

March 25, 2012 by Steve Brandon



The Trials of Ministry

Mark 6:1-32

1. Rejection at Home (verses 1-6)

2. Faith on the Road (verses 7-13)

3. Death for Some (verses 14-29)

4. Fatigue for All (verses 30-32)

Following Jesus isn't easy. Serving Jesus isn't easy. Today we come to a portion of Scripture where the disciples are shown the difficulties of ministry. For the lack of a better name, I have labeled them as "trials." "The Trials of Ministry."

Now, as you think about "ministry," don't think about those who are employed full-time in Christ's service. Rather, I want for you to think of all believers who are seeking to serve and minister to others.

Here's the first trial, ...

1. Rejection at Home (verses 1-6)

Let's begin in verse 1, ...

Mark 6:1

Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him.

Once again, we see Jesus changing location. At the end of chapter 5, Jesus and His disciples were near the seashore (5:21), probably near Capernaum. But, now, Jesus had come into "His hometown" (verse 1). Although Mark doesn't mention the town by name, you can piece things together and know that Mark is referring to Nazareth, which is about 20-25 miles southwest of Capernaum. Nazareth was the hometown of Jesus where he had lived for 30 years. He knew this place. Every Sabbath, Jesus and His family would go to the synagogue to worship. He knew these people.

And now, we see Jesus sitting in the seat of the synagogue to teach, where once he was taught.

Mark 6:2

When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue;

You might naturally think that He would get a hero's welcome. Isn't this how heroes come home? People are often proud of those who are from their town. My home town of DeKalb is proud of Cindy Crawford, the supermodel. The city of Dixon is proud of being the birthplace of Ronald Reagan.

I remember receiving a phone call from my mother-in-law. She was so excited that I could barely tell what she was saying on the answering machine. And, I didn't fully understand it until a few days later. Apparently, Chesley Sullenberger was speaking in Danville, California, where my mother-in-law lives. He was the pilot who successfully landed US Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River after both engines were knocked out by a large flock of birds. [\[1\]](#) Danville is Sullenberger's home town. And they were giving him a hero's welcome. He was presented with the "Key to the Town." He was named an honorary Danville police officer. The fire department presented him with their highest award, "the Medal of Valor." [\[2\]](#) And my mother-in-law was thrilled that Danville was giving Sullenberger a hero's welcome. She wanted to share the moment with us! She was telling us that he was on the television and that we could watch it right now!

And you might expect Jesus to have received the same sort of welcome. After all, Jesus was a teacher endowed with much wisdom. Jesus was a healer who had much power. And the people knew these things, ...

Mark 6:2

... and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands?"

But, alas, such was not the welcome that Jesus received. Instead, they began to scoff at Him, saying, ...

Mark 6:3

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?"

In the Jewish culture of the day, people were identified as their father's son, not their mother's son, even if (as some suppose), Joseph was dead. To call Jesus "the son of Mary" is to insult Jesus. It was to allude to the circumstances surrounding His birth, bringing into question the legitimacy of Jesus. The mention of His brothers and sisters was intended to bring Jesus down, saying that there is nothing so special about this guy. "What's the fuss?" And thereby, ...

Mark 6:3

... And they took offense at Him.

Jesus was not received in His hometown like He was in Capernaum and all of the cities in Galilee. But, this is often the reality of spiritual ministry. Believers in Christ often experience rejection at home.

How many times have new believers experienced this? They come to faith in Christ. And they come home and tell their family, only to be rejected for their new-found faith. Sometimes even, faith in Christ will mean that you are disowned from your family, disinherited and forced to leave your home.

Or, sometimes the rejection is more subtle, like the new believer isn't taken seriously. Why? Well, because they know too much about their family member. They remember when he was a snotty teenager. They remember when he wrecked the car and tried to hide it from his father. They remember the time that he got involved in the multi-level marketing scheme. They remember when he was totally into sports. They remember when he went through his atheism stage. And now, "He has religion? OK. We'll just wait it out." It's a stage he's going through. Just wait, he'll turn around." And as the years go by, nothing really changes. The family still thinks it's a stage. Then, it's "just who he is." Or, the family comes to think that your faith in Christ is good for you. But, it just never catches on at home.

