

Homiletics Analysis: Mark 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Mark 6 is a structurally complex chapter that moves through six distinct episodes: the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (vv. 1–6a), the commissioning and sending of the Twelve (vv. 6b–13), the flashback account of John the Baptist’s execution by Herod (vv. 14–29), the return of the Twelve and the feeding of the five thousand (vv. 30–44), Jesus walking on water (vv. 45–52), and healings at Gennesaret (vv. 53–56). At surface level the chapter appears episodic — a collection of incidents strung together by Markan narrative energy. But a single thread runs through every episode: the question of who Jesus is, and the radically different responses that question generates. Nazareth rejects him because they think they know him. Herod is haunted by him because he cannot place him. The disciples see him walk on water and are astonished because “they did not understand about the loaves, for their hearts were hardened.” The crowds press to touch even the fringe of his garment and are healed. The chapter is a gallery of responses to Jesus — ranging from rejection and confusion to fearful awe to desperate faith — organized around a figure whose identity remains beyond anyone’s full grasp.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through Mark 6 is to confront the reader with the same question all the chapter’s characters face: *who is this?* — and to expose the inadequacy of every answer that stops short of genuine recognition and surrender. The intent is not merely informational (here is more evidence of Jesus’ power) but diagnostic and invitational: Where do you land in this gallery of responses? Are you the hometown crowd, too familiar with Jesus to receive him? Are you Herod, half-fascinated and half-terrified, caught between the truth and the cost of receiving it? Are you the disciples, witnessing miracle after miracle yet still not understanding, your heart functionally hardened even within the following community? Or are you the desperate people of Gennesaret, pressing through every obstacle just to touch him? The chapter places the reader before Jesus and waits for an answer.

Subject Sentence: Who Jesus is exceeds every human category — and demands a response that matches.

Primary Claim: Through this kaleidoscope of encounters, God is pressing the reader to move beyond partial, comfortable, or merely intellectual responses to Jesus and toward

the kind of desperate, all-in recognition that drives people to press through crowds just to touch the fringe of his cloak.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Unity of the Chapter

Some readers treat Mark 6 as primarily a collection of independent pericopes — loosely connected tradition units joined by Markan redaction but with no organic thematic unity. On this reading, each episode is analyzed in isolation and the chapter has no single claim to make. This reading *acknowledges* the genuine diversity of material in the chapter and guards against forcing artificial unity, but it ultimately *fails* to account for Mark's deliberate compositional patterns. The Herod flashback (vv. 14–29) is explicitly framed as a response to questions about Jesus' identity (vv. 14–16), creating a structural bracket with the Nazareth rejection. The disciples' hardened hearts in v. 52 explicitly links the walking-on-water episode back to the feeding miracle. These are authorial signals that the chapter is doing unified work. The Reformed verdict: Mark 6 is not merely a collection — it is a *designed* gallery of responses to Jesus, and the interpreter should honor that design without forcing it to be tighter than it is.

The Hardened Hearts of the Disciples (v. 52)

This verse presents the sharpest interpretive challenge. Mark says the disciples “did not understand about the loaves, for their hearts were hardened” — language that elsewhere in Mark (3:5; 8:17) and in the Old Testament (Exodus 4:21; Isaiah 6:10) describes judicial hardening, not mere slowness to learn. Some traditions soften this considerably: the disciples were simply overwhelmed, tired, or learning gradually — a developmental model of discipleship. The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition tends toward this reading, emphasizing human receptivity and gradual growth in understanding. The Reformed reading does not deny the developmental element but takes the hardening language at full weight: something deeper than cognitive slowness is being diagnosed. The disciples have seen the feeding miracle, participated in it, collected the leftovers — and still do not understand. This is not the failure of a slow student but the condition of a heart that has not yet been broken open by grace. This matters homiletically because the text is not saying “the disciples needed more time.” It is saying “the disciples needed a transformation they could not produce.” That diagnostic edge must be preserved.

