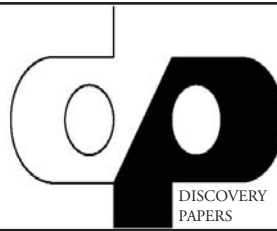


GOD'S PLATOON

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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When New York Times columnist David Brooks was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, he wrote a column for the student paper that poked fun at the ego of William F. Buckley Jr., who was coming to lecture at the university. Brooks wrote:

Buckley spent most of his infancy working on his memoirs. By the time he had learned to talk, he had finished three volumes: "The World Before Buckley," which traced the history of the world prior to his conception; "The Seeds of Utopia," which outlined his effect on world events during the nine months of his gestation; and "The Glorious Dawn," which described the profound ramifications of his birth on the social order.¹

In his parody, Brooks recounted facetiously that Buckley founded two magazines after college: The National Buckley and The Buckley Review, which merged to form The Buckley Buckley. Brooks wrote that Buckley's hobbies included extended bouts of name-dropping and entering rooms to make everyone else feel inferior.

Buckley came to the University of Chicago, delivered the lecture, and said at the end, "David Brooks, if you're in the audience, I'd like to offer you a job." Buckley's offer was the big break for Brooks, now a bestselling author and a fixture on the Public Broadcasting System's *News Hour*. A few years later, he went to work for Buckley at National Review.

Brooks, remembering Buckley after his death earlier this year, wrote of how his mentor included him in his world:

One night we were at his home, and his wife, Pat, at the height of her glamour, swept in from an evening on the town and took one look at the little group of us debating some point. You could feel her inner thought: "Why does he spend his time with those people?" But Buckley loved ideas, swept us along as his companions, and sent us out into the world.²

I wish not to commend Buckley's ideology, nor do I purport to know anything about him personally (although I too, as a college student, attended an appearance by Buckley. I covered it for my college paper. Unlike Brooks, however, I was neither savvy nor courageous enough to lampoon Buckley before his appearance. Otherwise, I might be a famous political pundit today!). I wish only to take note of his methodology. Buckley befriended people, drew them into his world, and sent them out with a purpose.

His methodology has much in common with that of Jesus of Nazareth. Who knows? Perhaps Buckley, a devout Catholic, learned it from Jesus. Jesus befriended twelve men and drew them into his world so that he might, ac-

ording to the gospel of Mark, "send them out" with a purpose. The two-part story in Mark 3:7-19 invites us to envision Jesus befriending us and sending us out.

Mark 3:7-19

Jesus withdrew to the sea with His disciples; and a great multitude from Galilee followed; and also from Judea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, a great number of people heard of all that He was doing and came to Him. And He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him because of the crowd, so that they would not crowd Him; for He had healed many, with the result that all those who had afflictions pressed around Him in order to touch Him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, "You are the Son of God!" And He earnestly warned them not to tell who He was.

And He went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons. And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, "Sons of Thunder"); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him.³

Crowd gathers, demons preach

The Pharisees, after their confrontation with Jesus in a synagogue, have determined that his vision of the kingdom of God is incompatible with theirs and that he must be stopped (Mark 3:6). At this time, Jesus doesn't want to be a sitting duck for the powerful forces that are aligning against him, so he retreats to the Sea of Galilee.

However, he can't escape the crowds that have been attracted to him because of his healing ministry. He has attracted people from the northernmost region of Galilee, from the southernmost region of Idumea, from the central—and staunchly Jewish—region of Judea, and from the most Jewish city of all, Jerusalem. His healings have also drawn people from the east, beyond the Jordan River, and from the west, the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. Mark depicts a pilgrimage to

Jesus, echoing the prophets' anticipation of a worldwide pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The inclusion of the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon calls to mind Isaiah's words about the Servant of the Lord, whom the New Testament identifies as Jesus:

He will not be disheartened or crushed
Until He has established justice in the earth,
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.
(Isaiah 42:4)

Today, some two millennia later, the Lord Jesus Christ is bringing God's healing, loving rule to every corner of the earth, and men and women in every place are streaming to him. They listen eagerly to his words in the gospels, waiting expectantly for his instruction.

Although many preachers would welcome the following that Jesus generated, Mark depicts the crowd as an unwelcome—and possibly dangerous—presence. Those eager to be healed were literally “falling on” Jesus. Jesus addresses the problem by making arrangements to use a boat to distance himself from the crowd.

