

What Discipleship Can Look Like

Mark 6:14-29

Introduction - Are We Chasing the Spectacular?

Our culture loves the spectacular and amazing. People seem to dread the idea of being average or normal. It is to the point now where some teachers feel pressure to write tremendous reports for students who are actually quite average.

When we read the Bible our eyes are drawn to stories where people display supernatural gifts and abilities and there is part of us that thinks that those abilities or experiences must be the characteristics of real disciples of Jesus, real Christians. Last week we read how Jesus sent out the twelve with his authority and we're told that, "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed with oil many people who were ill and healed them." Surely this is how Christians should be living, experiencing these amazing spiritual victories.

This morning we're going to look at an example of discipleship which will perhaps help us to temper our expectations as to what should be the normal Christian experience.

Context - Passage Is Between Two Sections About Discipleship (vv. 7-13, 30-44) John Is An Example Of A Disciple

Now it should be asked, why am I describing this experience of John the Baptist as an example of a disciple? We know that John baptised Jesus and recognised the significance of who Jesus was but was never a follower of Jesus like others were and in that respect wouldn't really be described as a disciple. Well, the answer as to why John is being presented as an example of being a disciple is because of the literary context, the way Mark has fit this story of John the Baptist's death into his account of Jesus. If you have your Bible with you open to Mark 6 you'll see that in verses 7 to 13 the focus is on appointing and sending out the twelve by Jesus. If we then jump over the story of John to verse 30 we read the start of the next

story saying, “The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.” This inclusion of a story within another story is used by Mark normally to highlight the meaning or the connection between the stories. It appears that with Jesus sending out the disciples in verses 7 to 13 and then the twelve reporting back in verse 30 which leads in to another story of Jesus setting an example for his disciples, that Mark wants his readers to think about what does it mean to be a disciple especially as a counter point to the amazing experiences of the disciples when they cast out demons and healed people. John the Baptist is that example of what it means to be a disciple.

Disciples Identified Intimately With Jesus (vv. 14-16)

So what do we learn about discipleship from John the Baptist? First, we notice in verses 14 to 16 that Herod is confused as to the identity of Jesus and whether it could be John the Baptist risen from the dead (which would explain why miracles were happening around him) and it's clear that there's confusion as to who Jesus is. King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, ‘John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.’

Others said, ‘He is Elijah.’

And still others claimed, ‘He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.’

But when Herod heard this, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!’

In one sense the reader is to understand that Herod is, of course, mistaken. Jesus was neither John the Baptist, nor the prophet who prepared the way for the Lord, not another prophet. Jesus is the Son of God and the bringer of the Kingdom. There's a significant difference between Jesus and John. However, in another sense, the reader is to see that we have John being closely identified with Jesus (or Jesus being identified with John depending on your perspective). I mentioned last week that when Jesus sent out the twelve he was sending them out to do what they had already seen him doing. Disciples are to follow Jesus' example, we are to imitate Jesus and

so be closely identified with him. This is the first thing we learn about discipleship from John is that we are to be closely aligned with and identified with Jesus. Where does my character accurately mirror Jesus' character? Do I personally demonstrate love, forgiveness, care, etc. and do I point people to trust in God and not in themselves? That's what Jesus did.

Disciples Characterised By Speaking Truth In The Face of Opposition (vv. 17-20)

Next we're told in the story, "For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him."

John the Baptist courageously speaks God's truth despite the risk and opposition. It was against the law which God had given to the Jews for a man to marry his brother's wife while his brother was still alive. This may not have gone down well with Herod but it went down even worse with Herodias, his wife, and she really wanted to kill John.

Disciples are not just to be characterised by imitating Jesus in what we do, we are also told to be characterised by speaking up and declaring the truth even in the midst of opposition and danger. There is a part of me that smiles when I see that John was in trouble for declaring God's teaching about marriage ... surely that wouldn't happen today would it?! Hmm ... I'm not sure if I smile or if I weep.