If that's your situation, then be encouraged. Know that it's not you. It's the dynamics of being a follower of God at home. Jesus explained it in verse 4, ...

Mark 6:4

Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household."

This is the nature of how the kingdom of God works. Familiarity breeds contempt. The prophet has receives honor all around except at home.

Our family saw a great example of this yesterday. A friend of ours from nearly 20 years ago stopped by. We were the ones who shared Christ with him. He very much appreciates what we did for his soul in directing him to Jesus.

While we were eating lunch, he asked about my parents. And so, I gave him the book that my father wrote. And as he looked at my father's picture on the back page, he teared up, remembering all of the kindness that my father showed him

Our friend has been through some rough times, and some great battles with sin. But 20 years later, he's doing very well. He has a heart for the Lord and for His word, that is very evident. He is bold in his faith. He wants others to know what he has found in Jesus.

Anyway, his mother was along as well. She isn't a believer. She's very nice. She's very accommodating. But, you could almost see her roll her eyes when our friend spoke. Almost as if to say, "Religion is good for my son, but it's not for me. It's good for him. But not for me. I'm not going to interrupt him or get into an argument or anything. But, it's not for me." In many ways, her reaction is because a prophet is not without honor except in his home town.

It's one of the trials of ministry: rejection at home (verses 1-6) But, here's an encouraging thing. It's not your sin that turns them away. It's not your failures that turn them away. It's not the fact that you haven't lived the perfect life before your family that turns them away. Because Jesus had none of these things; Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life before those in Nazareth, and He was still rejected by them.

I think that's why Jesus marveled.

Mark 6:5-6

And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief.

Now, of course, it isn't that Jesus wasn't powerful enough to do a miracle there. Rather, I believe, it's that the people weren't willing to come to be healed. Oh, there were a few, which He healed. But, the vast majority of them didn't believe. And Jesus wondered at their unbelief.

Let's move on to my next point. The Trials of Ministry include Rejection at Home (verses 1-6) And, ...

2. Faith on the Road (verses 7-13)

I get this from Jesus' instructions to the twelve disciples.

Mark 6:6-13

... And He was going around the villages teaching. And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and

gave them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belt— but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." They went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

The disciples had been with Jesus long enough to see the ministry that Jesus was doing. And now was time to send them out to do the same. He sent them out on a little missionary trip. He sent them out in pairs, a wise thing to do. They might encourage each other along the way. They might protect each other along the way. They might give credibility to those they encounter. As the law places emphasis upon the testimony of "two or three witnesses" (Deut. 17:6).

And as Jesus sent them out, He sent them out with little. No bread, no bag, no money (verse 8). Only a staff, some sandals and a single tunic (verses 8-9). In other words, just the clothes on their backs. The idea here is that they are to go out and trust the Lord entirely. When they came into a city, they had to trust the Lord for a place to stay. When they came into a city, they had to trust the Lord for their food.

How different this is than when we go on a trip! Yvonne and I are preparing for our trip to Nepal in a few weeks. We have our suitcases set out. In those suitcases, we will back everything that we need. We will pack food. We will pack snacks. We will pack a change of clothes. We will pack a coat and an extra pair of shoes and our soap and shampoo and toothbrush and an extra pillow. We will pack maps and schedules and instructions for arriving. We will pack books to read. We will pack gifts to hand out when we arrive in Nepal. And on top of that, we'll bring some money along with us. Furthermore, we'll bring our credit card, that we might use it to purchase anything that we forgot!

But, when Jesus sent His disciples out, it was much different. He sent them out with only the clothes on their backs. I do believe that this is intentional. Jesus intentionally put the disciples in a position of dependence. Or, as I have said, faith on the road (verses 7-13). Please note that none of them died when they went on this trip. They all came back safely. None of them went hungry during this trip. God provided everything that they needed.

