

February 27, 2011

Faithful Failures?

Mark 6:1-13

INTRODUCTION

Albert Einstein flunked high school math. Michael Jordan was cut from his varsity basketball team. Now these guys may have just been late bloomers. We can't fault Einstein's math teacher or Jordan's first coach too much; they may just not have been ready. But then there are the cases of those who have something real to say and important to do right now, and no one sees what is written across the sky as clear as the sun.

Israel in the wilderness for forty years might be the most glaring example of this mindless disbelief after all that God continued to do for them. Everybody and their grandmother came out to oppose the Reformers and the Puritans and William Wilberforce. And when George Washington led the colonial army through the long winter of 1776, not more than ten percent of the population lent any support to the cause.

So why is it that virtually everyone who has ever lived in history winds up on the wrong side of history? Why is it that almost every human being who has ever lived and all the common sense that we call 'common' is always so dead wrong about the things that matter most? Why is it that everyone who we call a hero today was resented and resisted by all the 'important and wise' people when they were here? What does all this say about human sincerity or human awareness? Have you ever thought about what this might say about you? A simple application of the law of averages to history should put you and I on guard: that we may not believe as much of what God is saying to us as we think we do.

- NO HOMELAND OR HONOR
- NO RESOURCES OR RESPONSE

The Big Idea is that true faithfulness is measured by God in eternity, not by unbelievers in time.

There is a very specific mindless disbelief that challenges us today. It is more clever than in the past because it doesn't call itself disbelief at all. It sets up an irrelevant standard of success and calls itself 'relevance' and 'fruitfulness' and 'results' and 'doing something.'

DOCTRINE

I. NO HOMELAND OR HONOR

A) Disbelief in the Teeth of Knowledge {1-4}

1. To set the scenery, this is Jesus' "hometown" (*patris*)—a word in classical Greek that means "fatherland" or "homeland" but not here in koine Greek, which was for the common person. Another way we can see that it is Nazareth being spoken of, and not the whole region, was that *on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue (2a)*, so "synagogue" is in the singular of which each town had one. And this is just like Jesus to get right to work teaching on the Lord's Day, an example for the church in all ages.

2. Now there is the reaction: *and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? (2b)*. It starts off sounding like a compliment. Mark had already used this word "astonished" about people's reaction to his teaching [cf. 1:22] and at that time it was more neutral and natural amazement. Now it is mixed with immediate resistance. They might as well be saying, "Who does he think he is to say such things!" as the next few sentences make clear. "These things" have two heads—divine wisdom and divine power—*What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? (2c)* Great questions, if you're really asking; but they weren't. They were setting up a different line of reasoning. Matthew Henry follows their disbelieving, broken rationale in his commentary:

They acknowledged the two great proofs of the divine original of his gospel—the *divine wisdom* that appeared in the contrivance of it, and the *divine power* that was exerted for the ratifying and recommending of it; and yet, though they could not deny the premises, they would not admit the conclusion.¹

3. Notice how much their questions become less like real questions: *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? (3)* How should we summarize this argument dressed in a question mark? (By the way, have you ever noticed how a question mark looks like a snake balancing on a world?) At any rate, I think their undercover logic would go like this: "Jesus, we remember when you were a kid. Your brothers and sisters still hang out here. You're dad was a carpenter"—which, by the way, reveals actual contempt for the family because **carpenter** for them comes to mean "mere carpenter." But it gets worse (and if the family wasn't so embarrassed by Jesus and we

¹ Henry, p. 1788

here, they would see that the sane public actually looked down on the family) because the words “son of Mary.” This was an ancient, patriarchal society. You never, under any circumstances, used the name of the mother for the head. This was a clear insinuation that Jesus was an illegitimate child. And it wasn’t the only time. When Jesus discussed family lines with the Pharisees they shot back, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God” [Jn. 8:41]. In other words, the suggestion here in Nazareth was ‘Jesus, why should we listen to what you say? You’re mother is unclean woman and you are genetic waste.’ It makes the point clear that, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” [Is. 53:3].

