

The Sending Of The Twelve

He went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching. ⁷ He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. ⁸ He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts. ⁹ They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic. ¹⁰ He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave from there. ¹¹ Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them.” ¹² So they went off and preached repentance. ¹³ They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:6b-13)



The Exhortation to the Apostles | James Tissot | ca. 1890 | Brooklyn Museum NYC | PD-US

It might be helpful to think of this passage as the “halftime” talk by the coach - in this case Jesus speaking to his “team,” the disciples that have gathered around him. The “first half” of the Galilean public ministry was centered on Jesus’ navigation of the tide that seemed to ebb and flow - sometimes propelling his mission, sometimes hindering it. Five Sundays ago, Jesus faced opposition from the scribes of Jerusalem who accused him of being in league with Satan as well as family members who thought he was out of his mind. The “playing field” was becoming more clear, revealing the true members of Jesus’ family in support of his mission to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom of God. Next, Jesus began to teach the disciples about the Kingdom via agricultural parables: the farm workers have their role but the real *dynamis* (power) to make the kingdom grow is of God. In the midst of the parable of the mustard seed there is a first reference to the ultimate extent of the mission to all the nations, as the parable echoes the Prophet Ezekiel and Daniel and their oracles of God’s promise being extended to all the nations of the world.

The Sunday gospels that follow we are witnesses to the extraordinary character of Jesus’ power as he stills a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:35-41); casts out a demonic legion (5:1-20); raises Jairus’ daughter and heals a woman sick for 12 years (5:21-43). These miracles show that Jesus has power over the realms of nature, the demonic, and death. Following this powerful series of miracles, Jesus

enters his hometown where the people “*take offense*” at him and “*So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.*” (Mark 6:5-6) Jesus is amazed (*ethaumazen*) at their unbelief (6:1-6a). The word used can also be taken as “to wonder,” and it uses the form that indicates present and ongoing amazement.

And now it is “halftime.” This Sunday’s gospel amounts to the playbook for the next phase of the Galilean mission. Jesus “*went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching,*” and seemingly determined that it is time to expand the scope of his mission by increasing the number of villages that are to be reached with the good news of the Kingdom. The “second half” starting lineup has been chosen and they are sent to their task which is defined by

- the way they are to move about the countryside: two by two.
- the logistics: nothing but sandals and a walking stick - and to accept the first hospitality offered.
- the foundation of their mission: the power from Jesus to cast out demons, heal the sick, and preach repentance.

With the instructions fresh in their mind: “¹² *So they went off and preached repentance.* ¹³ *They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*” That is all we hear about their mission save the simple conclusion: “*The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.*” (v.30)

The miracles of the preceding chapter in the Gospel according to Mark demonstrate his divine powers. Jesus overcomes the life-destroying powers of demonic possession, chronic illness, and death. The gospel two weeks prior contained the stories of Jairus/his daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage. Each account tells of an imperfect faith, yet enough faith that God enters into their lives in a way that is healing and ultimately life-giving. For Jairus’ daughter, it is the restoration of life; for the woman with the hemorrhage it is being restored to the fullness of life as her illness will no longer keep her from living life to its fullness in this lifetime. The miracles, viewed together even as they were told together, are the vestige of Jesus’ fuller mission: that all might have life eternal, free from death, and have life completely. Jesus is forming new family bonds, no longer centered on blood relationships, but on faith and those willing to act on that faith.

Their faith forms a striking contrast to the reception Jesus receives in his hometown. Jesus astonishes those gathered in the synagogue with his teaching and healing (vv. 1–2; Mark 1:21–28). Readers might expect an example of healing or exorcism to follow as in Capernaum, but it does not. As Perkins [591-2] notes: “Jesus’ natural family were excluded from the circle of believers in an earlier episode (3:21, 31–35). That episode establishes the contrast between the Twelve, whom Jesus chose to be with him (3:14); the natural family of Jesus (3:21, 31); and the wider circle of Jesus’ followers, his new family, those who do the will of God (3:35). Jesus’ return to Nazareth, with members of his new family (the disciples; v. 1) raised the question left open in an earlier episode: Will those with familial and social ties to Jesus believe?” Mark 6:1-6 answers the question: no

The rejection at Nazareth is intimately related to the subsequent mission of the Twelve (6:7–13). The tension between faith and unbelief permeates both accounts. Moreover in 6:11 there is a distinct indication that the disciples will also experience rejection. Mark the Evangelist shows that unbelief is the context in which the Christian mission advances and that rejection is an experience common to the Lord and the Church. This point had immediate relevance for the gospel-writer’s own hard-pressed community. It is probable that he recognized in the juxtaposition of rejection and mission a pattern confirmed in the rejection of Jesus by his own people, climaxed by crucifixion and resurrection, which created the apostolic mission.

