

Question: This past Christmas, how many of you participated in a white elephant gift exchange? How many of you know the origin of that practice? The story goes that, when the king of Siam (Thailand) set out to defeat an enemy, he would first send that enemy a unique gift, a white elephant, a live, albino elephant. These animals were considered sacred, so the recipient had no choice but to intentionally care for it. The objective was to distract the enemy by forcing him to spend so much time, energy, and resources on the elephant that he would think of little else but the extremely burdensome process of caring for the gift. So, a “white elephant” is code for a burdensome asset whose cost of upkeep is disproportional to its usefulness or value.

It is not uncommon to be preoccupied with white elephants, to be dominated or distracted by useless pursuits and worthless activities. What begins as a distraction can often end in defeat. In Mark 3 we encounter three “white elephants” that can distract us from our mission.

The noise of the needy...vv. 7-10. Everywhere Jesus went the crowds gathered. What is amazing is how fast and how far the news about Him spread...Galilee, Judea, Idumea, Transjordan, Tyre and Sidon. Many of them were drawn to his teaching. I’m sure some hung on His promises of a glorious kingdom to come while others enjoyed His combative Spirit as He took on the religious leaders. But most people followed Him because of what He could do for them. He offered something they needed. He healed the sick, cast out demons and even served lunch to thousands who came to hear Him. Many of these people were big fans of Jesus. But, as I have noted before, there is a big difference between a fan and a follower. It is clear they don’t yet fully understand who He is or what He is about.

We had a food ministry here which provided groceries to the needy in our neighborhood. Our motives were commendable, but our knowledge of the problem was deficient. The same people came every week, the same people who made the rounds to all the other food ministries in the city. We were operating a high maintenance/low impact program that was exhausting.

The hostility of the hateful...vv. 11-12, 22-30. Jesus was constantly opposed by demonic forces as well as those under the influence of demonic forces. Verse 11 records the second time an unclean spirit speaks to Jesus. Previously in Mk. 1:24, unclean spirits speak, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” I’ve said it before and will probably say it again, one of the ironies of the gospel story is that fact that while everyone else is trying to figure out who Jesus is, the unclean or demonic spirits have no doubt. They know He is the Son of God.

The demonic world is a shadowy subject. Some people never talk about demons while others talk about it too much. I appreciate the perspective of C. S. Lewis who said, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

All we can say is what the Bible says. God’s kingdom work will always encounter opposition from the kingdom of darkness. Notice how the Pharisees try desperately to discredit Jesus in v. 22, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” Think how irrational that statement is. If Jesus has a demon, then why is he casting out demons? Even their actions are irrational...3:6. They criticize Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath yet they have no problem plotting to kill Him on the Sabbath. There is no end to the confusion born out of this blasphemy.

Jesus doesn’t go easy on these guys. In fact, He accuses them of “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” (v. 18) which is an eternal, unforgivable sin. What is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? It is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. It is possible to become so perverted in your thinking that good becomes evil and evil becomes good. This is called the unforgivable sin...3:28-30.

I once had a man tell me he had committed the unforgivable sin. When I asked him how he knew that, he told me he had cursed God out at one point in his life and that God wouldn’t forgive him. I was happy to explain to him that he had not committed the unforgivable sin. In fact, his grief over what he had done proved it.

Beware of the white elephants offered to you by the devil. What looks delicious may leave you with a real belly ache. My brother was stationed in Germany. His landlord, who spoke no English, offered him a “gift” of some liquid in an amber bottle. My brother accepted it, smiled and said, “Danka.” The man said, “Nein, nein, gift!” As my sister-in-law scrambled to look up the word in her German dictionary, she discovered that in German, the word means POISON! Beware of the devil’s white elephant gifts – they are always poison.

The reproach of the relatives...vv. 20-21; 31-35. It must have been difficult being a member of Jesus’ family. How would you have liked to be James? Everybody thought he could do the same things Jesus could do but he couldn’t. He wasn’t James Christ. WWJD bracelet...what would James do? How do you explain Jesus’ actions? You never know when He is going to offend someone, particularly someone important. He seems to be out of His mind. Some of you have family members like that – they think YOU are out of your mind. The best approach to our unbelieving relatives is to live out a consistent lifestyle that brings glory to God and joy to your own life.

Notice how Jesus handled the contempt and scorn of His own family members – He expanded the definition of the family...vv. 33-35. When we follow Jesus and do His will, we prove to be members of His forever family. We take our place in the company of the called.

There is no shortage of white elephants, distractions designed to defeat our effectiveness as disciples of Jesus. Whether it is the needy, the haters or even our own relatives, the strategy of the enemy is the same - to distract us so he can destroy us. How do we avoid the distraction of the white elephant? Let's conclude by thinking about what Jesus did.

1. He retreated. That is what is described in v. 7 are, "Jesus withdrew with His disciples..." Have you ever been worn out by trying to meet the needs of others? Moms? Sometimes just getting away from the noise can help us regain perspective. But we live in a culture where we mistake rest for laziness. We confuse being busy with being effective.

One of my favorite magazine ads from several years ago showed a man in corner office with his feet up on the desk looking out over the city. The caption read, "Why does this man get paid a big salary to look out the window?" He is thinking. Jesus took time to recharge His body and realign His priorities.

2. He reloaded. He distanced Himself from the crowds in order to remember His calling. I wish I would have learned much earlier in my life that **the need is not the call**. There are more needs in this world than we can even begin to meet. This is the subtle message Jesus was teaching His disciples in Mk. 1:35. I want to be so convinced of my calling that I can respond to any need with a gracious "no" or an enthusiastic "yes."

This is true not only for individuals but for churches. are famous for overpromising and underdelivering. We try to provide something for everyone. We can chase needs all day and miss our calling.

3. He reengaged. Notice the job description of an apostle...vv. 14-15. What did He call them to do? Is it two actions or three? It's three activities, isn't it? To preach and cast our demons yes, but their priority was "to be with Him." They lived together and these twelve men had the opportunity to observe the way Jesus handled life. They laughed and cried, they prayed and partied, they encountered opposition as well as acceptance and they did it all "with Him." That was Jesus' kingdom strategy. "It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow Him. This revealed immediately the direction His evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God." Robert Coleman

Take your place in the community of the called and let's follow Jesus...together.

FOLLOW

JESUS THROUGH THE BOOK OF MARK

PART 1: FOLLOW THE PERSON OF JESUS



The noise of the needy

THE STRETCHER-BEARERS

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea 8 and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. 9 And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, 10 for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him.

MARK 3:7-10

The hostility of the hateful

11 And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

MARK 3:11-12

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

28 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

MARK 3:22-30

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

EPHESIANS 6:12

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

C. S. LEWIS

The reproach of our relatives

JESUS

20 Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

MARK 3:20-21

31 And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. 32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." 33 And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

MARK 3:31-35

The communion of the called

13 And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons. 16 He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

MARK 3:13-19

He retreated



He reloaded

He reengaged

“It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow Him. This revealed immediately the direction His evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.”

ROBERT COLEMAN