

Mark **Part 6**

Mark 6

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The Gospel of Mark

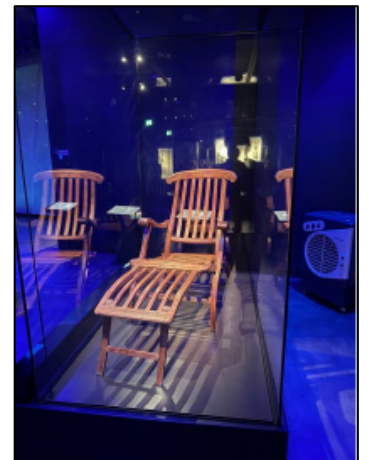
Chapter 6¹

As most of you know, a little over a month ago, Shelly and I celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary by taking a bucket-list trip to Ireland for two weeks. We toured the entire island, but spent a great deal of time in Northern Ireland, which was home of the Kingdom of the O'Neills for over 500 years.

Part of our time there was in the city of Belfast, and while we were there we toured the Titanic Museum. The Titanic was a huge ocean liner in the early 1900s, the greatest modern technological marvel of its time, considered to be unsinkable...until in the middle of the night on its maiden voyage, it struck an iceberg and sunk in less than 3 hours. There were 2,224 passengers and crew and 1,514 of them died. Seven hundred and ten were rescued from the frigid waters of the Atlantic ocean.

The museum is an immersive experience that is quite moving, and includes artifacts that were retrieved from the ocean – whether floating on top or from the wreckage 12,500 feet below the surface. One of those artifacts is in picture; it's one of the deck chairs. This item has become symbolic of being superficial and self-focused. You've heard the phrase, "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic"? It means to be focused on trivial things that only bring comfort to ourselves, even while very serious things are about to happen.

This picture is a good representation of the disciples of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark in chapter 6. The disciples were solely focused on themselves; despite the miraculous things Jesus was doing around them. God himself was among them – but they didn't see it.



I hope you've read chapter six on your weekly reading chart for today so that the Holy Spirit can prepare you for what he wants you to hear. If not, you'll have to do your best to follow along because we're not going to take the time to read all 56 verses.

Up until chapter six, the disciples have just been along for the ride; they've been arranging deck chairs while amazing, miraculous things have been going on around them that prove Jesus is God. But for all they've seen, they still haven't figured it out. In fact, they won't figure it out until the end of chapter 8. But today we see them actually getting involved in the mission – and from this chapter, we're going to see that this is *our* mission, too – *every* Christian is on mission in the Kingdom of God, and this chapter is going to show us what to expect and what to do.

Before we dive in, what exactly *is* the mission of God?

¹ Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012)
David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)
John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

The mission of God, or what has been called “Missio Dei,” refers to God’s mission to *rescue, redeem, and restore people and all of creation*. That’s God’s mission. That’s what Jesus came to set into place. That’s what Jesus meant when he repeatedly said, “The Kingdom of God is here,” or “The Kingdom of God has arrived.” That is God’s mission, and all of God’s people are involved in that mission until they die or Jesus comes back – whichever happens first. That is your mission as an individual and it is our mission together. It’s the mission of our local church and it is the mission of every Christ-following church in the world. It means this: the church does not have a mission; the mission has a church. It’s God’s mission and the church gets to participate in it. So we don’t do the things we do because we’ve got some kind of organizational priorities or agenda; we do what we do for our part of the Mission of God on this corner and in this community. We have the privilege and responsibility to participate in God’s mission. And since it is God’s mission, he is our CEO, our Commander in Chief, he is the Lord and Head of the mission, of which we are serving. So our calling, our power, our resources, come as we obey him and do what he tells us to. If he tells you to go tell your neighbor about Jesus, you will, and he will empower you for it. If he tells us to provide backpacks to our neighborhood schools, he will provide for us to do it. If he tells you to give a certain amount of money to the church, you will do it. If he tells us to support a certain need in the world, we will do it. And he will provide for us as we obey him. Do you understand that? It’s important that you do, because that is what you are going to see happening – successfully and not so successfully – by the disciples in chapter six.