Commentary

Rejected by his own family and home crowd, Jesus preaches elsewhere and sends his twelve disciples out with special instructions and powers. It is good to remember that the apostles are not sent out as a reaction to the rejection. The mission of the apostles is part of a larger plan. First, Jesus had called them personally (1:16–20). Then he selected twelve special ones to accompany him (3:13–19). The Twelve, tutored by Jesus and present with him as he healed many from sickness and evil (chapters 3–5), are now ready to become apostles, in Greek, literally the “ones sent out.”

It is also important to remember who is being sent. They were not extraordinary men with easy access to the corridors of power or privilege. They were fishermen and a tax collector. Their preparation was not extensive – they were no scribes or scholars. They had not always been exemplars of faith. One need only to recall the episode of the storm at sea when Jesus spoke to the disciples: “*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*” (4:40). These are the ones chosen and sent. If that's what Jesus' requires, most of us are well qualified. The power to be missionaries and perform the miraculous doesn't necessarily depend upon the faith of the messenger, but the authority/power (*exousia*) given by Jesus.

Two by Two

Missionary pairs appear to have been characteristic of early Christianity. Jesus initially called pairs of brothers (1:16–20). Acts refers to Peter and John (Acts 3:11; 8:9), to Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:25–26), and to companions whom Peter takes with him to Cornelius (Acts 10:23). The dangers of travel in antiquity make such arrangements necessary. Other interpreters have suggested that the use of pairs should be associated with the legal requirement for two witnesses to testify in a case (Num 35:30; Deut 19:15) since a judicial note is introduced in the gesture of judgment against those who refuse to hear the messengers of the gospel (v. 11).

Provisions and Logistics. In our Markan gospel we read:

“⁸ *He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts.* ⁹ *They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic.*” (Mark 6:8-9).

While these instructions are sparse compared to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, so too is Mark's prose style in general. For comparison's sake consider the other synoptic gospels' missionary instructions:

⁸ *Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.*⁹ *Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts;¹⁰ no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep.*¹ (Matthew 10:8–10)

³ *He said to them, “Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic.*⁴ *Whatever house you enter, stay there and leave from there.* (Luke 9:3)

³ *Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves.*⁴ *Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way.* (Luke 10:3-4; instructions for a later mission)

³⁵ *He said to them, “When I sent you forth without a money bag or a sack or sandals, were you in need of anything?” “No, nothing,” they replied.*³⁶ *He said to them, “But now one who has a*

money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one. (Luke 22:35-36; instructions during Holy Week)

Why the variant in the missionary commands? The early instructions agree regarding money/travel sack, etc, there is a slight variation in terms of sandals. Some scholars offer that Mark is reporting early Christian missionary practice, more akin to the later mission instructions in Luke 23:35-36 instructions in which missionaries are sent into the world with baggage, gold and sword – and given the context, sandals and a second tunic/cloak. That seems a bit of a stretch given as the later Lukan instructions are, by comparison, a full set of gear. The early mission instructions really only differ as regards sandals.

Perkins [595] reports that the tradition carried in Matthew and the early chapters of Luke might well be a means to distinguish the missionaries from other wandering preachers of the day. The Cynics were noted for carrying a bag and a staff; the staff was sometimes used against the audience as well as against animals. The Cynics challenged the presumptions of culture by claiming that it created unnatural needs and passions.

“Another thread of thought is that not allowing the second tunic or sandals (Matthew and early Luke), emphasized the urgency of eschatological judgment. Such judgment can be seen in Luke’s gospel where the towns that reject the message can expect to experience God’s wrath (Luke 10:11–12). Mark’s “*testimony against them*” (v. 11) suggests condemnation in the judgment given the context of preaching repentance (v.12). In any case eschatological judgment is elsewhere evident in Mark (e.g. Mark 11).” (Perkins, 595)

Mark’s instructions permit the disciples adequate clothing, but not a second tunic, which would have provided protection from the cold night air. Rather, they are to trust God to provide lodging each night. They are not permitted to carry money or extra provisions from one place to another. The disciples were to depend on local hospitality. Thus it is clear that the disciples are not engaged in preaching and healing in order to make money, which may have subjected them to the charge of being religious charlatans or magicians. Since they were required to remain in the first house that welcomed them (v. 10), they could not move to a household that offered more luxurious accommodations. Mark lacks telling the reason for such hospitality referred to in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 – *the laborer deserves his keep/payment*.

