

# 4

## SUMMARY

Jesus walks on water and feeds 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. He castigates the religious leaders for their artificial religious laws and explains that ritual cleanliness is a matter of the heart, not the stomach. Jesus heals a Gentile woman's child. The crowds acclaim that Jesus "has done everything well." Jesus feeds 4,000, yet the Pharisees demand a sign from him. A blind man is healed and sees clearly, but Peter, even after declaring Jesus to be Messiah, continues to have fuzzy vision. Jesus attempts to instruct the disciples about his impending death.

### **Basic Bible References**

Mark 6:35-9:1

### **Word List**

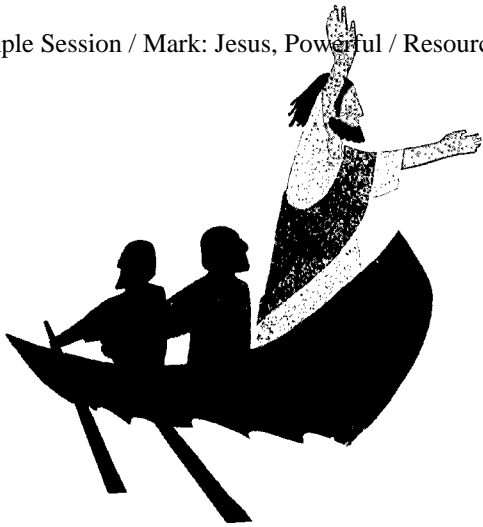
Torah

Tradition of the Elders

Fence around the Law

Corban

Eucharist



# 4

## A MAN WHO DOES EVERYTHING WELL

### **Feeding in the Wilderness**

Read **verses 35-44**. The crowds stay late and the disciples are, most likely, ready to be rid of them. If the crowd is to eat before it grows dark and travel becomes all but impossible, they will need to be dismissed so they can leave the “deserted place” for the various villages. At this point, Jesus, having taught the crowds, begins to teach the disciples: “You give them something to eat.” The disciples were well aware of the needs of the crowd but did not want responsibility for those needs; indeed, the disciples thought there was nothing they could do for them. Jesus tells the disciples that they can and will take responsibility for the needs of the crowd. The Church can do whatever is needed if it will stop looking at the practical and instead put its trust in Jesus’ power. Instead of listening to the disciples’ complaints about what they do not have, Jesus instructs them to find out what they do have: “Go and see.”

Jesus, having gotten their report on the loaves, “Five, and two fish,” organizes the crowd by fifties and hundreds. By putting them into groups, Jesus breaks up what could have become a mob. Jesus is an organizer. It is he who organizes the Palm Sunday parade (see Mark 11:1-3) and the Last Supper (see Mark 14:12-16). Jesus has the people sit down. Seated people cannot surge forward. Anything offered to God will prove to be enough. The disciples, who should by this time have trusted Jesus, are still learning to look beyond the ordinary and to see the power of Jesus. This is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels.

The “deserted place” is certainly meant to be reminiscent of the wilderness of the exodus where God fed the crowds with quails and manna (Exodus 16:1-21). John makes this connection explicit in chapter 6 of his Gospel. It was God who fed the crowds in the wilderness; the disciples should therefore be able to see God’s hand in what Jesus is doing here.

Mark gives the reader no indication at this point of the reaction either of the crowd or of the disciples. The reader of Mark, however, having been told from the beginning (Mark 1:1) who Jesus is, should easily make the connection. The Church of Mark’s day could also be expected to see in Jesus’ action overtones of Communion: “Taking . . . blessed . . . broke . . . gave” (verse 41).

### **Walking on Water**

Read **Mark 6:45-52**. This strange incident is found also in Matthew and John, but not in Luke. The three versions all have various details which make understanding the actual event more difficult. Whatever happened, the disciples all claim to have seen it (verse 50). The Church of Mark’s day could see in this event the Church, represented by the disciples in the boat, in serious trouble. But Jesus is able to be with them and to calm the danger. The Twelve still do not understand who it is they are dealing with. They did not understand about the loaves and they do not understand this.

### **The Power of Jesus**

Read **verses 53-56**. Mark has here a summary of Jesus’ activity not only in Gennesaret, but “wherever he went.” Jesus’ fame has spread far and near. Jesus’ compassion and healing power are poured out abundantly for any and all.

