

In at the Deep End

Mark Heath, 13th September 2004

Mark 6:7-13,30-32

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in their belts – ⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.

¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ 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.”

¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

We can all probably think of times in our lives when we were “thrown in at the deep end”. Perhaps literally it was in a swimming lesson where the teacher commanded you to swim in water that was out of your depth for the first time. It is often in situations like this that we surprise ourselves, finding that the task that seemed initially impossible is actually within our abilities. There are a few adventurous types who are always up for a challenge, but most of us are highly reluctant to volunteer ourselves for tasks that we feel we are not ready for.

When I was 17 years old, I decided I would volunteer to go on a week’s Christian mission. It was the first time I had done anything like this, and I turned up to find a team of about a dozen, many of whom were equally inexperienced. The activity for the first night came as something of a shock. I was expecting us to just sit around talking, getting to know one another a bit better, or perhaps praying for the week’s activities. But the leader had other ideas. He split us up into pairs and sent us out onto the streets of the town to tell anyone we might find about the gospel.

I was terrified, and so was the girl who was with me. Neither of us had done anything like it before. We had a choice – we could simply back out due to fear, or, knowing that we would have to report back later, we could step out talk to someone. Eventually we discovered that between us it was possible. She would say hello and start a conversation – and then I would come in with a basic explanation of the gospel. We came back an hour later excited at some of the meaningful conversations we experienced that evening. It hadn’t been too difficult for us, but we would never have done it without being given the task in the first place.

Evangelism is never easy, but always rewarding. Most of the time we need encouragement to step out and do something. And when we’ve done it, we find it wasn’t as bad as we had expected. In this passage, Jesus sends his disciples on what must have seemed a terrifying mission. He even seems to make it deliberately hard for them. But it is a tremendous learning experience for them.

Give and Take v7-9

As we look at Jesus’ instructions for the mission, we often focus on what he took from them. They weren’t to take bread, a bag, money or even an extra coat. But we should not fail to observe what he gave them. First, *companionship*. They were not sent out alone, but had a friend to go with. They would face whatever difficulties lay

ahead together, and be able to encourage each other. There are very few examples of “one man missions” in the New Testament. It is always advisable to find others to work with you in whatever you are doing for the service of God.

Second, they were given *authority*. Jesus himself possessed remarkable authority. This didn't just mean that people took notice when he taught, but that when he commanded something, it happened. His miracles demonstrated his authority in the spiritual realm (casting out demons) and even over nature (walking on water, healing the sick). Because Jesus had inherent authority, he was able to delegate it. The disciples were given only the authority to do what Jesus had commissioned them to do. For example, a school teacher may give a pupil authority to go into the staff room, collect something and bring it back. But that pupil cannot delegate that authority to anyone else, or assume that he no longer has to abide by the normal school rules.

What was taken from them for this mission is a little more surprising. Jesus seems to exclude all of the “common sense” things that you would take on such a journey. They were not to take bread – which meant that there could be *no delay*. If they didn't find a welcome on the first day of their mission they would go hungry.

Second, they were not to take a bag, which meant *no distractions*. Whatever “stuff” they might have brought with them – camera, pack of cards, book, mobile phone, hairbrush, toothbrush (or whatever the first century equivalents were) were not permitted. They would need to rely on hospitality to provide whatever was needed. The command not to take a bag also meant *no profit*. They were not to collect gifts or souvenirs from their journey. Each new place they came to would require as much faith as the previous one; for they would always leave with only what they had arrived with – nothing.

Third, they were not even to take money, leaving them with *no insurance*. They could not buy even one night's food and shelter. Their only hope of these things was to find someone who welcomed them and their message. It kept them focussed on the task, as they would be sleeping rough if they didn't get on with it. The disciples did have money, but on this journey they were to leave it behind to teach them not to put their security in it. Of all the things they were denied, this was undoubtedly the hardest. The mission would be a true test of their faith in God to provide for their needs.

Finally, they were not allowed to take spare clothes, which meant *no luxury*. They may find some generous hosts on their travels, but they were not to get too comfortable. If it rained, they would have to wear wet clothes the next day. They were constantly reminded that this was not a holiday they were on.

Put yourself in their shoes for a moment. How would you feel about going away for a week with no money, no phone, no credit card, no spare clothes? Just you and a friend travelling to unknown places and telling people the gospel, hoping they will invite you home for dinner and offer you a bed. It is true that our culture is considerably less hospitable than theirs, but we must not underestimate the faith required to embark on this venture. There was no contingency plan.

