Given that Mark is written as a narrative, the best way to get a sense of what this gospel means to say is to look at how Mark has unfolded his story. As I tried to demonstrate last time, even the insights from source criticism and redaction criticism make the best sense when they are interwoven with a grasp of how Mark has fashioned his narrative. And to that extent, narrative criticism provides a valuable tool for identifying Mark’s aims. As Powell states, “For narrative criticism, the ‘meaning’ of Mark’s Gospel … is to be understood in terms of the effect that the story is expected to have on its readers.”

As valuable as this approach is, however, I think Powell is a bit too enthusiastic in touting the benefits of narrative criticism over against the fruits of redaction criticism and other historical-critical methods. In fact, while earlier historical critics did, as he reports, view the “meaning” of Mark in terms of “the historical events and persons whom his work describes,” those of us who still value historical criticism use it in tandem with narrative-critical observations. We acknowledge the need to identify the role Mark gives a feature within his narrative before thinking about how it reflects issues of the evangelist’s day.

Another way of saying this is that while Powell correctly turns our attention to “the effect that the story is expected to have on its readers,” the word “expected” implies that “readers” are not simply readers of any time or place, but the readers for whom Mark wrote. Because, as Powell points out, Mark expects the readers to identify closely with the disciples, the role he assigns them is meant to address the readers as people in a particular set of circumstances. And to understand what Mark means to say via his narrative, then, means to perceive how he addresses those circumstances, a task with which we are given special help by redaction criticism.

Last time we noted that, following a prologue that sets the stage for Jesus’ work and immediately after Jesus calls four fishermen to follow him, stand four stories of healing that paint a picture of how Jesus was received by the general populace, with a fifth standing at the end of chapter 3 that again has the crowds singing Jesus’ praise. Sandwiched between the fourth and fifth stories, however, are five narratives detailing the conflict that arose between Jesus and the religious authorities, culminating in a report that the Pharisees and the “Herodians” (as Mark calls them) were plotting how they might get rid of Jesus.

As Powell points out, Mark has established for the reader Jesus’ identity as the “Son of God,” but he has also set up the theme of secrecy that keeps anyone else from recognizing that identity. Closer to the surface, he has depicted Jesus as wildly popular with the masses, but despised by the religious and civil leaders, who have already begun plotting his death. Thus, early on Mark foreshadows Jesus’ ultimate fate; he’s a marked man from the outset.

Now with Jesus’ appointment of the twelve, Mark brings to the foreground one of his overriding questions: what does it mean to be Jesus’ disciple? The choosing of the twelve is key in this, because it is in this circle of the twelve that Jesus’ identity becomes clearest as he reveals to them things that are undisclosed to the masses.

That’s not to say that the larger group of Jesus’ followers play no significant role. In fact, just after Jesus appoints the twelve, stands a set of stories displaying Mark’s device of intercalation. Jesus’ family, having heard of his extraordinary popularity and thinking him mad, shows up where he is, surrounded by crowds, to escort him home. But Mark interrupts that scene to tell us about scribes who have arrived from Jerusalem, accusing Jesus of exorcising demons by the power of Beelzebub.
Jesus responds by accusing them of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Then Mark resumes his story about Jesus’ family, with the crowd reporting to him that his family is outside, waiting for him to meet them. Of course, as we’ve seen, Jesus answers that report with a question: “33 Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” -- Even if Jesus has become a persona non grata with the rulers and even his own family thinks him made, he is not bereft of family: all of those who follow him, seeking to do God’s will, are his brothers, sisters, and mothers. This constitutes a striking statement about the nature of discipleship: to be Jesus’ disciple is to be part of a people whose relationship to each other surpasses their relationship to anyone outside the group. Here we have the insider/outsider view of the world we have noted before and that will be part of what constitutes, for Mark, the definition of discipleship.

That is, in fact, the topic of the first 34 verses of chapter 4, where Jesus speaks only in parables. As you’ll recall, Mark’s introduces them with the report, “Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.” -- Note that Mark emphasizes the size of the crowd by Jesus’ use a boat as a stage to address them.

