



WHY DO YOU PUSH HIM AWAY?

Mark 6:1-31, Romans 7:15-25

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On Ash Wednesday we were reminded that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return—apart from the grace of Christ. We need Jesus. Our only hope is in him. But as we often sing together, we’re “prone to wander” away from him. Lent is about turning our lives over to Jesus.

The bad news is that we’re spiritual adulterers. We’ve loved and worshiped so many gods other than him, whether the gods of wealth, knowledge, pleasure or power. The good news is that when Jesus caught us red-handed with one of these other lovers, instead of blowing up and destroying us in his wrath, before we even have time to say a word, he said, “I want you back.”

Lent isn’t a curse; it’s a blessing. The most wonderful thing about Lent is that Jesus really wants us to come to him. In spite of our sin, he genuinely loves us and desires to right our wrongs. He really does want us back.

Why then do we push him away? If Jesus is the answer to all our questions, if he is the only hope for our future, if his grace is the only thing that holds all our dust together, why not take him up on his offer to come to him? Why do we push him away?

As we’ll see, Mark 6:1-31 highlights several reasons why we might push Jesus away. As we work through the passage, consider how you would answer this question in your own life: Why do you push him away?

WE PUSH HIM AWAY OUT OF FAMILIARITY. Mark 6:1-6.

In Mark 6:1-6, Jesus goes back to Nazareth, his hometown, to do what he has done previously in Capernaum and other villages throughout Galilee: to proclaim the arrival of God’s kingdom in word and deed. This will be Jesus’ last explicit visit to a synagogue in Mark’s Gospel. In past visits to other synagogues, Jesus has always met demonic opposition, whether from a man with an evil spirit, or from the Pharisees who want to destroy him. Now, in the synagogue of Nazareth, we shouldn’t be surprised when he encounters stiff resistance. Yet this time it’s not the religious authorities opposing him. It’s Jesus’ relatives and childhood friends, saying in 6:2 “Where did this man get these things,” i.e. these authoritative words and powerful miracles? In contemporary English: “Isn’t he a construction worker? The Son of *Mary* (whom you’ll remember got pregnant out of wedlock)? Who does he think he is to come back home and try to teach us anything? He’s the Son of the Construction Worker, the Son of the Loose Woman, but not he’s certainly no Son of God.”

How do you think this makes Jesus feel? On one hand, I suppose he's not at all surprised. Since he always meets rejection whenever he goes into a synagogue, it's likely that Jesus went there as a final object lesson for his disciples before sending them out two by two. Thus Jesus encapsulates what happens with a proverb in 6:4 (a prophet has no honor in his hometown).

On the other hand, of course this rejection must have been salt in the wound of what had already begun when Jesus' family decided that he was out of his mind (3:20-21, 31-35). Thus in 6:6, Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. Just as Jesus had taught in the Parable of the Sower, the townspeople of Nazareth were like the seed sown along the path (4:15), which Satan immediately takes away. Undoubtedly Jesus would have preferred for them to have been the seed in the good soil, bearing fruit one hundred fold. They should have welcomed him as a hometown hero. Instead, they rejected him.

How would you feel if your family and hometown utterly and totally rejected you? Like the patriarch Joseph, who was rejected by his family, sold into slavery, and eventually after much suffering made the steward of Egypt. Genesis teaches that Joseph's brothers meant it for evil, but God meant it for good; that doesn't mean it didn't hurt, though. If you're rejected by family and friends because of Jesus, you can take comfort in the fact that he experienced the same thing. It hurt him too. But somehow in the hurt God is working this for good.

Mark says (6:5) that Jesus couldn't do many miracles in Nazareth because of their unbelief. This means exactly what it says; don't read into it more than is there. Jesus is the Son of God; fully divine. In terms of what Jesus *ability*, the sky's the limit. But Jesus *can't* do what his Father doesn't command him to do. Jesus is a man on a mission, under the authority of his heavenly Father. Mark has already explained that the reason Jesus came is to proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom in word and deed (1:38-39). Wherever his message isn't welcomed, 1) he shakes the dust off his feet (6:11) and 2) keeps moving rather than trying to convince them with magic tricks. In 6:6, he does just this: 1) he marvels at their unbelief, and then 2) he leaves, moving on to other villages that will listen to his teaching.

Why did the people of Nazareth push him away? Familiarity. They thought they already knew him completely (yawn), and weren't interested in hearing or seeing anything more.

Is this why you push him away? Has Jesus become old news? Have you heard it all before? Have you lost interest in his Word, his people, and/or his calling on your life? Are you going through the motions, doing church out of habit?

