

Dr. Mark Jennings, Mark, Lecture 12, Mark 6:45-7:23, Walks on Water, Human Traditions

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This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 12 on Mark 6:45-7:23. Walks on Water, Human Traditions.

I'm going to be back with you as we continue to work through the Gospel of Mark here, specifically Mark chapter 6. What we've just seen in Mark chapter 6, we've been talking about the sending out of the twelve and how the twelve, the apostles, are able to do amazing things. And then the return of the twelve after Mark's discussion of John the Baptist's beheading, the return of the twelve, and the setting up the feeding of the 5,000, where Jesus instructs the disciples, who have just been doing amazing things with the authority of Jesus, to see to the care for them to be under-shepherds, in a sense, if you will, to the people that are there. And they're unable to think about that in any terms outside of a human matter, any terms outside of how much money would it take to feed all of these people.

So, they're thinking of things in human concerns, in the similar way that Herod Antipas was thinking of things in human concerns regarding the situation of John the Baptist. And so, Jesus does this miraculous, as a shepherd, does this miraculous feeding of the 5,000 men plus women and children. And as we talked about, only the disciples would have seen that miracle.

I think that's important because we set what we know about the disciples at this point. We know that they themselves have done amazing things, and they just saw something amazing on a list of many things that they've witnessed, too. This sets the stage then for one of the more famous miracles of Jesus, and here that will end Chapter 6; there's a summary statement briefly after that, which is walking on the water. I think the key idea as we look at this is we have some similarities between this event and the other on-the-lake miracle event, which was the calming of the storm.

In both situations, we're going to have wind, and we're going to have an immediate cessation of wind. We're also going to have a revelation of who Jesus is, a self-depiction of his divine nature. Job 9:8 commentaries often remark here that God treads on the waves of the sea.

This is part of this that's happening. So, we pick this up with verse 45. So, this is after the feeding.

Immediately, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to Bethsaida while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on the

mountainside to pray, verses 45 and 46. It's probably important to note what might be happening here geographically, because it does seem a little bit strange at first, because he sends them on the boat to Bethsaida, which would be just east of the Jordan River.

But he actually will meet them as they're going westward, as they're going to the area of Gennesaret and Capernaum. One of the questions is, how is it possible that they're instructed to go eastward, yet Jesus meets them on a boat going westward? And I think the best sense of it is that we don't have the complete set of instructions here. He instructs them to go to Bethsaida and then afterward, especially if he doesn't arrive, to begin to cross westward.

I think that's the best sense of trying to understand how this plays out. Now, he chooses not to go with them. He chooses to go away to pray.

This is, again, not the first time where Jesus goes away to pray in solitude. And after going away to pray in solitude, when evening came, we pick up the story, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. So, we've got this time movement.

We know where the boat is, and he's nowhere near the boat. He's by himself on the land. And he saw the disciples straining at the oars because the wind was against them.

About the fourth watch of the night, he went out to them, walking on the lake. So, we get the clear sense, first of all, that Jesus notices the distress. This isn't the distress of the storm about the capsize and the water filling up, but that they're working to get across this lake and are not being able to do so.

And so that reads here as the motivation. Here in the middle of the night, the fourth watch of the night, what he sees there, and there's some, I think, interesting that he is seeing something in the middle of the night that is occurring. Is it because of the very bright moonlight? Is it because of supernatural sight? We don't really know.

But he goes out, and he's walking on the water. Here is where I think it's important to think of not only Job 9:8, Isaiah 43:16, Psalm 77:19, all of these ideas of the language of God walking on the water, but also, I think, the Exodus story comes into play. We've just had a feeding in the wilderness.

We've had motifs of Moses. We're going to see the language of Exodus 33:18, I think, even come up here in a little bit. But when Moses needed to cross the sea, it required God parting the waters so Moses and the Israelites can walk on land.

That Moses and the Israelites were not able to traverse the sea on water. God had to part the waters because, as humans, they could only walk on the land. Yet here, Jesus does not require the parting of any water for him to walk across.

He is able to walk on the waves. The laws of gravity that would require him to sink are not in play here. He does what God can do, which is tread upon the water.

Now, the terminology is very interesting. He goes out to them because he sees them straining at the oars because the wind is against them. But then Mark says at the end of verse 48 that he was about to pass by them.

Well, how does that work? How was he about to pass by them? Fit with their straining, I will go out to them. And I think that about to pass by them, that phrasing is Mark's way of indicating the divine identity message being given here in Jesus. Think of Exodus 33, 18, when Moses asked God to show him his glory, and God passed by him. Or in 1 Kings 19, when God says he is about to pass by Elijah.

I think this pass-by language is used to sort of capture the divine passing by human perception. It's at least a hint of it, I believe. And perhaps even strengthened by what happens next.

