

Imitating Jesus: Lessons of Unbelief

Novelist H. G. Wells, the author of *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*, also wrote a short story called "The Country of the Blind." It's about a remote but luxurious valley in Ecuador where, due to some strange disease, everyone was blind. After 15 generations of blindness, the people had no recollection of sight or color or the outside world. One day, a sighted man appeared in their valley. He had fallen off a high cliff but survived. When he realized that everyone was blind, he tried to tell them that sight was possible and how beautiful the world was. The people just plain didn't believe him.

The man fell in love with one of the young women in the village. The girl's father went to the village doctor. The doctor said, "I think I may say with reasonable certainty that, in order to cure him [the sighted man], all we need to do is a simple and easy surgical operation – namely, to remove these irritant bodies [his eyes!]."

"And then he will be sane?" the father asked.

"Then he will be perfectly sane, and a quite admirable citizen."

[The girl's father concluded:] "Thank Heaven for science!"

In Mark chapter 6, our gospel writer introduces the topic of spiritual blindness: unbelief. We meet several people who don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah and we even hear about a time when the disciples had their doubts. Why is Mark telling us these stories? Why does he group them all together? Is this something that Mark struggled with himself? If we're honest, I think we all will admit that doubt is a nagging irritant in our lives. So, let's see what the Spirit wants to teach us through John Mark and his Lessons from Unbelief. First, he warns us of...

I. The Dangers of Familiarity.

The events of chapter 5 take place around the Sea of Galilee. In chapter 6, Jesus returns to His hometown of Nazareth, about 40 miles away. It says in verse 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! 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?" And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:2-3)

First, let me point to a couple of side facts. Some think that this passage is in conflict with Luke's story of Jesus returning to His hometown in Luke 4 because Luke says that the town's people tried to kill Him. Well, how many of you right now are living away from your hometown? Have you only returned once in your lifetime? Mark's account and Luke's account refer to two different visits by Jesus to His hometown.

Secondly, what do you make of the fact that Mark lists the names of Jesus' brothers and the fact that he had sisters? This is simple, biblical proof that Mary was not an eternal virgin. Now, back to the main point of this story...

Mark says that the hometown crowd "*took offense at him.*" The Greek word behind this phrase is *skandalizomai* – they were scandalized by Jesus. But why? Why weren't they proud of Him? You know, "Small town boy makes good"? Well, have your brothers and sisters always been proud of your achievements in life or have they sometimes been threatened... or jealous... or threatened AND jealous?

Linda Dupree was the only English teacher in a small rural school. She said, "I had the mixed blessing of teaching my own three boys. They begged me not to call on them in class, use them as examples, or tell any family stories, to which I agreed," she said. Linda's sons would invariably on the first day of class choose seats in the far corner of the room and refuse to make eye contact with their mother.

But Linda Dupree was really a great teacher and the other students loved her. They were eager to sit near the front and many simply idolized her. She was often voted the most popular teacher in the school. Linda writes, "I watched as my children began to see me through the eyes of others. One day my oldest asked me in puzzlement, "Mom, do they know who you are?" I'm sure he was referring to the fact that I was "just" a mother. To which I responded, "Son, do *you* know who I am?"ⁱ

There are many great blessings to growing up in a godly family that will take you to worship and Amp 70 on the weekends and clubs or youth group during the week and tell you day after day all about Jesus. But there's a hidden danger in that kind of a childhood as well. It's the danger of familiarity. You can know tons and tons of facts ABOUT Jesus and still not know Jesus.

I grew up in a great Christian home; we were members of a conservative, evangelical church; I graduated from a Christian High School and went off to Wheaton College, a Christian college where I met dozens and dozens of people who had grown up just like me! And a disturbingly large number of them, while they were at Wheaton, abandoned their walk with Jesus Christ. They began drinking heavily, some did drugs, some were sexually active and some of them today are living lives of unbelief. How could that happen? They grew up knowing a lot ABOUT Jesus, but really, they never knew Jesus. They were never real followers of Christ.

