

March 20, 2011

Recognizing and Misrecognizing Jesus

Mark 6:45-56

INTRODUCTION

It is amazing how many times the world hits the biblical nail on the head where the church does not. In the 1980s after the generation that had witnessed the Death of God movement in liberal theology, the Anglican Church tried its hand at “selling church” which came in the form of offering parachuting off the top of one of their cathedrals. The subtitle to a newspaper article proclaimed: “If God isn’t dead, He wishes that He was!” Even when we come to a verse like the one today, you have biblical commentators (presumably professing Christians) who see here that Jesus was “walking on the sea,” but who explain it away by suggesting that this was just a sandbar and only appeared to be a miracle! The world sees things like this and laughs, not at Jesus, but, at those who are only pretending to believe in him.

Of course the world also totally misses who Jesus is in the ways that matter most. But sometimes it does us good to be put in our place by missing Jesus in spots where God allows the world to see him. It shames us into looking at things that we have refused to look at before.

- HOW THE CHURCH RECOGNIZES AND MISRECOGNIZES JESUS
- HOW THE WORLD RECOGNIZES AND MISRECOGNIZES JESUS

The Big Idea is that to recognize Jesus is to see that He is God *and* Man *for* finite sinners.

Recognizing Jesus is more than that, but it is not less. Notice that there are four elements to this doctrine of Christ contained in this passage. Jesus is fully God; Jesus is fully Man; Jesus fulfills a great need for you if you are finite; Jesus fulfills a great need for you if you are a sinner. This is going to be a first clue into a concept that will recur throughout this Gospel, and that is that we cannot separate the Person of Jesus Christ from the Work of Jesus Christ.

DOCTRINE

I. HOW THE CHURCH RECOGNIZES AND MISRECOGNIZES JESUS

A) The Separateness of Jesus for His People

1. Notice how the divine nature of Christ and the human nature of Christ will both be on display for the sake of his people here, starting with his intentionality: *Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd (45)*. There is that division again—this time He puts the church in a boat and dismisses the crowds. But it says “immediately” (*euthys*) and “He made” them get in the boat. The nineteenth century Anglican preacher J. C. Ryle says that this is “a beautiful picture of the position of all believers between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ.”¹ Jesus appears to all the world, feeds people, then separates the church from the crowd, places the church into a narrow strip of wood on a stormy sea and then **He ascends** to do what? *And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land (46-47)*. When Jesus begins his discourse in the Upper Room in John’s Gospel He had first dismissed the crowd (his generation), saying “Where I am going you cannot come’ [13:33], but then says to the disciples, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” [14:3]. As we going to see, this is not Jesus going up to a mountaintop to look down on the church with indifference. Far from it!

2. When Jesus ascended to heaven He was glorified for his people and He prays to the Father for his people and He watches over and protects his people. Notice carefully this second element of divine power: *And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them (48a)*. He saw them—from where, the mountaintop? Where were they? They were in the middle of the sea. And Mark stresses that Jesus did not just see a speck on the sea and then feel the wind and then draw an inference that ‘Whoa, they must be struggling out there!’ No, it specifically says that **He saw them** and He even saw, intimately, up close, their struggle; their pain; their predicament. This is not simply the X-ray vision of Superman. This is the omniscience and omnipresence of God perfectly united and available to the human Christ. He saw *them*, the ones He loved; and He was moved to visit them directly—“I will come to you” [Jn. 14:18, 28]. He could have commanded the winds from where He was and not taken the credit. He could have sent an angel. But if He is to be for us, humanly, then He must commend to us a good look at his divine power and

¹ Ryle, p. 95

glory: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, **to see my glory**” [Jn. 17:24]. Seeing the glory of Christ is what you need in a storm.

3. It takes eyes wearied by suffering and confusion and dangers in order to stand the sight of glory. Therefore the Lord waited till *about the fourth watch of the night (48b)*. Mark was writing to a Roman audience, remember, and so he communicates the Roman system of night-watches, which was four, rather than the Jewish system, which had three watches of the night. The fourth ‘watch’ was the three hours in between three and six in the morning—not the best time for rigorous survival activity! And then in the most obvious manifestation of the divinity of Christ: *he came to them, walking on the sea (48c)*. “Walking on the sea” means walking on the sea—Jesus was a real Man who walked solidly on the surface of the waters, not by transforming it into ice, but by resting and pivoting his perfectly real, material feet on the same plane as the surface of the water, wetting them and upholding his humanity from the power of his divinity. Nor does this miracle ‘violate’ the Laws of Nature. That shows a misunderstanding of terms. **The Laws of Nature** are, *at best, a description of physical phenomena*: they are not necessary *things* that they could be violated. These laws are descriptions of **contingent things**—which means, things that happen to occur, but could have been otherwise—so that any mature understanding of natural laws will have to encompass everything that ever occurs, which is impossible to observe. The idea of a total system of Laws of Nature is an old-fashioned idea from the Enlightenment that most atheists do not really believe in anymore. When you run into someone who objects in that way, you are dealing with someone who is a few centuries behind the times.