So, when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost, not the ghost of Jesus, but some sort of apparition. They're trying to come out with an explanation here of how is it that there's this man walking out. They cried out because they all saw him and were terrified.

Again, this motif of terror comes in. Immediately, he spoke to them and said, take courage; it is I, don't be afraid. And I wonder on this, it is I language, which the Greek of that would be ego eimi.

The Greek of that could be translated most rightly, it is I, but could also be translated I am. Well, if it's the latter, I am, if that's the preferred way of saying, well that brings up Exodus 3 immediately and God's revelation of the divine name, I am who I am. Now it could be overstating the point.

If I was working in the Gospel of John, I wouldn't be overstating the point. John makes that clear. It's possible here that I'm reading too much into it, because he does say, do not be afraid.

Usually, fear is associated with the right response to the identity of God. But it's hard not to see at least a hint of that, given everything else is happening in the walking on the water, which is something only the divine can do, even perhaps the passing by. It's hard not to at least see a subtle or an echo mentioning of it.

Interestingly enough, his concern was they were struggling against the wind. He tells them to not be afraid, to take courage. He climbed into the boat with them, and what happened? The wind died down.

The cause of the problem stopped, and the sense is there's an immediate stop, not dissimilar from when he rebuked the winds and the waves. Scholars have wondered if there was a purposeful design of the wind that God had orchestrated the wind to occur to cause the struggle for the revelation. And, of course, nothing is beyond the providence of God.

But the story isn't in there, and I think because this isn't simply about the identity of who Jesus is. The story isn't in there. It's very informative as we get into this approach, as we're approaching now Mark chapter 8 in earnest.

Notice after he enters in and the wind dies down, what does it say about the disciples here in verse 51? They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves. Their hearts were hardened. Notice that phrasing.

They were completely amazed. That's a characteristic we associate with the crowds. When the crowd sees something miraculous, they are amazed.

This is a characteristic that seems to align the disciples a bit more with the crowds. In fact, what strengthens that is that amazement is put in contrast with understanding about the loaves. So whatever the loaves were meant to communicate, and if it was meant to communicate this Moses imagery, the one who has a prophet greater than Moses, the one who was to come, the expected eschatological prophet, the messianic banquet.

If the loaves and the provision of the loaves were meant to convey all of this, they'd missed it. They are simply amazed at what Jesus can do. Maybe indicating they were amazed at what Jesus was able to do in feeding the 5,000.

They didn't understand why in the symbolism and the connecting it with the shepherd and the idea of what it was pointed to. And then we are told why they couldn't understand, for their hearts were hardened.

Now, we have associated hardened hearts with the Pharisees and with the religious leaders whose hearts were hardened. They sought to kill Jesus or would not understand or stand against him. So, the disciples here, the same group that was able to do things in the authority of Jesus over demons, to have taught, to teach the same message, to do miracles, Mark is reminding us that they are closer to the crowds and the Pharisees in their understanding of who Jesus is than they are in what Jesus is teaching, conveying, and showing.

That their understanding of Jesus is tipped towards Pharisees, that there's a hiddenness still there. There's a hardenedness still there. That their understanding of things is in human construction.

They're working within those categories. They're amazed like the crowds, but not yet what we would consider a right understanding of who Jesus is. And even this hardened language, of course, Exodus imagery.

So, this whole structure has been informed by the story of the Israelites coming out of Egypt, feeding, wandering in the wilderness, and crossing the sea. Chapter six, then, this really brief, ends here with a summary statement. When they crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there.

As soon as they got out of their boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout the whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages, towns, and countryside, they placed the sick in the marketplaces.

They begged him to touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched them were healed. And so, we get, as we've been getting, these summary statements of what life at a particular event or particular place looked like, looked like. All right, I'd like to move in now to chapter seven.

And as we engage in chapter seven, we're keeping in mind what has just been said about the disciples, what has just been said about human traditions, what has just been said about the Pharisees, and so forth. And I think that's important to look at. So, the first main episode in chapter seven is a conflict episode, verses one through 23.

We have a confrontation. Jesus has a confrontation with the Pharisees over the oral tradition. Now, there's no obvious connection between this and the previous episodes. We don't have a clear geographical link there, but conceptually it fits with what we've been seeing regarding Jesus and his interaction with the Pharisees.

And wherever he goes with crowds, wherever there are healings and people coming, there are often accompanying Pharisees and religious leaders who are challenging. So, it's not out of place. Let me begin a little bit in the walkthrough.

Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were unclean and unwashed. Parenthetically, the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and

kettles. Maybe to set the context here, one is that this is lining up very similarly to other controversial events with religious leaders in the Gospel of Mark, where the religious leaders see the disciples doing something, and so now they're going to approach Jesus about it.

