

Dr. Mark Jennings, Mark, Lecture 11, Mark 6:7-44, The 12, John the Baptist, Feeds 5,000

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This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 11 on Mark 6:7-44. The 12, John the Baptist, Feeds 5,000.

Good to be back with you. We're continuing to work through Mark chapter 6. When we first looked at the chapter 6, we got into in the first six verses that rejection that Jesus received at home and the irony of having had this amazement from the crowds, this acceptance. We've had these great displays of teaching authority, of power and miracles, of exorcisms and this growing clamor.

Then he comes to his hometown, and his meager beginnings become reasons for rejection and the lack of faith or trust that Jesus was uniquely positioned to do such great acts. We looked at that and its irony. That, in a little way, is interesting.

It sets us up for the next part of chapter 6. In the next part of chapter 6, we have another occasion, which is what we would call the Mark sandwich. This is that idea where a story starts, and then in the middle of the telling of that story comes a new story, and then the first story resumes. What we have here is the beginning of Mark chapter 6, the last part of verse 6, this discussion of the work of the Twelve and how the Twelve are an extension and are going down in some ministry doing very similar things to what Jesus was doing.

We'll look at that. But then, in the middle of that, we get this account of John the Baptist and the beheading of John the Baptist, a very abrupt interruption into this story. Then, after the account of the beheading of John the Baptist, the disciples return.

The return of the disciples sets the stage for the great feeding of the 5,000. As we look at these first few verses and the work of the Twelve and the discussion of the disciples, keep in mind that this is in concert with what will happen regarding John the Baptist. I wonder if to some respect the reason Mark does this big flashback to the beheading of John the Baptist, to his martyrdom, is because of the way it works in conjunction with the idea of discipleship.

As the Twelve are being commissioned and sent out, there is this component of discipleship that cannot be lost in the Gospel of Mark, which is the idea of suffering and suffering for the faith, the idea of taking up your cross as a model of discipleship. Of course, this is in the context of leading up to Jesus' own declarations in chapter 8 that the Son of Man must suffer. With that in mind, let's look at the work of the Twelve as this section starts out, beginning with the middle of verse 6. The first part

of verse 6 starts with the ending of the account of how Jesus, like most of the prophets, was held without honor in their hometown.

Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions.

Take nothing for the journey except a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.

And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave as a testimony against them. They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

So, we have a set of instructions here. Jesus has been going around from town to town, which we know was his purpose. He never stayed in one place very long but continued to move around.

And then he sends out the Twelve. Now, in the calling of the Twelve, you remember earlier in the Gospel of Mark, the first set of instructions that he gave them was to simply accompany him, to watch him, to see what he's doing. And now we get the second set of instructions where they're going to go out without him.

He's going to send them out, and they're going to be doing the very same things Jesus was doing. One, they're going to be teaching. We see that.

It says they went out and preached that people should repent. This is in concert with what Jesus was preaching. The overall theme of Jesus' preaching is to repent; the kingdom of God has drawn near.

So, they're giving the same message. They're talking about what Jesus is discussing. They're anointing people with oil and healing the sick.

In other words, they're doing these healing miracles that Jesus himself was doing. And it also says that they were given authority over evil spirits. And this authority is this idea of Jesus' authority now belonging to the Twelve to cast out evil spirits.

These have been the three main themes we've been seeing: exercising demons, authority over demons, authority over illness, and authority in teaching. So, the Twelve here are really an extension of what Jesus' ministry has been so far. And it's very clear how Mark is shaping that.

It's interesting two by two that he sends them out two by two; there could be some reason for that. One is just that it's not as safe to go alone. But the two-by-two probably, I think, reflects this Old Testament injunction idea of the need for two witnesses to confirm something.

And so here they're going out with these two people who can confirm the legitimacy of what has occurred and also what is occurring. So, when they report back what has occurred, they're also reporting back with the two witnesses' verification. The injunction is to take nothing with them except a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in your belts, sandals are fine, not an extra tunic.

