



Take a Staff or Not: Harmonizing the Mission Instructions of Jesus

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Introduction

One of the passages frequently raised as an alleged contradiction in the Gospel accounts concerns the instructions Jesus gave His disciples when He sent them out to minister. In Mark 6:8, the command reads, “And commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse.” Yet in Matthew 10:9–10, the instruction appears stricter: “Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves.” Luke 9:3 adds, “Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread, neither money; neither have two coats apiece.” At a superficial level, the texts appear to conflict. One passage allows a staff, while two others forbid staves. Critics often stop at that point and conclude that the Gospel writers cannot be reconciled. However, that conclusion is reached too quickly and without sufficient attention to context, language, purpose, and the larger biblical pattern of dependence upon God.

This issue matters for more than apologetic reasons. It matters because it tests whether Scripture can be read with the precision it deserves. The Gospels do not present careless reporting. They present complementary testimony. Differences in wording often reveal differences in emphasis rather than contradiction in fact. When Jesus sent out the Twelve, He was not merely giving them travel advice. He was establishing a pattern of ministry. He was training them to depend on the Lord rather than earthly preparation, to move with urgency rather than comfort, and to learn that the work of God is sustained by God Himself. The question is not simply whether a walking stick was permitted. The deeper issue is what kind of ministry Jesus was forming in them.

When the passages are read together, the picture becomes much clearer. Mark emphasizes what they may carry during ordinary travel. Matthew emphasizes what they are not to acquire or pack as provisions. Luke underscores the same principle of radical dependence. These are not contradictory commands but different angles on the same instruction. In fact, once the terms are carefully observed, the accounts fit together naturally. The disciples were not to outfit themselves with extra equipment for a self-sufficient campaign. They were to go in the simplicity of trust. If one already held an ordinary staff used for walking, that did not violate the command. What was forbidden was a planned, provision-heavy, self-protective outfitting of the mission.



God repeatedly uses what is already in the servant's hand. In Exodus 4:2, the Lord asked Moses, "What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod." That rod, ordinary in itself, became the instrument through which God displayed His power. The lesson is that God often does not call His servants first to gather more, but to yield what they already possess. This sheds important light on the mission of the Twelve. Their power would not be found in accumulated resources, but in obedience, authority delegated by Christ, and the provision of God.

The Sending of the Twelve in the Synoptic Gospels

The sending of the Twelve is recorded in Matthew 10, Mark 6, and Luke 9. Each account gives the same basic event but with different emphases. Mark 6:7 says, "And he called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two; and gave them power over unclean spirits." Luke 9:1 similarly states, "Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases." Matthew 10 expands the discourse further, including both the commissioning and a fuller description of the mission's character. From the outset, the context is one of delegated authority. The disciples are not traveling as tourists, merchants, or wandering philosophers. They are being commissioned as representatives of the Messiah.

Their mission was also specific in scope. Matthew 10:5-6 states, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This is not yet the global mission of Matthew 28:19. This is a focused, kingdom-oriented mission within Israel. That context matters because it helps explain the urgency and the simplicity of the instructions. The message was immediate: "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 10:7). They were not being sent to establish settled institutions or carry long-term supplies. They were being sent as heralds.

Mark's wording is especially concise: "Take nothing for their journey, save a staff only" (Mark 6:8). The point is not luxury or preparedness but minimalism. The rest of the verse reinforces that: "no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse." They are not to carry food reserves, money reserves, or travel bags filled with provisions. Luke 9:3 repeats the same austerity: "Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread, neither money." Matthew 10:9-10 adds further detail by forbidding gold, silver, brass, scrip, extra coats, shoes, and staves, followed by the principle: "for the workman is worthy of his meat." This final statement is essential. It explains why they were to go lightly. They were



to rely on God's provision through those who received their ministry.

The three accounts, then, are not isolated rulebooks but parallel descriptions of a training mission. Jesus was shaping the disciples' understanding of ministry. They would preach, heal, cast out demons, and depend upon God. This means the issue of the staff must be read within a larger framework. The central theme is not the equipment itself. The central theme is trust, simplicity, urgency, and the refusal to treat ministry as an enterprise sustained by personal stockpiling.

The Language of the Command and the Question of Acquisition

The strongest key to harmonization lies in the wording of Matthew's account. Matthew 10:9 begins, "Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses." The force of the command is not merely "do not carry," but "do not acquire," "do not procure," or "do not furnish yourselves with" such provisions. The same flow continues into verse 10: "Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves." The thrust is against equipping themselves with additional travel supplies for self-preservation. Matthew's emphasis is on refusing advance provisioning. Mark, by contrast, speaks from the angle of what may accompany them in ordinary simplicity: "save a staff only."

That distinction is neither forced nor artificial. It fits the natural sense of the passages. Matthew forbids gathering or furnishing a supply inventory for the journey. Mark allows the ordinary travel staff already in use. Luke, like Matthew, emphasizes the austerity of the command. In other words, the disciples were not to prepare as self-sustaining travelers. They were to go as dependent messengers. This is why the supposed contradiction is resolved when we distinguish between carrying what one already has in ordinary use and taking along extra items as calculated provisions.

