

barefoot on a long journey. There are a number of theories about why Mark seems more lenient, including the idea that his Gospel reflects the practice of the early church rather than what Jesus originally said. However, we cannot discount the possibility that Jesus sent his disciples on mission on more than one occasion, and gave different instructions for different occasions; and this resulted in some confusion about what was said when! Whilst it is important to clarify these issues, we must not forget the main point, which is that the missionary should go with little support, save trust in the Lord and the provision He gives through others.

The last main instruction in this text is Jesus' comments about being welcomed or rejected as missionaries of God in any place. The subject was fresh in Jesus' mind after being rejected Himself by His home town! The first instruction (6:10) requires the missionary to accept the first offer of hospitality given, and not to go around a place trying to find the best. The wisdom of such advice is obvious, and if it was ignored the Gospel would clearly be compromised. But what does it mean when Mark says 'as you leave, shake off the dust from your feet as evidence against them'? There are several possible explanations. In terms of hospitality, the first thing that should be done for a visitor in ancient times was to give them the facility to wash their feet, so this action would be a 'sign' of hospitality which had not been offered or received. Another possibility is that it was common for Jewish people to do this precise action of 'shaking the dust off their feet', when coming back into Jewish territory having been in Gentile territory. They did this so that nothing unholy would be transferred into Israel. It is possible that Jesus suggested using this sign as a way of saying to those who had rejected the Gospel that they were being left behind as unholy. It was a sharp reminder of the reality of the Gospel call.

Application

Throughout this passage, we are reminded that what was written about only happened because Jesus was preaching the Gospel, teaching, healing the sick and casting out demons (6:2,5,7,12,13). This is what caused the rejection of Jesus by His own people, and this is the ministry the disciples were called to follow and for which they were given instructions. All too often the mission of the church is compromised because people lose sight of the essential call of God to do these things. In addition, Jesus' amazement was at the lack of faith He found in people who would not accept the evidence of the ministry He performed.

We cannot be the church of God today and ignore the same call to preach, teach and demonstrate the Gospel. There will be some things we will do differently today because we live in different times, but the essentials remain. I find it amazing to find churches which have questionnaires about what people think the church should be doing. It is a pointless exercise! Jesus has given the church its marching orders and they are clear. We have to interpret them and work out how we can call people to repentance, teach people about God, care for people's needs and confront the demons within our world and cast them out. Although people will come up with many other things which they think make up the essence of being the church, you will find that the Gospel adds few things which do not fit within this short list. I have come to the simple conclusion therefore that this is what the church should be doing.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is it always true that people are not fully understood in their own home setting? In the home? Or in the church?
2. Are there large numbers of sick people waiting for healing ministry to be given within the church? What sort of ministry is appropriate?
3. Discuss the value of those sent from the church to preach the Gospel, going in twos.

Discipleship

Today, try to imagine yourself in the situation of one of the disciples in this text. You are required to preach, to teach, heal the sick and cast out demons and yet live like a pauper, relying on other people's generosity! Can you imagine circumstances like this, or what you would feel like? Today may be rather different from Jesus' day, but He still calls people to give up everything in order to do His will. How does such a call affect you?

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, may we speak to You honestly and listen to You carefully, so that we may learn to distinguish Your voice from the clamour all around us. We long to learn Your will and to put it into effect within our lives, and in this way, demonstrate our abiding faith in You; AMEN

Prayer

There are many things we do not understand, O Lord. We praise Your holy name, and yet all around us voices which speak out against You shout louder and louder still. Come amongst us with Your judgement and Your power, O Lord, and expose what is right and what is wrong, not so that we may claim victory, but so that Your Name be praised throughout the earth! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Decisions

Pray for young people who are learning, even if they do not fully know it, how to make decisions. What they learn will stay with them throughout their lives. Pray for young people themselves, and pray that God will move in the hearts of the people of your nation to motivate them to offer help to young people as they grow, develop and make decisions.

Meditation

(some reflections on the prophecies to the seven churches in Revelation)

Wait patiently for the Lord, and test all things;
And never forget the power of God's love.
Don't be afraid in the face of suffering;
And do not let the devil make things worse for you.
Hold fast to your faith, even if all seems lost;
And never accept teaching which doesn't point to Christ.
Persist in love and faith, and in patient endurance;
And do not give way to Satan's deceit.
Be alive in the Spirit, and be worthy of your call;
And don't turn a blind eye to Christ's coming.
See the door that Christ has held open before you;
And never let go of the treasures you have been given.
Obtain gold from the Lord, and you will always be rich;
And don't let the fire in your hearts go out!

