

Mark 8

by John Nelson Darby

The Lord's compassion and patience are contrasted with the hardness of heart and unbelief of the Pharisees and the disciples, highlighting the need for self-denial and taking up the cross to follow Him.

Scripture: Mark 8:1

Topics: "Divine Goodness", "Self-Denial and Suffering"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the divine goodness of the Lord as He provides for the hungry and demonstrates His power, contrasting the disciples' limited understanding with the people's unbelief. He highlights the importance of spiritual perception, as the disciples, despite witnessing miracles, fail to grasp the true nature of Jesus' mission and the necessity of the cross. The sermon illustrates the need for self-denial and the acceptance of suffering as part of following Christ, warning against the distractions of worldly desires. Darby concludes with a call to recognize the eternal value of the soul and the importance of standing firm in faith amidst a corrupt world, reminding believers of the glory that awaits those who are not ashamed of Christ.

Transcript

The Lord continues to manifest divine goodness. It is the chief thing to be noticed in this part of the Gospel. He had already given the hungry people to eat, a manifest sign of Jehovah's presence, as we have before remarked - a sign that should accompany His presence. Here it is more simply the divine power, without alluding to the kingdom which was to come. The number seven is the expression of perfection in spiritual things. The Lord's compassion makes Him think of the needs of the poor, whilst the disciples think only of human and visible means to satisfy themselves. This is the case only too often with real believers.

Then the Lord leaves the crowd, and goes into the parts of Dalmanutha. There the Pharisees ask for a sign from heaven, although they had already seen enough; but unbelief is never satisfied. But now the time of trial was passed, it was too late; the Lord leaves them. But observe the Lord's spirit towards the perverse generation; He sighed deeply in His spirit, saying, "Why doth this generation seek after a sign? There shall no sign be given to it." The end had come morally; it was useless to give proofs to hearts who had resolved not to believe. Perfect patience, love, deep pity, and sorrow in thinking of the unbelief of the leaders of the people were all there in Him, and manifested themselves all the more clearly as their hearts were hardened; and signs were useless for hearts who would not believe, and also it was not suited to

God's majesty to give any to men who would not receive Him. It would be casting pearls before swine.

268 Now we find that the disciples themselves were really blind, not wilfully, but in fact. The Lord warns the disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. The disciples had forgotten to take any bread, and alas! also the power of Jesus manifested in the miracles, by which He had fed thousands of people with a few loaves. The Lord reproves them, saying, "Perceive ye not, neither understand? Have ye your heart yet hardened?" They were, as it were, hardened at seeing so many miracles, and had understood nothing of Jesus' miracles in the multiplying of the loaves.

But the fact which follows shews the state of the disciples in contrast with the people. The latter did not see anything at all, and would not receive the light; the disciples saw indistinctly; they saw men as trees walking. They really loved the Lord, but Jewish habits prevented them from grasping fully His glory. They believed indeed that He was the Messiah, but the Messiah for their hearts was something else than the Christ of God, the Saviour of the world. They had attached themselves by grace to the person of the Lord, but they did not understand that divine glory which was, as it were, hid in that person, which revealed itself in His words and works. They had left all to follow the Lord; intelligence was wanting, not faith, however small it might be. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak, as we have already remarked. The Lord leads the blind man out of the city, separating him from Israel. First of all the man only sees partially: men seemed to him like trees walking. But the Lord's patience, as great as His power, gives a picture of the state of the disciples' heart, and also a picture of His untiring goodness, which does not leave the blind man until he sees clearly. Thus He did to the disciples, only here He does not speak of the means: when Jesus had ascended to heaven and had sat down at the right hand of God, He sent the Holy Ghost who led them into all truth. Then they saw clearly.

But the Lord forbids the blind man to enter into the town, or to tell it to anyone in the town, not only because He did not seek the vain glory of men, but also because He wished to avoid a large concourse of curious persons who were but an obstacle to His real work in consciences and hearts; and also because He wished to shew that the time of testimony in Israel was at an end. Rejected by the world, He commands the man who has been delivered from the power of the devils to return to his house, and there to proclaim that which God had done for him. The disciples would have done that - would have proclaimed His work - when Christ should have left this world; but here it was a question of Israel who had rejected the Lord, and God's testimony had no longer any place in their midst.

269 The Lord's discourse which follows touches upon this in the question which He asks His disciples, "Whom do men say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist; but some, Elias; and others one of the prophets": different opinions, but no faith. Then He asks them, "But whom say ye that I am?" Peter answers, "Thou art the Christ"; and the Lord forbids the disciples to tell it to any man, in the most positive manner. This is the clearest proof that the testimony in the midst of the people was entirely at an end. He was nevertheless the Christ, but He was rejected by the people, which shewed itself to be its own enemy in rejecting the wondrous grace of God. Now He begins to teach His disciples openly that He must suffer as Son of man: a much greater position and title, both as regards the extent of His power, and the greatness of the dominion which belonged to Him; for all things will be subjected to the sway of the Son of man. But in order that the Son of man might take His place in glory, He must first suffer, be put to death and rise again; it was necessary that redemption should be accomplished, and that man should enter into a new position, into an entirely new state, in which he had never been even when innocent. Christ's position as Messiah was now set aside for this time, and He enters into one greater where old things are left behind beyond death, and all that is founded upon Christ's work, upon His death - enters upon a state

altogether new and eternal.

