

THE GOSPEL OF MARK
Mark 6:1—8:26

By
Dr. James E. Potts

Just a little over a year had passed since Jesus first left Nazareth and traveled down the east side of the Jordan River to be baptized by John at Bethany beyond Jordan. Mark has taken us through this time rapidly. We have seen Jesus begin His ministry in Galilee and select His twelve disciples, and then move on to preach, teach, and heal the sick.

Out of all that happened during that year, Mark has described for us the healing of the man with an unclean spirit in the Capernaum synagogue, the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law of fever, and the healing of the man sick with palsy. We have watched as Jesus defied the Pharisees in the synagogue and healed the man with a withered hand, as He stopped the storm on the Sea of Galilee with His word, and in the country of the Gadarenes as He commanded the demons to leave the man.

Through Mark's eyes we followed Jesus as He healed the hemorrhaging woman who had gathered up nerve enough to reach out and touch the hem of His robe on a crowded street while He was on His way to give life back to Jairus' daughter. Then, Mark tells us again and again that He healed many people who crowded around Him and pleaded for His help.

At this stage of His ministry Jesus was eagerly received wherever He went. So now, as He headed back to His hometown of Nazareth, for the first time since He had left, Jesus had every reason to believe He would be received joyfully (6:1-6).

But such was not the case. First, we read that Jesus' friends and relatives were amazed at His teaching, and then they were offended by Him (6:1-3). They saw Jesus as a carpenter, a working man turned rabbi, and they rejected anything He had to say. Jesus was too ordinary to be the Messiah, and no person seems more ordinary than when he returns to his boyhood home. They saw Him only as "the Son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joseph, and Judah, and Simon."

Their rejection of Him was so complete that He could do no mighty work there, so, He left. From this point on we see a dramatic change in His approach. It was the custom of traveling rabbis to visit and teach in the synagogues wherever they went. But because of the bitter conflict that had come with all visits up to this time, Jesus dis-

continued the practice. Instead, He now began ministering to people on hillsides, along the seashore, or from fishing boats.

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth convinced Him of the need for a new strategy of outreach. He moved now to multiply His ministry by sending forth His disciples. We have seen how He called them (1:16-20), and Mark later identifies all the disciples by name (3:13-19). Now, Jesus sends them out ***“by two and two, and gave them power over unclean spirits” (6:7)***. Their instructions were simple but direct: travel light. The mission was urgent, and they would have to rely on the power of God, not the signs and symbols of wealth and status.

No longer could the disciples be only learners at the feet of Jesus. They had been His students for over a year. Now they were to become ambassadors/messengers, and they were to take nothing with them except what was necessary: Christ’s authority and power. Jesus knew from experience that the material “stuff” of the world tends to undo effective ministry.

As Jesus sent out His disciples, He told them to remain centered on the main task. He also advised them to accept whatever hospitality that was offered to them, and to not wait around for a better deal.

If people refused to listen to them and turned them away, as Jesus’ friends and relatives had done to Him, they were simply to move on and continue the task. It was not their to be argumentative or contentious. Their sole commission was to preach the Good News about Jesus and to exercise their God-given power to heal the sick and cast out demons.

We, too, can heed Jesus’ counsel. This passage (6:11) teaches us how to handle failure. Do not continue in lost causes. Shake off the dust, move on to the next place, and leave the judgment to God. This verse tells us that as Christ’s disciples and witnesses today, we are not responsible for the results of our sharing, since only God can determine the outcome. But we are responsible for our obedience.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, Mark 6:14-29 represents a kind of flashback to a birthday feast in the palace of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. The only previous reference to it was in 1:14 when, without warning, we were informed that John the Baptist had been put into prison.

The news of Jesus as teacher and healer had finally reached Herod. Mark suggests that Herod's superstitious fear, convinced him that John the Baptist had risen from the dead (6:16). Guilt tormented Herod.

A great deal of background information about Herod is available to us, some of which is implied in these verses. Life in his court was morally wrong and unrestrained. Herod Antipas had married Herodias, the former wife of his half brother Philip. And John the Baptist had condemned this bit of wife-swapping, ***“For John said unto Herod, it is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife” (6:18)***. The king was slow in his response to John the Baptist. After throwing him into prison, Herod would from time to time bring him out, for he knew John was a good and just man.

Herod's mistress-wife, Herodias, had no integrity. She was determined to protect her position as Herod's spouse, even if Jewish law forbade it (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). So, Mark reports the well-known story of how the daughter of Herodias, identified elsewhere as Salome, danced so well at Herod's birthday party, that he offered to give her anything she wanted. After a quick meeting with her mother, she requested the head of John the Baptist be brought to her on a platter (6:24-25).