The Nazareth Rejection and the “Limitation” of Jesus' Power (v. 5)

Mark 6:5 states that Jesus “could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them” — and v. 6 adds that “he marveled because of their unbelief.” Some traditions read this as a genuine limitation of Jesus' power, using it to support kenotic Christologies in which the incarnate Son operates under real constraints. Others, including some charismatic readings, use the passage to establish a direct causal

link between human faith and the release of divine power — turning it into a *principle* of faith-activated healing. Both readings *acknowledge* a real connection between faith and healing in the text but *overreach* in opposite directions. The Reformed reading holds: (1) Jesus’ “could not” is better understood as a moral/purposive restraint — he *would not* work wonders in an environment of contempt, because miracle-working in that context would not serve the kingdom; (2) the passage does not establish a universal principle about faith being required for healing (Jesus heals without being asked, heals from a distance, raises the dead) — it reveals something about *how* the kingdom operates in a community that has closed itself off. The text is about the scandal of unbelief, not a formula for accessing divine power.

The Feeding Miracle as Eucharistic Anticipation

The Roman Catholic tradition and some Anglican readings emphasize the eucharistic resonance of vv. 41–42 — the fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking, giving — as deliberate anticipation of the Last Supper and the Eucharist. This reading *acknowledges* genuine typological resonance: Mark clearly intends the feeding to be read Christologically and not merely historically. But the *refutation* is that making the passage’s primary claim eucharistic inverts the textual priority: the feeding is primarily a *christological* demonstration (the one who feeds Israel in the wilderness is here) that has *sacramental* overtones, not a sacramental institution with a christological backdrop. The primary claim of the feeding episode is: this is the shepherd-king of Israel, multiplying bread in the wilderness, caring for the sheep who had no shepherd (v. 34). The eucharistic resonance is real but secondary.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 16; Numbers 11** — The wilderness feeding narratives these episodes deliberately echo. Jesus feeding five thousand in a desolate place with multiplied bread identifies him as the one who gave manna in the desert, the LORD himself providing for his people.
- **Ezekiel 34:1–16** — God’s indictment of Israel’s false shepherds and his promise to shepherd his people himself. Mark 6:34 (“he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd”) is a direct fulfillment signal; Jesus is the divine shepherd of Ezekiel’s promise.
- **Isaiah 6:9–10; Mark 3:5; Mark 8:17–18** — The hardening language of v. 52 sits within a Markan pattern of the disciples’ incomprehension and within Isaiah’s judicial hardening. Canonical context insists the disciples’ failure is not merely pedagogical but spiritual — requiring the kind of healing Jesus performs on the blind man of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26) immediately following Mark’s repetition of the blindness/deafness diagnosis.

- **Psalm 23 / Psalm 107:23–32** — Psalm 23 provides the “sheep without a shepherd” and the valley provision that underlie the feeding narrative. Psalm 107 describes the LORD stilling the storm and bringing his people to their desired haven — the direct Old Testament pattern for Jesus walking on water and the storm ceasing.
- **John 6:25–69** — The Johannine parallel to the feeding develops the christological claim explicitly: “I am the bread of life.” Where Mark leaves the claim implicit in the act, John’s account makes the Primary Claim of the feeding episode audible. The canonical pair shows how Mark’s enacted christology and John’s discursive christology illuminate each other.

Aim: To expose the reader’s actual posture toward Jesus — whether hardened familiarity, fascinated half-belief, confused discipleship, or desperate pressing faith — and to call them to the one response that matches who he actually is.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2a	Jesus returns to Nazareth; teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath	His own hometown; familiar setting
2b–3	Crowd’s astonishment turns to offense: “Is not this the carpenter?”	Four questions — “Where did this man get these things?” — escalate to taking offense
4	Jesus’ response: a prophet is not honored in his hometown	Prophetic self-identification; compares himself to OT prophets
5–6a	Could do no mighty work there except heal a few; marveled at their unbelief	Moral/purposive restraint, not power limitation; unbelief as active rejection
6b	Jesus goes through surrounding villages teaching	Transition; mission continues despite rejection
7	Jesus summons the Twelve and sends them out two by two; gives authority over unclean spirits	Authority delegated; twos for legal witness
8–9	Instructions for the journey: staff, sandals, no bag, no	Radical dependence; not logistical management but