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of a man who went into a famous art museum and ran from painting to painting scarcely noticing what was in the frames! On his way out, he said to the guard, "I didn't see anything very special here." The guard responded, "Sir, it's not the paintings that are on trial – it's the visitors!"ⁱⁱ

Jesus was not on trial in his hometown. It was the "townies" who were on trial. Familiarity WITH Jesus can be a danger, an obstacle to your really KNOWING Jesus. Don't be fooled. Don't form your opinion of Him from what others say. Get to know Him for yourself – read all four gospels for yourself. Ask Jesus to prove Himself to you – I dare you! Jesus is not a myth or a monster or a madman. He's the Messiah, the friend of sinners and He would LOVE for you to really get to know Him. "Ask... and you will receive." Next, Mark shows us...

II. The Surprise Message in Hardcore Criticism.

I don't think I know anybody who "likes" criticism, especially really hard, biting criticism. Let's face it, criticism hurts and who likes pain? Only disturbed people like pain.

So, Mark now shows us a couple of "hardcore critics" not only of Jesus but of Jesus' second cousin, John the Baptist: Herod and his second wife, Herodias. John the Baptist got sideways with Herod and Herodias when he told them that it was against God's law for them to get married, because Herod had simply dumped his first wife to marry his half-brother's wife, Herodias. (The state of marriage was as bizarre in Jesus' day as it is in our day!)

As many of you know, Herodias really hated John and pressured her husband Herod to have him arrested on trumped-up charges, which he did. Then, at a banquet on his birthday, Herodias tricked her husband into making an offer to her daughter of whatever she wanted. When she asked her mother what she should ask for, her mom said, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." Too embarrassed not to grant her wish in front of all his guests, Herod carries out Herodias' hateful demand.

When Herod was later asked who he thought Jesus was, he said:

... "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" (Mk. 6:16)

Do you see behind that tough exterior what was really going on in Herod's heart? Guilt was doing a number on him. Guilt that was planted in Herod's heart by John was still doing its work of pointing him to the truth, even after Herod had killed him. Do you know what a biblical definition of guilt is? It's pain pointing you to truth. If you plant truth in someone's heart, it will keep on working even after you've given up on him.

John's greatest enemy was Herod. Who's your greatest enemy? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave this radical instruction. He taught: (Matt. 5:43-45)

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

Jordan Politz graduated from Avon High School last spring. While she was a student there, she was part of a Bible Study on campus. Another student at Avon wasn't exactly her enemy but he wasn't exactly an easy person for Jordan to get along with either. One day, God showed Jordan what He was doing in his heart...

[Play video of Jordan Politz]

Sometimes, for us as Christians, the one who is our greatest critic is the one who is closest to accepting the grace and mercy of God. It's like the phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," which in modern English means that the person who insists so passionately that something is NOT true is sometimes the one who is really thinking that it IS true!

Who was the greatest, most hardcore CRITIC of Christianity in the first year after Jesus' resurrection? It was Saul of Tarsus. And who became the greatest, most hardcore ADVOCATE of Christianity in the first century? It was Paul of Tarsus. Don't succumb to the temptation of thinking that it's a waste to plant a word of truth in your critic's heart because they're too far gone. In God's hands, passionate critics can become passionate evangelists. Plant the seed. Lastly, we need to see...

III. The Unbelief of Believers.

Most of us are pretty familiar with Jesus' miracle, which we call "The Feeding of the Five Thousand." It was actually more like 12 or 15 thousand because five thousand was just the men. Anyway, all these people had had been listening to Jesus teach all day and it gets to be supper time and the disciples say to Jesus, "Hey, send the people away so they can find something to eat."

And Jesus says to His disciples, **"You give them something to eat."** (Mk. 6:37) And the disciples essentially say, "That would cost thousands of dollars! Do you want US to buy them supper?"

Now, before we start defending the disciples for asking a perfectly reasonable question, let's think this through. First of all, have they seen Jesus do any miracles yet? The answer is, "Yes!" In the last chapter, they saw Him do some unbelievable miracles all in one 24-hour period. Secondly, have they seen Him do any food miracles? Think! Mark doesn't record it but what does John say was Jesus' first miracle? He turned water into wine at a wedding. And it wasn't just a little bit of wine either, was it?