Instructions for the Mission. ¹⁰ *He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave from there. ¹¹ Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them.”*

The final instruction provides a response for those who reject the disciples. Shaking dust off one’s feet was a gesture of cursing a place. The elements of curse and divine condemnation are more evident in

Matthew 10:14 (*Whoever will not receive you or listen to your words—go outside that house or town and shake the dust from your feet.*) and

Luke 10:10–12 (¹⁰ *Whatever town you enter and they do not receive you, go out into the streets and say,¹¹ ‘The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.’ Yet know this: the kingdom of God is at hand.¹² I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom on that day than for that town.”*)

Shaking dust off the feet may reflect the shaking of one’s clothing as a sign of renunciation (Neh 5:13; Acts 18:6). Clearing away even the dust under one’s sandals suggests an even more thorough rejection than shaking out garments or washing one’s hands (Matt 27:24). Mark may have moderated the severity of the judgment sayings from Matthew and Luke, since he does not anticipate Christian missionaries calling down curses on unreceptive towns. The tradition merely stands as a testimony

before God that the town has refused to hear God's word. Mark's judgment sayings correlate witness to or rejection of the Son of Man with a person's status in the judgment: "*Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*" (Mark 8:38)

Modern missionaries see the variations in the rules as evidence that the earliest Christians recognized the need to adapt to the circumstances in which they found themselves. A constant over time is that the gospel comes to bring healing, peace, and good news to people. This means that missionaries must adapt to the culture of those they come to serve in order that no barriers be erected that impede the message. For example, some of the early missionaries in East Africa brought with them trappings and comforts of their European lifestyles and were clearly associated with those who present in the land as agents of colonialism or political expansion. Adapting often means to live with and as the people live in order that the Word of God come simply and freely.

In this context, the gesture of shaking dust off one's shoes does not have to mean cursing those who will not listen. It acknowledges the mysterious elements in human freedom. Even the most sophisticated and culturally sensitive presentation of the gospel can be rejected. Christians are not to waste their resources in such situations. Others are waiting to hear the gospel.

Rick Warren (*The Purpose Driven Church*) writes about his stress on those waiting to hear the Good News:

"We've never encouraged other believers to transfer their membership to our church; in fact, we have openly discouraged it. We don't want transfer growth. In every membership class we say, "If you are coming to Saddleback from another church, you need to understand up front that this church was not designed for you. It is geared toward reaching the unchurched who do not attend anywhere. If you are transferring from another church you are welcome here only if you are willing to serve and minister. If all you intend to do is attend services, we'd rather save your seat for someone who is an unbeliever. There are plenty of good Bible-teaching churches in this area that we can recommend to you." [p. 39]

Warren is raising the question of whether the local church is a "branch office" of the larger denomination, serving the already-faithful, or a "mission outpost" serving on the frontier.

The Message. ¹² *So they went off and preached repentance.* ¹³ *They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

The New American Bible (NAB) offers a translation that seems minimally functional – merely reporting that they set out on mission and what they did when they got there. A more literal translation of the verse is: "And they went out and proclaimed so that all might repent." The second part of the verse is a *hina* clause in Greek, normally indicating purpose, aim, or goal. The purpose in their proclaiming is that people might repent, that is, have a change in mind/heart. Such preaching will include the demands from God and our failure to live up to them. It also includes the grace of God that accepts the law-breakers. It includes the mandate to speak the truth in such a way that it leads people to repent, to have a change in mind about their own sinfulness and about God's gracefulness.

In obedience to their commission the Twelve proclaimed the gospel through their word and deed. Their message and the exercise of power confirm the representative character of their mission. They preach the message of repentance that Jesus had proclaimed; they cast out demons and heal the sick because these activities had characterized his ministry. Their coming to a village brought healing and salvation in the most comprehensive terms because they were his representatives. Jesus had commissioned them and they came in his name. What Jesus did in his own power as commissioned by God, the disciples did in his power.

The essential element in the mission is the intrusion of the Kingdom of God “with power.” The expulsion of demons is clearly distinguished from the anointing of the sick, but both actions were visible functions of the Kingdom. They declared that it was God’s intention to apply salvation to man in his wholeness. The focus upon the words and works of Christ anticipates the character of the more permanent mission the disciples received by the appointment of the risen Christ.

Notes

Mark 6:7 the Twelve: It is notable that Mark, like the other gospel writers, for the most part, do not use the expression “the Twelve Apostles.” The word “apostle” means “the one sent” – and Scripture rightly refers to many people sent to spread the word of God as apostles. “The twelve” however is a different matter. This expression refers to those men chosen by Jesus to represent the restoration of Israel to its divine mission to be “the light to the world” (Is 66:1)

Sources

- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007).
- R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989)
- John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina v.2 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer / Liturgical Press, 2001) 189-94
- Wilfred Harrington, *Mark*, The New Testament Message, v.4 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer Press, 1979)
- William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974) 205-10
- Philip Van Linden, C.M., “Mark” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, ed. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989)
- PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 8 of The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1994) 595-96
- Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001) 203-12
- David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- Brian Stoffregen, CrossMarks Christian Resources, available at www.crossmarks.com/brian/

Dictionaries

- Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)
- Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990)
- The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins and Astrid B. Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

Scripture

The New American Bible available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/bible>