

“Do You Not Yet Understand?”

[Mark 8:14-21]

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“When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “**Twelve.**” And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “**Seven.**” Then he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?” ...Do *you* understand?

Why the emphasis on seven and twelve and why together in the same teaching? Did Jesus/Mark just pick these numbers out of thin air, without any consideration to relevance or meaning? Well, if you’ve at all been listening to my sermons over the last several engagements, you would trust by now that the Bible is so much more than shallow lessons and throw-away sentences. For as I implored and repeated for nearly 20 minutes last month when exegeting the Syro-Phoenician/Canaanite Woman, there are so many contextual layers at play in scripture, that if you were only to read the stories as words strung together for face value, then true meaning and enlightenment would ultimately escape you. And thus, it is our charge as people of this faith to study these texts, to unearth the historicity of these events and characters, and to encounter enjoyment... that’s right, I said it last time and I’ll say it again... enjoyment, along the way.

And such is the case with our passage this morning, where the fascinating contexts of symbology and numerology run wild. Now depending on your translation, the number seven is employed anywhere from 341-391 times in the Bible. And that’s not including 70, 77, or any such variation. Why so much? Well, even though our society has largely forgotten and abandoned its art, the reverence for numerology was supreme in antiquity and was especially useful to our Biblical authors when calling critical attention a certain point. Remember, this is how these people actually spoke, and indeed how they wrote. Symbols, numbers, metaphors, and poetry were all tricks of the trade when telling a story. So though perhaps unfamiliar to us, it was so very familiar to them and their audiences. And thus, Mark’s particular use of the number 7 would have immediately triggered a heightened state of awareness about Christ’s message to his disciples.

You see, 7 was so much more than the number that preceded 8 and that proceeded from 6. As Hippocrates famously stated, it was the number that maintained all things in existence and being. It was the number of the observable heavenly bodies visible to the naked eye (the sun, the moon, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn). It was the number of stars that burned brightest in Orion’s constellation – an infamous constellation mind you, as its belt was the celestial mapping of the three famous pyramids of Giza. It was the value of each lunar cycle’s duration, the number of Buddha’s first steps when he sought to measure the universe, and the integer of the geographical points of reference (north, south, east, west, up, down, and center). In ancient Egypt, seven symbolized the afterlife; in ancient Greece the god Apollo found seven to be sacred; in Mithraism there were seven rungs on the ladder to spiritual ascension; and throughout countless other civilizations seven was a universal number depicting wholeness, completion and regeneration. Do you understand?

In more modern times, Isaac Newton identified 7 colors on the rainbow (the ancient symbol of God's covenant with humanity). There are seven notes on the diatonic scale. Almost all mammals have exactly seven cervical vertebrae. ~7 is the pH balance for pure water. And in 1925, Mahatma Gandhi wrote about the Seven Blunders of the World which yield violence: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, religion without sacrifice and politics without principle. Do you understand?

And all of that would be just plain and pretty if it weren't also employed and understood by our Biblical authors... God created the world in 7 days, yes, that day of rest, the creation of the Sabbath, is crucial not to forget. There were seven pairs of animals in Noah's ark and seven years of work to complete Solomon's temple. There were seven special crops/produce for which Israel's land is praised: wheat, barley, grapes, pomegranates, figs, olives and dates (Deut. 8:8); and there were seven weeks of seven days between Passover and Shavuot. Yitro, perhaps the first real convert post the Sinai-covenant had seven different names and seven daughters. Zechariah (3:9) said there were seven eyes of God; Naaman the leper bathed seven times in the Jordan to be cleansed; and a boy was healed by Elisha's touch after sneezing for seven times. And no, I'm not making that one up (2 Kings 4:35). Do you understand?

Post Mark, but canonical, Revelation is littered with 7's – occurring 40 times in the book alone. Seven hills, seven heads, seven seals, seven jewels... there's even halves of seven that are important. In 12:6 a woman is shielded by God against a dragon for 1260 days, or 3 ½ years, symbolizing that her protection, unfortunately, is and will not be complete. In the Gospel of John there are seven signs/miracles of Jesus and seven "I am" speeches. And finally, our Bible opens with exactly seven words, in its original Hebrew that is. 7 words of wholeness and completion, and a total of 28 letters – obviously divisible by 7, yielding 4. Do you not yet understand?