The first of the parables Jesus tells is of a sower whose seed fell on four different types of soil, with different outcomes. Before Jesus provides an explanation of this parable, he gives his programmatic statement about the function of his parables: “10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12 in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”

Notice that the twelve are not the sum-total of Jesus’ disciples. The text speaks of “those who were around him along with the twelve.” The twelve are not the core group of disciples in Mark, but simply disciples charged with a special task. Mark tells us that in choosing the twelve, “14 he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, 15 and to have authority to cast out demons.” The twelve have the special role of being sent out to extend Jesus’ activity, which they will do in chapter 6. But disciples exist before the twelve are chosen, so that in chapter 2 Mark narrates a dispute that arose when Jesus’ disciples were plucking heads of grain one Sabbath. The disciples form a large group of which the 12 are a subset.

Equally noteworthy, as we’ve seen before, is the distinction Jesus draws between this large body of disciples and those on the outside: to his followers are granted an understanding of the kingdom which is denied to those outside. Hearing Jesus’ teaching in the form of parables is not a benefit, but an obstruction meant to impede understanding, as Mark’s Jesus explains by quoting from Isaiah 6: “in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”

The distinction between those inside and those outside is not that those inside have greater acuity, but that those outside are kept from understanding. As you’ll recall, this description of the function of the parables has been injected into chapter 4 by Mark. And here is where paying attention to both redaction-criticism and narrative criticism bears fruit.

The interpolation of Jesus’ explanation between his parable and its explanation of it is another Markan intercalation. Jesus’ interpretation of his parable in terms of different responses to the gospel explains why not everyone responds with whole-hearted enthusiasm. But by preceding
that explanation with Jesus’ statement about the subversive nature of parables, Mark is also able to tell his readers that only disciples understand even why most reject the gospel message; outsiders have no sense that their rejection of the gospel is due to hard-heartedness, distractions or the devil; insiders are given to understand this. Thereby Mark provides one answer to what might have been a troubling question for his readers who, indications are, found themselves under persecution. Why have the majority of those to whom the gospel has been proclaimed rejected it?

And the succeeding parables expand on this notion of response to the message. Mark’s Jesus emphasizes that one’s response, even if others do not perceive it now, will eventually be evident to all: “21He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lamp stand? 22For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.” 23Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” Even if there are some things hidden now, they will eventually become visible. Those who hear should be aware that however “hidden” their response to the kingdom or its motivations might be, all will one day become evident.

Mark’s Jesus is equally adamant that one’s response is not simply fated. Even if he speaks of confusing those outside with parables, it is one’s responsibility to hear well: “24And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. 25For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” -- The type of soil one is – rocky, thorny, fertile – is dependent on one’s attentiveness to the gospel message.

If this is how the land lies, why do the wicked continue to thrive, even to the point of harming Jesus’ followers? Mark’s Jesus provides the answer in his next parable: “26He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” -- Again, this is intelligible in the situation of Mark’s audience: why not just wipe out the wicked, those who persecute Jesus’ followers? Jesus’ answer is that God will separate the wicked from the righteous only when the time is right. Until then, the distinction between the righteous and the wicked remains, on one level, unintelligible.

The final parable, the parable of the mustard seed, returns to the theme of planting seeds and the theme of what is currently hidden: “30He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The kingdom might not be impressive at present – just as those outside do not recognize Jesus’ true significance and do not understand his gospel message – but this insignificant kingdom will one day grow to a magnificent size.

This collection of parables concludes with a summary that recapitulates the distinction between insiders and outsiders that Jesus stated earlier: “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

These parables, then, define discipleship in terms of its privileges, perils and responsibilities. Disciples are those on the inside who have come to understand who Jesus is and what his gospel
is. But they also need to be careful how they hear, so that they do not forfeit their ground, like those who hear the message but fall away in time of persecution. They must not expect God to insulate them from those outside, the wicked, since God will allow the wicked to prosper and the kingdom to seem weak, until the appropriate time comes.

This collection concludes with a story that shows the disciples still working to grasp who Jesus is. Getting into a boat, they begin to cross the Sea when a storm arises and the boat takes on water. The frantic disciples waken Jesus, who lies asleep in the stern: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” -- Their amazement, especially as expressed in the question, “Who then is this,” registers their growing realization that Jesus’ identity exceeds their earlier estimation of him.

In fact, this is the first of a series of stories appearing between 4:35 and the first half of v. 6 of chapter 6 that display, on the one hand, people’s perceptions of who Jesus is and, on the other, the difference between faith in him and unbelief.