What is to be emphasised here though is that disciples are to be characterised by speaking the truth even in the face of opposition from powerful people and the risks which that may entail. Last week we saw that Jesus alluded to this when he said, in verse 11, "if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and

shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” John serves as an example of what happens if a town won’t receive what you’re saying but doesn’t let you leave.

What are the areas in our lives where we have the opportunity to speak the truth even though it poses risks? I find it hard to give you concrete examples because it can vary from person to person. No, the truth doesn’t change but your circumstances may mean that what one person could easily say others would be at risk for saying. A grandparent suggesting to their son or daughter that perhaps the grand kids could come to church and Sunday school may be nothing in some households but in others will be met with fierce opposition. The idea that this world is not our own but we are to care for it as under-shepherds tending what God has made seems logical to some Christians and yet others may accuse a person making such a comment of being a humanity-hating left-wing hippie (if only I had the hair for it).

I don’t know your particular opportunities nor the particular opposition you face but I’d like to know. Your church family wants to know. We need to stand beside each other in support and in prayer because standing up for the truth can be a pretty lonely experience and can lead us to having doubts (which we know John the Baptist also struggled with). Let’s not try to do this alone but receive thankful help from our brothers and sisters in-Christ.

Disciples Are To Be Characterised By Holiness and Faithfulness Not Victoriousness (vv. 21-29)

In contrast to Christians who think that the mark of being a true disciple is by having amazing super-natural experiences of power and victory, we see in the example of John the Baptist that characteristic of being a disciple was being closely identified with Jesus and being willing to speak the truth in the face of opposition and risks.

We now come to the third and final characteristic of a disciple which John the Baptist sets as an example for us. Allow me to read verses 21 to 29 for us again.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'

She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?'

'The head of John the Baptist,' she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a dish.'

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a dish. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Remember how I said earlier that Herodias really didn't like John and nursed a grudge against him? Well Herodias has bided her time and seizes her opportunity when Herod was having his usual birthday celebrations. Herodias arranged for her daughter, Salome, to dance for the king and the guests in such a way as to entice him into making a rash promise. Herod isn't really putting his kingdom at risk or genuinely offering her half his kingdom but he is promising to be exceedingly generous.

When Salome knew that she has succeeded in getting the king to promise her something she went back to her mum for further information and Herodias tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. With the horrific reports of what ISIS has done in recent years it isn't actually hard for us to think of a teenager adding the little flourish that she wanted the head to be given to her on a platter.

Despite Herod's unease at what is asked of him he would rather do what he knows is wrong than lose face before his leading officials. What an interesting contrast Herod makes with John the Baptist who spoke and did the truth in the face of opposition and risk. The result of Herod's inability to do what is right is that John is killed and his disciples come and collect his body to bury it.

That's a bit of a disappointing end to what's supposed to be an example of what it means to be a disciple. Is this meant to encourage us? Well, yes it is. Mark's readers needed to know that sometimes they would be casting out demons and healing people and seeing other miraculous works and experiencing victorious power because the Kingdom of God had come in Jesus but there would be other times when it was clear that while the kingdom of God had come in Jesus it hadn't yet been fully consummated and so they needed to be prepared to remain faithful to the very end, even if that meant death.

For disciples of Jesus, we are to be characterised by holiness (dedicated to things of God) and faithfulness (a serious and public, personal continuing commitment to Jesus) more than being characterised by victoriousness and demonstrations of supernatural power. The greatest miracle anyone ever experiences is God working in our hearts so that we will trust in Jesus and this trust is to last to the end.

Conclusion

So then, let us learn from John's example of discipleship. May we be closely identified with Jesus (may Jesus shape who we are); may we be willing to speak the truth even in the face of opposition and risk, and may we be characterised by pursuing holiness and faithfulness to the very end rather than a chasing after the spectacular.

[pray to close]