4. Mark adds that *they took offense at him (4)*. When we think of ‘taking offense’ today, we tend to think only of someone saying something that actively or intentionally insults us. But in times past, “offending” included any interpersonal trait or action that upset the decorum of society: a poor person wandering onto a nobleman’s property or someone not using table manners. Everything about Jesus was “out of place” because it reminded these people that they were out of place. He was a threat to their way of life and their phony class distinctions. Now if Jesus message is a threat to everything and offends, and if He gives his followers the same message, then can we expect anything less than offense today?

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake [Mat. 10:21-22].

B) Disbelief Will Not be Honored by Christ {5-6}

1. *And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household” (5)*. Household and hometown here are used as symbolic reference points. Jesus obviously isn’t saying that prophets have only been hated in their own household and hometown. Otherwise how could we make sense of Moses, who was hated in a foreign court, or Elijah, who was hated by everyone all the way into sleeping in caves? Jesus’ point is that those who speak the words of eternal truth are always resented and resisted by those who can most use the excuse of familiarity. Israel was given the prophets and how did she always treat them? Stephen said, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” [Acts 7:52], or in Hebrews it says, “Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute,

afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” [Heb. 11:36-38]. But Jesus is not saying that the prophet has no honor. He is specifically saying that the prophet has no honor *in the world, according to the world*.

2. Mark is not showing us Jesus being rejected because he wants us to think of Jesus craving or depending upon this honor. Far from it! This is a battle of two different honors (or two different glories). We see it throughout the New Testament. So, “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory” [Jn. 7:18], “for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” [Jn. 12:43]. Everyone from Jewish rabbi to Greek speculator sought a fading honor. At Mars Hill, “all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” [Acts 17:22]. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom” [1 Cor. 1:22]. And why is all this the case? It is because the honor and glory that sinful man seeks is just enough to pretend that he has a form of immortality down here—fame, approval, respect, security, comfort—all fading glories:

I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? [Jn. 5:41-44].

In other words, why isn’t the fundamental question always, only ‘Where is God in this?’ ‘What does this thing, this moment, this truth—what does it say about God?’ And who is this Jesus? Is He for real? And if you’re not interested in that standard, then Jesus would tell you that *you’re* not for real. You’re a fraud. You won’t ask questions of ultimate truth because all you want to focus on is: “What town did he come from?” “Does he have his degrees?” “Does he wear emerging hip rimmed glasses?” “Do people like him?” “Is he old enough, smart enough, relevant enough—” You will waste your life and wind up on the wrong side of history! Jeremiah was tempted with such worldly concerns when God sent him on his mission:

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.” Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth” [Jer. 1:6-9].

II. NO RESOURCES OR RESPONSE

A) A Missionary's Lifestyle {7-10}

1. *And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits (7).* This is only one of the times that Jesus sent out his disciples while He was still on earth. This tells us something about what it takes to be ready. If you walk with the Lord and if you have his authority, then it is ultimately his powers working through you, no matter how long you've been walking with him: "do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" [Mat. 10:19-20].

2. Aside from readiness, what Jesus tells them demands a certain lifestyle. Sometimes we call it a "war-time lifestyle" or a "missionary lifestyle." But whatever you call it, the call is to embrace the power of simplicity. *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 (8-9).* First let me give our application to the skeptic in the middle of the text. There are some very bored people who compare Mark to Matthew [10:9] and Luke [9:3] here and say, 'Wait a minute—in Mark He is making an exception for the staff and sandals and maybe one tunic instead of two; while in the other two Jesus is clearly making no exception. Nothing can go. Two points and one bit of common sense: First, notice the different order and punctuation; second, notice the word 'Acquire' in Matthew, as opposed to 'Take' in Mark and Luke. Now put it all together and consider the possibility that Jesus is using "acquire" and "take" as synonyms and that He's restricting them from taking "on the journey" (as in purchase) more than they need. After all, Jesus is stressing simplicity, not nudity! By saying "No sandals, no tunic, etc"—He's not telling them to go naked and eat nothing. He's telling them to take only what they need to survive.