The second of those stories has Jesus encountering a demoniac who haunts the tombs of a district. He is possessed by so many demons that they call themselves “legion.” Jesus casts the demons into a herd of swine feeding nearby, after which they run over a cliff into the sea. Mark then reports, “The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.” -- Here recognition of Jesus’ powers leads the people to fear him, so much so that they demand that he leave their territory. Mark reports Jesus’ response when the former demoniac asks to go with him: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.” -- Again the report of what Jesus has done produces amazement.

The remainder of this chapter holds another Markan intercalation, this one beginning with the story of a synagogue official who begged Jesus to come heal his mortally ill daughter. On the way, a woman with a chronic hemorrhage steals up behind Jesus and touches the hem of his robe, which heals her. The peculiar element in this story, however, is how Jesus reacts: “Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

Understandably, the disciples judge this a rather inane question, under the circumstances: “And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

And yet, Jesus is undeterred: “He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Two things are significant here. First, the disciples show their incomplete comprehension of Jesus by their inability to fathom his statement that he had sensed power flowing out of him. In this Mark makes clear again that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye, even the eyes of his disciples.
Also significant is the way Jesus links the woman’s healing to her faith: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” -- The notion of faith as requisite for benefiting from Jesus’ powers will appear again in a moment, and plays out, once more, the distinction between insiders and outsiders: only those who believe in Jesus know his benefits.

At this point Mark resumes the story of the synagogue official. First, however, let’s consider why we should designate this a case of Markan intercalation rather than simply a narration of events that happened in this order. Aside from the fact that intercalations are common in Mark, there is a difference in the structure of these intertwined stories. That of the synagogue official is told in short sentences using what’s called the “historical present” in Greek (much as an English speaker might say, “First I go to John’s house, but he isn’t home”). The story of the woman with the chronic hemorrhage, on the other hand, uses complex sentences and the Greek equivalent of the past tense. These differences between the story of the woman and the one enshrouding it suggests that the two were composed separately and intertwined later, most likely by Mark.

The conclusion to the story of the synagogue official begins with news that the man’s daughter has died, prompting him to tell Jesus his services will not be needed. Jesus insists on continuing the journey, however, telling the official, “Do not fear, only believe.” Upon arriving, Jesus goes inside: “When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.”

The initial response to Jesus’ claim that “the child is not dead but sleeping” is laughter prompted by lack of belief that the girl would or could be anything but dead. Jesus expelled all but the father, the mother, and his disciples. Among these who have faith, Jesus raises the girl to life, and the result is as before: “At this they were overcome with amazement.” As in the case of the woman with the chronic hemorrhage, Jesus acts for a person who exhibits faith and the result is astonishment at Jesus. The two stories interplay with each other to emphasize this nexus between faith and Jesus’ amazing deeds.

But a striking contrast awaits us in the final pericope of this section, 6.1-6a, where Jesus visits his home town, accompanied by his disciples: “On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.”

This pericope begins auspiciously, with Jesus’ listeners “astounded” at him. But it soon becomes evident that this astonishment is not of the sort we’ve seen previously, for they quickly find reasons to dismiss him: they know where he came from, making it impossible to consider him extraordinary. And so, says Mark, “they took offense at him.” As before, failure to grasp Jesus’ significance funds opposition to him.

More intriguingly, Jesus is said to be “amazed at their unbelief.” This is the only time Mark reports Jesus is “amazed”; everywhere else those amazed are the crowds or the disciples. And the cause of Jesus’ amazement is unbelief. It’s as if lack of faith short-circuits what would
otherwise be a connection in which power and an amazed response from those who benefited would flourish. Lack of belief both constitutes and creates an anomaly.

In fact, according to Mark the refusal to believe had another affect on Jesus: “he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” This is one of those statements that apparently proved troubling for Matthew, since he changed Mark’s “he could do no deed of power” into “he did not do many mighty works there.” But in Mark, for whom the inability to recognize who Jesus is accounts for the animosity of outsiders, the limitation of Jesus’ powers to those who express faith explains why Jesus’ power is equally undetectable by them.

And so this section, from 4.35 to 6.6a, portrays Jesus’ deeds as prompting amazement and contemplation of his identity. But equally, it specifies faith as the prerequisite for understanding who he is and for benefiting from him. Those without faith can only reject him because they see nothing amazing.