Recently, while talking with an old friend, our conversation turned to Lent. She was completely over it, and was poking fun at people who fast during Lent. She said, "I gave up alcohol a few years ago, and that was terrible, because I really need alcohol to deal with my sin." Isn't this sad? The good news is that you don't need alcohol, or chocolate, or anything else to help you deal with your sin. All you need is Jesus. And that's precisely why so many of us give up things like alcohol during Lent—in order to keep them from bumping Jesus out into second place in our lives.

We all from time to time develop this "been there, done that" attitude toward Jesus. Then we push him away, much in the same way that people move on from one lover to another out of

boredom. The Rev. Joost Nixon says that most men are more like Francis Drake than John Smith. He writes, “They are interested in conquest, visiting women like cities along a coastline, stopping only long enough to raid and despoil. There is no real penetration of the interior before boredom strikes and they move on.”¹

There is, of course, another way. Instead of boredom, there’s diving deeper, knowing someone more and more. This is what every faithful husband must do with his wife, and this is what every faithful Christian must also do with Jesus. There’s still so much about Jesus that remains to be discovered. The deeper we go together, the better it gets.

Lent is a good time to take stock and consider whether familiarity has taken a toll in our spiritual lives. Has this “been there, done that” sort of attitude somehow eaten into your relationships, particularly with Jesus? Have you gotten bored with Jesus? Is this why you push him away?

FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT. Mark 6:7-13, 30

After having witnessed Jesus’ rejection in Nazareth, his disciples are ready to be sent out on their own first mission. This has been in the works from the beginning, when Jesus first called disciples in Mark 1 & 2. Then he designated the Twelve in Mark 3, and taught them in word (Mark 4) and deed (Mark 5). Now it’s time for their trial mission.

It’s difficult not to have a cartoonish view of the disciples going out as maniacal street preachers like we so often see in the news. However, Jesus didn’t send them out to engage in incendiary fear mongering. They were instead to seek hospitality in a particular place, and then make that place a base of operations as they spread the good news in both word and deed.

Thus, in 6:8-9, Jesus gives his disciples a rather funny packing list. Staff, yes. Bread, no. Bag, no. Money, no. Sandals, yes. Extra tunic, no. What’s this all about? They are to take what they need for the *journey*, but not for the *stay*. Why? Because their mission, just like Jesus’ mission, depends upon the hospitality of those whom they seek to serve. If the village receives them, then they have work to do. If the village rejects them, just as Nazareth has done to Jesus, then (6:11) they are to shake the dust off their sandals and keep moving. Jesus is merely establishing for his disciples what he has already demonstrated in his own ministry: in Capernaum, Jesus moved into Peter’s house and made it his base of operations. As soon as he got there, Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. Then she became a model disciple, as she immediately got up and began serving the Lord. Now as Jesus sends out his disciples he wants them to do the same. “Go where I send you, find a place of hospitality, and make it your base of operations for sharing the good news in both word and deed. But if they reject you, leave them behind, just as I have done in Nazareth.”

Think back again to the Parable of the Sower. As you spread the good news, don’t be surprised when it falls on the path, or the rocky soil, or among thorns. The same thing happened again and again to Jesus, even in his hometown! Keep moving, keep spreading the good news, because

¹ Joost Nixon, “Unknown and Frustrated,” *Credenda Agenda* 19:1. <http://www.credenda.org/archive/issues/19-1poimen.php>.

sometimes the seed falls on good soil and it bears fruit 30, 60, or 100 fold. Thus (6:12-13, 30) the disciples go out and come back reporting of success in their mission. And that very well may be the most surprising thing that has happened in Mark thus far.

Yes, it's amazing that Jesus calmed the storm, and cast out demons, and brought that little girl back to life (Mark 5). But what's even more amazing is that Jesus' disciples did the same kinds of things. Up to this point in Mark's Gospel, what we've seen of the disciples hasn't been especially encouraging. Throughout the rest of the story, they will continue to misunderstand Jesus and ultimately all either betray or abandon him. Nevertheless, Jesus employs these somewhat bumbling, uncomprehending and unprepared men—in the same way that he does us.

The truth is that you're never fully prepared to be Jesus' ambassador. Just like you'll never be 100% ready to have kids, you'll never be 100% ready for Christian ministry. Nevertheless, out of the riches of his amazing grace, God chooses to use unprepared people like you and me.

God also speaks *to* us through unprepared people like you and me, which brings us to the second reason we sometimes push Jesus away: contempt. Whenever Jesus speaks to us through others, there's plenty of opportunity for contempt. We push away brothers and sisters, as if saying, "Listen, I know you man, and you're not any more spiritually mature than me. How dare you, as my housemate or spouse, coworker or friend—how dare you meddle in my spiritual life? How dare you take the initiative to teach me, or pray with me, or read the Bible with me, or (God forbid) challenge me when I sin?"