Just as people threatened the safety of Jesus by falling on him and touching him, unclean spirits threaten his mission by literally “falling before” him and speaking about him. The demons, speaking through people whom they have possessed, proclaim Jesus to be the Son of God, a title for Jewish kings that was also associated with the anticipated Messiah. While would-be Messiahs might have welcomed such an acclamation, the true Messiah silences those who are making it. The time has not yet come for such a proclamation, which would only invite more unwelcome attention from those who are ill prepared to embrace Jesus' vision of the kingdom, including enemies who have already taken counsel to kill him. Moreover, the proclamation of Jesus as the holy Son of God is not the prerogative of unholy spirits.

Problems for the gospel

By and large, followers of Jesus Christ today are not in danger of being crushed by crowds of people who want to touch them. The North American “crowd,” particularly its Silicon Valley manifestation, threatens to smother not the messengers of the gospel but the message itself. The message of the New Testament is that God's healing, loving rule has broken into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah. If you were to ask a thousand people in the Silicon Valley who rarely, if ever, darken the doors of a church for their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you would probably hear about being a good person. You would probably hear about judgment. You would probably also hear about a hateful agenda aimed against homosexuals and women's right to choose. You might even hear about the forgiveness of sins. You are unlikely to hear about the in-breaking of God's healing, loving rule.

Why is this? Just as demons posed a threat to the mission of Jesus in his day, they pose a threat to the mission

of Jesus' people in our day. In Jesus' day, the demons were preaching the gospel—accurately, in fact—hoping to force Jesus' hand and alert authorities to the presence of a rival. In our day, they muddle the message. They have effectively convinced our world—and many in the church—that the gospel is something other than what it is.

Jesus needed breathing room from the crowd in his day. So he withdrew from the sea and ascended a mountain, taking his disciples with him.

Jesus remakes Israel

Mark depicted the crowd and the demons that came with it as problems. Jesus addressed the problems by telling his disciples to make a boat ready for him and by silencing the demons. Nevertheless, he has in mind a more far-reaching solution. For the crowd in verses 13-19 represents not so much a problem as an opportunity.

When Jesus ascends the mountain, he doesn't summon everyone, only those he wants. The crowd had come to him, but Jesus didn't want the crowd. Those he has summoned also come to him, and Jesus wants them. He doesn't want a large following; he wants a small following, at least at first.

Whereas verses 7-12 depicted people “falling on” Jesus and demons “falling before” him, verses 13-19 twice declare that Jesus “appointed” (literally, “made”) twelve disciples. Jesus is not insensitive to the crowd. After all, he healed many. More importantly, those he summoned and appointed, the twelve disciples, would be the solution to the problem of the crowd and the demons—the problem that was in fact an opportunity. For those he wanted would also be those who would begin taking the gospel of the kingdom to the world. Jesus promised to “make” his first few disciples fishers of men, and now he's “making” all the disciples. Scholar N.T. Wright comments: “Jesus went up into the hills for the same reason that others did at the time: to shape his followers into a truly revolutionary group, and to do so away from the prying eyes of authorities.”

He summons the disciples for two purposes: that they might be with him and that he might send them out. He intends on sending them out with a two-part commission: to preach and to cast out demons. Healing was evidently part of the commission as well, for when Jesus sent the disciples out, they also healed people (Mark 6:13). Jesus preached about the in-breaking of God's kingdom: his loving, healing rule. Jesus cast out demons, who had convinced the people of Israel to adopt counterfeit—and mostly nationalistic—versions of the kingdom of God. He spoke and acted with the “authority” of God (Mark 1:14-15, 1:27, 34). Now, Jesus shares his mission with his disciples, even granting them his authority to cast out demons. Demonic taunting would give

way to human preaching: at the right time, the disciples would begin preaching that Jesus is the Son of God—the Messiah, God’s final king.

Jesus doesn’t just want a small following; he wants a small following of twelve men. Israel had twelve tribes; Jesus chooses twelve disciples. Mark’s narrative is subtle yet powerful: Jesus is remaking Israel around himself. God formed Israel that it might be with him and that it might bless the world (Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:5-6). In calling twelve disciples, Jesus is restoring Israel to God’s purposes for it.

Jesus singles out the first three disciples in Mark’s list by giving names to them. Peter, James, and John would form his inner circle.⁵ Mark also singles out the last disciple on the list, Judas Iscariot, but in an ominous way, casting a shadow over the rest of the narrative.