This also explains why sandals and coats appear in different formulations. Mark 6:9 says, "But be shod with sandals; and not put on two coats." Matthew 10:10 says, "neither two coats, neither shoes." Again, the issue is not whether they were barefoot or stripped of all clothing, but whether they were to outfit themselves with extra supplies. The emphasis falls upon duplication, reserve, and preparation for comfort or self-reliance. They were not to bring a second coat. They were not to furnish themselves with extra footwear. They were to travel lightly, not lavishly.

Such differences in wording are exactly what one expects from genuine witnesses recounting the same instruction with different emphases. If the accounts were artificially



collusive, they would likely be flattened into exact repetition. Instead, they interlock. Matthew stresses the prohibition on acquisition. Mark stresses the minimal permission of ordinary travel equipment. Luke underscores the same severe dependence. Together they form a coherent picture.

The Ministry Principle: Trust Rather Than Stockpiling

The heart of Jesus' command is found in the principle that follows it. Matthew 10:10 concludes, "for the workman is worthy of his meat." Luke 10:7 uses the same principle in the later sending of the seventy: "for the laborer is worthy of his hire." The point is that God would sustain the messenger through those who received the message. The disciples were being taught that the ministry entrusted to them would not rest upon accumulated resources. It would rest upon divine provision.

This principle appears throughout Scripture. In Deuteronomy 8:3, Moses reminded Israel that God humbled them and fed them with manna "that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live." Jesus Himself quoted this in Matthew 4:4 during His temptation. The mission of the Twelve is an enacted lesson in that same truth. Their provision would not be bread stored in a bag, money stored in a purse, or gear stored for emergencies. Their provision would come as they obeyed the word of the Lord.

This does not mean that prudence is inherently sinful. Later, in Luke 22:35-36, Jesus changes the practical instructions because the setting has changed: "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing? And they said, Nothing. Then said he unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it." That later adjustment is highly important. It proves that the earlier restriction was a mission-specific discipline, not a universal ban on all preparation for all times. In the earlier mission, they were to learn dependence. In the later setting, conditions had changed, and the instructions changed with them.

This actually strengthens the harmonization. Jesus was not issuing arbitrary equipment laws. He was shaping them for a particular moment in redemptive history. If later He could alter the travel instructions, then the earlier instructions must be read as deliberate training for a specific mission. That training emphasized trust, urgency, and a refusal to rely on material reserve. The command regarding the staff fits within that larger principle and must be read accordingly.



The Old Testament Background of the Staff

The staff is not an insignificant object in biblical symbolism. It often represents support, authority, pilgrimage, and divine use of ordinary means. In Genesis 32:10, Jacob said, “for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.” His staff marked him as a pilgrim. Hebrews 11:21 notes that Jacob, “when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.” The staff becomes associated with the pilgrim life of faith.

Most notably, Moses’ rod becomes a repeated symbol of delegated authority. Exodus 4:2-5 says, “And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground.” That rod, commonplace in shepherding life, becomes an instrument in signs before Pharaoh and in the wilderness. It is not magical in itself. Its significance lies in the fact that God uses what is yielded to Him. This is one of the key typological patterns that illuminates the disciple mission. The servant need not stockpile impressive resources. God asks first: What is already in your hand?

The Passover itself contains a related image. In Exodus 12:11, the people were to eat in readiness: “thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand.” The staff there is associated with readiness, pilgrimage, and immediate obedience. That image fits the Gospel mission strikingly well. The disciples are not being sent into settled ease but into kingdom urgency. They are pilgrims proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom. The staff, in that sense, belongs to the symbolism of the traveler rather than the self-equipped campaigner.

This does not prove that Matthew must allow a staff in every nuance, but it does show that the staff is biblically linked with ordinary pilgrimage and readiness. That is entirely consistent with Mark’s wording. If a disciple already traveled as a walking pilgrim with a staff, that ordinary support does not violate the command against outfitting oneself with extensive provisions. The Old Testament background makes the distinction plausible and natural.

Typology and the Servant’s Hand

The staff question is not just about travel equipment. It touches a recurring pattern in Scripture: God does not begin by asking what resources men can collect; He begins by asking what they will surrender. Moses had a rod. David had a sling. The widow of Zarephath had a handful of meal and a little oil in a cruse. The boy in John 6 had loaves



and fish. In each case, human resources were insufficient, yet under divine direction, they became enough.

The disciples' mission fits this pattern. They are sent with delegated authority, not accumulated self-sufficiency. They are not to build a mobile infrastructure. They are to be available. This is consistent with Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." Though the immediate historical setting differs, the principle is the same. Ministry is sustained by God's empowerment, not merely by human inventory.

There is also a Christological pattern here. Jesus Himself ministered without earthly accumulation. Matthew 8:20 says, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." He was not rootless in a chaotic sense, but He was free from dependence upon material securities as the basis of His calling. When the disciples are sent in simplicity, they are being shaped into that same pattern of kingdom dependence. Their authority comes from union with Him, not from goods packed for the road.