So if I was to ask you, ‘Do you believe that Jesus walked on water?’ I am not asking whether you have trouble conceiving of the details! There is a lot to think about there. But if you have trouble conceiving of it being able to occur, then you need to test what assumptions of what worldview are informing your confusion. The author of Hebrews informs us that Christ is the Word “through whom also he created the world...and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” [1:2, 3]. Christ is the informing Creator through whom God the Father shapes the molecular structure of water that absorbs denser objects and the mass of the objects which sink. He does not break a sweat speaking into existence the exact conditions for a real human body to pass on a plane of locomotion over the helpless horizon of hydrogen and oxygen.

B) The Condescension of Jesus for His People

1. Modern religion pulls God down from the lofty heights because modern man is convinced that if God is to be for us then He has to be like us in every way, near, weak—and of course Jesus *did* identify with us and draw near and, yes, become weak—but that reaching down to us is only ever as good as his ability to reach down with strength. The Psalmist declares:

Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD
on high is mighty! [93:4].

What do you prefer: a friend at sea who will cry with you all the way down to the bottom of the drain, or, one who stands over the sea, who made the sea, who can blast it away with the whole universe for you if He so desired? A friend in trouble is a great thing; but a Savior who is a friend precisely because He saves is better! So when He condescends and enters our sea it is with lowliness and loftiness, it is with humanity and deity. Jesus means for his people to reach out to a mighty Savior who goes before them. So it says, *He meant to pass by them (48c)*. This may seem puzzling at first. Matthew and Luke do not include these words. Mark wants to stress the object-lessons of Jesus in things like this. Jesus pictures himself as a Being who is above it all and would be powerful enough to conquer all of our dangers; but is this Being good? Does He want to?

2. Well, it had the exact effect Jesus was looking for: *but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified (49-50a)*. The word **ghost** (*phantasma*) is not the usual word used for spirit (*pneuma*), so that all they were thinking was that ‘this must be the horrifying monster that’s trying to kill us!’ I wonder how many people sitting here think of God like that when He approaches in the middle of our mess. And how does Jesus respond to terrified thoughts like that in his people? *But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (50b)*. How do you feel when you hear those words? Or, can you even force yourself to ever hear Him saying this to you? The words “it is I” is just a different way to say *ego eimi* which is literally “I am I AM,” which Jesus constantly employs in John’s Gospel. So He is saying: No, it’s not an evil all-powerful force. There is no such thing! The only all-powerful One is Good! It’s Me. And why did they calm down? Because “his sheep hear his voice” [Jn. 10:4]. *And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased (51a)*. In Matthew’s Gospel we are told that Peter went out with Jesus but sunk, so that when Jesus got into the boat with them it was with Peter [cf. 14:28-32]. Why did Peter sink? Well if you listen to Rob Bell, it is because Peter did not believe in himself and Jesus was saying to the disciples “Come out on the water with me because *I* believe in *you*—*you* can do this!” Well, let us ignore that simple-minded

blasphemy for the moment and listen to Jesus' own words to Peter and the disciples together. He calls Peter on this occasion: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" [14:31]. *What* did he doubt? Well in spite of confessing Jesus as "the Son of God" [14:33], they are still expose as failing to recognize Jesus in a way that they should have.

3. *And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened (51b-52).* Notice that word "FOR." When it is used as a logical connective in a sentence, it means "be-cause." So the disciples were utterly astounded, not primarily because of the storm, not primarily because of Jesus walking on water and calming the storm. They were astounded that He did this BE-CAUSE—in other words the primary cause that Mark wants to focus on for their astonishment was that they did not understand what they had just seen *before* getting on the boat. They had seen Jesus' works; they had repeated Jesus' own words back to Him (like worshiping Him as the Son of God); and yet they could not put that 'two' and the other 'two' together. Jesus is treating this as sin. This is a morally blameworthy failure to connect the dots.

II. HOW THE WORLD RECOGNIZES AND MISRECOGNIZES JESUS

A) The World Recognizes Jesus Immediately

1. *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him (53-54).* Yes the disciples had more access to Jesus' identity than the crowds, and that truth was very important. But by sitting on it with their hardened hearts, they found themselves in a situation where at one moment they couldn't tell the difference between Jesus and a ghost, while the unbelievers immediately recognized him! There are two ways to take this. The wrong way to take this is to choose which limited perspective you like better. You could say, on the one hand, "Yeah, but the disciples had the more important relationship to Jesus and knowledge of God," or, on the other, "Exactly, where does knowledge of God by itself get you—you miss what Jesus is really doing for real people!" If you find yourself reacting at either extreme, then your heart is hardened because you refuse to recognize **everything about Jesus** that He wants to display in this account.