### **A Fence Around the Law**

Read **Mark 7:1-13**. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem have been observing Jesus for some time. Their complaint in verses 1-3 is not about hygiene. First-century people knew nothing of germs. “All the Jews” is an exaggeration, since these rituals were not followed by the common people. The religious leaders’ concern is with a ritual that had become part of “the tradition of the elders” (verse 5). This term is synonymous with “the tradition of men,” “your tradition,” and “precepts of men.” It refers to a body of case law that scholars had built up over the years to help interpret Torah (the Law of God). These

restrictions and practices were known as “a fence around the Law.” By keeping these rules, one would not be able to inadvertently violate Torah. They protected the Law.

Jesus revered Torah which he saw as a positive, a guide showing God’s people the truth about holy living. Love was the heart of the Law. Empty ritual meant nothing to Jesus. Jesus, therefore, did not approve of the tradition of the elders. He paraphrases Isaiah 29:13 where God speaks his disapproval of human rules masquerading as God’s Law. These rules caused people to lose sight of the spirit of the commandments. Moreover, they placed a heavy burden on the common people, who had neither the leisure nor the knowledge to keep all these rules and rituals. The common people’s failure to keep the traditions of the elders was one of the reasons the Pharisees believed them to be accursed by God.

Jesus contends that, rather than the traditions protecting the Law, they have replaced God’s word with man’s (verses 9-13). Jesus gives an example, one of many that he could name (verse 13b). The word “corban” means “gift.” It had come to mean something dedicated to God. If a man set aside, for example, a piece of property as corban, it could no longer be used for secular purposes. But some had used such a gift as an excuse for not helping their aging parents, thereby nullifying the commandment to “honor your father and your mother” by way of this humanly concocted rule. Jesus’ disgust with this kind of legalistic game-playing is palpable. For Jesus, the needs of people come before rules, Sabbath observance, or anything else.

Read **verses 14-23**. You can hear the frustration in Jesus’ voice as he calls the crowd of common people together to contradict the Pharisees and the kosher laws of the Old Testament (these laws can be found in Leviticus). Jesus dismisses the almost superstitious understanding that eating forbidden foods can make one ritually “unclean,” that is, unable to come before God in worship. Neither empty rituals nor forbidden foods have anything to do with one’s relationship with God. People are “defiled” or made “unclean” by the evil that they hold in their hearts, the selfishness, hate, and greed. It is the person’s *intention* that has the power to defile, not the eating of proscribed foods. For Jesus, religion is about being in a right and loving relationship with God, which shows itself in love of self and neighbor.

## Clean and Unclean

Jesus' pronouncement about what is clean and what is unclean is taken to a new level in the next two stories. Read **verses 24-30**. Jesus is trying to get some time alone and goes into the Gentile region of Tyre. But even here he is recognized! The woman is a Syrophenician, a Gentile. Tyre was a city of Phoenicia, which was part of Syria. It is odd that Jesus, an observant Jew, should be traveling and staying in Gentile territory, but there are several other times in the Gospels when he does just that (for example, Mark 5:1-20 and John 4:1-42).

The conversation between Jesus and the woman has had scholars scratching their heads for two millennia. Why should Jesus balk at healing the woman's daughter? He healed the Gerasene demoniac without question about race or religion. And why use the word "dog" which, as one might suspect, is a derogatory term. Jews used it of Gentiles and Greeks used it of "shameless and audacious women."<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars point out that Jesus uses the diminutive form of dog, "puppy." There is almost a banter going on between Jesus and the woman. Jesus speaks of the children's bread; the woman speaks of the bread used as a napkin which was thrown under the table and eaten by the "puppies." Did the Church of Mark's day hear a reference to the rejection of the gospel by the Jews and its acceptance by Gentiles like themselves? Whatever was going on here, Jesus is pleased with the woman's sharp wit and refusal to back off when it came to her daughter. Jesus heals the child at a distance. There are no clean or unclean people.