So in the first six and a half verses of chapter six, there is an abrupt shift from where we ended in chapter five. Chapter five highlights the faith of people; chapter six starts out with a story about people’s lack of faith – including from Jesus’ own brothers and sisters.

The trip from where Jesus was in five to where he is now in his hometown was about 18 miles, which would’ve taken Jesus and his disciples about five days of walking.

As he’s teaching, the response of the people is “amazement,” but not in a good way – it indicates sarcasm and rejection...

The mission rejected (vs. 1-6a)

So right off the bat we see the rejection of the mission. Why? Well, people often like things the way they are, so they don’t want to be open to new changes that God wants to make – even though it’s always for our good. So they reject Jesus and his mission. When they say, “Isn’t this Mary’s son, the carpenter?” – those are both intended as put downs. Carpenters were not high on the social ladder, and there’s a possibility that they are saying, “Isn’t this Mary’s illegitimate son?” (You understand why, right?) So we see Jesus’ half brothers and sisters distancing themselves and rejecting him, too.

Jesus’ response to them is “a prophet isn’t accepted in his own hometown,” which basically means, “Familiarity breeds contempt.”

Because of their rejection and lack of faith, Jesus could not do many miracles among them. So this is important: it wasn’t their level of faith or lack of it that determined whether or not Jesus could do miracles. Jesus can do miracles regardless of how we feel about it. But their lack of receptivity to Jesus limited *their own ability to let him work in them*. Jesus

always has the power to do mighty works even in the face of disbelief; what he cannot and will not do is compel people to accept him. You always have the choice to trust him or not.

By the way, even though Jesus' siblings rejected Jesus and the mission here in chapter six, later his brother James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James, and his brother Jude became the author of the book of Jude. So unbelief does not have to be permanent; people *can* choose differently!

But whether a person believes or not, the mission of God and the power of Jesus can't be stopped by anyone. He will accomplish what he plans for this world. Lack of belief on our part will only hinder his work in our own lives, personally – to our own detriment – but it will not ultimately hinder God's good purposes to rescue and redeem all creation.

So in the next section, from verses 6-13, Jesus decides it's time for the disciples to get involved in the mission; we see that Jesus gives them...

The commission (vs. 6b-13)

Despite the rejection and disbelief from Jesus' hometown, he continues the mission, and he does that now by sending the disciples to do the same things he's been doing, which is to call people to repent, to cast out demons, to anoint people and pray for their healing. These are all necessary components of the advancement of the Kingdom of God, of the *Missio Dei*.

From the very beginning, the mission of God has been to call the transformed people to be agents of God's transformation; for the believers to help others become believers by announcing and demonstrating the Good News that life can now be different. Repentance means we've turned our back on our old life and sin and will follow Jesus. The disciples were able to do this *only* because they were sent, authorized, and empowered by Jesus. The mission is never ours – the mission is his.

Let me tell you, there are times that being the pastor is really hard. I was talking about this with another pastor friend of mine. There is no other job like this. We are organizational and cultural leaders. We need to know how systems and structures work; we need to be organized. We need to be good stewards and understand organizational financial responsibly and with integrity. We need to be emotionally intelligent. We are not only counselors, but we are family. We don't just officiate important moments like weddings and funerals; we rejoice and we grieve. It all hits us hard. We are never totally off duty and we are never unburdened.

But do you know what helps me? Knowing that *this is not my church. It is God's church*. It's my job to obey him, not make this succeed or fail. Certainly not to make you happy. The only thing I need to do is obey him and do what he tells me to do for us for his mission.

It's not your church either; it is God's church. Someday I'll be done here, but the church will move on. Someday you will pass away or move or God forbid you'll get bent out of sorts and leave in a huff. But this church is still God's. And as long as we keep doing what he tells us to do with it, it will be here until Jesus comes back. This is God's mission, not ours. *But how exciting that we get to be a part of it!*

But sometimes, being in on God's mission is difficult. Oftentimes it is costly. Sometimes,

not everyone is going to like it. That's why in chapter six we see the next section...