Some have thought that that instruction resembles a cynic beggar idea, the beggar's bag, if you will. More likely, this has a consideration of a symbolic act in the way that Elijah, we think of Elijah and what he had, or even John the Baptist, there's this simple attire, there's this basic provision, and it conveys a dependence on God. It conveys that they're not going out already with their financial support in place but that there is a dependence on God, which really is a motif if you even go back to the wilderness, of the Israelites having to convey dependence on God they were wandering in the wilderness.

And I think there's also this presentation that they're not coming into a town with vestiges of honor that might be associated with status or with wealth, that the value that they bring is in their message and in their ministry, not in their possessions. The comment about where they should stay if a place welcomes them to stay there and not to go to other places, I think that has the idea of, one, giving value to those who first welcome them in their message, and not seeking to upgrade, if you will, not seeking to, as other people are accepting, if there's a host who says, hey, why don't you come stay with me? I've got a villa that's a little bit nicer, that they don't seek opportunity for gain in honor, for gain in status, for gain in wealth, by seeking out people who might be more receptive later on, but not initially. It is located within those first receptions, and it places high value on the importance of hospitality.

In ancient culture, hospitality was extremely important, and it is still in the majority of parts of the world, and their remaining there gives value to this virtue. There's something important about the reception of those carrying the message. And in fact, what strengthens that is we see there's the opposite side.

There's a judgment motif here as well. When Jesus instructs them that if any place will not welcome them or listen to them, shake the dust off their feet when they leave as a testimony against them. It was not uncommon that when those who were living in the diaspora and were sojourning back to the Holy Land or had visited or were coming back, crossed into the Holy Land would shake the dust off the clothing of the foreign lands.

There is a symbolic move of this is not part of me, this is not welcome, I do not want to carry that. But even more, this shaking the dust-off idea, I think, has a language of judgment with it. That there is a statement being made of separation.

If a place doesn't welcome them, then they won't have anything to do with that place. There's a hint of that there, which is consistent with what we've seen with Jesus' own ministry. That there is both welcoming and salvation, but there is also rejection in place.

And Jesus expects rejection as well. By giving instruction of what to do when a place doesn't welcome, there's an expectation that going out and doing the ministry of Jesus will have a similar response that Jesus has, which is some will accept and you honor them, and some will reject and you dismiss. Now, as we're into this process, though, we get this all of a sudden insert of a completely different account.

With verse 14, we move back in time to the death of John the Baptist in verses 14 through 29. We know this is a flashback, we know this isn't concurrent, we know that from 1:14, when chapter 1 verse 14 talks about how the ministry of Jesus began after John's arrest. So, this is not a concurrent.

Incidentally, this is the only episode in Mark's Gospel that does not directly concern Jesus, which also gives it a sense of stress or highlight. There's something about John the Baptist's suffering, and there's something about John the Baptist's martyrdom that is important for Mark in the telling of the story of who Jesus is. And when we think of John the Baptist even as the forerunner of Jesus, one of the things we note is that he not only was the forerunner in terms of proclaiming repent, the kingdom of God is drawn near, of preparing the way for Jesus, but there is also a sense there's an identity that they share in their arrest and in their death.

There is a contrast, of course, that's being made here as well between Jesus and what Jesus' king has looked like and with what the sham of the kin of Herod and their rule looks like. I want to look through this beheading episode and then discuss it. So, King Herod heard about this, for Jesus had become well known.

Some were saying John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said he is Elijah, and still others claimed he is a prophet, like one of the prophets long ago. But when Herod heard this, he said, John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead? For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had had him bound and put in prison.

Now, before we go on to talk about the account of John the Baptist, I want to address a little bit of what is occurring here in these first set of verses. So, Herod here has heard about what Jesus is doing, and the crowds are saying, some are

saying that this is John the Baptist raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him, and others are saying he is Elijah. Now, what's interesting in this is we're going to see, and others say, one of the prophets, we're going to see this response come up later.

