

Conference on World Mission and Evangelism
Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship
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Bible Study 1
Following Jesus: Becoming Disciples
Mark 6:1–13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

The Text in its Context

Our text locates Jesus in his hometown, presumably in and around Nazareth, which means that Jesus is speaking to people who know his birth status and honour rating. He and his antecedents are well-known persons, and from this distinction emerges a dynamic of honour-shame societies. “To be recognized as a prophet in one’s town meant that honor due to other persons and families

was diminished. Claims to more than one's appointed (at birth) share of honor thus threatened others and would eventually trigger attempts to cut the claimant down to size. That dynamic emerges in this text.”ⁱ

Initially, there was a positive response to Jesus, as the crowd in the synagogue was astonished at his words. But then doubts and questions arose concerning Jesus' family of origin, blood relations, inherited honour and social status, among other things. Mark's gospel emphasizes the fact that Jesus is rejected by his own. His own people showed their lack of faith in him and disowned him (Mark 6:1-6). The hostile reception he received raises the possibility that outsiders are better able to judge the honour of a prophet than those who seem like insiders—his close family and friends. Jesus' ability to perform mighty miracles required faith, loyalty and commitment to God. Jesus' homeland lacked this. This disloyalty is held in stark contrast to the faith of those who came to Jesus for help in Mark 5.

In Mark 6:7–13, Jesus calls the disciples to him, and then sends them out with clear instructions. Mark focuses on the disciples' inability to understand who Jesus is, yet when Jesus calls and sends them out, they are able to carry out the mission, not by their own independent authority, but by Jesus' authority and ministry. The disciples participated in Jesus' own activity in bringing about God's rule. Therefore, the origins of early Christian missionary activity are found in the authority and ministry of Jesus.

The Text in Our Context

As we reflect on the theme “Following Jesus: Becoming Disciples”, the text for our study provides further insight into the nature and character of our call to discipleship.

Discipleship is learned through practice and is always tested by the realities confronted in practice. Discipleship is more than learning about Jesus. To become a disciple is to follow Jesus. At the heart of discipleship, then, is Christ-connectedness—a disciple is bound to Christ.

Christ-connectedness and Christ-centredness

The text emphasizes that Christ-connectedness and Christ-centredness are essential to the pursuit of discipleship. This idea is also referred to in John 17:18; 20:21: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” The disciples' sending was connected with Jesus' own sending. It is interesting that Jesus instructed and sent the disciples immediately after he visited his hometown. In this mission, the disciples, as Jesus' representatives, replicated their teacher's healings, exorcisms and teaching and preaching ministry. They most likely replicated the teaching they heard from Jesus' lips and gave reports of what they had seen Jesus do. It is Jesus who called and sent the disciples, even as He was sent to the world.

An important point to keep in mind is that the instructions were not demands, nor requirements from which Jesus was exempt. He fulfilled God's will, even to the point of death on a cross.

There was nothing Jesus asked of his disciples that he would not do himself. He demonstrated ultimate obedience when he gave himself on the cross.

Practical Implications

Therefore, we must reflect as leaders on the demands we set for others but may not set for ourselves. Do we have expectations of others that benefit us by increasing our prestige or enhancing our reputations? Before Jesus called the disciples to follow him, he was with the people on the margins. Together with the people, Jesus faced the realities of the mission. There was no disconnect between what Jesus did and what he called his disciples to do.

Discipleship involves embodying Christ. “Following Jesus: Becoming Disciples” is not possible without recognizing our connectedness to Christ. We go because Jesus sends us, even as he was sent. At the very heart of discipleship, then, must be a connection to Christ. We do not possess independent authority, but we are disciples because of our connectedness to Christ.

Hostility

There is no limit to the sources from which rejection can and will emerge (Mark 3:21, 22 and 31). We must remember Jesus’ experiences wherever and whenever discipleship is carried out. Jesus experienced hostility from his own community. He was treated contemptuously by the people of his hometown, the people who knew him well, his relatives. Mark may have seen this rejection as foreshadowing what was to come later in the passion. The early church struggled with this. They wondered: If Jesus is the Messiah, why was he rejected by his own people?

Practical Implications

In “Following Jesus: Becoming Disciples”, we must be open to the experience of hostility and rejection because it comes with the territory. It is sometimes more difficult to witness among our own family and friends and within our own contexts than in other places. Rejection can also come from those outside of our circles, from those who have little knowledge of us. Jesus experienced rejection from every imaginable encounter.

Since rejection is inescapable and unavoidable, we ought to agree that surrender and apathy are not options as we find ways of fulfilling the call to discipleship. It is important that we become self-critical in determining the likely reasons for the rejection and opposition we face. Is it because we live in honour-shame societies? Or, do people look at us and determine that they do not want any part of our God based on what they see? Could it be that the God we present resembles exploitation, empire, economic acquisitiveness and discrimination? We must ask what makes it difficult for us to spread the gospel message in our own country, villages and communities.