The cost of mission (vs. 14-29)

It's at this point in Mark's gospel that we learn the story of what happened to John the Baptist, when King Herod murdered John by beheading him. I hope you read this passage, because the evil manipulations of Herod's wife and daughter and the opulence of the party are going to come back into play later. But John's death reminds us that being involved in God's mission doesn't always mean sunshine and roses. Sometimes it's hard on us and costs us. John's story is there to remind us of this, and to foreshadow Jesus' own imprisonment, torture, and death.

John's fate also tells us something else is going on through the forces of evil that are against the mission. Up until now, Jesus has not concerned himself within political circles. But word of him is spreading, and now his influence has expanded through the disciples being sent out on mission. King Herod is hearing about Jesus, and his first response is to think John's come back from the dead (which tells you how guilty Herod's conscience is!). Herod is also thinking, "Great – just when I thought my problems were over with John, along comes another one just like him!"

It's interesting that God's mission was considered a "problem" for Herod, isn't it? It's *Good News* – but *not* for those in power whose ambition is to control and dominate and arrogantly have power for themselves. The Bible is very clear: the Kingdom of God and politics do not mix, and when they do there are dire consequences. God's mission brings liberation from not only sin in the spiritual world, but from bondage to powers in this world. For those who hold the power or want the power, God's kingdom is a threat.

These are intense times for Jesus and the disciples, so Jesus calls them away to a quiet place. They are about to do some amazing things, so they need their rest, too, as next we see them in...

Participation in the mission (verses 30-44)

With all the crowds pressing in, all the demands of the mission, and the heavy news about John, the disciples haven't had much chance to eat, rest, or pray, so Jesus invites them to retreat to a quiet place. This is the way Jesus was able to recharge. If Jesus needs this, so do the disciples – and so do we. We need to make sure we are regularly stepping away to a quiet place to rest and pray, whether in our daily prayer times or in extended or stressful times. They needed this so they could keep their focus on the reason for the mission.

Now our attention turns to the crowd – we're told there were 5,000 men (which means it was much bigger than that including women and children). But the language that describes these men and the way they had gathered hints at that, they were organized like infantry. You need to know that at that time, politically, there was an insurgency group called the Zealots. These were militant Jewish people who wanted to overthrow the Roman government so that the Jews could be in power. This group expected the Messiah to come and lead them to do just that. There are lots of indicators that the disciples were part of

that group. But Jesus is *not* a militant, political leader who is going to overthrow or run governments.

So it's possible that when the disciples were sent out on Jesus' mission, they may have made it about *their* mission – spreading their Zealot ideas of who Jesus might be. This would also be in context with the political undertones of the story of John The Baptist and his murder. If that's the case, these men have gathered for the wrong reasons, which makes what happens next very compelling.

Jesus had compassion on them. The word that Mark uses when Jesus saw how hungry they were means he was “sick at heart” for them. This is exactly how the Old Testament describes how God feels about people. Yet again, Jesus is God, whether in displays of his authority or in the depth of his compassion for us. Jesus is moved because they are like sheep without a shepherd; they have no godly leaders.

There is some really clear irony here with this story being juxtaposed with the John the Baptist story. (Juxtaposed means “laid alongside each other.”) In John's story we see the extravagant and grotesque birthday feast of Herod. In this story we see the hungry and helpless people. Herod's legacy of leadership is self-serving, and sexuality filled riches, and wantonness; Jesus' leadership is holiness and compassion and serving common people.

But it's been a long day of teaching, and no one has eaten yet, so the disciples point out that all these people are hungry (and so are the disciples!). They come to Jesus to tell him about the needs of the people, but they don't do anything about it – they just want Jesus to tell them to leave. They don't care about the crowd, and they certainly don't see themselves as caregivers – even though they just got back from healing people and delivering people from demons. Jesus cares and aches for these people; the disciples want to send them away and not deal with it. His instinct is to gather them together and care for them.

