

QUITTERS WELCOMED HOME BY GOD

II Timothy 4: 11b -- (On the life and restoration to ministry of John Mark)
“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

Pastor Richard P. Carlson

It would be a self-righteous disciple of Christ, a hypocrite, who never admits to having failed the Lord. All great saints of the past acknowledged their failures. With Jesus, failure is not final. It can be overcome. It is probable that we should begin this message by speaking about believers who are “high maintenance” believers. At one time or another, all of us have been just that. Many of us may be “high maintenance” believers right now. The Bible is full of injunctions for us to support brothers and sisters who are in a time of spiritual crisis. We sometimes get ourselves into hot water, but God is faithful, I Corinthians 10:13, to provide for us a way to escape that we will be able to bear it. Thank God, along with John Mark. We have a great Deliverer in Jesus. He comes to our rescue when we may have seemed like we were past saving, but He rescued us.

In Romans 15:1 the Word teaches us, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Galatians 6:1 adds, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Now note who is writing these gentle words. It is the very same apostle Paul who once told John Mark that his ministry in wanting to go back with him on his second missionary journey was over--washed up. Paul even said, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) At the same time we are told to help the weak, the Word of God gives us commands that we have the responsibility also to become strong. In Galatians 6:5, Paul said, “For each will have to bear his own load.” The burdens in Galatians 6:2 are overburdens whereas the load in Galatians 6:5 is the load each of us carry every day, which no one else can, such as our own job we must finish and fulfill. Paul added in Romans 14:12, “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” In Hebrews 12:12,13, it appears the apostle is telling us we have some responsibility to pick ourselves up when we are weak. He writes, “Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”

Sadly, some Christians never seem to ever make it from the stage of always needing others’ support to becoming spiritually able to stand up for Jesus and to support themselves. They remain very dependent upon other brothers and sisters. These weak believers must always be nurtured by other fellow believers in the local church or they fall away repeatedly or they become careless and apathetic.

These people are spiritually “high maintenance disciples of Jesus. They require lots of attention and they require lots of personal time, energy, and money like high maintenance cars or employees that require close supervision to do their jobs right.

Beloved, are any of us perpetually high maintenance believers who will not remain faithful without continual attention? Do we require constant coddling to stay active in the fellowship of Christ’s church? Babes in Christ are by definition, high maintenance believers until they begin to mature. Yet, lazy, slothful Christians who work for Jesus only when pushed or prodded, are also high maintenance. I have found out as a district superintendent that even certain churches are high maintenance even as it was true of the church in Corinth. In I Corinthians 3: 1,2, we read, “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.”

It is important to know both the necessity as well as the difficulty of being a high maintenance disciple of Jesus. High maintenance is not only crucial for newborn Christians, but it is a **necessity** for each of us as hurting believers who might otherwise be overwhelmed. Strong believers who undergo hurt, grief, or who struggle in their marriage or family, are sometimes not given needed high maintenance. They are demanded to always be strong. This is tragic, because each of us have times we must be ministered to as weak believers because something we are facing has pulled us down low. High maintenance is only a hurtful state in our discipleship, if we choose to be high maintenance when we could be helpers in the body of Christ. Our choice to be high maintenance hinders growth in the church.

God has led me tonight to study with you this man, John Mark, who was high maintenance with Barnabas for a time. He didn’t stay in that role; he grew up in Jesus. In Hebrews 5:12 we read about Hebrew Christians who refused to grow up. We read, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.” In business, the goal of consumers is to become producers. In the work of the Lord, the goal of the Lord is for His children to grow and become reproducers for Him. Let us never look down on the necessity for each of us at times to be high maintenance believers. Let us all be willing to both receive high maintenance, and to extend high maintenance to others when they need it—no matter how long they have been saved. When our burdens become unbearable, we each need high maintenance from our brothers and sisters in Jesus. Sometimes, with certain illnesses, we may need high maintenance for years, but in that state of infirmity, it is amazing how folks like Joni Eareckson Tada have become not only receivers of constant care, but givers of constant care to millions.