## All Things Well

Read **verses 31-37**. The Decapolis (Ten Towns) was also Gentile territory. Here is another healing, that of a deaf man whose deafness no doubt accounts for his speech impediment. The praise of Jesus in verse 37 functions as a summary of Jesus' healing ministry and a benediction on the person and work of Jesus: "He has done everything well . . ." The witnesses are amazed beyond measure.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1976, page 178.

## Another Banquet

Read **Mark 8:1-10**. Matthew and Mark include this second feeding of a multitude; Luke and John omit it. Some scholars would argue that the feeding of the 4,000 is a variation of the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Certainly the question asked by the disciples in verse 4 is amazingly dense if they have already witnessed the first feeding. However, the disciples have been dense before and will be so again. At any rate, we have to deal with the text as we have it in Scripture. In verse 1, Mark lets us know that he knows that this is a second feeding story. As is typical for Mark, he records Jesus' motivation: "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat." Compassion is motivation for action in the sight of God.

This time, when Jesus asks how many loaves they have, the disciples reply, "Seven." In Jewish numerology, seven is symbolic for completeness (hence its use in Genesis 1 to show that God alone made everything that is). The number of baskets collected this time will be seven as well.

It is no longer clear what these numbers may have meant to Jesus. Mark does not enlighten us. Again, the feeding is in a "desert," reminding us of the Israelites during the exodus. Again the crowd is instructed to sit. One difference, and one that would have been noticed by those reading this in the original Greek, is the use of the word "eucharistesas," "having given thanks." This is the root of the word "Eucharist," a word used to refer to Holy Communion. In 1 Corinthians 11:24, Paul uses exactly this word to describe Jesus' actions when instituting Communion. There may be on Mark's part or on that of Jesus, an intention to look forward to that eschatological time when all will be fed and satisfied by the giving of Jesus' own self for the world. The location of Dalmanutha is unknown. Matthew changes it to Magadan (15:39), perhaps meaning Magdala.

## Just Give Me a Sign!

Read **verses 11-21**. The Pharisees are hard to convince, possibly because they do not wish to see. The word "sign" is used only one other time in Mark (excluding the late endings of the book). In that case (13:4, 22) it refers to the eschaton, the end-time. What the Pharisees want is absolute proof of Jesus' sonship. They want a "sign from heaven" (verse 11b). After all that Jesus has done up to now, it is no wonder that his first response

is a sigh! There will be no signs. They would not be believed anyway. Jesus walks away from the Pharisees.

Once again, this time in verse 16, the disciples make the mistake of looking to the ordinary and the physical when Jesus is speaking of larger things (this is the disciples' "claim to fame" throughout the Gospel of John). Jesus has warned them of the "yeast of the Pharisees" and the disciples think only of their lack of bread. What is Jesus referring to? The term "yeast" is generally a negative term in the Bible; it means something evil; something that will spoil things (for example, Leviticus 2:11 or Galatians 5:9). Jesus does not explain here just what the "yeast of the Pharisees" is. In Luke 12:1 we read these words of Jesus, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy." And in Matthew 16:12, "Then they understood that he [Jesus] had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." In Mark, Jesus seems to be indicating that the "yeast" of the Pharisees is their refusal to trust and obey; instead they demand "proofs." The Pharisees' problem is not their *inability* to believe in Jesus; it is their *refusal* to believe in Jesus. They demand that their tests and "proofs" be the litmus test of Jesus' authenticity. In Mark's Gospel, it is stressed again and again that to know Jesus, one must trust God and follow in obedience. The Pharisees' love of power and their own place as authorities makes them deaf to the message to trust God and follow Jesus.

Again, the meaning of the number of the leftover loaves remains mysterious. There may be a connection with the Old Testament story in 2 Kings 4:42-44 where Elisha feeds one hundred people with insufficient amounts of bread. There was enough and to spare. This was possible because he was the "man of God." Just so Jesus, the Man of God, can care for all God's people and to spare. Those who know the Scriptures (the Torah) should make this connection.