When we get to Mark chapter 8, Jesus asks the question of the disciples, who do the people say that I am, it's going to be very similar to what we have here. What this means is that there is this coalescing explanation of why it is that Jesus is able to speak as he does, why it is that he is able to do the wonders that he can do, and they're trying to find categories and boxes to put him in, one being John the Baptist, the other being Elijah, or one of the prophets. And I think as we get the sense of this, I mean, there is this question here, where Herod, it should be Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, he was over the region of Galilee and Perea, that we get this idea of, or this question of, how is it possible that people are saying this is John the Baptist when John the Baptist and Jesus would have been seen simultaneously, at least some would have been aware that John the Baptist even pointed to Jesus and talked about how he was unworthy, that he was the one.

And, of course, the baptism of Jesus would have also been known by at least some at this point. And in other words, there would be people who would have seen Clark Kent and Superman at the same time. The idea is that this isn't one person now pretending to be the other; they would have been seen together.

I wonder if the sense of it connects with this Elijah, and if the Elijah overtones are always present with John the Baptist, always present. Even his martyrdom story here, there are similarities between this and Elijah's conflict with Ahab and Jezebel. I mean, there are connections to be drawn.

But I wonder if the story of Elijah doesn't also help us understand how it is that people are thinking that Jesus is John the Baptist, or Jesus is even Elijah, or even one of the prophets. And part of that response is not that they consider this to be a reincarnation if you will. There are some elements of that.

I mean, obviously, Herod, Antipas here, is thinking, well, wait a minute. How can this be John the Baptist, or is this John the Baptist? But I wonder if looking at this, this isn't the idea of the spirit of John the Baptist, or the spirit of Elijah, or the spirit of one of the prophets, in the way that when you think of the Elijah-Elisha story, there's the mantle that Elijah then gives to Elisha, and then we hear the account with Elisha that Elisha has the power of Elijah, has the spirit of Elijah, is the, what was associated with the presence of Elijah, now is associated with the presence of Elisha, in a way that unites them. And so, this might be a little bit of what I wonder is at work here in these answers, rather than simply only an understanding of somebody who is dead has come back.

I think there are some thoughts to consider there. So, Herod, Antipas here, is hearing about this Jesus and the explanations of who he is. And when Herod heard this, picking up verse 16, he said, John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead.

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had bound him and put him in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

So, Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled yet liked to listen to him. So, setting up this standpoint of what's going on, is here is this political intrigue.

In the middle of this intrigue, you have Herod Antipas, who is now married to Herodias, who was the wife of his brother Philip. And John the Baptist is speaking against that. When he says it's not lawful, he's talking about this is not lawful within the law.

This is not lawful. This marriage is not holy and is not righteous. We're going to find a little bit later in the Gospel of Mark this question of, in Mark chapter 10, whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. This question is going to come back up, and incidentally, it's going to come back up in the same area where this whole controversy is taking place, indicating that some of the motivation for that question is probably less what is your opinion, but perhaps more setting Jesus up to perhaps receive the same result that happened when John the Baptist was making similar statements. But we'll get to that.

So, there's this, John the Baptist is a very overt critic. He was, Herod was doing that which was forbidden in the Old Testament. Now Herodias is already, the wife, is already against John and wants to kill him.

So, her motivation is clear. Yet Herod doesn't comply because of two reasons. One, he recognizes the holy and righteous nature of John the Baptist.

He recognizes that what John is doing seems in keeping with God's design, and there is a hesitancy to kill someone who's keeping with God's design. It's interesting when we think of we'll have a hesitancy later on, of course, in the story of Jesus and his crucifixion by Pilate to do something similar. But he also doesn't want to do it because he likes to listen to John, even though he doesn't understand him.