Bible Study - Mark 6:1-13

¹ Jesus went away from there and returned to His home town, and His disciples followed Him. ² On the Sabbath He began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astonished. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom He has been given, so that powerful deeds are being done by His hands?' ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are these not His sisters here with us?' And they took offense at Him. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not dishonoured, except in their home towns, amongst their own relatives, and in their own homes.' ⁵ He was not able to do any great work of power there, apart from healing a few sick people by laying His hands on them; ⁶ and He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Jesus then travelled around the villages teaching, ⁷ and He summoned the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits. ⁸ He gave them strict orders to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ and they were to wear sandals, but no extra tunic. ¹⁰ He told them, 'Wherever you go into a house, stay there until you leave the region; ¹¹ and wherever you are not welcomed and they refuse to listen to you, then as you leave, shake off the dust from your feet as evidence against them.' ¹² So they went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

Review

This reading appears to be something of a small break in the series of stories which make up Mark's Gospel. Firstly, there is a report of what happened when Jesus travelled to His home town

of Nazareth and away from Capernaum, the place that had been at the centre of His ministry. It was not a successful visit and many of the people with whom He had grown up rejected Jesus; it was not easy for Him. Secondly, Jesus gathered His disciples and gave them instructions about how to follow in His footsteps to do the preaching, teaching and works of power that were the mark of His ministry. However, the passage is not to be passed over lightly because it is very important, and we must put ourselves in Mark's position if we are to understand why.

When Mark wrote his Gospel it was only a few decades after Jesus had died at the hands of His own people, the Jews. The church had grown rapidly, and we can easily imagine some of the issues that would have been important to the groups of followers of Jesus who made up the early church. A question that would have been asked is this; 'Why is it that when so many of Jesus' own people, the Jews, disowned Him and would not accept Him as Messiah?' We know this was an important issue because of the way that it crops up in the New Testament in a number of places (see, for example, Paul's agonising over the issue in Romans chapters 9,10 and 11). In his Gospel, Mark had already begun to give an answer to this question by describing how the religious authorities rejected Jesus and His ministry (2:6,16,24, 3:6); and this passage adds a further explanation by describing the rejection of Jesus by His own family. The tragedy of this is all the more poignant because it comes after Jesus had performed the most astonishing miracles and healings, even raising a child from the dead (5:35-43). The evidence of His work as the Messiah was there for all to see.

Another important topic of discussion in the early church was the subject of how the mission of the church was to be done. It seems that the early disciples were well aware of the importance of Jesus' commission to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:19), and to do what Jesus had done in His own ministry; to preach and teach, and do works of power including healing people (as in 6:13). However, the early church was genuinely concerned to know what Jesus said about how this should be done, and each of the Gospels addresses this issue in one way or another (see Matt 10:1f., Luke 4:14f., and John 3, and 21:15f. for example). Mark describes what a missionary should wear, how they should behave and under what circumstances should they be expected to continue their ministry or move on. The message confirms that Jesus called His disciples to be active missionaries living a simple life without pretence or glamour, and dependent upon the sustenance of Almighty God. There are some differences between what Mark says here and what is said at similar places in Matthew and Mark, but there are reasons for the emphases of each evangelist, and further study will help us understand them.

There are some very important sayings of Jesus within this passage. His unhappy words 'Prophets are not dishonoured, except in their home towns ...' (6:4) may well have been a well known saying of His own day about prophets (see Isaiah 8:14,15), but from Jesus' mouth, they sound all the more tragic. Even to this day, some think of this as a general truth; but Jesus clearly used it to make a point about the rejection of His ministry by His own people. By contrast, the rest of our reading demonstrates the Gospel priority of the ministry of preaching, teaching and works of power including healing and deliverance. This is what Jesus did, and it is what He has always asked of His disciples (6:12,13). These things should lie at the heart of the church's ministry even today.

Going Deeper

This passage is an important section of Mark's Gospel where we pause from the hectic round of activity in Jesus' ministry, and consider some important issues. At the least, it tells us about the structure of Mark's Gospel; and whilst the rejection of Jesus by His own people is tragic, it is Jesus' mission instruction which Christians value highly today.

The structure of Mark's Gospel

The early part of Jesus' ministry was conducted in and around Galilee, with Capernaum being described as Jesus' 'home' (see 1:21 and 2:1). But Mark knew Jesus came from Nazareth (1:9) and sometimes called Him 'Jesus of Nazareth' (1:24), so at some time, Jesus must have moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, possibly before the beginning of His ministry, but we do not know when or why. Nevertheless, most of what we have read about Jesus' ministry so far in Mark has been in this region, apart from one trip across the lake to Geresá and the region of the Decapolis (5:1-20). After this passage, Jesus moves about more extensively, venturing out toward Tyre and Sidon (7:24), Bethsaida (8:22), Caesarea Philippi (8:27), and eventually Jerusalem (11f.). Jesus' rejection at Nazareth was the beginning of the end of the Galilean phase of His ministry.

