew 15:29-16:12

15 ²⁹Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up into the hills and sat there. ³⁰And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, blind, dumb, crippled, and many others. They laid them down at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹The crowd was amazed when they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled restored, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel. ³²Then Jesus called his disciples to himself and said, I have compassion for the people, because they have stayed with me now for three days, and they have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they will faint along the way. ³³The disciples said to him, Where could we get enough loaves [of bread out here] in [this] desolate area to feed such a large crowd of people? ³⁴Jesus said to them, How many loaves do you have? They replied, Seven, and [also] a few small fish. ³⁵He commanded the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and after giving thanks, he broke [them into pieces] and gave [them] to the disciples, and the disciples [distributed them] among the crowd. ³⁷They all ate and were filled; and [the disciples] gathered up seven baskets full of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹Then he sent the crowds away, got into the boat, and went to the region of Magadan.

16 The Pharisees and Sadducees came and tested [Jesus], requesting him to show them a sign from heaven. ²But he responded to them by saying, When it is evening, you say, [It will be] fair weather [tomorrow], because the sky is red. ³And in the morning [you say, It will be] bad weather today, because the sky is red and overcast. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky; but you are unable to recognize the signs of the times. ⁴An evil and adulterous generation desires a sign; but no sign shall be given to it, except the sign of Jonah. Then he left them, and went away.

⁵The disciples arrived at the other side [of the lake], but forgot to take bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, Be careful and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. ⁷Then they argued among themselves, saying, [Why is it that we] took no bread? ⁸Being aware [of their arguing], Jesus said, You who have such little faith, why are you arguing among yourselves because you have no bread? ⁹Do you still not understand, nor remember the five loaves [distributed] among the five thousand, and how many baskets [of broken pieces] you gathered up? ¹⁰[Do you not remember] the seven loaves distributed among the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered up? ¹¹How is it that you do not understand that I was not speaking to you about bread? On the contrary, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. ¹²Then they understood that he was not warning them to beware of the leaven [used in making] bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matt. 15:29-16:12)