I think that's a fascinating picture, that there was something about John's preaching that drew Herod, yet he did not understand. He had enough of an inkling to know that John was righteous and holy but was puzzled by what he had to say about the kingdom of God drawing near, about repenting, and perhaps even about the one who is to come. It's hard not to see a connection between Herod here and the crowds, who are confused and amazed simultaneously.

They are amazed at what Jesus is doing. They marvel at his teaching, yet there isn't a full understanding. But also even the disciples.

We're going to see just in a chapter or so where Jesus walks on water, and they are said to be amazed and perplexed and even hardened, which we'll get to. So, this figure, in other words, of Herod, who's about to do this horrible deed to John the Baptist, there's some sense of understanding that his reaction to John the Baptist is not dissimilar to reactions we see to Jesus. And even if we think of the Pharisees and the Herodians, if you remember the man with the withered hand where he was healed, the Pharisees and the Herodians aligned together to kill Jesus.

Their desire was to kill Jesus. There's a sense here of what even Herod Antipas, who is hearing John the Baptist, yet recognizing something partially, on the one hand, but not enough to stand for him, that there are these other figures who are associated with him and his power who will be doing something even similar, if not worse, which is seeking to kill Jesus. So, we pick up the controversy between Herodias and Herod.

Herodias wants him dead, and Herod is saying no. So, at this point, the only reason John the Baptist hasn't been killed is because of Herod, because of Herod's liking to listen to him. Finally, the opportune time came in verse 21.

On his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders, and leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, ask me for anything you want and I'll give it to you.

And he promised her with an oath. Whatever you ask, I will give you up to half my kingdom. She went out and asked her mother what she should ask for. The head of John the Baptist, she answered.

At once the girl hurried into the king with the request, I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king was greatly distressed. But because of his oath and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.

So, he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

On hearing of this, John's disciples came, took his body, and laid it in a tomb. It's a very gruesome picture. Very gruesome.

John the Baptist had been protesting against this incestuous marriage or this unlawful marriage, and here we have this picture of a banquet. It's full of the people who he would have honored. These are not simple folks.

These are folks with status. And there's his stepdaughter doing a dance. And I think the inclination here is a dance that was pleasing, that there was an allure, an attractive, a lustful quality as well.

And in appreciation of this dance, as a whole, and everyone's appreciation, he makes this wild promise with an oath in front of everyone. And so, we have this, what a banquet under King Herod looks like. There is dancing, there is sexual overtones, there is drinking, there is a concern of honoring one another in status, there is manipulation, there's opportunity to get, now Herod has the opportunity to get John the Baptist's head, there's fear of human disapproval.

So even though Herod's conscience was to keep John alive, his fear of what the crowds might say, of what those who he had sworn an oath in front of, overcame this partial recognition, at least, that John the Baptist was righteous and holy. And this desire to please human design leads to not simply only the execution of John the Baptist but the presentation of John's head on a platter, which Herodias receives as a prize from her daughter. It's hard not to think that John doesn't intend for us to see, at some level, a foreshadowing of Jesus' death in here, and the concern of public opinion, the concern of human designs, the ignominious way in which a death is done and presented.

Remember that Mark has inserted this story. He's inserted this story into two accounts. The account of the sending of the twelve, who had nothing, but went out and was seeking hospitality.

It is inserted into that account and the conclusion of that first story, which has the feeding of the five thousand when the disciples return. You have one banquet full of disorder, full of debauchery, full of sin, murder, lying, manipulation, and so forth, hosted by King Antipas. And we're about to get a banquet hosted by Jesus that's orderly, that's full, bountiful, and generous, and points to who Jesus is.

I think Mark intentionally wants us to see these two moments together, which is why he inserts the story of the head of John the Baptist here. So, we pick up then with,

after the story of John the Baptist, we pick up then with verse 30, where the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. So, he'd sent them out, verses 6, end of 6 to 13, and here then in 30, we pick up that story, with them returning, the apostles gathered around him.