Jesus tells the disciples to do something about it, and their response is shock and sarcasm, which only gets worse when they realize how little food they have on hand. Despite the selfishness of the disciples, Jesus is intent on them learning how to be on God's mission. He wants them to be participants in it. So he tells them to go out and get this huge crowd to take a seat. The language Mark uses for this event is very descriptive; he describes it as having them recline at a banquet table, and he describes their groupings as people who are sitting together eating and drinking, being relaxed in a friendly, lively, highly enjoyable small group dinner. This is like a party with Jesus as the host.

Again, this is a huge contrast from the picture of Herod's dinner with his lavish menu and upper-class guests and orgy like activities. Those people are there for Herod's pleasure. But with Jesus are just simple, ordinary folks enjoying each other's company with Jesus as the host who is providing for and serving them. Unlike Herod, Jesus' focus is on them and not himself.

We're told that the people are not just sitting down; they are on green grass – reminding us of God's promise in Psalm 23 that God is a shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures and feeds us from his banquet table.

With only five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus breaks the bread (what does that make you think of? The Lord's Supper), hands the bread to the disciples and tells them to pass

the bread out to everyone. *Jesus begins the miracle; the disciples distribute the miracle.* Jesus gave his life for us; we get to share that life with others. This is the mission of God that we are on. Our call is engagement, participation, and involvement in the mission of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the source of the miracle; we get to distribute it to others. They do that with the fish, too.

Caring for and meeting the needs of others is the heart of the mission. Compassion is always at the center of God's mission, and we have the abundant provision of Jesus. When we let God use us to care for others, we won't run out, and there will even be leftovers!

So the Kingdom of God is not about achieving power; the comparison of Herod and Jesus and the Zealot crowds is making this clear. Listen: God's mission is most at risk when the people of God end up being so closely aligned to political power and national governments that they lose their prophetic voice in their calls for justice. John the Baptist was silenced by Herod because John refused to keep quiet. The Zealots were beginning to organize themselves to gain political power. By miraculously feeding them, Jesus instead showed their true source of power and sustenance. We are *never* to give in to the temptation to seek power whether politically or otherwise; in the mission of God, only Jesus is our leader, our shepherd, and our source of power in all things that we need. The proper pursuit of Jesus followers should be to participate in his mission, not to give in to the temptation of gaining worldly power. We organize, we distribute, we pick up the leftovers. We deliver the care that Jesus provides.

But the disciples are beginning to be tempted to give in to political power. Jesus sees this, and he needs to get them out of that situation. So he tells them to go right now in their boat across the lake. Even Jesus might be tempted to give in to it. In John's gospel, we're told that people tried to take Jesus by force to make him their king (6:15). Jesus senses that this is happening with the crowd, so he sends the disciples away to keep them from getting swept up in it, while he himself goes up on the mountain to pray. There are two other times in Mark's gospel that Jesus gets away and prays – in both chapters one and (verse 35) and 14 (32-42). In those times, Jesus is praying to avoid temptation. It makes sense that Jesus is doing that here, too. His popularity has grown; he could easily make himself a political power and avoid the crucifixion that is headed his way. But he doesn't want to give in to that temptation, so he goes on the mountain to pray.

While he's up there, it's somewhere between 3-6am – it's still dark, and the disciples are between four or five miles from shore. But Jesus, being God, sees them struggling against the wind – it's so strong that they are rowing for all they're worth but not making any progress.

That can be a picture of our lives when we try to do things without Jesus! I've seen churches do this, too – the pastors and the people are busy working so hard but making no progress; Jesus is nowhere near them!

So Jesus goes for a walk. On the water. To the disciples. The crazy thing is, it appears that he's just going to walk right on by them! How weird is that? Jesus sent them. He saw them. He knew they would be struggling. So he walks out to them and then...just walks on by? "See ya fellas!"