In the same chapter, just verses before our text, Jesus and the disciples had finished miraculously feeding 4,000 people by dividing just 7 loaves of bread. And even after the multitude were filled, there were still seven baskets of scraps or crumbs leftover. So when the disciples get on the boat with only one loaf and thereby start worrying about how little they have and if it would be enough to go around, Jesus loses his cool. He demands, "do you have eyes, do you have ears?" *You were just with me when we fed 4,000 people with seven loaves. Are you really worrying that I won't be able to feed the 12 of you idiots?*

Ah, which brings us to our second important number for today: 12. Twelve appears 187 times in the Bible and naturally, it is not just the number for Christ's disciples. Speaking of which, many scholars agree that Christ likely had more than 12 disciples, and not all of them men, which makes sense when considering the presence of the Mary's throughout his ministry and particularly at his death and resurrection – but that's a separate sermon altogether. So have you ever wondered then why 12 became the magic number for his followers? Well, just like seven it had its roots firmly planted in sacred numerology and the ancient customs of the time.

Twelve, you see, is the product of Heaven and Earth as one, as Heaven is usually associated with the perfect number 3 and Earth with material number 4 (the basic elements, cardinal directions, etc.): 3 by 4=12 (and of course, 3+4=7). Twelve is also the recorded number of gates in Jerusalem, the number of the patriarchs/tribes of Judaism and the number of those specially

appointed to governmental offices in Old Testament literature (there were 5 specially appointed priests and 7 specially appointed kings; $5+7=12$). Thus, the number twelve is typically appropriated when thinking of Israel at large and its particular offices, assembly and foundations. Understand?

In the New Testament, after his birth, Jesus next appears in public at 12 years old; in Matthew it is understood that there are 12 legions of angels that symbolize the perfection of angelic powers. During the great tribulation in Revelation, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes are saved, and multiplied together: 144,000 (that's where that number comes from; Revelation 7). Furthermore, the bride of Christ is pictured with a crown of 12 stars (Rev. 12:1); New Jerusalem has 12 gates of pearls, its wall is 144 cubits high (the product of 12×12) and the city is 12,000 furlongs square.

Finally, and rather interestingly, the second verse of the Bible in Genesis 1:2, in its original language, has 12 words... you might remember that the first verse had exactly 7. Now, I'm not one of those Bible code junkies, nor do I believe the author of Genesis prophesied about our text from Mark in his construction of sentences and particular word choices. But just maybe this now-lost art of then-alive numerology was squarely in the mind of Jesus and/or Mark.

Mark writes, "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "**Twelve.**" And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "**Seven.**" Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" Even the Syro-Phoenician/Canaanite, that foreigner, that woman from my last sermon and just a chapter earlier understood about the broken pieces (remember: "yes, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the crumbs...") – unlike the disciples, she quickly understood the teachings of Jesus, his words, and that he was in fact both Lord and Messiah; the sacred 7 and 12: the whole, complete, regenerated [7] foundation and new assembly [12] of Israel. So yes, you bumbling disciples, this man who just fed 4,000 people before your very eyes, could easily feed the 12 of you. For with him all things were made possible.

But because they never understood this, Christ gives them a warning... he says, beware of the yeast (a symbol of that which grows and corrupts) of Herod and the Pharisees who themselves are symbols of the antiquated traditions that you are hard to hold onto. And stop concerning yourselves with the bread (spiritual food) that they offer in their obsolete rules -- who to talk to, how to eat, etc. For here, with me, there is something happening that is completely new: a necessary creation. A Kingdom of Heaven for the scraps of humanity, for those overlooked by the very rules and concerns which you fail to let go.

And thus, there before them in that boat stood their savior, their redeemer ready to set them free, the hallowed 7 from ages past, the remedy to their anachronous 12. But as it was throughout the entire Gospel of Mark, the Messianic Secret marched on and his own disciples remained oblivious to very man they claimed to follow. And so, here before Christ as his disciples today, will you do the same? Or will you choose to look underneath scripture? Will you investigate its contexts, seek its meanings, and want to know him and his words with greater clarity? Will you understand? Amen.