And what the disciples are specifically doing is they seem to be eating without having ceremonially prepared their hands for eating. Then, the parenthetical comment in verses 3 through 4 is fascinating. One, it's interesting enough because Mark gives a parenthetical comment. He explains to his reader what he's talking about, and this indicates that his audience might not have already, or at least part of his audience wouldn't have a ready understanding of this reference.

And so, he wants to give some insight into what the Pharisees talked about in this process, what they were talking about. However, we should also note the extent of the detail that the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. So, this ceremonial washing that the Pharisees are now going to be questioning Jesus about is something that's rooted in the oral tradition and the teaching of the elders regarding cleanliness state.

It extends to the point that they do not eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles. So, you get a sense of the thoroughness of this tradition, of these cultic practices. Keep in mind that this sits within this idea where the Pharisees saw the observations that were commanded to the priests in the law regarding the handling of utensils in the temple to apply to all people, all the Jews.

And so, there's an extension of these purity laws. Now, when we hadn't seen the Pharisees in a while, the Pharisees actually hadn't been on the scene since chapter three, and the same with the scribes. One of the things is we know that they have come from Jerusalem, and we've already begun to set this opposition in place.

And so, this group from Jerusalem, these Pharisees, and these religious leaders are pointing out that there's an unclean act, a lack of ritual cleanliness that was necessary. And, of course, one can understand why the Pharisees and religious leaders might be targeting ritual cleanliness by maybe expanding the priesthood demands of Exodus 30 and 40 and Leviticus 20 because we're in this time period where Judeah's encounter with Gentile culture has radically increased.

And so there could even be a need for a deeper cleavage, if you will, as the term one commentator uses, between what is clean and what is unclean. So, we pick it up in verse five. So, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law ask Jesus, why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands? Now, Jesus responds to this question.

And Jesus, in a lot of ways, is responding to this issue of the tradition of the elders and the significance. The tradition of the elders is this oral tradition that was put in place to help understand the law. The missionary calls the oral tradition the fence around Torah.

It elaborates on all the implications. And when Jesus responds, he responds as he frequently does to the religious leaders by going to what the scriptures say. He replied Isaiah was right about you.

Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are rules taught by men.

I think there are a couple of points to point out here. First is Jesus' response to the question of why the disciples aren't following the tradition of the elders is not to defend the action but to accuse the basis of the question. He locates the Pharisees, these teachers of the law, these interpreters of the law, and he says, Isaiah spoke about you when he was condemning the current religious leaders of Isaiah's day who were not honoring God, who were worshiping but not for true reasons, who in their teachings were simply human teachings, rules of men.

So, notice what he has done here to this group who would have presented themselves as those who are the experts on the keeping of Torah, who are the experts on the importance of tradition, who are the ones who would have said, we are making sure that there is a continual authentic devotion to God and to the law and to his ways. He had said, you know, when Isaiah spoke to the bad guys of the exile that led to the exile, to religious leadership that was corrupt, he actually was also speaking about you. Well, we see this throughout the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus takes the current religious leaders and puts them in the family of the disobedient Israelites, the disobedient Jewish people of the Old Testament, and he has done this here as well.

The hypocrite language is fascinating as well. He calls them hypocrites. This is a common insult of Jesus to this group.

In the other Gospels, Jesus also frequently says, you hypocrites. Now, this term hypocrite, it has this idea. It actually stems from and kind of carries over this sense.

It was in ancient Greek and sort of the Greek prior to here, and this would have been the term for an actor, one who puts on a persona and does so for applause, does so for the entertainment, which really you see that play out of Matthew very clearly, where it's you hypocrites, and then he goes through the different religious, whether it's praying or fasting or the giving of alms, and accuses the religious leaders of being

hypocrites. They receive their rewards in the praise and accolades of men, but they won't receive rewards from heaven. they're the actor motif, and I think it is very appropriate because it has this idea of public acclaim over a persona. I think here it is fitting as well that he says, you hypocrites, you claim to be presenting the religious teaching of God, but what you are in effect doing is showing that your devotion is not to divine concerns, but to humanly, manly concerns.

Verse 8 even makes it clear. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. So, he issues this injunction against them.

Notice he has not yet defended the practice. He has pointed out that the very acting of the, the asking of the question is indicative of the character of the Pharisees and religious leaders, in the same way that their accusation that Jesus was possessed and in league with Beelzebul was indicative of their hardness to the point of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Here they're asking of this question about the concern over the oral tradition indicates where their priority lies.

And then he gives an example, and he said to them, you have a fine way of setting aside the commandments of God in order to observe your own tradition. So, he's about to give a clear argument in the Testament that justifies the accusation he has just made. Interesting enough in terms of the way that I think the Greek is interesting, the exact phrasing where it says Isaiah was right, those words are the same way with you have a fine way of setting aside.

