

Walking without Burden

Mark 6:7-13

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Sunday, April 14, 2002

Real Audio (3 MB)

One of the most important things to remember about walking with Jesus, is that you have to travel lightly.

Our text today begins with the words, "And Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits" (6:7). Through almost every chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus is taking on the unclean spirits. Now he is sending us out, as his followers, to do the same thing because the unclean spirits remain in our world.

Repeatedly this week when we picked up our papers, we saw Israeli and Palestinian mothers in anguish over their dead children. Their faces reminded me of the anguish we saw in the faces of American mothers who rushed to the rubble of the Trade Towers and the Pentagon on September 11. Clearly there is something wrong, some unclean spirit that is loose in our world. When God created the world, he didn't intend for mothers to have to dig through charred buses, bulldozed homes, or the lists of missing persons find their dead children.

Let us not only point to those who are lost in a crazed cycle of violent retribution "over there." For in beautiful homes all over our own city, families are being torn apart by their own cycles of hurt. We work in places plagued by the unclean spirits that addicts people to money and power. Our children go to schools that are filled with the unclean spirits that tempt to conform or be lost in loneliness. We all know about living in a world that struggles under what can only be called evil. That's because we have wandered a long way from paradise. That is why Jesus Christ arrived in this world as the incarnation of a God who was determined to find us, rescue us from the evil, and bring us home.

According to this text, you now have been given the "authority" to participate in this same holy mission. You have the ability to transcend the hurt, and you have the calling to stand up and say, "This is crazy. We don't have to live like this." Do you want to know what God's will is for your life? Here it is. God doesn't care as much as we do about whether we become doctors or lawyers or candlestick makers. He cares an awful lot about what you are doing and where you are today for the mission of Jesus.

You can't stay neutral on the matter of evil in this world, which is always our favorite response. You have to take a side. And it isn't a matter of their side or our side. It's a matter of standing with Jesus against the evil lurking in all our hearts. Because that is where the unclean spirit lives. The core of it isn't found in the enemy, a political agenda, or another nation. The core of it is in the human heart. Until we learn how to deal with the evil in our own hearts, and the hearts of those around us, we will never contain it in the violent places of the world.

How will you do that? How in the world will little ol' you take on the evil that is plaguing the hearts of men and women causing them to self-destruct? Well, that's where it gets really interesting. "He ordered them to take nothing for the journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics" (6:8). If Jesus is giving his disciples such an overwhelming mission, you'd think he would have sent them out better equipped. Why does he insist that we journey through life so lightly?

One reason is if you are going to take on evil and make changes in the world, you can't have anything to lose. The things you are trying to hang onto in life have a funny way of controlling you. That is how the evil gets into your heart. It tells you that there is someone out there, somewhere, who's trying to take something from you. This creates a paranoia that is just demonic. Before you know it, you are worried all the time. Then the anxiety takes over, and you become more worried about what you are losing than your mission in life.

You cannot use your life for the work of Christ's new kingdom of peace and justice, or even strive for some semblance of that in your own corner of the world, if you are worried. The unclean spirits have a way of finding your anxieties. Then they will threaten to make your greatest fears come true if you get involved in the great holy drama of working for Christ's new kingdom. The only way you can prevent the evil spirits from this blackmail is to give up the things you are afraid of losing. Give them to God, whose grasp upon them is better than yours anyway. Let him hold them, because it is the only way you can enjoy them, while assuming your great mission in life.

Do you want your obituary simply to list a few meager achievements you had in life, which will soon be forgotten, or do you want people to rise up at your funeral and say that this world is a little bit of a better place because of you? You can have that kind of wonderful legacy. But the cost is everything, as it was for Jesus.

A second reason Jesus calls us to travel lightly through life is that we are never going to go far if we are weighed down by baggage. Have you ever stood for a long time at the baggage carousel at the airport? It is proof to me that all people are inherently spiritual, because a little circle of prayer develops there as people wait and hope their bags made the trip. Even the atheists are praying, "Dear God, please..." Meanwhile, the people who travel lightly are already on their way.

