

If you want to measure temperature you use a thermometer. To measure distance use an odometer. Barometers measure barometric pressure. Tape measures, measuring cups, rain gauges, clocks, all these instruments are part of our daily lives and help us determine how hot it is, how big it is, how far it is, or what time it is. But how do you measure spiritual progress? There is no sancto-meter to measure sanctification. Do we measure spiritual growth by the number of verses memorized? Are we growing spiritually if we know how to find Obadiah in the OT? Is spirituality measured by the length of our prayers or the width of our Bibles? I do believe there are some ways to monitor our spiritual growth. That is why we are asking you to participate in a SPIRITUAL LIFE SURVEY...we really want to know if people are “growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ.”

This morning I want to take you to a passage that reveals some indicators Jesus used in the spiritual progress of His disciples. They are difficult to measure objectively but you will know subjectively if you are growing in these areas. In Mk. 6:30-52 we drop in on a coaching session Jesus is having in which He demonstrates three qualities that prove the progress of our faith.

I. Open eyes. As we grow in our faith we begin to see things differently...vv. 30-33. The disciples saw a crowd, a nuisance, an interruption in their schedule. But that’s not what Jesus saw. Jesus saw “sheep without a shepherd.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the crowd this way: They had “questions but no answers, distress but no relief, anguish of conscience but no deliverance, tears but no consolation, sin but no forgiveness.” Do you see anyone around you who fits that description? If not, then open your eyes.

To say that people were “like sheep without a shepherd” was not only a description of the condition of these people but an insult to the religious leaders of the day. There was no shortage of priests (they even had a platoon system), it’s just that they were not doing what they were called to do. Jesus cared little for how big the temple was, or the attendance or the size of the offerings, His concern was with the results of all this religious activity. Were people being fed? Were they being led? Were they being cared for? The people were as hungry spiritually as they were physically, maybe more so, and those entrusted to lead them seemed unconcerned. All they cared about was conformity to rules. The people’s souls were bound with religious red tape.

What do you see when you go to work? Or when you walk through the mall? Or when you drive on the expressway? Remember the little boy who went with his dad one Saturday morning to do some errands? When they got home the mom asked, “Did you boys have a good morning?” The little boy said, “Yes, it was great, we saw two jerks and an idiot.” The little boy was seeing life through the eyes of his father. The more Christ-like we become the more we see what Jesus sees.

II. The second measuring instrument is open hands...vv. 35-44. Jesus’ pattern among the people was to address two basic needs. First, he addressed their physical needs. When the disciples see that the people are hungry they want to send them away. Jesus says, “No, feed them.” But Jesus knows that “man does not live by bread alone” so He ministers to their physical needs without neglecting their spiritual needs...Mk. 1:14-15; 1:35. This pattern in Jesus’ life is described by

Don Stephens as, “the two hands of the Gospel.” As we grown in Christ-likeness we open our hands – one hand ministers to physical needs while the other offers spiritual food.

Notice that Jesus teaches the disciples to accept personal responsibility for meeting the needs of those around them. (God sometimes asks us to do things that seem contradictory. He told the disciples to take no food with them (6:8) but now he tells them to feed a large crowd.) Jesus requires His disciples to address the need, “YOU give them something to eat.” The miracle does not happen until the disciples obey and share what they already have.

We understand the objection of the disciples, “How can we possibly feed all these people?” The task is impossible and the cost is too great. The lesson is that we all have something to offer. If we will only offer up what we have it is enough. How many times have you seen a need and said, “Oh, I can’t do anything about that. My \$20 won’t do much to feed the hungry or get medicine to children with AIDS or support a pastor in India.” Jesus says, “Give what you have and I’ll worry about how far it goes.”

III. The third measurement for spiritual progress is open hearts. This may be the clearest indicator of all. How can I tell if my heart is open to what God wants to do? Two questions:

When you’re overwhelmed by the needs around you, do you get hysterical or historical?

1. Historically, the miraculous provision of food is an important theme in the Bible. Moses was commanded to feed a large army and he asked how. (Nu. 11:22). The bread and the fish parallel the manna and the quail Moses served up in the desert. The manna could not be saved for the next day. The food Jesus provides is collected. The people of Israel were not satisfied with Moses’ offering. Here, the people eat and are satisfied. (v. 42). Jesus is demonstrating that He is “the one greater than Moses.” Moses was a spokesman for God. Jesus was God. Jesus wants His disciples to know they are helpless without His divine aid. “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

2. Jesus walks on water...vv. 45-48a. What is the point of this trick? Is this some kind of David Blaine stunt? Remember, it was power over the waters that marked one of the greatest miracles in the history of Israel as Moses parted the sea.

3. But there is a strange phrase in the story, “He intended to pass them by.” (6:48). God promised for centuries that a Messiah would come to usher in the Kingdom, one greater than Moses and Elijah. God touched down on earth in OT times on two remarkable occasions for the purpose of communicating what He is like. One was in Ex. 33:19-34:7 when He appeared to Moses. He told Moses to hide in the cleft of the rock while His “glory” passed by. The other in 1 Ki. 19:11-12 when He appeared to Elijah in that “still small voice” at the mouth of the cave in which Elijah was hiding. The great prophet thought he was a total failure and God graciously appears to him and gives him his marching orders.

4. Even the words Jesus speaks as He gets close to them hearkens back to the days of Moses, “It is I.” (6:50). The words are literally, “Be encouraged, I AM.” The great I Am has come aboard.

When you feel overwhelmed, don't close your mind, open your heart...v. 52. What connection is there between these two stories? Like the disciples we are often blind to the presence of God and the needs of men. You never know when God is going to show up.

But what if God actually showed up? We would probably respond just like the disciples did with surprise and fear. It is interesting that the disciples seem more frightened by Jesus' presence than by His absence. But Jesus never gave up on the disciples and He won't give up on you. They may have been just as clueless as the Pharisees but they are not hostile like the Pharisees. In fact, Jesus gave them another chance to feed the multitudes in ch. 8.

We have the same problem they had – hardness of heart. (v. 52). Jesus may not appear this way any longer because the cross and the resurrection are the clearest revelation of who He is and what He wants from us but I know there are times when God shows up in some still small voice and we miss Him because of our hardness of heart. It is not just in the quiet times, the times of inspiring worship, but it is in the troubled times when the wind is howling and the waves are crashing and we strain desperately to go forward when God show up. That may be why Mark frames the story of the feeding of the 5,000 with the necessity of being alone with God (6:31-32 and 6:45-46). Jesus sets the example for His disciples that because there is no end to the line of those who need physical and spiritual help, prayer and solitude must be a priority. Even when we are drained physically and financially we still have what people need if we are connected to the Source.

There is a postscript to this story in Acts 3:1-10 – Peter and John, the same guys who were in that secluded place where 5,000 were fed. They had strained against the oars and were scared witless when Jesus strolled out to them on the water. They had “learned nothing from the incident of the loaves because their hearts were hard.” But in Acts 3 the same two guys, Peter and John, encounter a lame beggar asking for money. They confidently told him, “We don't have what you're looking for but we have what you need.” And he walks. No, he does better than walk. He goes, “walking and leaping and praising God...and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.” Somewhere between Mark 6 and Acts 3 God softened the hearts of these disciples and the world was changed because of them.