The apostle Paul is urging Timothy in our text, to bring John Mark along with him when he came to Rome. Why? The words given are, Get Mark, and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.” John Mark had a curiously chequered career. He was very young when the Church was born. Yet, he lived at the very center of the church’s life. When Peter escaped from prison, Acts 12:12, he went to the central meeting place of the Jerusalem Church, the house of Mary, Mark’s mother. We read, “And when Peter realized this (that the Lord, v. 11 had sent forth His angel and rescued him from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” It was an all-night prayer meeting.

When Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey they took John Mark along with them to be their helper and assistant. (Acts 13:5) John Mark was embarking on an incredibly great career for God. Called of God, and called as well by Paul and Barnabas—for the service of the Lord and His church—what a calling! And first, things went well in Cyprus. Then something happened. It was tragic! Paul and Barnabas left Pamphylia and went inland on a hard and dangerous road that led to the central plateau of Asia Mino. John Mark left them--Acts 13:13, and he went home. His nerve and his courage seem to have failed. He turned back. Peter called Mark his son in the faith in I Peter 5:13, so we know Peter led John Mark to the Lord. He was a believer. Peter was Mark’s spiritual father. It is almost certain the young man spoken of in Mark’s Gospel was Mark himself. When the Lord was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mark 14:51,52 reads, “And they all, all the disciples, left Jesus and fled. And a certain young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked.” Let’s study this man and identify three phases of his life the Word of God reveals. Perhaps, for all of us, we can look back to all three of these phases of life in our lives as we too have seen Christian discipleship at work and failure overcome? What are these three phases?

LET’S MEET THE MAN WHO TURNED BACK AND RAN AWAY. (I) No doubt Mark was chosen to go on this first mission, because he was the nephew of Barnabas, Colossians 4:10 calls him literally, Barnabas’ sister’s son. We first see Mark in Acts 12:25 which tells us, “And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.” For whatever reason, John Mark defected when Paul needed him most. And Paul took this defection very hard--personally. Early church fathers say Mark was homesick and afraid. Some commentators say it was perhaps a moral failure. Others tell us that Pamphylia was a hot-bed, fever laden area with the malaria germ that Paul picked up, the possible reason for his oozy eyes and his

much trembling. This awful disease frightened Mark perhaps and he wanted no more part in the missionary journey—perhaps he was even ashamed of being associated with Paul. But those are all speculations. When the Bible leaves something a mystery, we need to leave it a mystery too. In Acts 13:5, we read, “When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John Mark to assist them.” But in Acts 13:13, just 7 verses later, we read, “Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.” The Greek word for left is **apochoreo**. It is not strong like Demas forsaking Paul, but Mark just said, in effect, “See you; I’m out of here, I have to go home. I can’t stay. God bless you, but I must get back home to Jerusalem.”

No matter what the depth of the problem was, Paul was minus a co-worker whose help and whose service he counted on. He felt abandoned, and left in the lurch. So, when Paul and Barnabas set out on their second missionary journey, Paul absolutely refused to have that quitter with them for a second missionary journey. Barnabas argued long and strongly until the debate was fierce and Paul won the debate. John whose surname was Mark would not be going with him. He had no use for him. Mark appeared to Paul as a spineless deserter. He would not serve on Paul’s staff. Turn to Acts 15:36-41. Listen to the debate and disagreement over John Mark, the deserter, the defector, the run-away, the quitter, and the coward.

How many of us here today are people who have messed up big time in one area of our Christian life? For good reason, we may have been asked to step down from a ministry or a call that we once performed with honor and valor. But now we are under discipline, and we wonder if we’ll ever be restored. Can you imagine being John Mark and knowing your defection is going to cost your own precious uncle Barnabas, his sacred spot beside the apostle Paul? Beloved, know that our departure from serving God and doing His work with integrity, will cost us and others more than we could ever dream. Secondly, let’s take a further look:

LET’S MEET THE MAN ONE MAN REFUSED TO GIVE UP ON. (II)

When we mess up God’s plan by our pride, our fears, our cowardice, our lust, our bitterness, our selfishness, or our stubbornness, thank God, He doesn’t throw us under the bus. No, God is into providing advocates, people who will work one on one with us, who specialize in giving high maintenance to those in need. To be used of God to turn a brother back to God is one of the highest callings God can give any man living. James 5:19,20 tells us, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.” Beloved, if you are called to be a Barnabas, don’t despair that

you have missed-out on Paul's second missionary journey. Think of the benefit of giving high maintenance discipleship and mentoring a fallen brother or sister until you see that person you are devoted to, become a disciple of distinction in the body of Christ. This same John Mark was the man, who with the apostle Peter's input and help, wrote the second Gospel in the New Testament—the Gospel of Mark.