Coming and Going v10-11

The disciples were to expect a welcome wherever they went. They were, after all, bringing good news. There was a clear incentive for the disciples to be warm and friendly to those they spoke to, as no one will invite someone they dislike to stay for a while.

They were told to stay in the house of the first person who had welcomed them for the duration of their stay. There was the possibility that after a couple of days, some of the more important or wealthy people in the town who had not initially welcomed them would offer hospitality. But they were not to snub those who had given them that meal and a roof over their heads on the first night in a new place. And again, we see that they are not to get too comfortable – they are on a mission and there are other places to visit.

Jesus was aware that there would be places where they would not be well received. When they came across such situations, their response should be to move on. There was no requirement for them to keep trying until someone accepted them. As they left they were told to shake the dust from their feet as a testimony against the town. They had not just been inhospitable towards the disciples, but they had rejected the message from God. Whilst the disciples were not to respond angrily to this rejection, they shouldn't act as though it didn't matter.

There are indications in the book of Acts that Paul followed this approach on his travels. He looked for people who would welcome him and his companions into their home and provide for them. Where he found acceptance he would stay a while, but where he was rejected he moved on (although not necessarily writing it off completely – he often returned to places where he had faced persecution before).

Message and Miracles v12-13

The disciples' message was one of *repentance*, essentially the same as that of John the Baptist. People needed to change direction in their lives, to embrace a new way of thinking in readiness for the new thing that God was about to do. To accept this message was therefore to confess your sins and start living differently. Those who would not accept this message of repentance would be left on the outside of the new kingdom that was about to be inaugurated.

Repentance remains essential for entering into the kingdom. As the apostle John points out, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins (1 John 1:9), but if we claim we have not sinned, the truth is not in us (1 John 1:10). Confession is only the first part of repentance. There must be a change of mind and a change of behaviour. The trouble is, this is not always easy, and it is here that Jesus' authority over evil spirits becomes important. The disciples had been given authority to release those who were in bondage to sin, oppressed by demons. Without this freedom, the people were unable to respond to the message.

The casting out of evil spirits powerfully symbolised the decline of Satan's domain, whilst the healing of the sick was an indicator that the kingdom was at hand. One of the important signs of the kingdom was that the sick would be healed (Isa 53:5,6; Matt 11:5). This gave authenticity to the disciples' message. There was something happening now, and if people did not get ready for it, they would come under judgement.

Returning and Resting v30-32

At this point in the narrative, Mark inserts the story of the death of John the Baptist, and then continues the story of the disciples' mission in verse 30. This is quite deliberate, and is placed here to remind us that preaching a message of repentance is not without cost. Some people do not take too kindly to hearing such a message, and John paid for his prophetic declarations with his life. This time the disciples all came

back alive and well, but later in their lives, many of them were to suffer martyrdom for their evangelistic efforts. Obedience to God's calling will not remove you from suffering; in fact, it may lead you directly into it (e.g. 2:Tim 3:12 "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted").

The disciples were able to encourage one another with the stories of what God had done through them once they got back together. It would seem that their mission had generated a huge amount of interest and they themselves were becoming minor celebrities. Jesus saw that they needed to get away and have some rest and food. More importantly, they needed time alone with him. Unfortunately, they didn't get as much as they might have wanted, as there was a big crowd waiting for them after they crossed the river. But at least they had a short time in the boat, eating, resting and learning from Jesus.

We must not underestimate the importance of rest and time alone with Jesus. You can be busy 'serving God' but actually begin to lose the reason for what you are doing. Rest was built right into the ten commandments as it is crucial for our maximum effectiveness for God.

Conclusion

After considering this story, you may be tempted to think, "I'm glad I've not been sent out on a mission like that". But that would be to miss the point. We have been given a commission to tell the world the good news of the kingdom, with its call to repentance (Luke 24:47). And we have also been commanded not to put our trust in worldly wealth (1 Tim 6:17). So our job is actually not that different from theirs.

We are forced by this story to ask ourselves whether our security is found in our possessions, or in God. Do we really trust him to provide when we step out in faith to serve him? Look through church history and you will find many individuals who obeyed God even though humanly speaking it seemed a foolish idea. They had no earthly resources, just faith and a commission from God. And they were not let down. With faith like that, is it any wonder that they saw miracles?

There will be a cost if you follow in this path. People will tell you that you are crazy. Friends and relatives won't understand. Some people get angry when they hear the message of repentance. You could even lose your life like John the Baptist. But the reward is far greater than the value of anything you may lose – you are storing up treasure for yourself in heaven (Luke 12:33).