So, there's even a bit of an echo of terminology there. Moses said, so here he's setting up the accusation of how they do not follow the commands of God. For Moses said, honor your father and your mother.

So, we're talking in the Decalogue here. And anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death. So, the establishment here then of the fifth commandment, one of the foundational commandments of Moses.

But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corbin, that is a gift devoted to God, then you no longer let him do anything for his mother, for his father or mother. Maybe we need to think a little bit about this Corbin critique that is occurring here. So, the custom that sort of is developing here is developing around Leviticus 27, 28, and Numbers 18 and 14.

This idea of devoting a particular good to God, of setting aside something for the Lord's purpose. This actually developed into a huge discussion of rulings and regulations regarding this Corbin idea. And if you think about it, Corbin to some extent became what we would call deferred giving today, where you give something to an institution, but you retain the rights to use that until your death.

You retain the rights. So, I might give property to a local college, for example, but I'm allowed to live in that and earn from that property. But upon my death, the college receives the property.

That's a type of deferred giving. And this is, in a sense, what is happening here with Corbin. The point is that this idea of Corbin, of a person setting aside something for service and temple, is now being used as a way of putting aside the son's obligation to care for his parents as they grew older, to honor his mother and father.

And that not only was this mechanism being put in place, it was actually being reinforced by the religious leaders. That's the sense of then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. So, if a son declares his property or portion of his property Corbin, meaning it belongs to the temple, he can't use it for the benefit of anyone else, though he's allowed still to retain benefit for himself.

But he says to mother and father, who now may be unable to sustain or need lodging or need work, that the son is now being sanctioned, being allowed by the religious leaders to say to his parents, I can't help you. Because this piece of property, I say, belongs to God, even though I'm able to still retain the rights to use it and have it. In fact, once a property was offered as corban, not only did the religious leadership discourage the breaking of Corbin, but according to Josephus, you actually had to pay to un-Corbin something.

So, once you dedicated something like corban, you had to give money if you wanted to take it back. This becomes a clear example of the fact that there's no greater display of honoring father and mother than taking care of them. Yet the religious leadership is not only allowing for this Corbin rule, which they're rooting in the interpretation of scripture, but they're reinforcing it.

They're treating Corbin as a way of getting around other obligations that might not be to their financial benefit. This becomes such a great example of their hypocrisy that the Leviticus 27, Numbers 18 custom of devoting particular goods to the Lord did not have in mind the undoing of the Decalogue. Yet they have allowed that to happen.

And then Jesus says, thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and you do many things like this. Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, listen to me, everyone. So, this picture shows he has just criticized his practice of Corbin.

It says, listen to me, everyone, understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it's what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.

This is now the answer to the accusation of the uncleanness of the hands of the eating. What they were arguing, what the religious leaders of Pharisees and those from Jerusalem were arguing, is that the disciples were defiling themselves in terms of cleanliness by eating tainted, unclean practices with their hands. And that somehow, they were now, by violating the tradition, becoming unclean.

Jesus' response after pointing out the hypocrisy and the motivation that the Pharisees really are not concerned about what the scripture says about clean and unclean and obedience to God and not obedience to God, he then turns and says, here is why this practice is not a practice that reveals the intent of God. The Pharisees and religious leaders are consumed with how the food might have been tainted, or the process might have been tainted of the eating, but what goes into the mouth is not what makes one unclean, but what comes out reveals it. What comes out of the Pharisees reveals their uncleanness because they're affirming this practice of Corbin rather than what goes into the disciples, whether they wash their hands or not.

After he left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull? I love that response. Are you so dull, he asks.

Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body. In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. That parenthetical comment is interesting because Mark there, I think, is giving, in a lot of ways, an extrapolation of Jesus' teaching that matches what the early church was teaching.

And so, you have not the intent of Jesus declaring all foods clean, but the reasonable understanding of if it's not the utensils and the washing of the hands, and that doesn't make someone unclean because that doesn't affect the heart, then it's actually even the content, the identity of the food itself. And so, Mark is pointing out that Peter had been teaching from his vision and Paul had been teaching, and we talked about how Mark was most likely a companion of Paul and Peter if we understand the authorship correctly, that there is a link to what Peter is saying and what Paul is saying and the teaching of Jesus. That Jesus, though he didn't speak directly to the matters here of kosher law, that it certainly applies.

He went on, saying that what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. You know, for from within, out of a man's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. And these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.

This is a continuation, of course, of the controversies that we are having over purity laws with the religious leaders and Jesus, and what makes someone unclean and

what makes them clean. How does the purity of Jesus go with the cleansing act? And we've now seen that if it's about the heart and the internal, then when Jesus is said to be clean, and your sins are forgiven, he doesn't have in mind external regulations of an oral tradition that they've been met, but the actual change of the heart. We'll continue to pick up the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark with the Syrophenician woman and then move on into chapter 8.

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