Herod was trapped by his drunken promise. ***“And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her” (6:26)***. So, John became a victim and a casualty of Herodias' revenge. The early readers of Mark's Gospel would have seen in this story a prediction of the death of Jesus. In Mark's description of the court of Herod, it was clear that good intentions were smothered by fear, envy, and ambition. The followers of Jesus in any era should note this and take heed. Those who trust in politics and power to protect them will be disappointed, and compromise with such forces is impossible. The early Christians would have understood.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus reported in all four Gospels. Mark tells us that Jesus had a private retreat with His disciples in mind: ***“And he said unto them, ‘Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile’: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure time so much as to eat” (6:31)***.

These words are a reminder of the way most of us live today. Our lives are so jammed with activity and our minds are so filled with routine clutter that it is easy to lose touch with ourselves and with God. And while it does not come easy, we must sch-

dulle times of quiet and rest for ourselves if we are to be at our creative best. It is in our quiet times, our rest times, that we are best able to hear the voice of God.

Jesus understood the need for this all to well, but this time it was not to be. Crowds of people saw them leaving and went on ahead. ***“They ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him” (6:33).*** Jesus was moved by compassion and ministered to them. He saw them as “sheep without a shepherd,” and He taught them.

So purposeful was Jesus with His teaching that He completely forgot the crowd’s physical hunger. The disciples had to interrupt and remind Him that they had missed lunch. Then what happened next has been thought about and discussed for centuries. Mark says Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, blessed them, and then had the disciples distribute the food among the crowd.

Some readers understand this symbolically, as a form of holy communion. They see it as a celebration, an experience of worship. Others say that Jesus’ example inspired the crowd to share the food they had brought for themselves, and this made it possible for everyone to have something to eat. And the most obvious reading of the text is to take it at face value. Jesus took the five small loaves and the two fish and miraculously caused them to be multiplied.

As we look back at the story, we are told that the disciples’ growling stomachs reminded them it was long past time to eat. Jesus had been teaching them, but now He modeled what is characteristic of the gospel: He was concerned with their physical needs. Christianity is not simply a spiritual religion. Jesus’ compassion included both spiritual and physical food. And believers concern is for both bodies and souls. We are called to build hospitals and churches, to provide medicine for those who need it, to feed the hungry, and to nourish the spiritually deprived.

But as the disciples saw the problem, they confronted it realistically. It was late and the only sensible thing to do was to scatter the crowd and send them away to find food. But Jesus had another idea. ***“You give them something to eat.”*** They were speechless, and their frustration show in their reply, ***“Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat?” (6:37).*** That would have been close to a year’s pay—and there were no credit cards!

This is where the incident speaks to us. As we look around at the needs of the world, we are overwhelmed. Our inadequacies leap out at us, and it seems hopeless. Like our predecessors, Jesus’ disciples, we protest that too much is expected of us, and

when we take inventory, our worst fears are justified. This is not enough to feed the crowd.

But remember Gideon and his little army of three hundred men, David and Goliath, Paul in Ephesus, Dr. M. L. King Jr. in Montgomery? All odds were against them, but they got it done. Five thousand hungry people? Five little loaves and two fish? Ridiculous! But Jesus managed it. The people ate all they could and there was food left over.

Our curiosity drives us to ask how Jesus did it, but that is not important. Mark wants us to see the people, not the loaves and the fish. He reminds his readers and us that five loaves and two fish are plenty because Christ will make them sufficient. You and I can face the world with our little bits and not panic because Christ, with His blessing, can make them adequate. We all feel inadequate in the face of the world's material and spiritual needs. Yet, again and again, Christ performs miracles through concerned people.

I read a story about a young student minister who had visited one day a very sick patient. Later, the patient told the hospital chaplain that the young man's visit had been crucial to his recovery—the words spoken, and the prayer offered brought hope and life at a time of deep need. The patient never saw the young man again, and that student minister probably never knew how God had used his visit that day. Christ had blessed that student's "loaves" and a needy patient had been fed despite human inadequacy.

That Mark places the story of Jesus' walking on the sea right after the feeding of the five thousand is worth taken note of (6:47-52). The phrase "walking on water" has become part of our vocabulary and it means now what it meant then: doing something incredible. Mark is telling us that the disciples could not make connections between the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' coming to meet them on the water: ***"And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were so amazed in themselves beyond measure and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened"*** (6:51-52).

The miraculous feeding was forgotten as soon as the disciples found themselves once again in trouble. When Jesus came walking toward them on the water, He was not at first perceived as a comforting presence, but as some sort of ghost (6:49). It was only after He spoke to them and calmed the wind that they recognized Him: ***"And immediately he talked with them, and saith unto them, be of good cheer; it is I; Be not afraid"*** (6:50).