It’s at this point that Jesus commissions and dispatches the twelve, and this becomes the occasion for contemplation of who Jesus is, as Herod weighs in on his identity: 14King Herod heard of it [the 12], for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” 15But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

Of course, Mark uses this as the occasion for telling the story of John’s imprisonment and execution by Herod. Prior to the report about Herod’s speculation (and the subjoined story of John’s fate) stands Jesus’ instructions to his disciples about their mission, and the report that they went out, following Jesus’ directions. After the report of Herod’s ruminations about Jesus, the twelve return, telling Jesus of their successes, after which he summons them to a private location for rest. I.e. we have here another Markan intercalation.

By encapsulating popular speculation and Herod’s reflections about Jesus within the story of the mission of the twelve, Mark creates an interlude in which such options are played out for the reader to contemplate, a central issue for discipleship. Of course, Mark has already let us readers in on the secret: he is the Messiah and the son of God. But those in the story are still in the dark, as the final verses of this chapter demonstrate.

Jesus’ attempt to take the disciples to a private place upon their return proves fruitless, for the crowds find them, and Jesus teaches them. Rather than sending them away at dinner time, Jesus multiplies five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed all 5,000 men, plus women and children. Mark makes no explicit comment about this event, but the scene continues the focus on Jesus’ acts, so that the implicit question remains who Jesus is.

Following the mass feeding, Jesus sends the disciples across the sea by boat, promising to join them after dismissing the crowds. And so he does, but by the unusual means of walking on the sea. Mark tells us that the disciples, upon seeing Jesus walking on the water, were terrified, taking him for a ghost. 50But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” 51Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”

Again we have a group astonished at something Jesus does, but their astonishment is tacitly criticized in Mark’s explanation of it: “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” -- If the discsiples had understood what the multiplication of the loaves and fish indicated about Jesus, they should not have been at all astonished at Jesus walking on the water.
An advantage we have here is that the Fourth Gospel carries a parallel story. John and the Synoptics don’t share many pericopes. And where they do have parallels, it appears John had his own source rather than taking the stories from the Synoptics. John’s parallel to this pericope can help us uncover some peculiar features in Mark’s use of it.

John’s story reads as follows: “16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” 21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.”

The extensive agreements in the way Mark and John narrate this story indicate they are working from the same tradition. Both set the story in the evening and both report that the sea was troubled by a wind, making sailing difficult. Both report that when the disciples saw Jesus, they were terrified. But the most striking parallel is in Jesus’ reassurance to them: “It is I; do not be afraid.” This last feature proves that Mark and John are working from the same tradition. And that makes their different endings to this scene significant.

John has Jesus getting into the boat, upon which the boat instantaneously arrives on the shore where it was heading. Mark, on the other hand, concludes the episode with Jesus stilling the wind and leaving the disciples astounded.

This is not the first time Mark has Jesus stilling a storm at sea. In chapter 4, vv. 35-41 we find this narrative: “35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Here again the disciples are at sea in a boat, in the midst of “a great windstorm.” This time, however, Jesus is already in the boat, though asleep in the stern, so that the disciples have to wake him. But once they do, Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea, so that “the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.” The impact of this on the disciples is awe and contemplation of who this could be. Both of these features show up in the story of Jesus’ walking on the water in chapter 6. Moreover, parallel to the disciple’s question about Jesus’ identity at the conclusion of chapter 4’s story, the story in chapter 6 concludes with Mark’s explanation of the disciples’ astonishment: “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”

Accordingly, there is good reason to conclude that John’s Gospel, with its conclusion about the boat reaching its destination when Jesus entered it, comes closer to the form of the story, which Mark modified based on his earlier pericope of Jesus calming the storm. And this conclusion is supported by the fact that Mark links the disciples’ lack of perception with their failure to understand about the loaves, an allusion to the story of the feeding of the 5,000 that immediately precedes this incident in Mark, but not in John. I.e. this indicates Mark has tailored this story to its immediate context.
This is strong confirmation we are correct to see Mark shaping his narrative so as to highlight the question of Jesus’ identity. Here he indicates that the disciples’ inability to grasp Jesus’ identity is due to their hard-heartedness, a phrase that connotes stubbornness and thus responsibility for not understanding. Recall Jesus’ warning in chapter 4, “Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” -- Consistent with that, Jesus asserts that the disciples have failed to comprehend his actions as they should, and thus find themselves frightened about something that should have simply evoked a response more like, “but of course he’s walking on water.”

Mark concludes this sequence with a report of what happened once the boat reached the other side, landing at the same place Jesus had cleansed the man with a legion of demons: “When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.”