Interestingly enough, this is the only time Mark uses the term apostle in his gospel. And so here you can see apostles is already being associated with the twelve, this idea, and so there's this connection that is being made. Apostle can mean sent ones, ambassadors, which also sort of fits the context, they were sent out to Jesus.

And so, he reported back to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going, they did not even have a chance to eat. This is not an uncommon occurrence in the Gospel of Mark.

Remember the crowds have one primary job, in addition to being astonished, they get in the way of things. And here they are, preventing even a chance to eat. And he said to them, Come with me by yourselves to a remote place, a quiet place, and get some rest.

So, they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. Interestingly enough, this is the exact same type of activity Jesus does; after he ministers heavily, he likes to retreat. We even saw that in that first day at Capernaum, where he went to a remote place to pray after he had been healing and exercising demons all day long.

That he likes to go to a remote place. There's an importance of recharging. And Jesus recognizes that the disciples have been doing the same ministry that he has been doing.

The results have been very similar to many of these crowds' going, and they need rest. And so, there's a very compassionate move by Jesus here to bring them to a deserted place for rest. Now, we have an interesting cycle of events that is about to form.

We'll get a feeding miracle, followed by a trip across the lake, and then a healing miracle. So, we're going to get this feeding moment of the healing of the 5,000 that kicks off this particular cycle. Right after this, we'll get a second particular cycle that's kicked off by the feeding of the 4,000.

Both of them will have a trip across the lake, and both of them will have a healing miracle. There will be different miracles, but both of them will have this. Both of them will involve a dispute also with the Pharisees.

In other words, I think Marcus set this up so that these two cycles are meant to be received similarly. That there's a mutual interpretation that is going on. The details

are different enough that I do not think these are the same events being told two different ways or being received two different ways because the numbers are distinct.

One of the things we know about oral tradition is that numbers were a detail that often did not change. That number was one of the anchors in forms that would come down orally. And so the fact that we have these different numbers, one is it would indicate that these are different accounts, different events, even though there's some similarity.

I think Mark intends for us to see some of these similarities. So, they came back and wanted to go to this remote place. It could also translate that as wilderness.

Perhaps there is an echo here. We're about to have a miraculous feeding in a remote place. Miraculous feeding in a wilderness.

Perhaps it is manna from heaven exodus idea. We'll talk a little bit more about this. But the crowds run ahead of them.

So, they go to this remote place. Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. Then, in verse 33, many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns to get there ahead of them.

So there must have been some idea of they knew where they were going. And even though it says they got in a boat, the idea here is they must have been going along the shore where the crowds would be able to run ahead, not crossing over. And so the crowds run ahead.

And when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them. And I think it's very important that he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

So, he began teaching them many things. I think the idea of sheep without a shepherd is important here. The idea of a shepherd as a metaphor for a ruler, guide, religious leader, or even God is not uncommon in the Old Testament and is not uncommon in Second Temple Judaism.

For example, in Numbers 27, Moses, when he's speaking for Joshua, recommending him, desires for Joshua to lead so that Israel will not be like sheep without a shepherd. Ezekiel 34 speaks of a time when the people were scattered and devoured by animals. They will be like a people without a shepherd.

One can't help but think of the Psalms in this consideration, where God is a shepherd, thinking of Psalms 23 or Psalms 80. We see Isaiah 40. The Messiah will come from David and will be a shepherd in Jeremiah 23, Micah 5, and Zechariah 13.

So, Christ doesn't just have compassion over their state of hunger. He recognizes that here are the Jewish people without a shepherd, without any real leaders. They are shepherdless.

And the answer to it is not the feeding. The answer to it is His teaching. He had compassion on them because they were sheep without a shepherd, which probably also speaks to the fact that they were so rushing to Him that they finally had some sort of sense of a draw with His teaching authority.