Here the subject is treated more with regard to His sufferings; He puts the cross before the disciples, but He always speaks of death and resurrection. "And he spake that saying openly." This was a stumbling stone for Peter who did not wish that his Master should be despised in the eyes of the crowd; but the cross is the portion of those who wish to follow the Saviour. Peter in saying this placed a stumbling block on the disciples' path; the Lord thinks of this, and, turning about and looking upon His disciples, He reproves Peter, who had confessed Him but a moment ago, by the grace of God, and says to him, "Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou savourest not of the things that be of God, but of the things that be of men." We have here an important lesson, indeed, more than one lesson. First, the Christian needs to understand well that the way of salvation, the way which leads to glory and to heaven, the way in which Christ Himself walked, and in which He wishes us to follow Him, is a way in which we must deny ourselves, suffer, and conquer. Secondly, let us learn that a Christian can have true faith, and be taught of God, as in Peter's case here, without having the flesh in him judged so as to render him capable of walking in the way into which this truth brings him. It is important to remember this; sincerity may exist without knowing oneself. The new position of Christ, that of Son of man which embraced the heavenly glory of man in Him, and the supremacy over everything, rendered the cross absolutely necessary. But Peter's heart was not ready for the cross; when the Lord announces its practical effect, he cannot bear it.

270 How many hearts there are in this state! Sincere, no doubt; but they have not the spiritual courage to accept the consequences of the truth they believe. See the difference in Paul, made strong by the presence of the Holy Ghost and by faith. He says in the presence of death, "To know him [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and the communion of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death," Phil. 3:10. But there was in him the power of the Holy Ghost, and he bore always in his body the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus should manifest itself in his body. Happy man! always willing to suffer everything, rather than not follow fully the Lord Jesus, and to confess His name whatever the consequence might be; and, having walked faithfully, by grace to obtain at last the prize of his heavenly calling.

But the Lord does not conceal the consequence, nor does He wish to do so. He warns the crowd, and He warns us also that if we wish to be with Him, if we wish to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross. Let us receive the Lord's words: if we wish to be with Him for ever, we must follow Him, and if we follow Him, we shall find upon the road that which He found. Of course it is not a question of expiatory sufferings, of that which He suffered from God's hand for sin, but of His sufferings from man, the contradiction of sinners, the opposition of men, abuse and even death. We know but little what it is to suffer for the name of Jesus; but remember, Christians, that which the Lord says first, "Let him deny himself"; you can always do this by grace. It is by doing this that we learn to suffer with Him, if God should call us to it. And what shall we give in exchange for our soul? This leads us to a third lesson, which requires a little more development.

271 That which nourishes the flesh and self-love is the great system which is called the world. Man wishes to be something in his own eyes; he would like to forget God, and make himself happy, if possible, without Him. Thus Cain, when he was driven out from God's presence, after Abel's death, went away from before His face, judged in such a manner by God, that he could not hope to be admitted again into His presence to enjoy communion with Him; for God had made him to be a vagabond and a wanderer on the earth (a striking type of the Jews at this time, after having put to death the Lord Jesus, who had become, so to speak, their brother). But Cain was not willing to remain a poor vagabond; at all events he did not wish to

leave his family in such a state; he wished it to escape his own proper lot; and to this end he built a city in the land of Nod ("Nod" is the Hebrew word translated vagabond in the first instance); he desired that his family should be established in the country where God had made him a vagabond. He names the city after his son, as do the great people of this world. There is to be found the father (that is, the inventor) of music, the father of them that work in brass and iron; there the riches of this present age were heaped together, much cattle. This is the world!

Man's heart, alienated from God, tries to make the earth, where he was set at a distance from God, as pleasing to himself as possible; and, in order to accomplish this, he uses God's gifts and creatures to be able to do without Him. It is said that there is no harm in these things: - this is true, but this is not the question. They are good as being created things; it is said (as a figure) that there will be music in heaven also; but in heaven it will not be employed in order to divert the mind without God. It is a question of the use we make of these things. For instance, there is no harm in strength, but in the manner of employing it; with it one does harm to one's neighbour. Is it not true that the world which knows not God uses all kinds of pleasures to enjoy itself without Him? The heart which has not God in it endeavours to amuse itself, and for this it employs all the things which are seen, heard, and invented; as for instance, the theatre, music, and every kind of thing, because it is empty and sad and cannot satisfy itself; and after a few years, during which it has kept up its natural spirits, it finds itself tired and weary, even of trying everything, and says with Solomon after having essayed all, "All is vanity and vexation of spirit." God is neglected, and the soul lost.

272 For the Christian too, amusements only lead him away to a distance from God, and destroy his communion with Him. All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but of the world. The world and its lust pass away, but he that does the will of God abides for ever. The prince of this world is Satan, who seduced Eve with these things, having first of all destroyed her confidence in God; and it was with these things that he tried to seduce the Lord also, although, thank God, in vain. But with little trouble he succeeds but too often to seduce the hearts of men and of Christians; and to cause the pleasures of the world to have more power upon the soul than Christ Himself, than the love of a dying Saviour.

It was thus with poor Peter! It is true, he had not yet received the Holy Ghost, but this does not change the nature of his desires. He wished for this world's glory, and that under the appearance of love for the Lord. Notice here too the Lord's love for His disciples and how great is His tender care for them; He turns round and sees how great a stumbling-block Peter's words may be for the other disciples, and reproves him as severely as his words deserved. Then the Lord puts two principles before the disciples, first, the soul is worth more than everything, it is not to be exchanged for anything; secondly, the Lord is about to come in glory, and whosoever shall be ashamed of Him in this corrupt world where He is rejected, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when He shall come in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.

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