

June 22, 2025

MISSION AND MARTYRDOM
Mark 6:6b-30
(12 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

The text we're looking at this morning is exceptional in one way and typical in another. It's exceptional in that the main actors in each section are other people other than Jesus. The main people we're drawn to focus in on these sections are the twelve apostles and John the Baptist. In the first section, we read about Jesus sending out the twelve into villages on a journey, and though Jesus is the one giving commands the whole time, the ones who capture our minds are his followers. After all, this is the first time that the twelve do anything in Mark's gospel apart from Jesus, and they're being charged to go do things that they probably never dreamed of, such as casting out demons and healing to the sick.

In the second section, the main actors are John the Baptist and Herod. Herod is shown to be a vile, sinful, ruthless, prideful fellow, and John becomes the object of all his vile ways, getting beheaded in the process. And so, these sections are unique in that we're used to the focus of each story and the subject of each showdown in this book being Jesus. In this way, our text is exceptional.

In another sense, this text is quite typical for Mark. I have in mind here mainly the way he tells these stories. He uses, once more, that technique that we've no doubt gotten used to at this point, a technique we've referred to as "sandwiching," where Mark begins one story, stops that story, inserts another story, and then when that second story is done, comes back around and finishes the first story. It's obvious in our text. After Jesus is rejected in Nazareth, he continues teaching in nearby villages, but then he quickly pivots to sending out the twelve. They're told to go out with limited supplies to do amazing work, and it grips our imaginations.

However, just at the point that you think we should be getting the report of the twelve coming back to Jesus, Mark inserts another story, the story of John the Baptist's death. That story is itself so captivating that you probably forget anything about the mission of the twelve, but then, right after the story of John's death, we read, "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught" (v. 30). And once more we see that Mark sandwiches these stories together.

Now, I've noted that commentators agree that Mark utilizes this sandwich storytelling technique because he wants us to see a connection between the stories. For example, the story of Jairus's daughter and the woman with the issue of blood both noted the need for faith while also providing a contrast of the spectrum of those whom Jesus saves. And it seems quite obvious that Mark has a reason for linking the stories together in our text as well because the events of John's death had occurred prior to this moment. In other words, he could have already told the story of John's beheading, but he has intentionally placed it here, sandwiched between the beginning

and end of the disciples' journey to expand Jesus' ministry. Why? Well, I think it's because he wanted us to draw connections between the two stories.

Specifically, I believe there are two connections that Mark wanted us to make. The first is that the disciples, being sent out from Jesus, were doing something very similar to what John the Baptist was doing. In other words, if we look into the details of what the twelve were proclaiming and what John was proclaiming, we'll find great overlap. And so that's the first thing I think Mark wants us to see. The second connection, I believe, is that Mark is signaling to his readers the cost of obeying Christ and the mission he's given us. Here's what I mean. When Jesus sends out his disciples on this mission, they come back unharmed. So, you might conclude that obeying Jesus and the mission he's given us means that we'll be just fine, absolutely unharmed, just as the twelve were in this text. However, Mark squeezes in the John the Baptist story to tell us, "Not so fast." He's signaling what obeying Jesus and the mission he's given will cost us. And it ultimately did cost Jesus' apostles. All but John the apostle ended up being martyred, just like John the Baptist. And so I think that's the second connection Mark wants us to see in these stories.

Therefore, what I want to do this morning is simply draw one large note of application from the connections between these two stories and the flesh out what that means for us. Here's the one note of application: we too have been sent out to proclaim the gospel and plant churches, just like we see foreshadowed by the disciples and John.

We've been sent out to proclaim the gospel and plant churches

If you'd never read Mark's gospel, you would find Jesus sending out the twelve to be an odd exception. After all, it's been Jesus to this point who's been doing everything. He's been the one preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, facing reception by some and rejection by others. His disciples have been quite passive. And so when Jesus commissions his followers to go out and do what he'd already been doing, it feels odd and maybe not something we anticipate. However, if you've read the rest of Mark's gospel and the rest of the New Testament, you know that what Jesus did in sending out his followers as an extension of his ministry is just a foreshadowing of what would come. As Jesus rises from the grave (before ascending back to heaven), he commissions his followers to go and make disciples of the nations—which involves worldwide proclamation of the gospel and the planting of churches.

Therefore, what we see in this opening scene is simply foreshadowing for what the church would be ultimately commissioned to do. *And so it's fitting to stop and explore a bit about the nature of how Jesus sends them out because it will serve to remind us of the nature of our own mission.* And the first thing I'd note here is that they went out with the authority and power of Christ.

A. With the authority and power of Christ

That's how the text begins, as Mark writes, "And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits" (v. 7). Now, I'll come back to the fact that Jesus sent them out two by two, but note first that they go with his authority and

power. Of course, the only way that they're going to go out as an extension of the ministry of Jesus is if he grants them the authority and power to do what he's been doing. And that's precisely what he does. He gives them his authority and power, and so we read in verse 13, "And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them"—clearly something they couldn't have done apart from Jesus' authority and power.