Now, it's not that everything went so well. Jesus gave instructions for when His disciples would be rejected. They were to "shake the dust of the soles of [their] feet as a testimony against [the place]" (verse 11). This is what the Jews would do when they left Gentile places, because they considered the land upon which they walked to be unclean. I'm assuming that their journeys were filled with some feet-shaking.

Repentance is a difficult message that few want to hear. But, this is the message that the disciples preached. "They went out and preached that men should repent" (Mark 6:12). They were merely imitating their Master, who said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This is our message as well. We preach that men should repent and turn from their sins. Whenever this is preached, there is resistance. So, I'm sure that on their journeys, not everything went perfectly well for the disciples. But, God provided in everything.

Now, this isn't to say that we ought to do as the disciples did. In fact, we have reason why we shouldn't do so. In Luke 22:35, Jesus said, "When I sent you out without money belt and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you?" "They said, 'No, nothing.'" And He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one" (Luke 22:36). In other words, we don't have to go out on a missions trip with nothing in our hands and fully trust the Lord to supply all of our needs on the trip. In our day and age, the Lord will supply some of our needs before the trip.

But, that's not to say that the principle doesn't remain true. In fact, I believe that the principle is the same. We need to have Faith on the Road (verses 7-13). Whenever we go out, we need to have faith. And there are times when we go out to build up our faith.

From our congregation, Alyssa returned last week from a trip to Berlin, Germany. She went there to share Jesus Christ with university students in Germany. She wrote to us a report of her time there. I've included a couple of paragraphs from what she wrote.

Please be praying for the 93 students who heard the gospel, some for the very first time. When I asked Harumi, a young Brazilian woman studying at the technical college, who Jesus was, she responded saying "Jesus? Who is that?". The reality of the nations is that there are so many people who have grown up not hearing about or not having a correct view of who Christ is or what he did. I am blessed to have been given the opportunity to serve God the past week and be one of the people to share Christ with someone for the first time!

I am thankful that the Lord chose to take me out of my comfort zone in the States to share my faith. It's much more difficult to talk to someone about the Lord when everyone around them and everything they've learned points them away from there even being the existence of a God. A man on staff with Cru in Berlin appropriately called Europe the "prodigal son" of the world. A place once revived and following God is now a hub for spiritual emptiness.

Another way I was challenged in my faith while in Berlin was simply to just grow in the way I trust my heavenly father to be in control and provide for all of my needs. I felt doubt creeping in during conversations, things like "there's no way they'll change" "they aren't really listening to you" or "can you even communicate well enough to them?" The Holy Spirit really did take over conversations and overwhelm my heart with confidence in him. Being a part of Cru during the last few years I've been able to witness women coming to Christ by the power of the Spirit through our conversations, but this week I experienced Him completely taking conversations the way he wanted to and putting words and scripture in my mouth that I did not prepare or even know how to say beforehand. I was asked for more faith too when I didn't see anyone meet Jesus for the first time, but instead I have to trust that the seeds were planted and the Lord will water them and cause them to grow.

Other areas I felt challenged in my faith were growing in boldness to ask spiritual questions, confidence in discerning the Lord's will, and humbling my heart to desire confessing sin continually and specifically. It was also wonderful to learn the history of Berlin and see God's hand in Germany's history. On our free day Friday a group of us students went to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp just outside Berlin. Being in the concentration camp and seeing the evil that Satan was behind during the 1930's and 40's was sobering and heart wrenching, but ultimately seeing how the Lord has and is redeeming his people, and that his plan [is] to love Him and trust him more.

Did you catch what Alyssa said about her trip and about faith? I will pull out four sentences for you. "I am thankful that the Lord chose to take me out of my comfort zone in the States to share my faith. ... Another way I was challenged in my faith. ... Other areas I felt challenged in my faith. ... His plan [is] to love Him and trust him more."

Certainly, one of the purposes of her trip was to share the gospel with university students in Germany. But, there was something else going on. God was calling Alyssa to trust in Him more. And God was demonstrating that He is trustworthy. It's one of the trials of ministry -- Faith on the Road (verses 7-13).

