

“Focusing On What Is Important”

Mark 6:7-13

July 9th, 2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

When reading about Jesus preparing the twelve to go off on local mission trips and His insistence on their living a simple life-style, for some unknown reason I thought back to the old James Bond movies. Remember some of the usual things secret agent Bond would be given by the special weapon's expert named "Q?" There were the special cars that would have machine guns mounted in the front and rear to ward off enemy attackers, along with the ejector seats for unwanted passengers. There would be poison pens, hidden cameras and tape recorders and other gadgets. Just about any moving vehicle could transform into an airplane or a boat. Pencils would have oxygen supplies for underwater swimming and bracelets could shoot darts with armor-piercing capabilities.

From having seen these vintage James Bond movies, I wondered what it would have been like if Jesus had issued special equipment to the disciples for their mission. Maybe their walking staffs could be converted into rifles so they could shoot wild animals or teargas angry mobs. Perhaps their sandals could have a trigger-activated knife blade that flicks out from beneath the sole of the sandal, in case they were captured and had to get untied.

Instead of being given weapons and gadgets, the twelve were given basic instructions having to do with the urgency of their message and the importance of their tasks. At this point, the disciples had been with Jesus for many months. They had seen His miracles and had been in most of His teaching sessions.

Typical of the Jewish way of conducting mission campaigns then, Jesus sent them out in twos. With two, there was greater safety and credibility. In giving them authority (that verse seven mentions), it means that Jesus was giving them, as the Greek word means, 'the ability, permission and right to perform their duties' – similar to a king or queen delegating authority to another.

Looking at the parallel gospels in your bulletin, in Mark's verses, you see that the disciples were given the authority to cast out demons or at least deal with all of the infirmities commonly thought to be related to demonic possession in those days. Matthew and Luke give more detail to this incident. The disciples were told to heal every disease and infirmity, even raise the dead (according to Matthew) and preach that the kingdom of God was soon coming.

Matthew and Luke further say, as you look over at their columns, that Jesus told them to take no gold, silver or copper coins as remuneration for these miraculous services. They were not to take food or even a staff along but Mark says, in his verse 8, that they were permitted a staff.

When Jesus said to take no bag, He was referring to a travel bag, the sort of bag commonly used for begging. In other words, unlike many missionaries of that time, who were involved in various religious sects, they were not to beg for their support. They were to keep their clothing simple – one pair of sandals, one tunic and no designer togas.

In that climate, clothing was already simple. First there was a tunic that was worn next to the skin. This was usually a long cloth folded over and sewn down the sides. It would have arm holes cut in it and usually sold without an opening for the head so the buyer would cut the hole to his or her own style.

They would wear another tunic or cloak on top of that, serving as a coat during the day and a blanket in which to wrap during the night. If you were a shepherd, camping out under the stars, this outer tunic would be seven feet long by four and a half feet wide. Those of you with Scottish descent would see similarities with the use of the kilt. So where the text says that they were to take only one tunic, it meant they should take only their outer tunic and completely rely on hospitality for their lodging.

Continuing in His instructions on a simple life-style, Jesus told them that they were to remain in their

host's home for the duration of their stay in that town. The understanding would be that they were not to go from house to house, looking for a more comfortable situation to use for a base of operations. They had probably heard Jesus' sermon about how they were to depend on God because God even watches over the birds and flowers and will provide.

We also know, from Josephus the historian, that in many Jewish towns, there was a social welfare individual whose job it was to provide food and clothing for transients. So the general picture is that, unlike the fictional character James Bond, who has a provision for every emergency, they were to totally rely on God for their needs. But our question as to 'why' perhaps has a simple answer.

Jesus, and those with Him, were operating locally in Palestine, not far from their homes and places of occupation. Jesus was sending them out in that county just as you might be sent out in the upstate New York area for a few weeks. The apostle Paul could not have carried out his extensive missionary work in the Mediterranean countries if he had adhered to this sort of life-style. These instructions, then, were for a limited and local Palestinian mission.

Another reason for this trimmed down life-style was the urgency of their message. You recall that the sermons of John the Baptist had this sense of urgency as well. He went about with one animal skin suit of clothing, eating a vegetarian diet, saying: "Repent, because God's kingdom is just around the corner. Get ready or else!"

In the same way, Jesus knew He was only going to be there for a limited time before His work would be violently ended. His followers were to go out in that area and proclaim an urgent message that things are beginning to happen because God's kingdom is here. The Messiah has come.

