



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Developing Disciples

Mark 8.31-35; 9.32-37; 10.32-45

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Develop - to bring out the capacities or possibilities of; bring to a more advanced or effective state; to cause to grow or expand.¹

An Example of Really Trying

What would it look like if those of us who follow Jesus consistently asked what he would do in any situation and then actually did it regardless of the consequences? That was the question Charles Sheldon set out to explore in his 1896 novel, *In His Steps*. A preacher Sheldon named Henry Maxwell challenged a group of church members to do that for a year. He based his plan on 1 Peter 2.21: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."²

More than fifty million copies of Sheldon's book have been sold and many have been inspired to do what Sheldon advocated. But we don't need his fictional story to see what can happen when would-be followers of Jesus make a commitment to develop in their faith. While I would not discourage you from reading *In His Steps* or similar writings, I would urge you not to elevate it above the inspired true story of a group of people who committed themselves to follow Jesus' example and consistently do what he would do.

Mark's gospel shows them learning to do that. We will review his telling of the story, focus on three passages in his writing, and think about what we can learn for our own development.

A Open-Ended Contract

Mark's heading for his writing tells us it is about "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1.1). Just sixteen verses in, he begins the story of Jesus' recruitment of followers. He first called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, all of whom Mark says "immediately" left everything and committed to follow him (1.16-20). What would that entail? They didn't know. In effect, they signed an open-ended service contract for a commitment that would develop and grow over time in ways they never would have anticipated. Through the examples he includes in his telling, Mark shows the challenges involved in growing as disciples and what is possible.

Recall what happened in Mark's first few chapters where he alternated Jesus' amazing deeds and teaching with how people reacted to him. The common reaction is effectively summarized by the question the disciples asked in 4.41, after Jesus calmed the sea: "Who then is this?" (see 1.27; 2.6-7; 6.2), a question prefaced by them being "filled with great fear." Mark reported a

similar reaction in 6.45-52 when they were again amazed when Jesus walked on the sea and calmed another storm. But he also showed their need to continue to grow, reporting that they failed “to understand about the loaves.” In 8.13-21, he reported that they were puzzled about the meaning of the two miraculous feedings (of 5,000 and 4,000), emphasizing that Jesus asked them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Not long afterward, it appeared they finally did. When Jesus asked what others were saying about him, and then what they thought, Peter spoke for all of them: “You are the Christ” (8.29). It quickly became apparent, however, that while they had made considerable progress in their development, they still had a ways to go. Any sense of satisfaction they might have felt at their realization that Jesus was the Christ was about to be dramatically and repeatedly shaken.

Unnerved Disciples

On the heels of Peter’s confession, Jesus began to teach them that the Council would abuse, reject, and execute him. At one level, the disciples couldn’t miss his point because “he said this plainly” (8.32). But, while they heard clearly what he said, they didn’t understand what he meant. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (8.33)—and was surprised again. Jesus “rebuked Peter,” accusing him of not having his mind “on the things of God.” In fact, Jesus said, he was effectively acting as an agent of Satan!

We better understand why Peter would do that when we recall two presuppositions about the Messiah that were common in ancient Israel. First, they had no expectation of a suffering Messiah such as Jesus said he would be. They never expected the Messiah to be rejected by their rulers. Instead, he would be welcomed as the one who would reestablish God’s awaited reign and restore David’s glory. Second, and closely related, to their minds, Jesus’ call to take up a cross would have meant execution by the authorities and therefore that the Messiah had been defeated.³ In sum, the disciples were shocked, both by Jesus’ expectation for himself and by what it suggested for them. Succeeding passages provide insight into how this played out.

In Mark 9, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus’ transfiguration and glorious appearance with Moses and Elijah (9.2-13). Then, with the other disciples, they saw him heal a boy with an unclean spirit. Of interest is that the disciples had been unable to heal him. When they asked Jesus why they couldn’t cast it out, he said it was because “this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (9.29). Then, as they resumed their travel through Galilee, Jesus again told them he would be betrayed and killed, but would rise again (9.31).

The next verse is illuminating: “But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him” (9.32). We learn why in the following conversation in Capernaum. When Jesus asked what they had been discussing as they walked, “they kept silent, for on the way they had argued about who was the greatest” (9.34). They needed a lesson on serving, which Jesus both declared and illustrated (9.35-37). To follow him was to learn to serve.

But they still pursued Satan’s ways, not the things of God. In chapter 10, right after Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who valued his possessions more than God’s reign, Jesus again taught about forsaking everything for his sake and the sake of the gospel (10.17-31). He followed that teaching with yet another announcement of his impending suffering (10.32-34).

This time, it was James and John who led the way in showing their slow development. Showing the typical cultural presumption about the Messiah’s reign, they asked for the top two adviser

positions. Although they assured Jesus they could handle the “cup” and “baptism” he would experience, it’s evident that they were more concerned about their own greatness than following his example of service. That the other ten “began to be indignant at James and John” (10.41) shows they felt the same way. So, Jesus tried yet again to show them the different way, emphasizing his own example as “the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10.45).

Most of us know the rest of the story. As the events played out as Jesus expected, the disciples’ bravado evaporated and they fled the scene in panic. Peter’s response gets the most attention, but we should note that all the disciples had declared their willingness to die before they would deny him (14.31). While by this point they were not the same men who started with Jesus in Galilee, neither were they the servants they would become, the men who, according to tradition, would either die as martyrs or be exiled for the sake of the gospel.

Lessons as We Develop

If, as I think he intended, their story is supposed to be a model for all who would follow Jesus, there is much to learn from Mark’s candid portrayal. First, we too can be slow to understand, and to change and align our lives more closely with Jesus’ way than with the alternatives. But, we can also be like them in learning to persevere (see 1 Peter 1.3-7).

Second, we too may cave in when pressure is brought to bear on our faith, even when we have imagined that we would never do such a thing. But from them we learn that denial of the Son before men does not have to be fatal to our faith. As all but one of them did, we can come back, stronger, able to help others endure when they face pressure (see 1 Peter 3.13-17).

Third, like them, we can be slow to come around to the idea that the world’s way with its emphasis on success and greatness is not the way to glory. In Mark 8, 9, and 10, they were thinking materialistically and were therefore aligned with Satan, not God. They learned and did better. So can we (see 1 Peter 4.2-5).

Fourth, we can overcome our reversals because we know that Jesus kept teaching and transforming them. If we keep following, he will keep helping us develop.

Finally

In Mark 1:16-20, when four fisherman first set out to follow Jesus, they embarked on one of the greatest adventures of all time. They did not know where they were going, but they followed in confidence that they would be thankful when they got there. They were. And we will be too (Black, 90).

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Notes

¹ developing. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/developing>. Accessed June 12, 2022.

² I am indebted to Allen Black for this illustration and idea for the direction of this sermon. See his lecture, “Jesus ‘Unnerves’ His Disciples,” *The Lifestyle of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark: Harding University’s 1988 Lectures* (Searcy, AR: Harding University, 1988), 84-90.

³ See Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1983, 1989), 137-138.