

“Expect the Best; Prepare for the Worst”

Mark 1:9-15

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This morning our attention is drawn to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. What stands out in this passage is the lack of details concerning three major events in Jesus’ life as he began this journey--his baptism, confrontation with Satan in the desert and first message. Mark devotes three sentences to each one.

Based upon Mark’s writing style, I am not surprised. Mark was the first to write about Jesus’ ministry, and he did not have the benefit of others’ memories to add to his, nor did he appear to be as interested in details as we are.

I do find something intriguing about the way Mark connected the baptism of Jesus with his temptation in the wilderness. He concluded the baptism experience by telling his readers about a voice from heaven which said, “You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased” Mark 1:11.

Mark followed these warm, affirming, encouraging words with rather bleak and harsh ones. “At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with wild animals and angels attended him” Mark 1:12-13.

Does this sound odd to you or a bit inconsistent and confusing?

If God really loved Jesus, don’t you think God would have discouraged Jesus from going to such a dangerous place as a desert for a long period of time? Surely, a loving God would have

protected Jesus from the Evil One. The idea of the Spirit sending Jesus into the desert doesn't sound very loving, does it? What was Mark's point?

When you love others, you do all you can to prepare them for the world they will encounter when they head out on their own. In those early years when little ones are weak, vulnerable and naïve, you keep them from harm's way. There comes a time, however, when you remove the bubble and the boundaries and let them experience life with all its ups and downs, joys and sorrows, privileges and challenges.

It is no coincidence Jesus was led to the desert immediately after his baptism by the same Spirit who led him to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. There were lessons Jesus needed to learn about the difficulty of his mission, and there was no time to waste. An unprepared Jesus would be overwhelmed by his enemies.

Everyone would not celebrate Jesus' call from God to change the world or support his worthy endeavors. To the contrary, Jesus would face more opposition than support. As a result, this mission would require his best every day and everywhere. He could never let his guard down.

Jesus needed to know of this challenge before he preached his first sermon, called his disciples or began responding to desperate people's pleas for help. The road he would be traveling was filled with land mines, and his mission was risky. If he failed to take this into consideration, he would not make wise decisions and accomplish what God sent him to do.

I get the sense Mark wanted his readers to understand their call to follow Jesus would lead them down the same dangerous path. He did not want them to be unprepared and ineffective either.

Mark has taught us a valuable lesson, hasn't he? Love protects but love also prepares those we love for living in the real world—a world of unlimited opportunities accompanied by endless challenges.

How prepared were you for the challenges and temptations you faced as you headed out into the world? I am not sure anyone is adequately prepared. I know I wasn't.

What can you do to prepare those whom you love? What do you wish you had been told when you left home to pursue your dreams? What would you tell a family member or friend who is embarking on a new journey? Let me share with you some items on my list.

The road you are heading down will not be easy. If it is, your dreams are too small.

Achieving anything of value will require grit, determination, energy, passion and the highest level of commitment. This is because you will encounter resistance almost every day.

Those who are jealous of you or threatened by what you are doing will oppose you, and the Evil One Jesus struggled with in the desert will also tempt you to take short cuts, follow the path of least resistance or give up. What was true for Jesus will be for us, too. No one will escape the temptation to settle for less than their best and choose lesser goals than those inspired by God.

From the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Satan tempted him to use his talents, skills, resources, power and influence selfishly in order to build his own kingdom instead of God's. Like every person who came before him, Jesus was tempted to be less than God created him to be by taking the easy road.

Would Jesus give in to this enticing temptation and become another holy man who began his work with good intentions only to become selfish and sidetracked, or would he remain faithful to God's call upon his life? To be candid with you, I don't think Jesus knew the answer to this question at that time. Only time would tell.

What Jesus did know, however, was what lay ahead of him demanded nothing less than his very best and the highest level of commitment to God and those around him to stay the course. That day, Jesus made that kind of commitment.

Those we love who are embarking on new adventures need to understand they will face the same struggles. Every promise and commitment they make among friends who support them will be tested in a hostile environment. Don't let them be surprised when this happens.