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	bread, no money	trust
10–11	Reception instructions: stay where welcomed; shake dust from feet where rejected	Rejection is possible; response is dignified departure, not retaliation
12–13	The Twelve preach repentance, cast out demons, anoint and heal the sick	Success of delegated mission; they accomplish what they were commissioned to do
14–16	Herod hears of Jesus; various identifications proposed — John raised, Elijah, a prophet	The identity question recurs at the highest political level
17–20	Background: Herod's imprisonment of John; Herodias' hostility; Herod's conflicted fascination	Herod "heard him gladly" but would not act — the portrait of compromised hearing
21–28	Herod's birthday banquet; Salome's dance; rash oath; Herodias' demand; John beheaded	Political calculation overrides conscience; John's death foreshadows Jesus'
29	John's disciples take his body and lay it in a tomb	Anticipates Jesus' burial; narrative link
30	The apostles return and report	First use of "apostles" in Mark
31–32	Jesus calls them to a desolate place to rest; they go by boat	Withdrawal from the crowds; pastoral care for the Twelve
33–34	Crowds outrun them; Jesus sees them and has compassion — "sheep without a shepherd"	Ezekiel 34 fulfillment signal; divine compassion overrides the planned rest
35–36	Disciples suggest sending the crowd away to buy food	Practical problem-solving; they do not yet see what Jesus sees
37	Jesus: "You give them something to eat"	Deliberate — he involves the disciples; the command is impossible on their resources

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
38	Five loaves, two fish	The impossibility is named; the provision is from nothing
39–40	Jesus organizes the crowd into groups of hundreds and fifties	Orderly provision; echoes Israel’s wilderness encampment structure
41	Takes, blesses, breaks, gives — to disciples to distribute	Fourfold action; the disciples are the mediators of his provision
42–44	All eat and are satisfied; twelve baskets of fragments; five thousand men	Abundance beyond sufficiency; twelve baskets — one for each apostle, or one for each tribe
45–46	Jesus immediately sends disciples by boat to Bethsaida; dismisses crowd; goes to pray	Deliberate separation; his prayer is not an afterthought
47–48a	Evening: disciples alone on sea, straining against the wind	The disciples in difficulty without him
48b	Jesus comes toward them, walking on the sea; “about the fourth watch” (3–6 a.m.)	The timing is deliberate — they have been straining for hours
48c	“He meant to pass by them”	Theophanic language — echoes of the LORD passing before Elijah (1 Kings 19:11) and Moses (Exodus 33:19–23)
49–50a	They see him, think he is a ghost, cry out in fear	Their category for what they see is wrong — “ghost” rather than Lord
50b–51	He speaks: “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” He enters the boat; wind ceases; they are utterly astounded	“It is I” — the divine <i>egō eimi</i> ; the response to his presence is astonishment, not worship
52	They did not understand about the loaves, for their hearts were hardened	The diagnostic verdict: incomprehension is spiritual, not merely cognitive
53–54	They land at Gennesaret;	Contrast with Nazareth —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
55–56	people immediately recognize Jesus People bring the sick wherever he goes; beg to touch even the fringe of his garment; all who touch are healed	here, recognition leads to action Maximum contrast with Nazareth: desperate, pressing faith; “fringe” echoes the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:28)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6a	Rejected by the Familiar: Nazareth’s Unbelief
2	6b–13	Sent Out by the Sovereign: The Mission of the Twelve
3	14–29	Silenced by the Powerful: John’s Death and the Cost of the Word
4	30–44	Fed by the Shepherd: Compassion in the Wilderness
5	45–52	Encountered on the Water: The LORD Passes By
6	53–56	Pressed by the Desperate: Faith That Reaches for the Fringe

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Who Jesus is exceeds every human category — and demands a response that matches.

Primary Claim: Through this kaleidoscope of encounters, God is pressing the reader to move beyond partial, comfortable, or merely intellectual responses to Jesus and toward the kind of desperate, all-in recognition that drives people to press through crowds just to touch the fringe of his cloak.

Applications (Five)

1. Familiarity is one of the most dangerous postures toward Jesus. (*Mind/belief*) The Nazareth crowd did not reject Jesus in ignorance — they rejected him *because* they thought they knew who he was. “Is not this the carpenter?” is not a question; it is a verdict. The reader who has grown up in the church, who knows the Sunday school answers, who can cite the doctrines without effort, is the reader most likely to replicate Nazareth’s failure. Familiarity with *information about* Jesus is not the same as openness to Jesus himself. The application is not “learn more theology” but “ask honestly whether your knowledge has closed you to him rather than opened you to him.”