Here's a key: this is a hyperlink to two other stories from the Old Testament: in Exodus

34:5-6 God reveals himself to Moses by “passing by” Moses. In 1 Kings 19:11 Elijah is in the cave and God “passes by” and reveals himself to Elijah. Jesus is doing the exact same thing here. The disciples are nearly scared out of their ship (what did you think I said?) and think it’s a ghost! So Jesus says “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” “It is I.” “It is I.” The original language says, “Take courage. *I AM*. Don’t be afraid.” Do you remember, Moses asked what God’s name was, and God said, “I AM.” (see *Exodus 3:14*) In other words, this whole event is for the disciples to see that Jesus is God. Jesus is...

The focus of the mission (verses 45-52)

While participating in the mission, the disciples were tempted to shift their focus to political power and doing things in their own strength, when all they really needed to do is stay close to Jesus. Jesus gets in the boat and what happens in verse 51? Everything suddenly gets calm.

When Jesus is with us, it doesn’t matter what’s going on around us. We will experience his peace. His calm. When we try to do things on our own, what happens? We are floating over the abyss in chaos (remember last week?)

But the disciples still don’t get it. Why not? Mark says it’s because they did not understand about the loaves. Why that? Why not, because they didn’t understand all the other things? Because when Jesus broke the loaves of bread and fed everyone from the broken bread, it represented that Jesus is the bread of life, that his broken body will take care of everything everyone ever needs – but the disciples still don’t connect the dots.

But the chapter closes as we see...

The mission continues (verses 53-56)

We’re right back into the mission with crowds and miracles and healing and deliverance in the marketplace. The word that Mark uses for healing is “saved.” The big picture of the kingdom of God – the mission of God – it is peoples’ wholeness in our healing – not just physically and emotionally but always ultimately spiritually.

Here’s the point of all this: following God’s call and pursuing his mission, even successfully, does not exempt us from rejection or hardships or the temptation to take an easier path or to seek governmental power. We need to remain in prayer, close to God. The picture of the disciples straining against the wind is the image of a struggling community that is getting nowhere, especially when we are trying to do things without Jesus. But the struggle is not hidden from Jesus, who comes to us, even in the darkest hours of the night, gets our priority back on him and gets into the boat with us, and through his presence calms the wind. When your battles seem unwinnable, Jesus sees, comes, and gets in the boat.

Because of all this, we can be sure that Jesus will rescue us, even in the worst of circumstances. He sees us when we struggle and comes to rescue us in the dark night. We can be faithful in carrying out our life call to be on mission for Jesus, because he will provide for us and care for us. He is the great I AM.

Pray to believe, and to be on mission.

Did you know there were two boats that could've responded to the *Titanic* when it was sinking? One boat, the *Californian*, was only about 20 miles away. But they turned off their radio about ten minutes before the *Titanic* hit the iceberg. They saw rockets and flares shoot off in the distance. They couldn't figure out why another boat was shooting rockets and flares, but they didn't turn on their radio, and they didn't investigate. They saw the boat's light turn off, but thought it was just turning its light off for the night. The crew of the *Californian* was arranging their own deck chairs; they were so in maintenance-mode with what they were already doing, they couldn't imagine the *Titanic* sinking. For the rest of their lives the crew members of the *Californian* had to wrestle with why they didn't go.

But there was another ship, the *Carpathia*. It was 58 miles away. But its radio was on, and when it got the call that the *Titanic* was sinking it powered up all its engines and headed straight for the *Titanic*, navigating around icebergs in the night. It ran full-power ahead for 3.5 hours. When the crew showed up at the scene of the disaster, many had already perished, but they saved 710 lives.

*The Carpathia was in mission mode. The Californian was in maintenance mode. Which would we rather be? The Californian? Or The Carpathia? A church just trying to please itself? Or a church on a mission, saving lives?*²

Benediction

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
(Hebrews 13:20-21)

² Adapted from William Hull, *Strategic Preaching: The Role of the Pulpit in Pastoral Leadership* (Chalice Press, 2006), pp 209-213; "RMS Carpathia," Wikipedia (Accessed 9/14/21); "Stanley Lord," Wikipedia (Accessed 9/14/21)