My wife and I recently returned from a week of vacation in Italy where we were visiting our daughter who is studying there. As we waited at the baggage carousel watching the bags come down the chute, I thought about how much this reminded me of pastoral

counseling. That is when I listen to people talk about the emotional baggage they had checked for a while, but now the time has come to take possession of those emotions. As we sit there, one by one, the bags start to appear: down the chute comes the parent baggage, then comes the children baggage, then I hear about their dream, which is the bag that seems to have gotten lost. Then down come more bags that we could label "failed relationships," "unsatisfying work," and lots of bags marked "hurt." Some think I'm the skycap who's going to lug all this stuff away for them, but that's not my job. So we just talk about it as the same bags circle around and around. When the time is right, I invite them to just walk away and leave it all.

The hardest things to leave behind in the journey with Jesus are not our many possessions, but the hurt and guilt we have carried for so long. Periodically, you have to have a garage sale of the soul to get rid of that stuff.

Many of us are pretty good at giving God our victories and achievements. When we receive a compliment, if we're obnoxiously spiritual, we'll say, "Oh, the glory belongs to God." Well, of course. But what about your failures and your hurts, do they belong to God as well? They better, because again, the cost of discipleship is everything. Even the things you are not so proud of giving to God. Until you give him everything, you'll never make a world of difference.

A third reason Jesus calls you to travel lightly is that he has always wanted you to be free. But it was the unclean spirits that enslaved you. If you are going to be free again, you have to walk away from the slavery and start acting like a human being again. Only then can your life make a difference.

No one is actually born free. We are first dependent on the womb, and then we are dependent on the nurture of our parents. But loving parents know their job is to train a child to leave home as a free young adult, because freedom is a skill, and it takes years and years of learning and discipline, trial and error, accident and healing. All of it bathed in unconditional love. The purpose of all that was not to keep you in your parent's home until you were fifty. The purpose was to make you free to go out and commit yourself to something worthy of a life.

Similarly, Jesus called you to himself, not to make you afraid of the world plagued by unclean spirits but to make you free to be in the world but not of it. Jesus wants you to be free: free of the baggage the world lays upon you, free of the fears over what you will lose, free of the possessions that have taken possession over you, and free of the guilt that has sucked away your humanity. He wants you to be who God created you to be, and who God is converting you back to being.

The Heavenly Father loves you! That is why he insists that you be free and fully human. When my family was touring through so much of the magnificent art of Florence, I was struck by how many of the pre-Renaissance paintings portrayed the anger of God. The scenes were dark, the themes were frequently of judgment, and the people were diminished, dour, and two-dimensional. In the middle of this touring, during my devotions I came upon Psalm 149:4 that claims, "The Lord takes pleasure in his people." On that same day we begin to see the work of artists like Michelangelo who apparently had also stumbled across this verse. The tourists, I noticed, tended to hustle by the medieval art as quickly as possible, but when they got to the statue of David, everyone wanted only to stand there and stare at such beauty. What were we starting at? At a depiction of humanity as it was created to be, at "a man after God's own heart," and at a glimpse of life from an artist who believed God is pleased with us.

As you know, Michelangelo's philosophy of sculpture was that the image was already inside the stone. The artist was merely freeing it by removing everything that didn't belong there. That is what Jesus is calling you to do to yourself in our text. He says that when you accumulate hurt in your mission through life, you have to shake off the dust from your feet, because it doesn't belong on you.

The reason the world is plagued by the cycles of hurt and retribution is we have believed the evil spirits' lies that we have to stay hurt and act like victims. But rather than an eye for an eye, Jesus said to shake off the hurt, forgive, and move on. Rather than rehearsing guilt, Jesus said to confess, repent, shake off the sin, and move on. Rather than living in fear, Jesus said to shake off the anxiety and be free.

What about you? What do you need to shake off so you will be free to take up the family business of changing the world?

Set us free, O God, whatever it takes, set us free. Amen.