Their task was so important that they were instructed to leave a town, shaking the dust from their feet as they left, if they had not been received. They were not to get delayed in their travels by towns that were not receptive to their message. Shaking the dust from their feet was a somber sign, probably more for the disciples' benefit than for anyone else.

Finally, in Mark's verse thirteen, again you see him mentioning 'casting out demons.' Of all of the Gospel writers, Mark had a particular interest in Jesus' authority over the spirit world and he mentions demonic exorcisms more than the others.

History shows that the early Church did not consider this mission trip to be of major significance. Little was said of what the disciples actually did on these excursions. On another occasion, Jesus sent out seventy people for similar purposes. But this incident does give us a picture of the urgency of the message of Jesus and perhaps it suggests a sense of urgency about the purpose of our lives today.

Today, we often feel that it is more urgent to get to know someone and establish a secure, comfortable, non-threatening relationship with them, before we ever mention important values on which our lives are based. We generally fear rejection from others because our self-concepts are generally shaky to begin with. We can't stand the thought of others thinking poorly of us, so we often go to great lengths to be liked. At times, we put our convictions back in the religion closet, only to gingerly pull them out in a discussion that someone else begins about "God and all that."

The picture we see in the text, however, is of individuals who are confident that they have an important message about people's relationship with God. They were to sense the importance of it above all other things. They were to feel so confident about it that when they met people who were simply uninterested in their message about God, they were to walk away and seek others who may be more receptive.

The extent of their raising people from the dead or curing leprosy is a mystery. I've always had trouble reconciling this passage with their behavior on the night of Jesus' arrest. But then, not all of the things summarized in this book two thousand years ago fit neatly together. At the same time, we can't forget what was happening shortly after Jesus was resurrected and the believers were given God's Holy Spirit.

Acts 5:12-16 describes a time when the Apostles (the twelve) were actually performing healing miracles around town. "Signs and wonders" were done so that

not only were they feared and respected, people would drag their ailing loved ones out into the street on cots and blankets, hoping that Peter's shadow might fall on them and heal them as he walked by. "Great numbers of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits and they were *all* cured."¹ Imagine the *Buffalo News* reporting that the CedarGrove residents came out to our parking lot in hopes of having the shadow, of one of our Elders, fall on them in order to be healed?

If Jesus were addressing us this morning, preparing us to go our ways and urgently spread the good news of the love of God to others, I suspect He'd point out at least two things that get in our way.

First, He'd say we've got to get rid of our consumer mentality. Unfortunately, this is a big deal for most of us. This is what I mean.

A writer, named Bill McKibben, had a team videotape all the broadcasted shows on the largest cable-television system available, which, at the time, was a hundred-channel operation in Fairfax, Virginia. The team taped everything that came across all the channels during a single twenty-four hour period. Next, he took the 2,400 hours of videotape to the Adirondacks and spent a year watching it. He was trying to figure out what the world would look like from the viewpoint of the easy chair in front of the television.

What he found, amid the many lessons that spewed forth from the six home-shopping channels, the four music-video channels and the three sports channels, was this one overriding message: "You are the most important thing on earth." You, sitting there on the couch – clutching the remote, are the center of creation – the heaviest object in the known universe. All things orbit your desires. This Bud's for you.²

This, of course, is the mantra of our consumer society – the elevation of each one of us above all else. Bob Dyllan once wrote "With everything from

¹ Acts 5:16

² See Bill McKibben's wonderful article "Consuming Nature" *The Sun* July 2000 p.20.

flesh colored Christs that glow in the dark, it's easy to see, without lookin' too far, that not much is really sacred."³

The result of our consumer mentality is that we forget about God and pretty much live out our lives, focused almost entirely, on what we earn, what we save and how much we acquire. Of course, in other times and other places, people have managed to put other things at the center of their lives – their tribe or community, their God, nature or some combination of these. There have been other choices offered as worthy of respect or reverence.

So there's no getting around it. You and I have grown up in a culture so devoted to consuming goods and services – we've grown so set in defining who we are by our patterns of consuming – that I very much doubt that you and I can ever shake our conditioning.⁴

When *we* hear how Jesus sent out His followers, urging them to maintain a simplified life-style, we tend to chalk that up as just a first century-ism and irrelevant to the high-tech needs of our lifestyle. "*If it were today, maybe they could have brought palm-size computers?*" we wistfully wonder. So for starters, if Jesus were here with advice for our ministries in our neighborhoods, He'd probably hammer us on our obsession with material things. "It isn't about what you *have*, . . . it's about who you are and what you have to offer the person you are with at the moment!" He would tell us.