2. Fascination without surrender leaves you worse off than rejection.

(*Affections/worship*) Herod is the chapter’s most tragic figure — not because he was a monster but because he was almost persuaded. He “heard him gladly.” He knew John was righteous. He was “greatly distressed” when the oath cornered him. And still he killed John rather than lose face. Herod’s fascination with the truth made him culpable in a way that simple ignorance could not. The application is for the reader who finds Jesus interesting, even compelling, but who keeps a tactical distance — who enjoys sermons, engages discussions, admires Jesus’ ethics, but will not let the claims reorganize their actual life. Herod is the portrait of where that stopping point leads.

3. The disciples’ hardened hearts are a warning for those already inside the following community. (*Mind/belief*) The hardening diagnosis of v. 52 lands on the Twelve — the inner circle, the called, the commissioned, the ones who have already seen extraordinary things. The failure of comprehension Mark diagnoses is not the failure of the hostile outsider but of the committed insider. This is the application for the long-term churchgoer, the ministry leader, the person who has been following Jesus long enough to develop a routine relationship with him. The question the text asks of them is not “do you believe in Jesus?” but “has following Jesus actually changed how you see? Or has proximity without penetration hardened you?”

4. Desperate faith presses through every obstacle to reach Jesus — and is met with healing. (*Will/behavior*) The people of Gennesaret ran, brought their sick, and begged to touch even the fringe of his garment. Their faith expressed itself in physical, urgent, determined action — they did not wait for Jesus to come to them. They went to him. The application is concrete: what does that kind of pressing look like for the reader right now? It looks like prayer that does not give up. It looks like bringing sick people — spiritually, physically — to where Jesus is rather than managing their condition ourselves. It looks like pursuing Jesus with the same energy the Gennesaret crowds pursued him, rather than waiting at a polite distance for a more convenient moment.

5. Jesus’ compassion overrides our planning, our exhaustion, and our resource calculations. (*Affections/worship*) The disciples had legitimate reasons for the crowd to be sent away — it was late, they were tired, they had just returned from a demanding mission, and they had exactly five loaves and two fish. Every practical calculation pointed

toward dismissal. Jesus' response was not a lesson in logistics but a revelation of character: he looked at the crowd and had compassion because he saw what the disciples did not see — sheep without a shepherd. The application is not primarily behavioral (“be generous”) but affectional: what does it do to you to worship a Savior whose compassion is not constrained by your resource calculations or his own? He is not measuring what he has and then deciding what he can afford to give. He gives because of what he sees, not because of what he has.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Mark 6 is a concentrated Christological argument conducted through narrative rather than proposition. In episode after episode, Jesus does what only the LORD of Israel does: he feeds his people in the wilderness as the divine manna-giver, he shepherds the leaderless crowd as the one Ezekiel promised, he walks on the sea and speaks the divine *egō eimi* as the God who holds the waters in his hands. The chapter does not explain these connections; it enacts them, trusting the reader formed in Israel's scriptures to hear the resonances. This is Mark's Christological method: he demonstrates who Jesus is by showing Jesus *doing* what God does, and the cumulative weight of those enacted identifications builds a claim more powerful than doctrinal assertion. The chapter equally teaches the nature of unbelief — not merely intellectual doubt but an active hardening, a functional closing of the self against the One who has come. Unbelief in Mark 6 is not the absence of evidence but the refusal of evidence — Nazareth has seen the works, Herod has heard the words, the disciples have touched the loaves, and still the recognition does not come. This is a profound theology of human spiritual incapacity: the problem is not information but transformation.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Mark 6 is particularly significant for Reformed theology at two points. First, the disciples' hardening in v. 52 is a direct challenge to the assumption — common in both therapeutic and moralistic preaching — that spiritual growth is primarily a matter of effort and attention. Mark's language is diagnostic rather than educational: the disciples do not merely need to try harder or pay more attention; they need a transformation of heart they cannot generate themselves. This is precisely the soteriological anthropology that grounds the Reformed doctrine of total depravity and its corollary, the necessity of regenerating grace — even for those already following Jesus, heart-hardening is a real spiritual condition requiring divine address. Second, the feeding miracle and walking-on-water episode together ground the Reformed insistence on the full deity of Jesus Christ: these are not a superior human being performing impressive acts but the LORD of the cosmos enacting his own identity through a human life. The response the chapter calls for — the desperate pressing of Gennesaret — is not admiration of a