And for us, this is a truth we need to recognize for ourselves as well. We've not only been sent into the world to make disciples of Jesus under his authority (which he notes in Matthew 28:18) but also with the presence of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Jesus not only commissioned us to go under his authority, so that we do what we do by the authority of Jesus, but also indwelt by his Holy Spirit so that we're empowered to do what he commands us to do. Think of Jesus' words to his disciples after his resurrection but before Pentecost. He said to them, "But you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

That we're sent with his under his authority and with his power means two things for us. One is that we must not forget that what we say and do is in obedience to Jesus. The reason this is important for us to remember is because when our message becomes unpopular (as it almost always is) and we are rejected by many (as we often are), then there can come the temptation to alter our message. For example, if the culture shifts and says that what the church is saying is outdated, then we'll feel the pressure to get up-to-date and on board with what the culture demands. But at this point we need to stop and say to ourselves, "Wait a minute. We didn't come up with this message or mission. We didn't do this under our own authority-making power. This is what Jesus demanded we do and say. And we're under his authority to do so, and so we cannot alter anything."

And it should also be encouraging to know that we labor not only under his authority but with his power, through the Holy Spirit. I mean, just as the disciples would have been hopeless apart from Jesus' empowerment, Jesus knew that we'd be hopeless without his Spirit. That's why he told those earliest believers to wait until the Spirit came to them. Then, once he came on Pentecost, they were suddenly empowered to fulfill the Great Commission. And Paul tells us in Romans 8:9 that every believer has the Spirit just like those early believers. And greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world. Therefore, we should not doubt the Lord's powerful provision to fulfill the task he's given us any more than the twelve in this story should have doubted that they'd be able to do what Jesus gave them authority and power to do. We should go forth in obedience to the Great Commission with no less confidence in our task than the twelve went out in our text. And we also see that we go out in dependence on the Lord and his people.

B. In dependence on the Lord and his people

When Jesus sends out the twelve, he gives them limitations on what they should take and do. Mark tells us, "He charged 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 put on two tunics. And he said to them, ‘Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there’” (vv. 8-10).

Now, why give them these instructions? Well, practically, perhaps it would have been too much to take these things with them, and certainly Jesus didn’t want them to go into a house and instantly be thinking if there’s a better housing opportunity around the corner. But I think Jesus is teaching them that they will go out in dependence on him and his people.

It’s not by mistake that some of the instructions Jesus gives here are similar to the instructions that the Lord gave the Israelites when they came out of Egypt. The Israelites coming out of Egypt were to learn that the Lord provides for them—and he did—providing everything they needed in the wilderness. So here the Lord is wanting the twelve to know that they should rely on their Lord and his people. The reason I add “and his people,” of course, is because the Lord is banking on them being shown hospitality on this journey, with people taking them into their homes and caring for them while they were in town.

Similarly, the New Testament envisions this reality of the church completing its mission in reliance on the Lord and his people. Third John 5-8 explicitly encourages and commends believers providing for those who have gone out “for the sake of the name,” providing hospitality and financial support so that they don’t have anything from unbelievers. And Paul will argue repeatedly that those whom we ask to give their full time to laboring over us in the word, blessing us spiritually, should be provided for financially. And it’s a beautiful design because it lets all of us labor in these things as “fellow workers” (3 John 8).

I remember years ago when Christopher and Sarah Ortiz wanted to get to New York but were prohibited by school debt of \$13,000 they needed to pay off first. And a member came to us with a \$13,000 check for them, saying, “I don’t want the Ortizes to know who gave this, but you can know that it’s half my annual salary this year.” That’s a picture of being fellow workers. And don’t think for one second that Christopher would begrudge thinking his labors in New York are part of a team project. He delights in that reality. I delight in that reality as one of your pastors on staff, who is supported by the church. Every time I stand to preach, praying that this would edify you all, I stand, knowing that this is a team project. Apart from the financial support through you all, I’d never be able to give my full time to this. But because of those gifts, we labor together, showing that Christ’s mission is more valuable to us than what this world can offer.

And so let’s not be fearful when we see the cost of ministry. Instead, let’s be bold and obedient and trusting. And let’s dig deep into our pockets to make sure that here in Jackson at 730 Pipkin Road, throughout the nation, and around the world, we’re making disciples of Jesus. Third, I want to note that we go with the aim of planting churches.

C. With the aim of planting churches

I’ve already noted this in my main application point, but I want to draw it out from the text for two reasons. First, I want to do so because you may not think it’s there, and so I want to make an

argument for it. And, second, I want to do so because I believe that church planting is at the heart of the Great Commission. In fact, if I could put a moratorium on the word “missions” and say “church planting” instead, I’d do so, and I think it’d help focus us in the work of missions toward what Jesus envisioned. After all, Jesus mentions the church prior to giving the Great Commission, as he mentions it in Matthew 16 and 18 before giving the Great Commission in Matthew 28. But even the Great Commission itself assumes the reality of the local church as Jesus begins the commission by telling us to baptize others.