People’s path to faith is sometimes blocked by a myriad of visible and invisible obstacles. Yet thanks be to God that the power of Jesus cannot be eclipsed by a lack of faith. “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them”

(Mark 6:5). Despite rejection, all is not necessarily lost. Even in rejection, there is a place for the disciple to continue the mission. Rather than condemning to hell those who refuse to hear him, Jesus found another way to reach those who rejected him without imposing himself.

Authenticity and Authority

Some people attempted to question Jesus' authenticity and authority by questioning the source of his wisdom and power (v. 2b–3b). “From what source does he take these things,” was prompted in part by the fact that he had not studied with a rabbi and therefore did not have “proper” credentials. Is not this the carpenter? The people were also scandalized by Jesus’ lowly origin (6:3). The reference to Jesus as the “Son of Mary” could also be understood as an insult. It was unusual in Semitic cultures to refer to a man as the son of his mother, even when the father was dead. Jesus faced a mixture of sarcasm and insult that attempted to undermine his authority and authenticity.

Practical Implications

People sometimes judge a disciple’s authenticity and authority based on stereotypical considerations of social bias and discrimination, location, religious pedigree, race, class and gender. These are the realities of socially stratified societies, particularly those influenced by an imperial and colonial history (Jesus’ society was stratified, organized by honour-shame designations.) Today many societies with a missionary history tend to exhibit these biases. Some societies uphold an elitist attitude toward other forms of worship and seek to impose their ways on others. This approach often gets in the way of unity and impairs our ability to further the mission of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, some of us devalue our own context and believe others’ judgments about our worth. We display signs of discomfort with the gifts and peculiarities that God has bestowed on us and, over time, lose our unique sense of identity.

Here is a note of caution to those of us in the global South who are now experiencing church growth: Let us resist the temptation to believe that what we have to offer is more authentic and credible than what takes place in other areas of missional engagement.

In following Jesus and becoming disciples, it is important to remember that authenticity lies in putting into practice what Jesus calls us to do, which is proclaiming the gospel unto repentance regardless of our pedigree, sex, race, class, geographic location etc.

Our authority rests in Jesus alone and not in perceived status, resources or training. This authority is not over people, but over the forces or demons that imprison and dehumanize God’s children.

Simplicity and Hospitality

Jesus' instruction to the disciples to take nothing for their journey except a staff, to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics is subject to different interpretations. But it is not farfetched to see this directive as a call to embrace the value of simplicity and the practice of hospitality.

Disciples are called upon to live lives that affirm dependency on Christ and to practise a discipleship that is devoid of mistrust or suspicion of those who are being served. There ought to be no thought of superiority, and their work should not depend upon a welcoming reception (6:8–10).

Practical Implications

Those who go out in Jesus' name should do so unencumbered, bringing only what is useful and necessary for their mission and trusting in God's providential care. This goes against the spirit of the age, which glorifies abundance, a spirit that has, at times, infiltrated the church and distorted the gospel.

For some, mission becomes possible only when we have material resources. In fact, some use limited resources as an excuse for not being faithful disciples. However, following Jesus is not a journey of material prosperity; rather it requires trusting God to take care of our needs. There is no place for the spirit of acquisition, which breeds greed. There ought not to be a dissonance between the simplicity of Jesus' life and the way disciples live today.

People are free to reject the ministry and mission. We must respect individuals' freedom. Disciples are not to intimidate or exert force on those they encounter. Such tactics and strategies are used by the proud, who are impressed with their own power and who believe this power gives them authority over others. It is important to recognize that some missions are not led by Christ, but by empire, power, greed and imperialism. The question must be asked: How have missionaries at given points in time behaved? What has been the history of their connection with the imperial powers of the centres from which they were sent?

There is a time to discuss with those who reject the gospel the consequences of their decision and suggest that they may be acting against their own best interests (v. 11). The urgency of the mission of discipleship requires disciples to move on to the needs of others.

There is also no place for adding or taking away from the gospel to make it more acceptable and attractive. We must be careful that when presenting the gospel, we do not employ the same strategies that underpin the consumeristic and competitive age. The way we live out our discipleship can speak volumes about our authenticity and authority.

The Christ-centered nature of discipleship is lived out through authenticity and authority, hospitality and simplicity amid hostility. Following Jesus requires us to put into practice the learning we have received, which is always tested by the realities we confront. Despite the

rejection and obstacles that disciples face, the need for discipleship and the resolve Christians have to pursue the call are always present.

Questions

1. What does it mean to be a disciple in your own context? Are there common themes/threads that run through the concept of discipleship, or does discipleship vary across time and space?
2. What are some of the implications of a Christ-connected discipleship?
3. What are some of the opportunities and threats facing global mission today?

Prayer

*Gracious God,
through your son, Jesus Christ,
we have been set as an example of what it means to follow you
and become your disciples.
Enable and equip us by your Holy Spirit
to be faithful in responding to your call upon our lives.
Grant courage to your people
so that even in the face of rejection,
we fulfill your calling to be a missionary church,
participating in the reign of the kingdom of God. Amen.*

About the Author

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Notes

ⁱ Malina, B, and Rohrbaugh R. (1992). *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis.