

“They Went Out and Preached”

The Seventeenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 6:1-13; Isaiah 42:18-25

Just months before, no one outside his hometown had ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, people throughout the entire region know his name. Jesus is a well-known Rabbi (teacher) with a number of disciples. He is a miracle-worker and an exorcist. Huge crowds follow him everywhere he goes. In fact, Jesus has become so well-known that he has attracted the interest of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, who watch his every move, hoping for an opportunity to put Jesus to death. Because of the large crowds and hostile reaction from the religious leaders, Jesus is now preaching in parables as a form of divine judgment. He has also performed a number of dramatic miracles, part of the revelation of his true identity. Jesus has calmed the sea. He has cast out a legion of demons. He has even raised the dead. His disciples, who witnessed these events first-hand, were astonished by Jesus’ words and deed. Slowly but surely, Jesus’ true identity is being revealed to them. The crowds too were astonished, but they see in Jesus nothing more than someone who has come to alleviate their suffering and meet their immediate needs. In light of all of this, you would think that the people of Israel would realize that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the Son of God. You would think that those who heard Jesus preach and who witnessed his miraculous power would repent of their sins and trust in him just as Jesus has commanded them to do. Sadly, they do not. Now it is Jesus who marvels—at depth of the unbelief on the part of the people in his own hometown.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. We have come to a transitional phase in Jesus’ messianic mission. As we move into Mark 6, the focus of Mark’s Gospel shifts from events in the area immediately surrounding the Sea of Galilee, to outlying areas, such as Nazareth, which is Jesus’ hometown. As we have seen in previous weeks, huge crowds are following Jesus seeking healing and deliverance from demonic oppression, while the religious leaders of Israel are jealous and resentful of Jesus and are plotting against him. Since it was Jesus’ mission to preach the message of the kingdom to the people of Israel, Jesus will now venture into new areas as well as seek to escape from the huge crowds which prevented him from getting rest and going about his mission. As his ministry enters a new phase, the focus moves from Galilee to outlying areas (such as Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth), where Jesus will commission his disciples to likewise go and preach the gospel of the kingdom. Like ripples spreading out from a rock dropped into a calm body of water, so too the message of the kingdom of God will now spread throughout much of northern Israel.

After the three dramatic miracles Jesus has just performed—the calming of the sea, the casting out of a legion of demons and the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead—the time has come for Jesus to preach elsewhere, starting with a journey to his home town of Nazareth, which was located in the hill country about twenty miles to the southwest of Capernaum.

While Mark does not explicitly mention the city of Nazareth, we do know from Mark 1:9 and 1:24 that Jesus was known even from the opening days of his ministry as “Jesus of Nazareth.” Recall, that earlier in Mark’s gospel (Mark 3:21, 31-35), Jesus’ family had come from Nazareth to Capernaum to take charge of Jesus and bring him home because they thought that Jesus was not in his right mind. With Jesus’ journey to Nazareth, the situation is now reversed. This time, Jesus heads to Nazareth where he will preach to people with whom he was very familiar, including many old friends and neighbors. And so Mark simply tells us in verse 1 that “*Jesus left there [Capernaum] and went to his hometown*

[Nazareth], *accompanied by his disciples.*”

As this section of Mark’s gospel unfolds, we need to keep in mind the dramatic symbolism of Jesus traveling back to his hometown as a well-known Rabbi accompanied by his disciples. While Jesus will use this time with his disciples to teach them and prepare them for their own mission of preaching the gospel of the kingdom, this is Jesus’ dramatic return to his home.¹ When he left Nazareth he was simply “Mary’s son” and without understanding of the true nature of his person and work, Jesus looked like just another young man eager to make his way through life. But when Jesus returns home, his fame has preceded him. Everyone must have been wondering just what had happened to this hometown boy. While there must have been some talk of the biblical picture—Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God—Mark’s account drives home the fact that at this phase of Jesus’ ministry, this was the return of the hometown boy, now famous. Or at least, that is how the people of Nazareth would have seen Jesus’ return.

As was his custom, Jesus went to the local synagogue and began to preach. Nazareth would never be the same. As we read in Mark 6:2, “*When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. ‘Where did this man get these things?’ they asked. ‘What’s this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!’*” Jesus was granted permission to preach on the Torah (law) and the prophets. The congregation assembled that Sabbath in Nazareth reacts just as the congregation in Capernaum did. The people were astonished when Jesus began to preach. They had never heard such teaching before. Many of them wondered about the source of his amazing words. Young men like Jesus, however zealous and sincere they may be, usually do not have the kind of amazing insights that Jesus had. The people had also heard about Jesus’ miracles, making it clear that Jesus’ reputation as a miracle-worker had preceded him. Therefore, the presence of Jesus in their midst would have created quite a buzz. If the same thing happened in Nazareth as happened in Capernaum, some of the people would see this as the work of God. They knew that his wisdom was divinely-given. And yet there would be many others who were worried that the source of his teaching may indeed be the demonic.

Contrary to all of the wild speculation about Jesus being an Essene, or having learned from the teachers of the East, the fact of the matter is, the people of this village knew Jesus personally from his earliest youth. Jesus grew up here. The people knew him and his family. They knew that Jesus was not trained as a Rabbi, and that he was a common laborer whose family was well-known to everyone present in the synagogue. This familiarity explains why some of the people asked in an overtly derogatory way, “*Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?*” Some have taken these words to mean that it was widely rumored that Jesus was illegitimate, since it was not customary for Jews to describe someone as the son of his mother. The common (and polite) way to do this would be to speak of Jesus as the son of Joseph.² While it is hard to know for sure what the people had heard about Jesus’ supernatural conception and if they had heard that Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father—certainly, this derogatory title implies there was gossip about this—Mark’s words do make it clear that there is a fair amount of resentment toward Jesus among the people. This is often the case when a hometown nobody becomes a somebody.

These people all knew that Jesus was a carpenter by trade—although the term Mark uses can refer to a

¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 200.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 201-202.

wood worker as well as a stonemason or a blacksmith. Jesus probably would have been able to repair furniture and farm implements, as well as help with construction and home repair. Since there is no made mention of Joseph, it is probably the case that he had already died and that Jesus would have taken over Joseph's business as the legal heir—although that may have been disputed.³ In any case, the people assembled in the synagogue were very familiar with Jesus, his mother Mary, as well as his half-brothers, James, Judas and Simon, as well as his sisters. Although even Reformed greats such as Calvin and Francis Turretin believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary, it is clear from Mark's account that Mary and Joseph had a number of children after Jesus was born.

All of this serves to explain why the people were so astonished by Jesus' teaching—it was completely unexpected coming from a common laborer they knew so well. You can almost hear the snide remarks to the effect that "Jesus should have stayed in Nazareth, running the family business." "But no, he's disappeared, gone off and become a religious zealot of some sort." "He's even resisted the efforts of his family to bring him back home." And now, here Jesus is in the synagogue preaching strange new things, surrounded by a band of disciples who act like they believe everything he says. Therefore, we should not be surprised to learn that the people assembled that Saturday "*took offense at him.*" Not only was the true nature of Jesus' mission beyond all human comprehension at this point, but as is typical of most any small town, those who don't do what is expected of them are often times resented by those who do. In any case, Jesus' amazing preaching, his change in demeanor, the disciples who followed him, as well as reports of miracles, made the people resentful and cynical of Jesus. Who was he to come back as a Rabbi and instruct them?

And so when the people raised their snide question about Jesus the carpenter, the Son of Mary, Jesus replied with a popular aphorism: "*Jesus said to them, 'Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.'*" Those present knew exactly the point Jesus was making. Israel's prophets were stoned when they announced that God's judgment would come upon the people unless they repented and renounced idolatry. So it is probably not a coincidence that Jesus quotes a popular aphorism about a prophet and then applies it to himself. Jesus is being treated just as Israel's prophets had been treated. If Jesus' own family thought him insane, it probably did not come as a surprise that those people who watched him grow up would not be particularly impressed by his return home. The sad fact is that these people do not let their prejudices, culture and small town ways, allow them to see the obvious—the kingdom of God and the glorious age of salvation had come to their village. But they couldn't see it, because it came in the person of the son of Mary, the carpenter. And why should they listen to him?

And so we read the sad words of Mark 6:5: "[Jesus] *could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.*" We should not take this report to mean that Jesus could not perform any miracles because people did not have faith, as though it was our faith which actualizes the miraculous power of God. Rather, we should understand Mark to be saying that because unbelief was so rampant in Nazareth, Jesus did not perform any miracles there because to do so would only further harden the people's hearts, thereby subjecting them to great levels of divine judgment.⁴ Although Jesus did lay his hands upon a few people and heal them, his homecoming was sad evidence of the blinding effects of human sin upon Adam's fallen race. This was only more evidence that Jesus will be rejected

³ France, The Gospel of Mark, 242-243.

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 204.

by the people of Israel, since even in his hometown of Nazareth, the people do not believe that he is sent from God. They mock him by calling him the “son of Mary.”⁵

The whole scene reflects the prophecy of Isaiah 42:18-25 (our Old Testament lesson), where the Israelites, in effect, accuse YHWH of being deaf and blind to their plight because he has not given them what they want. Isaiah’s reply is that the reality is that it is the Israelites who are spiritually blind and who deserved the judgment soon to come upon them in the form of the exile and captivity. Sadly, the citizens of Nazareth are much like the Israelites in the days of Isaiah. Jesus does not do for them what they wanted—heal them all and provide for their every need—and so they respond by mocking him. The sad reality is, it is the citizens of Capernaum who are blind and who do not understand that even though Jesus did not heal many, he gave them the greatest gift imaginable; he preached the gospel to them.

Just as the disciples had been amazed when Jesus performed dramatic miracles, and just as the congregations in the synagogue of Capernaum and now Nazareth are amazed at Jesus’ teaching, now it is Jesus’ turn to be amazed. As we read in verse 6, “*And he was amazed at their lack of faith.*” This is the only place where Mark uses this word of Jesus. It was not that the people’s unbelief caught Jesus by surprise, but it does indicate that Jesus marveled at how deeply entrenched unbelief was in his own hometown. His family thought him crazy. His friends and neighbors now spoke of him in less than flattering terms as the “son of Mary.” But Jesus had indeed been about his father’s work—his heavenly Father’s work—but the people in his own hometown did not (or could not see) the obvious. Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. But in Nazareth, he is Jesus the carpenter, son of his mother. Seeing just how entrenched this unbelief was causes Jesus to marvel. The irony is profound and sad.

And so given the unbelief in Nazareth and the fact that Jesus was unable to perform miracles there because their lack of faith would only harden the people’s hearts against God should Jesus perform a miracle, Jesus now moves on to the surrounding villages.

Mark reports in the last half of verse 6 that, “*Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.*” It is hard to tell from Mark’s report whether it was because Jesus was rejected at Nazareth that he began to preach elsewhere, or if his preaching elsewhere was part of his original purpose. The latter is probably the case, since this is the third such trip to preach in the various villages of Galilee (cf. Mark 1:14, 39).⁶ Jesus has already stated that it was his desire to preach throughout the area beyond the Galilee.

Now that his mission will extend to new regions, Jesus is ready to commission those same twelve men as preachers whom earlier he had called to be fishers of men (cf. Mark 1:16-20). As is his custom, Mark gives us a bare-bones “nothing but the facts” account of this in verse 7. “*Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.*” These words clearly bring to fruition the earlier directive given by Jesus in Mark 3:13-19: “*Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter, James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon*

⁵ See the discussion in; Ralph Martin, Mark: Evangelist and Theologian, 122 ff.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 206.

the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.”

By now, the twelve have spent a fair amount of time with Jesus. They have witnessed things beyond their wildest imaginations. They have heard Jesus preach in parables, and have been granted the privilege of his personal explanation of them. There can be no doubt that Jesus has also given them a fair bit of private instruction, not recorded by Mark. Now, Jesus deems that the twelve are ready to go out and preach as his representatives as well as cast out any demons they may encounter. Through this commissioning—a temporary commission which prefigures a permanent and abiding commission given on Pentecost—these men will be Jesus’ delegates and will speak in his name with his full authorization. Their message is not to be their own, as they were to repeat their master’s words. Sending the twelve out in groups of two was in keeping with the requirement in the Mosaic law that the truthfulness of the testimony is established by two or more witnesses.⁷ Through these actions, Jesus was acting as a Rabbi and it was an expected practice in Judaism for a noted Rabbi to commission disciples who would act in the Rabbi’s name and for whom the Rabbi would be personally responsible. This is why, as we will see in Mark 6:30, that the twelve must report back to Jesus what has happened as a result of their preaching.⁸

Jesus’ instructions to them in verses 8-11 are quite specific. *“These were his instructions: ‘Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.’”* When Jesus instructs them to take along a staff and sandals, the image in view is that of Exodus 12:11, when YHWH instructs the Israelites, *“This is how you are to eat [the Passover meal]: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover.”* In giving such instructions, Jesus is clearly associating the disciples’ preaching throughout Israel with that of a new Exodus as God’s people will undertake a new journey through the wilderness of this present evil age as they make their way to the promised land of the age to come. This also explains why Jesus instructs the disciples not to take food nor money. They are to rely upon God’s provision—just like Israel did in the wilderness—this time in the form of hospitality.

According to Mark, the disciples did as Jesus commanded them. As we read in verses 12-13, *“They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”* As Jesus’ chosen representatives, the disciples preach the same basic message that Jesus began preaching when he first appeared in Capernaum (Mark 1:14)—*“The time has come,” he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”* The result was that the kingdom of God was manifest wherever they went, as many people were healed and many demons were cast out. These were the unmistakable signs that the kingdom of God was at hand in the person of Jesus. In all of this, the disciples are being equipped for the commission they will receive when Jesus is raised from the dead and when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them at Pentecost.

Indeed, the good news will now be proclaimed in ever wider and wider circles as Jesus and his disciples make their way through the villages near Nazareth. Jesus’ messianic mission will soon take him as far northwest as the Mediterranean Sea and as far north as the city of Tyre. He will then preach in Caesarea Philippi and throughout the Decapolis area before inevitably making his way south to Jerusalem where

⁷ Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 207.

⁸ Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 206-207.

his mission will come to its dramatic climax. As Jesus' fame and reputation spread, King Herod got wind of Jesus' ministry thinking that he was John the Baptist now raised from the dead.

What application can we make from this section of Mark's Gospel?

Jesus' return to his home town constitutes both a poignant moment and ironic scene. We don't know how much the people of Nazareth knew about Jesus' birth and the nature of his mission before he returned home as a noted Rabbi, miracle-worker and exorcist. If his own family thought him not to be in his right mind, we can only imagine what the town's people thought when they began hearing that this local boy and manual laborer was now following in the footsteps of John the Baptist—preaching a controversial message of repentance and performing miracles. The sad thing is that whatever they thought, their preconceptions about Jesus prevented them from seeing the true nature of his mission.

Mark does not tell us what Jesus' preached in the synagogue, probably because Jesus preached the same message he preached everywhere he went and which he taught the disciples to preach—*"The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* But this news was hard to accept from someone who they knew as a common laborer and who, according to the rumors they may have heard, was illegitimate. Joseph had probably died some time before and there was no telling how the story of Jesus' supernatural conception was distorted by small town gossip. Maybe the people had no idea of how Jesus was conceived. Perhaps they all heard stories and spread lies. The point is that Jesus comes back to Nazareth as the most famous man in all Israel. Not only is there the whole small town boy made good going on in the story, there is the sad fact that all of this prevented the people in Nazareth from seeing the obvious—Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the Son of God. When he came to Nazareth, he came bringing salvation to his people. Their hearts were so indifferent to the gospel because of the messenger that Jesus only healed a few people while marveling at the extent of their unbelief. A prophet is truly without honor in his own town. Resentment, jealousy and small town dynamics surely got in the way of the gospel. Is this the carpenter, the son of Mary? Who is he to preach to us?

This principle explains, in part, why it is so difficult for us to share the gospel with people who are close to us—our friends, family, neighbors. If Jesus was without sin and yet the people of Nazareth own prejudices and unbelief were exposed when Jesus preached the gospel to them, we should expect much the same when we share the gospel with those we know the best. The hardest people to share the gospel with are the people closest to us. They have seen our sins and our shortcomings. They are way too familiar with us. Their impression of us inevitably colors their impression of our message. While our confidence should lie in the power of God in the gospel which can indeed transcend all such human and sinful limitations, the fact of the matter is it is very difficult to evangelize those closest to us. Not only should we pray for wisdom to speak the truth in the right way in such cases, we should also pray that God will send to such people other messengers of the gospel, who may get a hearing when we won't. But never lose heart. If God can raise the dead, he can save the most hardened unbeliever if it be his will. And so if we are without honor in our own town, we should all be willing to serve as the messenger who brings to good news to someone else's home.

In this section of Mark's gospel Jesus also commissions the twelve who went out two by two and who preached the good news, just as Jesus commanded. From Jesus' instructions to them it is at the very least implied that a New Exodus has begun and that his disciples are to rely on the providence of God just as the Israelites did in the wilderness. Surely, this was to teach them that God would provide for their every need—a lesson they would need to learn before Jesus' crucifixion and death. They too have witnessed the power of God as it is manifest in the preaching of the gospel. People are healed and demons are cast out.

They are being equipped and trained for their own mission, in which the gospel will spread from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Throughout all of this, we see the importance of preaching. Jesus preaches the message of the kingdom and he instructs his disciples to do the same. Thus is it by proclaiming that the “hour has come, the kingdom of God is at hand, we must repent and believe the good news,” that people come to faith in Jesus.

This was Jesus’ method of evangelism. It was the method he taught his disciples. It is the message he has entrusted to all of us. Let it be said of us, “that they all went out and preached,” that is, they all went out from Christ Reformed Church and proclaimed the gospel to everyone in their sphere of influence. For this is how the kingdom advances. This is how God saves sinners. Amen!