If Mark presents the disciples as the solution to the problem of the crowd, he also sets up another problem: there’s a fox in the hen house. How, pray tell, will Jesus advance God’s purposes with Judas in his midst? The stunning answer, understandable only in hindsight, is that the betrayal of Judas would be drawn into God’s purposes. God, in fact, would use the actions of Judas to establish his healing, loving rule.

The solution: us

Is the Silicon Valley “crowd,” which smothers the gospel and advocates worldviews that oppose the rule of God, a problem or an opportunity? True, Jesus acknowledged the crowd as problem, but he also perceived an opportunity. We may surmise that he also sees the crowd of our day as both a problem and an opportunity. Furthermore, if Jesus acknowledges the crowd of our day as a problem, he must have a solution in mind. What is it? In short, it’s us – we have the opportunity. Jesus summoned twelve disciples so that he might remake the people of God and that they might realize God’s purposes for them. Jesus summons us that we might realize God’s purposes for his people.

The call to be a disciple of Jesus includes both relational and missional aspects. Jesus calls us to be “with him”—to spend time with him, to listen to him, to share our thoughts with him, and to do so not only as individuals but also, and most especially, in community. It never ceases to delight me that I get to walk the path of this human journey both with Jesus and with a few fellow travelers. Jesus also sends us out to preach, which means proclaiming the good news about the in-breaking of God’s rule, and to cast out demons, which means courageously challenging the strongholds of evil that keep people enslaved in our world. We need not fear being sent out for such tasks, for Jesus grants us his authority, which includes the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus entrusts us with the most powerful message in the world (the gospel) and grants us the most powerful force in the world (the Holy Spirit). It’s inspiring to hear stories of people from this church who are doing the work of the gospel both in our own community and around the world. Perhaps, by the power of the Spirit, we

can open the eyes of a few more men and women in our world, blinded as they are by a false understanding of the gospel, that they might behold a compelling vision of the healing, loving rule of God.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who disagrees with evangelical theology, nevertheless wrote earlier this year that he had observed a transformation in those who espouse it. Although he had nothing to say about the gospel, he had plenty to say about those who believe it. Kristof commended evangelicals for doing “superb work on poverty, AIDS, sex trafficking, climate change, prison abuses, malaria and genocide in Darfur.” He wrote that today many evangelicals “are powerful internationalists and humanitarians” and that those who disagree with evangelical theology “haven’t awakened to the transformation.” He observed that more than 7,500 members of Saddleback Church in Southern California had paid their own way to fight AIDS, malaria, and poverty in more than 68 countries. Kristof quoted Helene Gayle, the head of CARE, who said evangelicals “have made some incredible contributions” in the struggle against global poverty and added, “We don’t give them credit for the changes they’ve made.” Kristof wrote, “In parts of Africa where bandits and warlords shoot or rape anything that moves, you often find that the only groups still operating are Doctors Without Borders and religious aid workers: crazy doctors and crazy Christians.”⁶ Followers of Jesus today who are courageously challenging strongholds of evil are giving our world reason to pay attention to the gospel.

Is it true that the church is the solution to the problems of the world? Yes, insofar as it follows Jesus and as the Holy Spirit empowers it. God is establishing his reign—his healing, loving rule—through his Jesus-following, Spirit-empowered people. God is doing it, but he’s doing it—at least in part—through his partnership with us. We are the link between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of his people, which is connected to the restoration of creation (Romans 8:18-25). The apostle Paul can therefore say, “Therefore, my beloved, brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Our labor, even if it seems ineffective, is not in vain: we are contributing to the establishment of the healing, loving rule of God.

Many of us are more comfortable with the relational aspect of discipleship than with the missional aspect and may therefore feel as if we’re spiritual failures. The answer is not to work to turn ourselves into mission-minded people but to spend time, along with others, in the company of Jesus and to be sensitive to how and when he might be sending us out. Jesus told his first disciples not to *become* fishers of men but that he would “*make*” them become fishers of men (Mark 1:17). Even though he summons the twelve in order to send them out in Mark 3:13-15, not until chapter 6 does Mark report him actually sending them out. Inevitably, if you spend time with someone, you find out what concerns him or her. If we spend time with Jesus, we’ll find out that he’s concerned for the world. He

wants us to share his concern and to carry on his mission to the world. Spend time with Jesus, particularly in the company of others, listen to his words as he speaks to you in the scriptures, and watch what he does to your heart. See if the wind of his Spirit doesn't fan into a flame the flicker of passion you feel for the gospel. Watch for the doors for mission that the Spirit opens.

