

THE APOSTLES OF JESUS CHRIST

MARK 6:7-56

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Today we are going to take a brief look at three Bible stories found in our Scripture reading. The first is the story of Jesus sending out the twelve apostles. The second is the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. And, the third is the story of Jesus walking on the water.

In each one of these stories, we will attempt to focus our attention on the apostles of Jesus Christ. I want to point out some of their weak points so that you can see them as the people they really were, that is people who are just like you and me. And, I also want you to notice how graciously Jesus accepted them and helped them in their weaknesses.

First of all, let us take a look at the story of Jesus sending out the twelve. The fact that Jesus sent them out the way He did meant that these men needed more than just the teaching they were receiving from Jesus in order to be the kind of witnesses that would change the world. Besides just watching Jesus in action, they needed to receive some practical training in evangelism.

They had been with Jesus for a year. They had seen how Jesus healed the sick, and cast out demons. They watched Jesus teaching people, and they saw them repent from their sins. They saw how Jesus forgave sin, bringing peace to the souls of people. All this was very valuable training. In addition to this experience, they would soon receive the Holy Spirit. It seems that the knowledge they received by being with Jesus plus the power of the Holy Spirit should be all that they would need to be good witnesses after Jesus ascended back to heaven.

But, Jesus knew that they needed more than just knowledge. They also needed some practical experience. When Jesus sent out these twelve men, He was not instructing them how to make evangelism a way of life. Instead, He was giving them specific instructions to witness to as many people as possible in a short period of time. It was an intense period of evangelistic training.

I believe part of the reason Jesus did this, and the reason why we need to receive similar training today, is because many people lack the confidence they need to do aggressive evangelism. Many of us are afraid that our message will be rejected or, even worse, that people will oppose us. For reasons that are not good, we often feel shy about sharing our faith. Sometimes we are just too busy or lazy to take the time out to witness to the people around us. And, often we just don't know what to say. These are human weaknesses that we all can relate to, and I believe that the apostles shared the same kind of weaknesses that we have.

So, one reason I believe that Jesus sent out the twelve was for their own good. He knew that this experience would increase their confidence to share their faith.

But, it was not just for the apostles' sakes that Jesus sent them out. Jesus had a burden for the masses, and He knew that by sending the twelve apostles out, He could multiply His efforts in reaching them. MATTHEW 9:36-38 tells us that, right before Jesus sent the apostles out on this mission, "He saw the crowds, and He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, '*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.*'"

Jesus was not trying to give His students training at the expense of other people. No, it was His compassion for the masses which was the main inspiration behind this first apostolic mission. Jesus mainly wanted to help reach the masses with the good news, but I believe He also knew that the twelve apostles would benefit from the experience.

When we try to apply this story to our own experience, we must be careful to examine our motives. Our efforts at evangelism must be inspired by a strong love for the lost. We must see people as Jesus saw them, like sheep without a shepherd and not just as opportunities to gain experience in evangelism.

There are certain things about this mission that can be applied to all times. And, there are certain things that do not apply to all times. For instance, MARK 6:8 says that the apostles were to “take nothing for the journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, and no money.” This kind of advice would not apply in most situations today. MATTHEW 10:5 records another instruction which says that the apostles were “not to go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans.” But, we must preach to people from all nations. In MARK 6:11, Jesus instructs the twelve to leave a place if they are not welcome. But, today missionaries will often stay on even when they meet strong resistance. Obviously, the instructions given here were meant to keep the apostles pressing on quickly with their work so that a lot of ground could be covered in a short period of time. These instructions that I just mentioned should not be applied to the overall mission of the Church.

And yet, there are certain instructions that do apply to the overall mission of the Church. For instance, MARK 6:7 says that Jesus sent them out two by two. When the Church sends people to witness in difficult places, it's best for them not to be alone. The same verse says that Jesus gave them authority over evil spirits. When we witness today we do so with the same authority. When we go out to witness, we go in His name.

And, the things that happened during and after the mission should also be things that the church can relate to and learn from when it does its work of evangelism. Verse 12 says, “They went out and preached that people should repent.” In the original language this does not mean that they told people to repent, but that they preached in such a way as to produce repentance. I used to know a man who would stand on the street corner and shout out to the people who were passing by to repent or go to hell. That man was telling people to repent, but his preaching was not producing repentance. On the other hand, I have heard people preach in such a way as to cause people to repent with tears without ever telling them directly to repent. What the apostles did on their first mission produced repentance.