It is also interesting to note that after Jesus' first preaching and healing miracles, there was a crisis when the Pharisees rejected Jesus (3:6), and after that, Mark described Jesus' general

ministry and then the calling of the twelve disciples (3:7-19). Now, in our passage today after a couple of more chapters of Jesus' teaching and His signs and wonders, Jesus is again rejected (this time by His family) and Mark follows this by a description of Jesus' general ministry (6:5,6) and then the commission of the twelve to go out in pairs to do this ministry themselves. The pattern is clear; twice Jesus has been rejected and then the emphasis of the Gospel falls on the message of the Kingdom of God and the disciples who are called to proclaim it. At the very least, we can say that it points towards a possible structure within Mark's Gospel, and we will; see whether this develops further as the Gospel continues.

The rejection of Jesus in Nazareth

Although Nazareth is not mentioned here, this is where Jesus' family lived and so this is what is meant by His 'home town' (6:1). Following custom, and just as Jesus had been asked to do in Capernaum after his baptism (1:21), Jesus was asked to teach. It is difficult to imagine that the nature of Jesus' message had changed much from what He had said in Capernaum, but here in Nazareth, they were astonished, but in quite a different way than in Capernaum. The people there knew Jesus and knew His family, and they therefore believed that they knew 'the real' Jesus well, and the transformation in Him by the Holy Spirit was more than they could take. They asked questions about where Jesus had obtained the 'wisdom' which enabled Him to do the 'powerful deeds' (6:2) which were claimed. They lived in days when all manner of religious sects claimed special knowledge and power, and 'secrets' by which special things could be done. 'Which sect had brainwashed this young man?' They appeared to be saying (6:2,3).

In verse 3, Jesus is described as 'the carpenter, the son of Mary ...' and four brothers. This description of Jesus is strange and not normal for the day; a man was usually spoken of as His father's son. The issue is not helped by the fact that almost every one of the most ancient texts of Mark's Gospel reads differently at this point; some have the words as I have translated above; 'the carpenter, son of Mary ...' but others say 'the carpenter's son, of Mary ...' and one says 'the carpenter, son of Joseph, son of Mary ...' Tradition generally suggests that Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, had died, and this would explain why Mark might have omitted his name. Now, if Jesus had been the 'eldest' son of a family (of four brothers and some sisters) and Joseph had died, then he would have been expected to take the place of the father and provide for his mother and family, but He had gone away on a ministry which the local people did not understand. This could explain their antipathy towards Him; but it is pure conjecture.

The famous saying 'prophets are not dishonoured, except in their home towns' is a proverbial saying which probably goes back well before the time of Jesus, and it is likely that He did not 'invent' this, but used it in part, to explain the rejection of those he knew. However, Mark picks up on the important theme of faith (see verse 6), for in the recent works of power done by Jesus, faith had become increasingly important (4:40, 5:34,36). Jesus said that in this particular setting, where He was working with the scepticism of people who thought they knew Him but did not, their lack of faith prevented Him from doing God's works of power in their midst (6:5,6). Be cautious, Jesus did not make a blanket statement that lack of faith was a general barrier to God's power to work. Some people try to say that today, but it is neither Scriptural nor true.

The sending out of the twelve

Jesus' instructed the disciples to go out in pairs (6:7), and this has been an important principle for mission amongst many Christians for centuries. There is a lively debate about whether this instruction of Jesus is absolute, which means that the church should not send out people individually. The fact of the matter is that Scripture includes this instruction here and also in Luke's commission to the 'seventy', but where Matthew (10:5f.) and Luke (9:1-6) report this instruction they do not mention going in pairs. Because Scripture is therefore not unified about this, the best way to respond to this is to accept that this is good advice, but it is unwise to follow it too slavishly. History has plenty of examples of missionaries who have gone out singly and done great works for the Lord (for example, William Carey in India, 1761-1834).

The instructions for journeying (6:8,9) are spartan, with no provision, money or 'bag' (probably meaning the begging bag used by many travellers to gain help as a last resort). However, Mark did allow the missionaries a staff and sandals, and one shirt on their back, but not two. Our difficulty is that Luke's version does not allow a staff and does not mention sandals (Luke 9:3), and Matthew's version allows neither (Matt 10:9). It is generally reckoned that allowing a staff to be carried gave the missionary more stability and was also a tool to ward off wild beasts and snakes, and whilst people did go around barefoot in Israel in Jesus' day it was difficult to go