But, you don't need to go to Berlin to take a similar trip. We have organized an outreach event for the Cub and the Sox home openers. The Cubs open on Thursday, April 5th. The Sox open on Friday, April 13th. The idea is to hand out tracts for two hours before the game begins. It's not very difficult. You simply need to hand out tracts to people. It has some Cubs or Sox trivia on the front. And on the back it has a short gospel tract -- as much as can be placed on a business card.

But, here's one of the things. It will stretch your faith. By handing out those cards, you will set your stake in the ground as one who follows Jesus. If you want to stretch your faith, I encourage you to consider coming. I know that it's a bad time. It's a Thursday or Friday afternoon. Many of you men are working. But, you can always consider taking a day off work to join us. And to try your Faith on the Road.

Let's move on to my third point of The Trials of Ministry
3. Death for Some (verses 14-29)

Beginning in verse 14, we have a flashback to the circumstances surrounding the death of John the Baptist. As some have said, this is the first passion narrative in Mark's gospel, the second being the passion narrative of our Lord at the end of Mark.

Mark has already hinted at the suffering of John the Baptist. Back in chapter 1, and verse 14, we read, "Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God." There was one verse to indicate the imprisonment of John the Baptist. But now, with seventeen verses, Mark tells us the whole story.

Now, it is important to note that this story could have been told anywhere in Mark's gospel. In other words, you could lift verses 14-29 out of this spot in Mark 6, and place it anywhere in Mark's gospel, and it would make sense. In fact, it almost seems that this is a poor place to insert this narrative, because at the end of the story, we return again to the disciples and their missions trip. Verse 30 says, "The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught."

So, a good question to ask is this: Why did Mark place it here? I believe that it has to do with the overall theme of what Mark is attempting to do here in Mark, chapter 6. I think that he is telling us of the hardships of ministry. They will reject you at home. You need to trust God on the road. And now, the message of John the Baptist: It may cost you your life. This fits perfectly well with the theme that I have discerned in this portion of Scripture: "The Trials of Ministry." We pick up the story in verse 14, ...

Mark 6:14-16

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"

Here we see Herod out of his mind. "He heard of it" (verse 14). That may refer to verse 13 and the ministry of the disciples as they went out, preaching and performing miracles. Or, it may refer to the ministry of Jesus, which is more likely, as the entire discussion in verses 14-16 are about the identity of Jesus.

Herod heard of the miraculous things that were being done. Demons were being cast out of people. Sick people were being made well. People were crying to the Lord and repenting of their sins (verse 12). Because of the similarity with the ministry of John the Baptist, some were saying John had risen from the dead. Some thought that Elijah had come onto the scene. Others thought that some other prophet had arisen.

Regardless of what the people thought, Herod was convinced that John the Baptist had risen from the dead. Now this isn't really a rational thought. I mean, if we hear of some wicked deed taking place in the Middle East, we don't think, "Saddam Hussein has risen from the dead!" Nor do we think, "Osama Bin Laden has risen from the dead!" But, the fact that Herod was saying these things does indicate the instability of his mind. There must be something else going on. Certainly, he had a troubled conscience, because he, himself, was responsible for the death of a righteous man. You can see it there in verse 16, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"

And then, in verses 17-29, we read of how John's death took place.

Mark 6:17-18

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Why was John in prison? Because he was speaking out on the issues of marriage and divorce!

We don't know all of the details surrounding what took place. But, you can imagine it quite well. Herod's first wife was "a daughter of the Arabian king, Aretas IV." ^[3] Somehow, he was attracted to Herodias, his niece, and the wife of his brother, Philip. They certainly had an affair. They were certainly guilty of adultery. And so, as is often the case, Herodias divorced Philip so as to marry Herod. The story has lust and passion and sin all over it. And rather than sweeping it all under the table, John wouldn't let it go. He continued to preach against this marital union, saying that it was not lawful.

Herodias, of course, hated John the Baptist for it. He wasn't content to let it go. And so, we read in verse 19, ...

Mark 6:19-20

Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.