Now, that’s odd at first because he tells us to make disciples by teaching them to obey all that Jesus commands, and that includes being baptized, right? So why single out baptism, saying, “Baptize them and teach them to obey all I’ve commanded?” Well, the answer, I think, is because Jesus is saying that as people hear the gospel and believe, we baptize them and bring them into a local church, where they have pastors to oversee them, fellow members to walk with them, love them, and hold them accountable. And then, in that context, we teach them to obey Jesus. In other words, the local church is at the heart of the Great Commission. It’s the context where discipleship occurs. In other words, the church is Jesus’ discipleship plan.

Okay, you might say, but if this sending out of the twelve foreshadows the Great Commission, how does it foreshadow the local church and church planting? I believe it’s in sending them out two by two. After all, why do that? Well, most commentators agree that the reason Jesus did so is because the law of Moses noted that you needed two witnesses to establish reliable testimony (Deut 19:15). Therefore, as the twelve went out, they would be teaching and proclaiming the arrival of God’s kingdom through God’s king (Jesus), and they would be testifying with two witnesses to this truth.

Okay, so what does this have to do with the church? Well, the church continues this proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, and we have been given the authority (the keys) to publicly proclaim that we believe one belongs to Christ (in baptism) or that one doesn’t give evidence of belonging to Christ (in discipline). And when Jesus gives us instructions in exercising discipline, for example, he shows us that one individual cannot exercise discipline against another. Rather, he says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt 18:20). In other words, Jesus never envisioned solo, lone ranger Christians fulfilling the mission he gave his followers, but gathered, united believers in local churches fulfilling the Great Commission—something that I think is foreshadowed here even as he sends them out two by two. And, finally, we’re reminded that obeying the Great Commission may cost us our lives.

D. Recognizing that it may cost us our lives

John’s story reveals this, doesn’t it? The story of John’s death starts with Herod’s paranoia. As Herod hears of what’s going on with Jesus, he starts getting paranoid, thinking, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him” (v. 14). Now, we’re told others thought Jesus may be Elijah or one of the prophets, but not Herod, he thought he was the resurrected John the Baptist. Why?

Well, that's a good question because a second's thought would have noted that Jesus was around and ministering before John even died, so this is utterly illogical. But Herod wasn't driven by logic but by some terror that gripped his soul. And here's why: he'd been the one to execute John.

Here's how it happened. John had been preaching against Herod, telling him that it was unlawful to have his brother's wife. You see, Herod's brother, Phillip, was married to Herodias, and Herod wanted to be married to her. Therefore, he divorced his own wife, convinced Herodias to divorce Phillip, and they'd gotten married. That was obviously against Jewish law, and John told Herod so.

But the person who was really bothered by John's declaration that Herod and Herodias should repent was Herodias. She wanted John dead, and Herod knew that, but Herod feared John. Therefore, he arrested John, basically to protect him from Herodias. The thinking seemed to be that as long as John was in his custody, Herodias couldn't get to him. But then the fateful day came.

It was Herod's birthday, and he had many friends over to get drunk and celebrate with him. And in the course of their drunken celebration, Herodias sent her daughter (Herod's stepdaughter) to dance before the men, and it pleased Herod so much that he wanted to shower her with whatever gift she wanted. And this is where Herodias seized the moment, telling her daughter to request John the Baptist's head on a platter, and so she did.

And as soon as Herod heard her request, he knew he was trapped. He no doubt regretted his rash promise. He didn't want to kill John, but he couldn't go back on his word in front of his guests, and so he ordered John beheaded, and brought her his head on a platter. That's how John died, a victim of Herod's lust, drunkenness, and pride. And it's why Herod was filled with such paranoia that it drove him to conclude something utterly illogical like the idea that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Now, we've already established that the reason that Mark sandwiches these episodes together is to show that when we obey the mission of Jesus, we will face the same kind of dangers and potentially even the same end as John. After all, John wasn't the only martyr in history. Many have come after him. There have been continuing reports even this week that numerous believers in Nigeria are dying for the faith.

Why? Well, we noted last week that this is the way it's always been and always will be. But another reason is because of what we're proclaiming. Notice the overlap in the message of the twelve and that of John. We read in verse 12, "So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent." And we know that John was telling Herod to repent, noting that his marriage was not lawful. So both the disciples and John were commanding people to repent. And that's what we must do as well.

The message that Jesus gave us to proclaim is good news, but the good news isn't that people can stay as they are and remain on the course that they've chosen and be okay. We command

them to repent and place their faith in Jesus. We call them away from their rebellion in sin. We call them away from their self-righteousness, greed, pride, immorality, homosexuality, devotion to false gods, and all the rest, and we tell them to trust in Jesus and then obey him in their lives. That's a message that brings great offense and because it does so, it may cost us. As we've seen with many examples—including in our text today—it may cost us our lives.

But if we're tempted to shrink back, remember two things. First, death is not the last word for us. We'll be with the Lord and then raised from our graves. And, second, remember that the message isn't ours. We have been charged by Christ to proclaim precisely what he's said. And though it's hard, we've been equipped by Christ, being given his Holy Spirit. And we get to preach this, knowing that we can depend on Jesus and his church. So let's walk in faithfulness and proclaim that as we come to the table this morning. Amen.