A small group manifesto

How will Jesus lead you and empower you for mission to the world? His Spirit is creative beyond programs, formulas, or expectations. However, Mark 3:7-19 may have something to say to us about how we conceive of a small group ministry. The twelve disciples represented all of Israel, but they also constituted a small group. The two-part story in Mark 3:7-19 therefore has implications for the church as a whole but also for small groups within the church. Consider the following approach as a possible template:

In forming a small group, don't throw open the doors to everyone—at least not at first. Instead, like Jesus, summon those you want. You do this, like Jesus, not because you are insensitive to others but precisely because you are sensitive to them. You explain that your purpose in forming this group is for Jesus to shape it so that it might realize God's purposes. Articulate a vision that embraces both the relational and missional aspects of following Jesus. At first, spend time with Jesus together, perhaps studying passages in the gospels while being sensitive to the leading of his Spirit. Share your authentic selves with each other and don't settle for surface relationships.

Early on, start praying about how Jesus might send you out into the world in order to bless the world, not simply in one-off forays but in an ongoing and sustainable initiative. At some point, perhaps after a few months, when you're prepared to embrace a ministry of hospitality, open the group to others. Make a commitment to invite acquaintances who have not yet chosen to follow Jesus. You may decide that you want to make extending hospitality to seekers and skeptics the mission of the group.

If the group is an authentic community that pulsates with the life of Jesus and embraces his love for the world, even someone who doesn't know him may "fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25). I often find myself in small-group settings with other followers of Jesus and think to myself: "If those outside the church knew about this, wouldn't they be attracted to the church instead of repulsed by it?" If the group grows beyond a certain size, consider taking part of it and forming another mission-minded group.

You are not simply forming a Bible study, though you will want to give attention to the scriptures and you may find that you need the scriptures as never before. You're not forming an accountability group, though group members will be expected to share their authentic selves. You're forming a platoon—a platoon that employs not bullets

and bombs but love, prayer, and truth (1 Corinthians 10:3-5).

I fathom that more than a few people in this church are equipped to form such a group and that such a vision resonates with them. If, on the other hand, you're already in a small group, you may want to reconsider its vision if this approach resonates with you.

One more thing: don't expect things to go smoothly. After all, Jesus summoned a man who betrayed him. But watch for how God draws even apparent disasters into his purposes. Get ready for an adventure.

Jumping with Jesus

I heard a story of a U.S. general who was reviewing a platoon of paratroopers during the Vietnam War. As he went down the line, he asked each soldier, "How do you like jumping, son?" Each one dutifully answered, "I love it, Sir." Near the end of the line, however, he came upon a soldier who answered, "I hate jumping, Sir." The dumbfounded general responded, "Then why do you jump?" The soldier answered, "Because I want to be around guys who jump."

Jesus likes to jump, so to speak. The Father sent him into the world that he might send others into the world—that they might jump into a hurting world that needs the love of God. Spend some time with Jesus. Find a few others who are also spending time with him—maybe a few who also like to jump. Let Jesus, in his time and his way, send you out to bring the healing, loving rule of God to some place in our world that needs it.

NOTES

¹ David Brooks, "Remembering the Mentor" (*New York Times*, Feb. 29, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ *Literary structure:*

A *Jesus withdrew to sea; multitude came to him (7-8)*

B *Problem 1: Crowd literally "falling on" Jesus to touch him (9-10)*

C *Problem 2: Unclean spirits literally "falling before" Jesus to identify him (11-12)*

A' *Jesus went up on mountain; those he wanted came to him (13)*

B' *Solution 1: Jesus literally "made" twelve disciples: he commissioned them (14-15)*

C' *Solution 2: Jesus literally "made" twelve disciples: he identified them (16-19)*

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone (London and Louisville, Kent.: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 2004)*, 35.

⁵ *The two most prominent leaders of Israel, Moses and David, each had an inner circle of three (Exodus 24:9, 2 Samuel 23:8-23,*

1 Chronicles 11:10-25). Mark portrays Jesus as the new Moses who effects a new exodus with references to the sea, the crowd, the mountain, and the number twelve. When God was forming Israel in the wilderness, Moses ascended a mountain. Likewise, as God reforms Israel, Jesus ascends a mountain.

⁶ Nicholas Kristof, "Evangelicals a Liberal Can Love," New York Times (Feb. 3, 2008).

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