Has God sent a Barnabas to you when you were a quitter, a defector, or a man or woman who did not make the grade? You flunked out spiritually. Tradition, which is often correct, tells us that Mark went to Egypt and founded the Christian Church in that country. Paul even acknowledged Mark's change in his epistle to the Colossians. He wrote the church there from his Roman prison. Paul knew the debate over Mark had probably gotten around, a marring of Mark's testimony, which doubtless, marred Mark's good name. So, Paul wrote the church in AD 64, 12 years after Mark's defection. He commanded them in Colossians 4:10, saying, "Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas' nephew Mark, about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome and receive him." So, this passage in Colossians, written 2 years before our text in II Timothy, in 66 AD, tells us that Mark had come once before to Paul in Rome in Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Paul made no great commendation in AD 64, except that he expected the church in Colossae to welcome Mark as a brother in the Lord, if Mark came to them. The work of one man, Barnabas, behind the scenes, working with Mark for 10-12 years had totally led to a change in John Mark. Now, he was a seasoned disciple, able to disciple others. Thirdly, most importantly,

LET'S MEET THE MAN WHO WAS TOTALLY RESTORED. (III)

When we are restored and forgive completely, there is no greater sign of the full restoration of us, than if the ones who once rejected us want us by their side in the hour of their death/martyrdom. Now Paul knew Mark by a new title, not a quitter, but a very useful man—**diaconia**—a servant of the Lord. In II Timothy 2:19, 21, Paul had written Timothy, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity... Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the Master of the house, ready for every good work." This same phrase about being fit for the Master's use is now Paul's same Greek phrase when he asks Timothy to pick Mark up and bring him to Rome. Why? This man who was once a quitter was now fit for the Master's use. None of us need to stay in the messes we get ourselves into. We cannot redeem ourselves, but God can do it. God will often use others who believe in us, if we will humble ourselves to receive their instruction and discipline and the "*discipling*" or mentoring they provide. John Mark is living proof that God is in the restoration business. No one who fails, needs to die a failure.

Still today, Jesus Christ can make the coward spirit brave, and He can nerve the feeble arm for the fight. He can release the sleeping hero in each one of us and turn the shame of our failure into the joy of triumphant service. There is always a road home for the backslider. God will make a way where there seems to be no way—even if He must prepare a big fish. Ask Jonah the renegade, the runaway. The hymnwriter Faber wrote these touching lines: “Have you sinned as none else in the world have before? Are you blacker than other creatures in guilt? Oh, fear not, and doubt not! The mother who bore you, loves you less than the Savior whose Blood you have spilt. Come, come to His feet, and lay open your story, Of suffering and sorrow, of guilt and of shame; For the pardon of sin is the crown of His glory, And the joy of our Lord to be true to His Name.”

If God can take a John Mark and come upon him so strongly after his restoration, that his very Holy Spirit inspired words would become the priceless record of the Gospel of Mark, there’s hope for you and me. Tradition tells us that this once young quitter, who became a saint and a servant of Christ, died in deathless devotion to his dearest of all Masters, the Lord Jesus Christ. Egyptians dragged him through the streets, then they flung him bruised and bleeding into a dungeon before burning him to death. John Mark, once owned a quitter’s label, but in Glory he awaits a martyr’s crown. If you have been a John Mark, all you need to do tonight, is to accept the fact of your failure, admit your sin, and return in undenyng repentance to Jesus. Then repent to those you have failed. Then accept their forgiveness as you accept the Lord’s forgiveness and receive the joy of restoration and the restored privilege of service to the Lord. May God bring every John Mark among us back home to His loving arms. Amen!