### **Healing the Blind—Twice!**

Read **verses 22-26**. At first it may look as if Jesus is having trouble curing the blind man. At the first attempt, the man sees, but not clearly. Matthew and Luke omit this story from their Gospels. However, when we look at the positioning of this story in Mark, it may be that there is symbolic intent here. On the physical level, Jesus is able to do what no one can do: heal the blind. But on another level, Mark may mean for us to see in this healing a call to understanding. In verse 18, Jesus asked the uncomprehending disciples, "Do

you have eyes, and fail to see?” In verse 21, he asks in amazement, “Do you not yet understand?” Now here is a man, touched by Jesus, who sees, but not clearly. In Mark 10:46, Jesus will heal blind Bartimaeus, who, seeing, “followed him on his way.” Those who see with the eyes of faith are those who can follow. The blind man in the present case needs to be touched again. Then he “looked intently” and his sight became clear. It may be that the disciples need to be touched by the crucifixion and resurrection before they will be able to really “see.” Disciples of Jesus had better learn to think deeply and to see beyond the obvious if they want to know who Jesus is.

## Caesarea Philippi

Caesarea Philippi was a neighborhood under the jurisdiction of Herod Philip’s city of Caesarea, a city named for Augustus Caesar. It was a Gentile area. The statement that Peter is about to make here is the fulcrum, the center of the Gospel of Mark. Having talked about seeing and not seeing, Jesus is about to ask Peter, as spokesman for all the disciples, the crucial question around which the book of Mark is centered: “Who do you say that I am?” Read **verses 27-30**. The “people” have been throwing up all kinds of ideas about who Jesus is: John the Baptizer was fresh in their minds, but Elijah was believed to be the one who would return to announce Messiah’s arrival. Others think one of the old prophets has returned. These strange ideas all point to their understanding that in Jesus something unique is happening. But it is Peter’s answer that most interests Jesus: “You are the Messiah.” Is Peter beginning to see more clearly? Once again, Jesus commands silence about his Messiahship. Jesus’ understanding of Messiah is not that of the crowds. They will have to see Jesus’ story played out before they can understand.

## Explaining What is Coming

Read **8:31-9:1**. Here Jesus turns away from the crowds in order to begin preparing the disciples for what is to come. Peter, who appeared to be seeing clearly just two verses ago, is again completely confused. There was in Judaism no concept of a suffering Messiah. Messiah was to be victorious. (Read **Isaiah 9:7** and **11:1-4**). The Messiah was to conquer all their foes and restore the fortunes of Israel (Read **Luke 24:13-21a** and **Acts 1:6**). Peter believes that Jesus is the Messiah, and if the Messiah, he must be victorious; he must not suffer or die! Jesus calls Peter “Satan” because Peter’s concept of the Messiah is tempting to Jesus, a man with no desire to die. Again, disciples must set their minds on the divine, not the human. Their job is to trust Jesus, not to instruct him.



In verse 34, Jesus begins to make it clear even to the crowds that following him is costly. They will have to sacrifice themselves to his service. If they try to save themselves for themselves they will never have the life that God is calling them to in Jesus. On the other hand, those who give themselves in obedience to Jesus will have real life. It will do no good to accumulate all the things that people think they need in order to live “the good life” if one has not lived a life of radical discipleship. You cannot pay any price to get your life back. This section closes with what was probably an independent saying of Jesus placed here (verse 38). Those who are ashamed to claim Jesus, who do not want to be ostracized by their neighbors, perhaps, will find themselves outside of Jesus’ circle at the eschaton. The warning is clear to the Church of Mark’s day, when people might well have been tempted not to let their discipleship be known.

If 9:1 refers to the eschaton, to the final coming in power of the kingdom of God, then that did not happen. There were, of course, many in the early Church who thought the kingdom would come immediately. But even in the first fifty years of the Church many began to understand that that was not to be the case. There were, however, those who did see the resurrection which is the foretaste and guarantee of the kingdom’s coming.

## **For Further Study and Reflection**

### ***Memory Bank***

1. Memorize the definitions of the terms in the Word List at the beginning of the Session.
2. Be able to tell the story of the healing of the blind man (Mark 8:22-26) from memory.

### ***Research***

1. In a good Bible dictionary such as *the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, learn more about the Torah.
2. Discover more about the Decapolis and other Gentile towns that Jesus visited.

### ***Reflection***

1. How do you view the miracles that Mark describes in this Session (walking on water, feeding five thousand and four thousand people, healing the blind)?
2. What is your definition of the “yeast of the Pharisees”? Is there a parallel in today’s Church?