So, His compassion motivates Him to begin to teach many things. Of course, this teaching says that by the time it was late in the day, by this time it was late in the day, so His disciples came to Him. I think the idea is also the length of the teaching, not just the length of the day.

And they say, this is a remote place, and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat. Now, we need to be clear: the disciples aren't being hard-hearted here.

They're actually interrupting Jesus' teaching to bring attention to the fact that these people are hungry and they need to eat, and before it gets too late, you need to dismiss the crowd so they can go places and be able to purchase food and to be able to feed themselves. There's nothing in this setting that indicates the disciples at this moment are somehow dense. They're recognizing the need.

So then what Jesus says, He affirms that there's this need. He says you give them something to eat. Now, keep in mind, this is in the context of they've just been doing amazing things, healing, exorcisms, teaching.

It's in the context of that return. He says, you give them something to eat, and their response is basically, we don't have that kind of money. It's not, you know, feed them with what you have.

They understand Jesus to be saying, you go to the towns. I'm not going to dismiss the crowd. You go to the towns, and you get the necessary food.

And their response is that, in essence, that would take, in my translation, eight months of a man's wages. Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat? And then so, they're unable to think of any other possibility of feeding. Jesus' response, of course, is very pragmatic.

Tell me what we have. How many loaves do you have? And he asked, go and see. When they found out, he said, five and two fish.

Interesting on the five and two fish. There's a lot of debate of whether there's symbolic imagery in that number. Does the five represent the five books of Moses? Do the two represent the two tablets? It's always hard to say.

My sense here is probably this is what they had, which was five loaves and two fish. So, I'm a little less likely to see symbolic imagery in that amount, though this event itself is full of symbolism. So, then Jesus directed all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

Once again, this is orderly. He even sits down in groups of hundreds and fifties. And in this ordering of things, you wonder, too, if there's not even here this idea if there is Moses imagery, we're in the wilderness, we're about to have a miraculous feeding, we're going to have the number 12 represented, we're talking about sheep without a shepherd, which is Israel and God relationship, or Israel and king ruler relationship.

Even if this orderly account doesn't draw to mind the organization of Israel by God into the groups when they were coming into the promised land. Perhaps. I do think the green grass imagery here is very interesting.

It's a level of detail. It says that he directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. Well, perhaps it's just historical memory.

Or perhaps there is a connection Mark is wanting us to make with Psalm 23, too. He makes me lie down in green pastures. That this shepherding, the Lord is my shepherd idea, then connected with green grass, green pastures, that Mark is wanting to say, look, this isn't just a feeding.

There is imagery of the Lord providing. That there is the imagery of a messianic banquet. There was this: when one thought of the time of the Messiah and the eschatological arrival of salvation, it was often in a banquet form.

And here we have orderly seating. This isn't like Herod's banquet, his birthday banquet. This is different.

There is orderly seating, and it's on a green pasture full of shepherding imagery. Then Jesus takes these five loaves and these two fish, and everyone is fed.

And everyone is fed to their full. And there are even baskets that are brought in. The surplus of food, I think, is not unlike Elisha's feeding of the 100 with the 20 barley loaves.

Fascinating here is this idea then, and I'll finish up here, is this idea of who actually saw this miracle. I think this is one of the questions that we ask. And if I'm reading Mark correctly, the only ones who saw this miracle, this feeding of the 5,000, of course, the number here we would have only referred to the men.

So there probably would have been some women and children, so the number is actually greater. The 12 baskets, perhaps, again, restored the imagery of Israel involved. Every disciple has a basket.

But there's no account of amazement or wonder by the crowds. And I think that's important to note. In Mark, whenever something miraculous happens to the crowds, he is quick to tell us they were amazed.

There's no account of amazement here, which I think lends to the idea that only the disciples realize Jesus in the wilderness. Five loaves and two fish became enough to feed everyone. Therefore, it becomes a setup. This story sets up what we're going to see next, which is the miraculous account of Jesus walking on water.

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