2. When those who are 'closest to God' begin to neglect and despise and minimize the importance of knowing God, one of the ways that God judges them is to make their knowledge into unperceiving dead weight. God has to frequently humble those who claim to know it all, but who really despise knowing him more, by showing himself to the

unbeliever—by having the unbeliever immediately recognize him. The main contrast in these two episodes being back to back is that the disciples did not recognize him even in all his glory, while the misguided carnal crowds immediately recognized him and started moving fast in his name. “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor” [Prov. 15:33]. God will sooner honor the belief of the unbeliever than He will the lazy, arrogant disbelief of the professing believer.

B) The World Recognizes Jesus Horizontally

1. What did these fleshly people who recognized Jesus do once they saw Him? It says that they *ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was* (55). Running around, bringing weak, sickly people to Jesus? That’s the **Social Gospel!** I’m against “running around” and ministering to “sickly people”! Have you ever been guilty of throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Well, if you respond that way, that’s you! I would point out that they brought these people “to Jesus” and not to some lesser resource. Notice that Mark does not bother to mention anything about the disciples serving aggressively in this way. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they didn’t lift a finger. But that is not the emphasis. How many different times and ways did the world misrecognize Jesus by doing a lot of moving around? After Jesus had fed the five thousand, John tells us that, “they were about to come and take him by force to make him king” [6:15]; and Judas scolded the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, since that inwardly-driven act of worship wasted a natural resource that should have fed the poor [cf. Mk. 14:5]. Many will use his name but never know him—“Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims” [Acts 19:13].

On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’ [Mat. 7:22-23].

There are a lot of people in the world who are ready to ‘accept Jesus into their heart,’ so long as He remains nothing but a good moral teacher, a self-help guru, a cosmic shrink, a political mascot, a feeder of the poor, an example for them to feed and clothe and so on. But the moment that Jesus is the holy God who is offended by our sin and the only sacrifice who takes away that sin—the moment He is that, then the very mention of his name becomes a phantom!

2. *And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.* Notice that Jesus healed “as many as touched” him, so that unlike in his hometown where He would not honor the lack of faith that dishonored him, here he honors this weak, misguided faith because at least it made much of him in drawing attention to his power and his goodness. If you are mad at the new Social Gospel getting away with minimizing doctrinal truth and drawing a crowd only to bring them to things less than Jesus, then maybe you and I should start immediately recognizing the lowly when it washes up on our shores and run around and bring people on stretchers if necessary. The world will only recognize Jesus as a good moral teacher, a healer of felt-needs, a man of wisdom, a religious leader, an inspiring martyr, an example, a figure-head for social action, but they will not recognize him as God in the flesh on behalf of his people. But if the devil has his way, this false recognition *will recognize* him immediately. If that bothers you, maybe you lovers of truth need to go out and get some more “immediately” in your doctrine.

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – One of the more simple objections that modern people have brought up against Christianity is that the biblical accounts of miracles, like walking on water, were all natural to believe back in the day. That was when people did not understand the ‘laws of nature,’ and therefore they ascribed anything they didn’t understand to the movements of God or the gods. C. S. Lewis applies some good common sense to this not-very-well-thought-out idea:

When St Joseph discovered that his bride was pregnant he was ‘minded to put her away.’ He knew enough biology for that. Otherwise, of course he would not have regarded pregnancy as a proof of infidelity. When he accepted the Christian explanation, he regarded it as a miracle precisely because he knew enough of the Laws of Nature to know that this was a suspension of them. When the disciples saw Christ walking on the water they were frightened: they would not have been frightened unless they had known the Laws of Nature and known that this was an exception. If a man had no conception of a regular order in Nature, then of course he could not notice departures from that order.²

To the Saint – When we are in life’s greatest storms, instead of going to God we assume, as we look at him, that He is coming to us as a phantom. The reason is that we are not performing well. Life is crumbling—Oh great there’s a supernatural being coming too! This

² C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1997, fp. 1970); p. 26

can't be good! Jesus says to his own "Do not fear—it is I." When God draws near to one of his own, it is not just a phantom, even an omnipotent holy phantom. No, the one who is invading your world and pressing in on you with his truth and his eternity that is swallowing up the 'reality' you thought was real and forcing you to come to some quick conclusions—this Almighty Spirit approaching you says to not be afraid because He is good. He has been good to you. You know him. That's what Jesus was saying to them—it's Me, the One who has stuck closer to you than a brother. This is really an episode about the very intentional goodness of God toward us. As you learn more about God you find that you know longer recognize him—'Fear him / don't fear'—which is it?! Well, if you are in Christ, if He has given to you to believe, and if you fear Him, then you have no need to fear anything else, and in Christ you see the love of God toward you, so *don't fear* death and judgment.

To the Sinner – How do you get "in Christ" so that you do not have this fear?

The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" [Rom. 3:23] and "the wages of sin is death" [Rom. 6:23], but "God sent forth his Son" [Gal. 4:4] and "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" [1 Pet. 2:24]. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" [2 Cor. 5:21], so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [Rom. 10:13]. So "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" [Acts 16:31].