remarkable teacher but the casting of oneself upon the one who multiplies bread from nothing and walks on the sea. The gospel of grace begins here: the One who has inexhaustible compassion and inexhaustible resources is the one upon whom we are called to throw ourselves entirely.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: Jesus will not be placed in any category that lets you keep a comfortable distance from him — not the carpenter’s son, not the ghost on the water, not the interesting prophet Herod couldn’t quite dismiss. Every encounter in this chapter ends with the same unresolved pressure: who is this, and what will you do with him? The people of Gennesaret got it right — they ran to him, they brought their sick, they begged to touch even the hem of his robe, and all who touched him were healed. That is the invitation Mark 6 is extending. Stop managing your distance from Jesus. Press through whatever is in the way and reach for him.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the chapter as disconnected pericopes and preaching each episode in isolation.** The most common handling of Mark 6 is to pull out one episode — usually the feeding or the walking on water — and preach it as a self-contained unit without reference to the chapter’s designed gallery structure. This loses the cumulative diagnostic force of Mark’s argument. The hardening of the disciples in v. 52 only lands with full weight when the reader has watched episode after episode of inadequate response — Nazareth, Herod, the disciples — building toward the question: “And what about you?” If you preach only the feeding miracle, you have a wonderful Christological display but you have missed the chapter’s intent.
- **Softening the disciples’ hardening in v. 52 into a developmental learning curve.** Preaching the disciples’ failure as “they were still growing” or “they didn’t understand yet, but they would” is textually inaccurate and homiletically toothless. Mark uses hardening language deliberately and connects it to the same language used of Pharaoh and of the opponents of Isaiah’s preaching. The point is not that they needed more time but that they needed a different kind of heart — one they could not produce. The failure to name this spiritual condition as genuine spiritual incapacity rather than pedagogical lag evacuates the passage’s diagnostic power.
- **Turning the Nazareth episode into a lesson about persevering through rejection in ministry.** This is a common misapplication — the preacher identifies with Jesus, encourages other preachers and ministry workers that rejection is normal, and

moves on. The primary claim of the Nazareth episode is not “rejection happens” but “familiarity hardens.” The danger is not to the minister being rejected from outside but to the congregant who has been so close to Jesus for so long that they can no longer hear what he is actually saying. The homiletical target is the comfortable insider, not the suffering outsider.

- **Using vv. 5–6 to construct a faith-as-activation-mechanism principle.** The temptation, particularly in contexts influenced by charismatic or Word of Faith hermeneutics, is to read “he could do no mighty work there” as establishing a general principle: faith releases healing; unbelief blocks healing. This makes the passage into a formula and misrepresents the character of Jesus’ ministry throughout the Gospels, where he heals people who did not ask, heals from a distance, raises the dead. The Nazareth restraint is not a mechanism but a moral statement: Jesus does not perform signs in an environment of contempt because to do so would not serve the kingdom. The pitfall is turning a revelation of Jesus’ character into a technique for getting what we want from him.
- **Preaching Herod as a villain and missing his function as a mirror.** If Herod is simply a monster — the man who killed John the Baptist — the homiletical impact is “don’t be like this bad man.” But Herod is drawn with enough complexity that he functions as a mirror for a very specific kind of hearer: the one who is fascinated, even emotionally moved, by the gospel but who will not let it cost them anything. The preacher who presents Herod only as an object of condemnation has missed the category of “half-persuaded” as a spiritual danger. Herod heard John gladly. That detail is meant to disturb readers who also hear gladly but do not obey.
- **Ending the chapter on the miracles of Gennesaret without the diagnostic contrast with what preceded them.** The healings in vv. 53–56 are glorious and should be preached with full Christological celebration. But their force depends entirely on their position in the chapter — they are the positive image against which every inadequate response has been painted. Preaching the Gennesaret healings without the contrast of Nazareth’s refusal, Herod’s paralysis, and the disciples’ hardened incomprehension reduces the ending to miracle-report rather than invitation. The desperate pressing of the crowds is the answer to the question the whole chapter has been asking. Name the contrast explicitly or the invitation loses its edge.