Stay focused and keep your eyes on the people who appreciate what you are doing and need you to stay on track. This journey is not just about you, but also the people whose lives will become better by your influence and contributions.

Every time Jesus met with resistance or disappointment, he had to decide if this mission was about him or the people he came to serve. Had he decided at any point along his journey life was more about him than them, he would have thrown in the towel. The risks, dangers and frustrations would have become too much for him to endure.

The same will be true of you. The price you pay to get to the finish line will be too high if you take your eyes off of those who are counting on you to complete your race.

Maintain self-discipline throughout your journey. At all times, say no to anything harmful and yes to all things good. Don't expect anyone else to draw your boundaries and make your decisions for you.

The three temptations Satan placed before Jesus that day were especially alluring and enticing. From Matthew's perspective, they were designed to stop him in his tracks before he even got out of the starting gate.

There is no question this same tactic worked on many of the leaders of Jesus' day. They sold their soul to the devil and became addicted to attention, power, pleasure, prestige and lavish lifestyles. They opted to build their own kingdoms instead of advancing God's.

Surely, Jesus would follow in their footsteps; the temptation would be too strong to resist. He did not give in, though, not that day or any day during his time on earth. All the way to the cross he remained true to God's calling in the face of opportunities to choose lesser goals.

Why? He knew if he had to worship anyone other than the God who called him and in whom he placed all his trust, it was too big a price to pay. His mission was to reflect the heart and nature of a righteous and loving God. Any decision which did not meet this standard was rejected. Just because he could do something did not mean he should, and he was wise enough to know when to say no and when to say yes.

Everyone who achieves their dreams knows this, too. There is no substitute for self-awareness and self-discipline. You will not stay the course without them.

Be careful who you listen to as you pursue your dreams. Who you listen to will determine who you are becoming.

When Jesus was in the desert, he had to decide between listening to the patriarchs and prophets or Satan. He chose the patriarchs and prophets, not because their advice was easy, but because it was best.

Tell your loved ones to be leery of anyone who encourages them to use their influence selfishly, to do anything which does not reflect the nature of God or settle for less than their best. Carefully examine their motives. They have a hidden agenda, and they do not have anyone's interest at heart but their own.

Encourage those who need your support to follow Jesus' example and surround themselves with good role models and encouragers. Immediately after this encounter with Satan, Jesus called twelve disciples to join him on this faith journey. He knew he needed a support group who would listen to him, offer wise counsel, encourage him and pray with him.

If Jesus needed a support group, how much more do we? All of us need friends who will hold us up when we are weak and hold us accountable when we are tempted to stray. We need companions who will ask us tough questions, challenge our faulty thinking and warn us of impending dangers.

Choose wisely the voices which will influence and guide you. Make sure they are bringing the best out in you.

Rely upon God for wisdom, strength and courage. Jesus certainly did, which is supported by the number of times he withdrew to pray. As much as Jesus needed the fellowship of his disciples, he needed a close relationship with God more.

This would not be the last encounter between Jesus and Satan. Often the tempter would return with new offers and better deals, and he would show up when Jesus was most vulnerable. It would be impossible to resist the temptations he would face without God's help. Others had tried and failed; so would he.

It is obvious Jesus lived by the Pendulum Principle. "Every encounter with man must be balanced by an encounter with God." What makes us think we handle our challenges and temptations on our own?

Don't be too hard on yourself. No one lives a mistake free life.

Teach those who look to you for encouragement to own up to their mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Challenge them to learn from what they have done wrong so they can grow and mature. Model God's grace by being the first to forgive them and help them to their feet.

I wonder if we are doing a better job of protecting those entrusted to our care than preparing them for pursuing their dreams. Think about this in the days ahead and pray about how God can use you to prepare someone you love to live in a world of opportunities and challenges.

On the other hand, whose voice do you need to listen to as you pursue your dreams? Whose counsel do you need to seek? Who has your best interest at heart? I hope you will listen to them with an open mind and heart. Following their wise advice can save you a lot of heartache and help you achieve the dreams God has for you.