3. The last ingredient to a missionary's lifestyle is really just another form of simplicity—freedom. *And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there (10).* This applies to every Christian in making their plans for living arrangements. You may think: "No it doesn't—Jesus is just sending these guys out on a temporary mission trip," but let me ask you a question: When they return, do they return 'home?' No, they have already been sent out with Jesus. Where is home? It is not in this age. In Matthew's account Jesus puts the stress on what I'm going to call **gospel worthiness**, so Jesus says that when you come to a place to stay: "find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is

not worthy, let your peace return to you.” [10:11-13]. Peace here equals freedom to speak and move. Worthiness here isn’t talking about merit before God; it is talking about a practical worthiness—i.e. Is it worth it, for the free flow of the gospel, to stay here and be bound to these people? Do we have an understanding that I’m here to speak the gospel?

B) A Missionary’s Reward {11-13}

1. *And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (11).* The missionary’s reward is no different than their Master’s reward. It is not earthly applause or acceptance. Some cultural background will be helpful here. When the Jews would interact with Gentiles, they would shake the dust off their feet on their way away from them, which would symbolize the uncleanness and unworthiness of their hearers. So this isn’t the missionary working on his own self-esteem here. Jesus is specifically calling this a “testimony against them,” so that if a Jew did this to a Jew, it was a piece of imagery that could not be missed. Now we would do this differently today, so don’t get the idea that this is about turning up our noses or saying something sarcastic or demeaning or snarky while walking away from someone who rejects the message. But there does need to be closure to our gospel presentation. It simply means breaking ties or breaking the conversation in a way that does not communicate the weakness of needing their earthly resources. They must know that *they* have missed the boat, and that they have been warned in some expression of sorrow, a reminder of the finality of judgment—in other words, words that say that they (the hearer) have just committed themselves to everlasting judgment unless the God of mercy pities them again: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone” [Col. 1:28]. How the Christian and the church present the gospel says something about what reward we expect. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once preached:

We are used to the Christian Church doing everything she can to attract people, bringing great pressure upon people to come and join—and making it easy for them to do so. Here, however, our Lord seems to be doing the exact opposite...All human movements do their best to attract followers; they appeal to them and make it easy for them; they will bribe them if necessary. All political parties do it. They want a crowd, they want support...Our Lord does not want (mere) followers, He is not interested in numbers as such.”²

2. Note the divisions here in the ministry of the church: *So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them (12-13).* The preaching is first, the signs are second (which is why the Word and

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Kingdom of God* (Crossway, Wheaton 2010, fp. 1963); pp. 121, 126

sacraments have the relationship they do to each other in the church)—of the second division, signs, there is the further break down of driving out evil and restoring good. I won't ask what the missionary's ultimate reward is here. We've talked about that many times and this text does not draw that out. It only implies it through these secondary rewards. The secondary rewards that Jesus' sent missionaries get are 1) the freedom of simplicity to preach the gospel clearly [vv. 7-10], and, 2) the preaching of the gospel itself with its accompanying signs [vv. 11-13]. Another way to say the same thing is that if God is the primary reward of the gospel, then it makes sense that the primary rewards of the gospel during our life on earth will all be gospel treasures. Jesus would not have his missionaries be sent out on any other mission than the one that judges faithfulness by God's assessment. Paul was such a man on Jesus' mission. When the worldly, wealthy Corinthians demanded more relevance, more eloquence, more hipness, Paul said, No, you're obsessed with vapors!

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God [1 Cor. 4:1-5].

APPLICATION

To the Saint – How do you fare in Jesus' call live like a missionary? How do you fare in Jesus' call to be rejected like a prophet? Do you desperately need an earthly homeland and honor and worldly resources and responses from people? Test yourselves. Jesus demands a balance here: Can you live like a missionary and be rejected like a prophet? You can't beat your chest and flap your gums about being "missional" on the one hand or "faithful" on the other unless you are prepared to follow Jesus in both of these things.

To the Sinner – Who are you in this story? How have you rejected the gospel and excused yourself because of the familiarity of the messenger, the shortcomings of the messenger, the lack of resources of the messenger? Have these functioned as excuses for you to counting the good news of Jesus as really good news?