This helps expose why the claim of contradiction is shallow. The real point of the passage is not lost in a technicality about travel gear. The deeper issue is whether the disciples would trust the One who sent them. Once that is seen, the wording differences serve the larger truth rather than undermine it. Matthew's prohibition on provisioning and Mark's allowance of the ordinary staff both point in the same direction: go as servants, not as self-insured operators.

The House, the Reception, and the Worthiness Principle

Jesus' instructions about entering houses further illuminate the mission. Matthew 10:11-13 says, "And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, inquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence. And when ye come into an house, salute it." Mark 6:10 similarly says, "In what place soever ye enter into an house, there abide till ye depart from that place." They are not to move about in search of better accommodations. They are to receive provision where God opens the door.

This reinforces the non-commercial character of the mission. The disciples are not to behave like opportunists, collecting resources and upgrading comforts. They are to remain where received. They are to bless the house. If rejected, they are to depart and shake off the dust of their feet as a testimony (Mark 6:11; Matthew 10:14). That entire framework is



incompatible with a self-equipped traveling campaign. It depends instead upon God-ordered reception.

The principle “the workman is worthy of his meat” therefore does more than explain how they will eat. It explains the entire mission mode. They will preach, heal, deliver, and rely upon God’s provision through human response. That is why the command regarding money, bags, extra coats, and staves belongs together. The issue is not obsessive rule-keeping over objects; it is the posture of ministry. The worker is sustained by the One who sends him.

This is also why the disciples later could testify in Luke 22:35, “Nothing.” When Jesus asked, “Lacked ye any thing?” they answered that they lacked nothing. That statement is an experiential vindication of the earlier instructions. It proves that what appeared risky from the standpoint of ordinary preparation turned out to be sufficient under the care of God. The lesson had worked. They had been sustained without stockpiling.

Why the Alleged Contradiction Fails

The charge of contradiction assumes that the only possible meaning of the passages is a flat wooden literalism in which every wording must express the same nuance in precisely the same form. But the Gospels do not function that way. They report the same events with different emphases. In this case, the harmonization is straightforward. Mark permits the ordinary staff already on hand. Matthew and Luke prohibit provisioning oneself with extra travel equipment, including staves, as part of outfitting. The command is against preparation for self-sufficient travel, not against all ordinary use of a walking aid.

This is not special pleading. It flows naturally from the texts, especially Matthew’s emphasis on “Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass.” The sequence concerns what they are not to furnish for themselves. Read that way, the passages align cleanly. The alleged contradiction depends on ignoring the different forces of the commands and collapsing them into a single, oversimplified formula.

There is also an apologetic principle here worth noticing. Real eyewitness tradition often preserves complementary wording rather than robotic repetition. If Matthew, Mark, and Luke had given identical wording at every point, critics would likely accuse them of collusion. Yet when the wording varies in ways that reflect different emphases and still harmonize, that is exactly the kind of texture one expects from authentic testimony. The presence of surface variation does not disprove reliability. Often it supports it.



Application for Ministry and Discipleship

The practical force of this passage is not limited to resolving an objection. It speaks directly to ministry today. It reminds believers that effectiveness in service is not ultimately grounded in visible inventory. There is a place for planning, administration, and stewardship, but those are not substitutes for dependence upon God. Ministry can become overburdened with bags, purses, extra coats, and reserve systems of every kind, until the servant begins trusting the apparatus more than the Lord.

The disciples were being trained to distinguish between means and source. Means may be used, but God is the source. Even a staff, if already in hand, is not the issue. The issue is whether the heart is leaning on the provision instead of the Provider. Psalm 20:7 says, “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.” Jesus’ command to the Twelve expresses the same principle in terms of travel.

The passage also teaches urgency. Kingdom work does not wait for perfect readiness, as the flesh defines readiness. The servants of God often imagine that once they have gathered enough, learned enough, or secured enough, they will go. Yet Christ frequently sends His servants in a way that makes them depend upon Him in motion. The disciples learned by going. They learned by seeing God supply. They learned by entering homes, preaching, healing, and discovering that obedience is the path on which provision appears.

Conclusion

The staff question does not expose a contradiction in Scripture. It reveals the danger of reading the Gospels superficially. Mark 6:8 allows the ordinary travel staff. Matthew 10:9–10 and Luke 9:3 forbid the gathering of extra provisions for a self-sustaining journey. The emphasis in all three accounts is the same: the disciples are to go in simplicity, urgency, and dependence upon God. The wording differs because the emphasis differs, not because the truth differs.

When seen in the light of the wider biblical pattern, the passage becomes even richer. The staff recalls the pilgrim life, the servant’s readiness, and the principle that God uses what is already in hand. Moses had a rod. Israel ate the Passover with staff in hand. The disciples went as travelers of the kingdom. In each case, the visible resource is secondary. The primary reality is trust in the God who sends, sustains, and empowers. The real answer to the objection, then, is not merely linguistic harmonization, though that is important. The real answer is that the whole passage belongs to a theology of dependence. The servants of Christ are not called to build their confidence on gathered



equipment, but on the One whose authority sends them forward.