So, with that in mind, how should we interpret the disciples' question? It's a criticism! It's "friendly fire." Maybe they were tired, maybe they were hungry, but they could have responded differently. At least one of them could've said, "Hey guys, wait a minute. Remember the wedding? Okay, so, Jesus wants US to feed these people. This is gonna be cool! I don't know how He's gonna do it but let's trust Him! Okay, Jesus, what do we do first?" Instead of questioning, they could have believed.

But now watch this! Watch what Jesus does even with their unbelief. He says, **"How many loaves do you have? ...Go and see."** (Mark 6:38)

It turns out they have five loaves and two fish... for 15,000 people! Now, watch! What does Jesus do with their unbelief? He uses their doubt to drag them into His miracle. He has THEM tell the people to sit down. He prays over the tiny lunch and gives it to THEM to set before the people. When they've all eaten, Jesus sends THEM out to pick up the leftovers. And how much is leftover? Twelve basketfuls – one basketful for each of the doubting disciples!

Have you ever had someone, another Christian, doubt you, doubt your call from God? You believe God has called you in a certain direction, and you believe He has confirmed that through others and in your heart and so you head out into ministry only to be criticized, strongly criticized – not by unbelievers, you expect that! But you were criticized by believers! They said, "What are you thinking? You can't meet that need with the meager resources you've got. Are you nuts? Five loaves and two fish for 15,000 people? Send them home!" Have you ever faced unbelief like that? What should you do?

You should follow Jesus. Look at the pattern Jesus gives us here. **First, discover their need.** What do these people need? Define it. Describe it. In Mark 6 the people needed food. Maybe you know some people who need that. Or maybe they need healing, or jobs, or housing, or maybe they need to hear about the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ? Discover their need - that's step one.

Step two is answer Jesus' question, **"How much do you have?"** The disciples could've said, "Well, we have nothing! Five loaves and two fish, that's nothing!" And Jesus would've said, "No, that's not nothing. It's five loaves and two fish!" Just answer His question, "How much do you have?"

The third step is this: Ask God to bless what you have. In fact, what Jesus actually did was “give thanks” for the little that they had.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. (Mark 6:41)

This is the beginning of living by faith, isn't it? It takes some faith to discover the need and add up how much you have toward meeting it, but now, NOW big-time faith has to kick in to look at 15,000 people and then look at your Friendly's takeout Fishamajig and give thanks for it. That takes faith! But that's what this is all about.

And this leads to step four: just start meeting their need.

Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. (Mark 6:41b)

What should you do with “friendly fire,” criticism from other Christians? Just follow your call, begin your ministry and invite them to join you. Do you see that that's what Jesus did? Do you see that this is the pattern we're following with our Grace and Mercy Campaign? I'm not saying we're receiving criticism. We're not. But we're following this pattern. Step one, we believe that God has shown us a need here in Connecticut, a big need, a HUGE need: 1.2 million people who really don't understand the Grace and Mercy that God is offering them. Step two, we're examining our resources. We're beginning to gather our “Fishamajigs.” Next will come step three: we will pray and thank God for what we have and we're trusting God to multiply what we have until it's the right size to meet this gigantic need.

And then, step four will come. We'll just start the distribution of God's Grace and Mercy to this starving crowd. So, I'm asking you today, “Will you join us? Will you step into this miracle with us?” In verse 34 it says that:

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Their deepest need wasn't food, it was a shepherd! And what did Jesus do?

So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6:34)

This is what the Grace and Mercy Campaign is all about. It's teaching the people of Hartford and Litchfield Counties the “Good News” of Jesus Christ. Will you join us in this massive distribution of soul food? If your answer is “yes,” then here's what I want you to do. Over the next couple of months, we're holding information meetings here at church. We're sending out invitations in an organized way, so that our meetings can be small enough for you to ask your questions. When you get your invitation, pick a meeting that works for you and call the church so we know you're coming. Then come and learn about how you can join other disciples by stepping into this miracle God wants to do among us here in Connecticut. Come join us as we see Jesus Christ feed 1.2 million people the Grace and Mercy of God!

Jesus turned doubters into doers and they ended up being blessed even more than those whom they served. When you receive your invitation to join us, say “YES!” Say, “YES!” Let's pray...

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- ⁱ Linda H. Dupree as posted on PreachingToday.com/illustrations/2002/november
- ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1987), p. 75