Here lies a warning to all churchgoers. Herod (an unrighteous man) enjoyed listening to the preaching of John the Baptist. Herod didn't believe him, but he still enjoyed listening to him. This is a real possibility for those who attend church worship services each week. They may be coming because they enjoy listening to the one preaching, even though they don't believe what he is saying. This may be conscious (as was the case of Benjamin Franklin, who loved to listen to George Whitefield), or it may be unconscious. People may easily be deceived into loving the sermons they hear, while not embracing what is said. The Bible warns such people to "be a doer of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22).

Regarding Herodias, she had no such feeling toward John the Baptist. She wanted justification for her marriage. One commentator said that Herodias knew that "the only place where her marriage certificate could safely be written was on the back of the death warrant of John." ^[4] And that's exactly what happened. The story tells itself, ...

Mark 6:21-29

A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.

Such was the trial of John's life. He made a stand for righteousness and paid dearly for it. He paid with His life.

John Calvin said it well, "We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage, which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God." ^[5]

You and I may not pay with our lives. But, we are called to make moral stands in this life. And as do, we won't be popular. And it may cost us. It may cost us a promotion. It may cost us a relationship. It may cost us financially. People may slander us. People may accuse us of being unloving or unkind. People may say all sorts of evil things against us. But, in the end, what are we seeking anyway? We aren't seeking the approval of men, are we? No, we are seeking the approval of God.

I have a pastor friend, who is in the midst of a great trial right now. One of the widows in the church has been speaking out against him and against the fellow leaders of the church. In church business meetings, she has stood up and slandered him with totally false accusations, creating division in the church body. She has been confronted individually. She has been confronted by several at church. Her sin has been identified and told to the church (all in accordance with Matthew 18). Through it all, she has continued to be unrepentant. She continues to love her sin more than the cross upon which Jesus died. She continues to be rebellious and disruptive of the unity of the church.

It has come to such a head that a restraining order has been placed against her -- this morning! She is no longer welcome to show up at church. The police are involved. Can this be popular? Here we have a widow. I'm guessing that she's in her 70's. Perhaps she's in her 80's. And you need to call the police to keep her away from the church property? Such is the price of ministry. It will be hard. It may even mean death for some (verses 14-29).

Well, let's turn to my last point. The trials of ministry include (1) Rejection at Home, (2) Faith on the Road, (4) Death for Some, and finally, ...
4. Fatigue for All (verses 30-32)

This is a reality for all who serve Christ. Ministry to others is exhausting. Bearing other's burdens is hard. Those engaged in ministry need rest. This is what we see with Jesus and the disciples. We read in verse 30, ...

Mark 6:30-32

The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He *said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

They went away to rest.

There have been several times in my life when I was completely exhausted due to ministry to others. Not here in Rockford. But, in DeKalb. Before I was in full-time ministry, I experienced fatigue on several occasions. I had overwhelming responsibilities. I was an elder at the church. I was leading worship each week. I was preaching on occasion. I was teaching a flock group. I had all of these responsibilities, all while working full-time. I remember coming to a crisis point on several occasions.

So, I am sensitive to those who serve in the church--especially those who give themselves completely to the work. I've been there. We can't go on in this fatigue. We need rest.

Now, this may be the problem for some, but it's not the problem for all. There are many who know nothing of weariness in the ministry. Instead, they are resting all the time. That's not right either. If that is you, I would encourage you to give yourself to serving others. Find yourself at the point of fatigue. As Horatius Bonar once wrote,

Go, labor on; spend, and be spent,
Thy joy to do the Father's will:
It is the way the Master went;
Should not the servant tread it still?

If you are serving in the ministry, you will find that the fatigue will come. But, the good news is this -- God knows. Jesus cared for His disciples, tenderly pulling them away for a while to rest (verse 31). We, too, can find rest. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 25, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] See the fascinating video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imDFSnkIB0k>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesley_Sullenberger

[3] Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 129.

[4] T. W. Manson, *The Servant Messiah* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1953], p. 40 as quoted in Expositor's Bible Commentary, volume 8, p. 670.

[5] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005], volume 1, p. 223.