Mark expands on this, using this as an opportunity to recapitulate Jesus’ popularity and success: “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” -- You’ll recall this motif of touching the fringe of his cloak from the story of the woman who approached Jesus from behind and was healed from chronic hemorrhaging by touching the hem of his garment. Mark uses that resonance to further this image of Jesus as a person whose healing powers virtually ooze from every pore.

This is one of the reasons I consider unlikely Nickle’s suggestion that Mark writes to counteract a tendency to associate Jesus with the sort of “divine man” known elsewhere in Hellenistic culture. Passages such as this and the story of the hemorrhaging woman would have, instead, encouraged that association rather than discouraged it.

Chapter 7 spotlights the themes of Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees, the disciples lack of comprehension, and Jesus’ works on behalf of the crowds. It opens with Pharisees questioning Jesus about why his disciples ate with impure hands, to which Jesus responds that the Pharisees, with their scrupulous care for the fine points of the Torah (as interpreted by their elders), violate its most fundamental demands, as evidenced by their denial of support to their elderly parents on the grounds that their money must go to support the temple – thereby violating the command to honor one’s father and mother. Turning to the crowds Jesus says, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

After the crowds disperse and Jesus is alone with his followers, they ask him to explain this aphorism, to which Jesus responds, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?”

Notice Jesus’ incredulity and even impatience, especially in his exasperated question that begins with, “Do you not see…”; he cannot believe the disciples didn’t get his point. But intriguingly, Mark sets the stage for Jesus’ words with the comment, “When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.” -- While Jesus’ original statement was more of an aphorism, Mark labels it a parable, thus classing it with the form of teaching he has already said that outsiders would not understand; only his disciples would be given insight. But his frustration with their inability to understand is part-and-parcel of Mark’s characterization of them as unable to draw the right conclusions without Jesus’ help.
And that topic will resurface after two healings Mark reports in vv. 24-37, where Jesus frees a woman’s daughter from demonic control and then gives a mute man the ability to speak. At the conclusion of those reports Mark summarizes the crowd’s reaction as follows: “They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Via the crowd’s accolades, Mark brings to our attention once more the image of Jesus as seen through the eyes of the general populace. They voice the amazement we have seen before, and they underscore it with the statement, “He has done everything well.” Consistent with ancient biographies, Mark uses this indirect way of pressing his image of Jesus into the reader’s mind, encouraging the reader to endorse the crowd’s view of Jesus.

What follows in the first 15 verses of chapter 8 is another incident of Jesus feeding a large crowd, followed by a challenge from the Pharisees. As you’ll recall, on the heels of that episode Jesus cautions his disciples, “Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” As you might remember, this statement befuddles the disciples, who conclude that Jesus must be reproaching them for forgetting to bring along bread.

When Jesus perceives what they’re discussing he reprimands them, saying, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? 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?”

Jesus’ frustration, implicit in the previous chapter, becomes explicit in his question, “Do you still not perceive or understand?” And notice that he again suggests that their lack of understanding is due to their hearts being hardened. But more significant is his pair of questions about having eyes but not seeing and having ears but not hearing, for these hearken back to Jesus’ words in chapter 4 about his message of the kingdom, which would be intelligible to his disciples, but obscured from those outside in parables “in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’” Those words, taken from Isaiah 6, are there applied to those outside Jesus’ group, but here are applied to his followers, clearly meant to goad them to grasp what they ought to by now.

Moreover, in Jesus’ mind (as Mark portrays it), their lack of understanding arises from not paying attention to what they have witnessed: “And do you not remember?” His prodding of them to remember how many leftovers survived the feeding of the crowds intends to spur recognition that supposing his statement about the “leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” must be about lack of bread is folly. The disciples should realize by now that if Jesus could supply a surplus of food for large crowds, he could easily take care of bread for his smaller group of followers.

And so, when Jesus concludes his pointed questions with, “Do you not yet understand?” the point is not simply, “Don’t you understand what I mean about the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” – the issue that led to this discussion – but, “Don’t you yet understand who I am?” The issue, as previously, is Jesus’ identity. And note the word “yet,” in Greek identical to the word “still” we noted earlier: Jesus anticipates that the disciples might be expected to understand who he is by this point, given what they have seen him do. As obscured as Jesus’ identity is from the general populace, it should be clear as day to his disciples.
As we have noted before, this pointed question about their perception of Jesus paves the way for the next section, which will deal squarely with the question of understanding Jesus. We’ll turn to that next session.