The second thing that gets in our way, of doing miracles in our neighborhood, is our fear of being rejected. We don't want to rock the boat by bringing up things like religious values that might jeopardize what others think of us.

You probably read the syndicated *Knight Ridder* article last week that reported how computer companies have lost over twelve billion dollars from stolen software.⁵ There's undoubtedly a similar

³ In his song "Desolation Row."

⁴ So concludes McKibben, as he goes on in his article to point out that even our focus on consuming less can become consumerism in itself and he uses his neighborhood's drive to consume air free of black flies.

⁵ Benjamin Y. Lowe, Computer Companies Lost \$12.2 Billion in

financial loss for business in the recording and entertainment industry. These companies lose money because people make illegal copies of their computer programs and music software because the technology now enables us to easily and cheaply make copies of CDs. Kids do it in junior high and the older adults do it in companies to save themselves money – enabling them to have and use these products free, as well as sell them to make money. This is nothing other than theft.

But we'd never want to say anything about this because we don't want the other person to not like us; or if it is the place that gives us our pay check, we don't want to confront that robbery because we'd be fired. Just so you know, it is the company policy of our church that there will never be computer software used on our machines that has not been legitimately purchased. How about where you work or your home? Are you using stolen merchandise?

More importantly and related to our topic, how we approach others in life has to do with the Christian authority we've been given and the lack of baggage we should have when we stand before another human being to whom God has sent us. When we are around others, how often are we preoccupied with our homes, our positions in our jobs, our automobiles, our education and so on? We *tend* to talk about what's on our minds – so when we are in the presence of others, are we mindful that God has put us in front of them to minister to them – to help heal them? Or are we waiting for them to finish their sentence so we can tell them about how we, like them, have had a similar kind of experience with our car, our home or something else we've just gotten from Home Depot?

If Jesus were here, maybe He'd tell us to stop talking about sports and drop what we're doing and schedule a time to go to that person's house – within five seconds of hearing that they have a small carpentry problem and we figure out that they're not able to handle it. Maybe He'd tell us to stop talking about all of our busyness – how we are transporting

Stolen Software" from *Knight Ridder*, reprinted in *The Buffalo News*, 7/4/2000 D7 & 8.

our kids or working on yet another family reunion – long enough, at least, to really hear the tone in their voice and see the sadness in their eyes when they are telling us that they aren't coming to a church social event because they can't afford it.

I bet you could spend at least a hundred dollars cash each week, right out of your pocket, responding to other's needs if you truly listened to the needs of the people right around you. Some of you do.

It has to do with living from your heart. It has to do with spontaneously responding to others wherever and whenever you're with them. And it certainly isn't about spraying two puffs of breath spray and going out on a "missionary trip" to knock on the doors of the so-called "un-churched." And they're not "un-churched" in the first place.

They no longer go to church because when they did, the people they met didn't impress them as authentically caring about them. They didn't experience a sense of welcome or healing and for some reason, they apparently didn't find the love of God in the hearts of the people they met or they would have gone back to that church.

Instead, they've become overwhelming convinced that Christ is not real and that the Christians they met were no more caring about them or authoritative or knowledgeable about their God than the retail clerk at the mall who may only know what the last television commercial has told them. So when we're out there in real life 101, talking with the person whom God has intentionally put in our path, we're supposed to be there without our consumerism and without our faltering self-concept, looking for what they can do for *us*.

We're supposed to be standing there without our material things on our mind, . . . without any care about whether or not they're going to like us. We are to stand before them, totally open to who they are, standing in a non-judging and graceful openness to all they are as a person whom God has made. We are to be there, before them, as the face of God and the hands of God and the heart of God. It's as if what is going in *their* life is the only thing that matters. That's the only way we can be open to others and be used by God to bring healing and wholeness in their lives.

After all, “Who (really) wants to be a millionaire?”⁶ If that’s all you’re about, you’ll be the first one voted off God’s island.⁷ ■



⁶ As is asked by the popular quiz show hosted by Regis Philbin.

⁷ As happens in the summer 2000 television show “Survival.”