Once again, the earliest readers of Mark's Gospel would have seen themselves in this story. These verses hint at one of the most puzzling problem of communication that we believers face. To the question, how do we survive the difficult storms of life? The answer is: because Christ is with us. But at times when we are experiencing unbearable stress, that answer may seem inadequate unless we remember those earlier moments when Christ's presence and power overcame our fears and calmed our internal and external storms. In recalling the vivid story of Christ's presence on the wind-driven sea during those dark early morning hours when the disciples were straining against fearsome odds, Mark wants his readers and us to remember that we are never alone. To remember those earlier acts of His saving grace is to receive strength for present difficulties.

Later when the boat landed on the shores of Gennesaret, a familiar scene was repeated. Crowds of sick, hurting people crowded around Jesus. Those who were able carried bedridden persons to Him: ***"They laid the sick in the streets and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment"*** (6:56).

Jesus feeds the hungry, walks on water, heals the sick. Matter of fact, we are told that all who *"touched him were made whole."* Mark's point screams at his readers: Do you not see who Jesus is? And the answer, sadly, is that many still do not understand that the Messiah, the world's Savior, has come to deliver people from the sickness and oppression of sin.

Immediately following these mountain top experiences, the chief opponents of Jesus reappeared on the scene and instigated the sixth controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities, which Mark records in his Gospel. This time the issue centered around external requirements of the Law and scribal traditions.

A SWAT team of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem confronted Him about a picky tradition deeply rooted in Jewish Oral Law that applied to the ritual of washing hands before eating ***"...when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashed hands, they found fault"*** (7:2).

The issue at stake had nothing to do with hygiene but with ceremonial cleansing. Several hundred years earlier, the scribes had set out to implement the moral rules set down in the Pentateuch, and in time, literally thousands of small laws were established to regulate all Jewish life. These became known as the ***"tradition of the elders"*** (7:5).

Ceremonial handwashing was among these rules. The demands were ridiculous—the water used had to be kept in certain types of containers. The hands had to be held in a certain position for washing. There was a specific way in which the water was to be poured over the hands. There were rules for every step, and there were a lot of steps.

These meaningless man-made rules were what Jesus' disciples failed to keep. But in the critical eyes of the Pharisees the breaking of these rules was to cause offense to God. Sadly, this tradition of faultfinding has passed through church from then until now. To stress man-made rules and laws and codes of behavior is to negate the spirit of Christ just as much today as when the Pharisees found fault with the disciples.

On the other hand, Jesus stressed that all ceremonies are created by people. People, not God, make cups and the rules about handling cups (7:8). Rituals are externals. Jesus does not say externals are evil, but His point is that internal reality is crucial. If we have the proper inner motivation, for example, love for others, and a proper relationship with God, for example, commitment to Him; external rules are unnecessary. Proper ceremonial washing is not needed if our hands are clean before God. And if they are not clean before God, all the scrubbing in the world will do no good. Jesus shows that real blasphemy comes from deifying the trivial.

Jesus' response to the objection of His critics has the ring of an Old Testament prophet. He quotes Isaiah in **Mark 7:6**, "*This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.*" To push His point, "*...ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition*" (7:9), Jesus discusses using the custom of Corban. The practice of Corban meant that a son could set aside a material possession as a gift for holy use sometime in the future (7:10-13). The son might then justify neglect for his needy parents, even though he had the means to help them. It would be like our refusing to help our needy parents, even though we had the money in long term certificates of deposit, because there was a penalty for early withdrawal.

People of any era who really care for parents will set aside man-made traditions in the name of love. Jesus saw Corban as a way of evading a necessary duty to honor parents. The custom was strangling the intent of the commandment. At the same time, Jesus was speaking out against the religious forms and practices that place a higher priority on laws and rules than on meeting the needs of people. Our role as believers is to love, not find fault or become slaves to legalities.

Jesus' arguments about inner and outer religion makes good sense, and it is a huge difference to the petty legalism of His opponents. From the perspective of the Phari-

sees, Jesus was performing radical moral surgery. In Chapter seven Mark reports two more healings that also demonstrated Jesus' break with the past. Just as He had declared all foods clean regardless of ceremony, in these stories He insists that all individuals are clean. First, He casts out a demon from the daughter of a Syrophenecian woman (7:24-37). Mark's readers would have seen in both events a continuing refusal by Jesus of longstanding restrictions.

Jesus and His disciples had left Capernaum and traveled the forty to fifty miles to Phoenicia and the region of Tyre and Sidon—gentile territory. It is possibility they were looking for temporary relief from the harassment of the scribes and Pharisees. At any rate, when the Syrophenecian woman found Jesus, she ran the risk of being rejected or humiliated. Since she was Greek, her ethnic identity was a barrier to Jews, and it was like asking for help from someone we did not know personally, and everything we did know—of their race, religion, and custom—was negative. On the surface, Jesus' reply to her plea to “*cast forth the devil out of her daughter*” seems superficial: “***Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it unto the dogs***” (7:27).