And, there was also a demonstration of power which means that the apostles were exercising faith. Verse 13 says that “they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” This must have required a lot of faith on the part of the apostles. They had been watching Jesus do these things, and now it was their turn. And, even though Jesus told them that they could do it, the first time any one of them came face to face with a demon-possessed person must have been a tremendous challenge. To cast out a demon for the first time must have required a lot of faith.

And, perhaps the most important thing to notice are the results of the mission. There are two very obvious results. One is that “Jesus’ name became well known.” And, the other is that “King Herod heard about it.” Both these results are recorded in MARK 6:14. Christ's name became known, and the powers of evil were alerted to the fact. Throughout the ages, when evangelistic campaigns are effectively carried out, these two things happen.

And, finally notice how the apostles reported everything that happened. In our modern world where computers and statistics are so important, it is interesting to notice that no statistics are recorded. There is no record of how many people were healed, how many demons were cast out, or how many decisions were made. They told everything to Jesus, but it was decided not to record the results for men to see. How opposite this is from the way we do things today, where great effort is taken to report the results of our efforts in detail to one another and little time is spent talking to Jesus.

We can learn some valuable lessons from this first apostolic mission. It was designed for a specific time and purpose, but some of the instructions and things that happened still apply to our day and age.

But, now I must return to the main thing I am trying to emphasize in this sermon, and that is the human weakness of these apostles. Their mission was successful, but in the end they were very tired. This is clearly indicated by the words of Jesus at the end of MARK 6:31. Jesus said to the apostles, “*Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.*”

Jesus understood the spiritual and emotional exhaustion of these apostles, and so He invited them to set aside their work for a period of time. They were to come with Jesus. First they would be in a boat, alone with Jesus. Then they would row their boat to a solitary place. But, when they got there, the place was anything but solitary.

Verse 33 and 34 tell us that many people on shore realized where they were headed, so they ran there ahead of them. When they landed, a large crowd of people had already gathered. At first glance, it seems like the apostles

were cheated of their rest. But, on the other hand, nothing was required of them but to sit with the crowd and listen to Jesus teach. So, in a real sense, they did have a rest from responsibility. For a while they did not have to do anything. All they had to do was to sit and listen. It was a kind of spiritual retreat. Jesus did not rest, but the apostles did.

When we come to the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, we again are confronted with the weakness of the apostles. But, this time the weakness is not exhaustion; rather, it is a failure to obey without questioning the command of Jesus. When it began to become late in the day, the disciples wanted to send the crowds away to get something to eat. But, Jesus did not want to send them away. He wanted to feed them. Jesus said to His apostles, "*You give them something to eat.*" At that point, we read in MARK 6:37 that the apostles said to Jesus, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" These words are words of protest. They protested because they were not willing to obey at all cost. They did not say, "we don't have that much money." Instead they said, "we don't want to spend that much money." Jesus had asked them to feed the crowds, and the only way that seemed possible to feed them was a way that seemed unreasonable to them, so they protested.

And then, we go to the story of Jesus walking on the water and we see again the weakness of the apostles. Jesus commanded the apostles to row their boat against the wind to the opposite shore. This time they obeyed without any recorded protest. But, the path of obedience was very difficult. Verse 48 says that "they were straining at the oars, because the wind was against them." They were straining in the very path of obedience.

And then, Jesus appeared, walking on the water. When He got in the boat with them, the storm immediately died down. When the apostles saw this, verse 51 says that "they were completely amazed." And, verse 52 says that the reason why they were amazed was because they did not understand the miracle of the loaves because their hearts were hardened. The weakness that we see here on the part of the apostles is a dullness or a lack of understanding. They could not understand, because their hearts were hardened to understanding. And, I believe it was their lack of willingness to obey which brought this dullness on. In the case of these disciples, one bad thing led to another. They protested when Jesus commanded them to do something. This caused them to miss the truth that Jesus was trying to communicate through the miracle. Jesus is the source of all life. He is the "bread of life." Because they did not understand this, they were then amazed when Jesus walked on the water and when He calmed the storm. They were amazed because their hearts had become hardened to the truth.

These were the apostles that Jesus called. They were people who experienced lack of confidence and tiredness and disobedience, and lack of understanding. But, they were the ones that Jesus chose. Jesus chose them despite their weaknesses.

This thought brings a lot of encouragement to my soul, because all too often I feel tired. And, I sometimes complain and protest instead of obeying. And, I find myself amazed at what the Lord is doing when I should have understood.

Thank God that, as we enter the new year, we can be encouraged knowing that our Lord can even use us in our weakness to serve Him and to bring glory to His name.