Contempt takes root in our hearts, and eats away at community within the church. Contempt gives us eyes to see the sin in other Christians, but blinds us to our own. Contempt says, "I'm sick and tired of the hypocrites in this church and I'm going elsewhere." Then a couple of years later, it happens again in the next congregation. Again and again, contempt keeps a person moving until the day comes when he's aware of his own urgent need, but he's bounced from one group to the next for so many years that he's spiritually homeless. Then he says, "God and the church have abandoned me," and Satan claims the victory.

Lent is the time to consider whether we push away Jesus' messengers out of contempt. Has your heart become hardened to the ministry of others? Are you unteachable? Is this why you push him away?

WE PUSH HIM AWAY WITH (APATHETIC) ADMIRATION. Mark 6:14-29.

There are only two passages in Mark's Gospel that aren't about Jesus. Both of them are about John the Baptist, and both foreshadow Jesus. In the first (1:2-8), John is the forerunner of Jesus' message and ministry. In the second (6:14-29), John is the forerunner of Jesus' death. Both Jesus and John experienced seizure and imprisonment, execution by vacillating tyrants, and burial in a tomb. Unlike John, Jesus is raised from the dead after three days.

Mark shifts the focus over to John in this case because (6:14) news continued to spread about Jesus, so that even King Herod heard of him. The word on the street was that Jesus was a

prophet of some kind. And that would have been bad enough for Herod. He wasn't Jewish, but he knew enough of Jewish religion to know that prophets often led to the downfall of tyrants like himself. But Herod was downright paranoid regarding Jesus, because of what he had done to John the Baptist. In fact, Herod thought Jesus was John come back from the dead. For this reason, Mark goes on to narrate the story of the Passion of John.

It all started when Herod took a second wife and married Herodias, who was simultaneously his niece and his brother's wife. John rebuked Herod for this incestuous and wicked relationship. Herodias responded by demanding that Herod have John arrested. Herod consented, but he kept John safely imprisoned nearby because (6:20) he found John's teaching marvelously entertaining.

It was, in fact, Herod's penchant for entertainment that led to John's downfall. On Herod's birthday (6:21), he was so impressed with his step-daughter's dancing that he offered to reward her with anything she asked (6:23). Herodias set the trap (6:24), and moments later John was beheaded (6:28).

Why did this happy birthday party end in a bloody mess? Herod's apathy. Back to Jesus' Parable of the Sower: if the people in Nazareth are like the seed on the path, then Herod is like the seed among thorns (4:18). He enjoys hearing the message, but he's so easily distracted, and he never takes action. He listens again and again to a righteous man calling him to repentance, yet he does absolutely nothing about it. He's "ever seeing but never perceiving" (4:12). But when a pretty girl catches his eye, suddenly he's quick to take action, and his action is terribly wrong.

Apathetic admiration like this is another reason people push Jesus away. Herod admired John, but he did nothing about it. Herod is like the modern man who says that Jesus was "the greatest person who ever lived," but nevertheless makes no effort to follow him. Admiring Jesus doesn't necessarily bring you any closer to him. In fact, it can do the opposite, as it may be just enough of a nod in Jesus' direction to inoculate yourself against him. If, instead of discounting him as a madman and a fool, you patronize him as a "great moral teacher" and still push him away, what difference does it make?

How about it? Is this why you push Jesus away? Do you find Jesus a spectacular teacher and moral example, but not personally motivating?

WHO WILL DELIVER US? Romans 7:15-25

Jesus really does want us to come to him. His arms are open wide. Why, then, do you push him away? Is it familiarity, or contempt, or (apathetic) admiration? Is it something else? Maybe skepticism? Fear? Peer pressure or shame?

In Romans 7, one of the greatest Christians the world has ever known, the Apostle Paul, describes his own struggle as a spiritual adulterer, asking why he pushes Jesus away? He says (Romans 7:15), "I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (7:18) "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." Does this sound familiar? It sure does to me. I am tired of pushing him away; aren't you?

Finally Paul exclaims (7:24) “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” And then he goes on to describe a life of prayer and friendship with Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, whereby we come to see ourselves first and foremost as children of God, our Abba Father (8:15).

Jesus wants us back. Over and over again he has shown us that he is good and trustworthy and true. Before Mark’s story ends, Jesus will go to the cross in order to ransom us back from Satan. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

Jesus says “I want you back.” That’s what Lent is all about. Don’t push him away. Draw near to the Lord and he will draw near to you (James 4:8).