His words meant that He must first feed the Jews (children) and not gentiles (dogs). Was He being cruel and insensitive? Not at all. The probability is that Jesus was facetious with the woman, the way in which people of different races sometimes joke about in visible racial difference that separate them. And it seems to be that the idea that Jesus was intending to be humorous is supported by her facetious reply, “***Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs***” (7:28). In other words, she might be a dog (gentile), but she was not asking much, just the crumbs. Jesus responded positively to her humor and plea for help, “***For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter***” (7:29).

In the same fashion Jesus' healing of the deaf and stammering man represented a larger issue than simply bringing healing and wholeness to a needy person, as important as that was. Again, Jesus was in gentile territory, the region of Decapolis to the east of the Sea of Galilee. Mark's readers would have understood Jesus' action in this gentile stronghold as a call to missionary work. The Good News of the Kingdom of God defies any limitations of race or culture. Believers of every generation are called to faithful proclamation and compassionate service in every place and to all people.

A close look at the story also shows the way Jesus worked. He was always sensitive to the feedings of people, and in this story, He wanted to avoid embarrassing the stammering man. Mark tells us that “***He took him aside from the multitude and***

used a ‘hands on’” method with him. Upon the command “Be opened,” the miracle occurred, “... straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.”

In these two stirring episodes (7:24-37) we find a affirmation of God’s power working in Jesus. That power burst forth in unlikely places and under unusual circumstances. It is experienced by all sorts of people—a quick-witted woman, a deaf-mute man in Decapolis, and sometimes by us.

Some scholars think Mark’s account of the feeding of the four thousand (8:1-9) is simply a different version of the earlier story of the feeding of the five thousand (6:35-41). This story, which is shorter and features different numbers, has similarities to the earlier episode. Mark was probably convinced that both events had occurred, but the second story makes a slightly different point from the first. In the story about feeding of the five thousand, the crowd is seen as sheep who need a shepherd, *“I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from afar” (8:2-3).*

The similarities between the two stories also underline the continuing lack of understanding by Jesus’ disciples. Having been through a similar experience not long before, why do the disciples bring up the same question again? *“From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?” (8:4).* The Pharisees also had witnessed Jesus at work—healing, teaching and authority, and setting people free. Yet, they came asking for *“a sign from heaven, tempting Him” (8:11).*

Mark comments in his next verse that Jesus *“sighed deeply in His spirit.”* Their spiritual blindness and short memories must have been frustrating and wearisome to Jesus. But He refused to give them any sign other than what had been demonstrated day after day in His ministry. But by refusing their request, Jesus, once again, incited their opposition in the seventh controversy over “signs.”

Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees is instructive to us, as well. Often, we look for God’s activity in the abnormal or spectacular. We ask for unquestionable proof that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The proof may be around us all the time, yet only those with eyes to see and ears to hear are able to identify God’s work.

The disciple and the Pharisees seemed to take turns expressing their spiritual thick-headedness. In 8:14-21, Jesus asks nine pointed questions to help His closest followers understand the meaning of what had been happening. They are in a boat, and the

disciples begin to worry because they forgot to bring lunch. In rapid-fire style Jesus' questions burst forth: "***Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? Perceive ye not yet, neither understand? Have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? And having ears, hear ye not? And do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up?***" Jesus' final question is a summary of all the others, "***How is it that ye do not understand?***" (8:17-21).

It was as if Jesus were saying, "*What more does it take?*" And Mark readers, under pressure and fearful for their lives, would get the point: when we remember who Jesus is, we can face whatever comes.

It is no accident that Mark records the healing of a blind man immediately after the incident in the ship. He addressed the problem of physical blindness just as He had addressed the problem of the disciples' spiritual blindness. The stories are connected, also, by the way they show Jesus's willingness to stand by "blind" individuals until they can see.

The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) happened gradually in two stages. In the first stage Jesus took the man away from the crowd, touched his eyes with His saliva, and asked him if he were able to see. The man answered, "***I see men as trees, walking.***" Jesus then touched his eyes a second time, and the man was able to see "***every man clearly.***"

In telling this story Mark is trying to help us see that in our early contact with Jesus, as we are just beginning to see who He is, our *perception* may be hazy. For now, as Paul says, "***we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face***" (1 Cor. 13:12).

But as we come to see who Jesus really is and to know His touch, we see life and people with fresh vision. People are no longer perceived as trees walking, as just objects. It is then that fear gives way to trust, and dramatic signs from heaven are unnecessary. We know who Jesus is, and that is enough.