

Special Series

the Call of God – the first disciples

Prayer

Almighty God, may we always be ready for the releasing of Your power through the Gospel. Give us a longing to see You work in our midst, and an expectation that great things will be achieved. Give us a heart to join with You in the Gospel work of salvation and deliverance, and the joy of Your presence as we work together in this great and Godly task. Thank You, Almighty God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for the body God has given you; praise Him for His gift, and ask for healing as necessary

On-going prayers

- ***Pray for those who are growing old*** *Pray about the problems faced by the elderly in your country, especially those who have no relatives*
- *Give thanks for the gift of water and pray for those who supply it*
- *Pray about the injustices you can see within your own country*

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord, give me the concentration I need
To pay attention to the detail of what I do, and honour You with my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panicking;
Help me to focus on You, and trust in Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord, give me the courage to hold firmly to You;
Drawing from Your Spirit the energy I need to get through every trouble.

When life becomes easier, Lord, may I not forget You or Your love;
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;
Keep me alert, and prepare me, in faith, for all that's to come.

Bible passage - Mark 1:16-20

¹⁶ As Jesus passed by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, 'Come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' ¹⁸ They left their nets immediately, and followed Him. ¹⁹ When He had gone a little farther, He saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; they were in a boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Jesus called them straight away, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired labourers and followed Him.

Bible Study

Review

This is a brief and powerful story about the calling of the first disciples. In the previous verses (1:9-14) we read a compelling summary of Jesus' mission to announce the Kingdom and call people to repent. Jesus now had to choose people to accompany Him in His work. The story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples is well known, but it demonstrates a significant point about how God works within His world. He wants to work with people, and he does this irrespective of human attitudes towards personality, general suitability and background. The people Jesus chose would not have figured strongly on most people's list of candidates to begin a spiritual revolution.

Many sermons have been preached on this passage. However, we cannot read these words without recalling that the man who was called first, being Simon (later Peter), was the man who spoke out bravely and boldly only a few years later on the great day of Pentecost. He delivered a stunning sermon (Acts 2) that kick-started the church, and he guided these Christians through their earliest and most formative years. In addition, Simon Peter's brother Andrew became the man who did more than most to introduce people to Jesus (see John 1:40, 6:8, 12:22), James became a prominent leader of the church, and John became the disciple who was possibly closest to Jesus during His life (John 21:7,20). This story reminds us that all four of them started out as country fishermen. Their lives may have been satisfying and interesting before they met Jesus, but without His call, all of them would have spent the rest of their lives doing the same work and being tied to the same family and social groups from which they came in Galilee. Yet because of Jesus' call, they were used by God to change the world forever after Jesus died and was raised again. What happened to these four men has fascinated people ever since, and the story of their call to follow Jesus remains one of the most popular stories of the New Testament.

We only have the bare bones of this wonderful story; Mark has cut it right back to the minimum of information, just like the baptism of Jesus (as we find it in 1:9-11). Because of this, there is little we can say with any certainty about these four men, and we know nothing of their past except that they were fishermen. God's choice can never be subject to human scrutiny, especially where a special and unique work of God is at stake. Jesus' choice of Peter, Andrew, James and John is the New Testament equivalent of God's choice of Abraham in the Old. Abraham was chosen by God to be the forefather of Israel, though we know nothing about him to distinguish him from anyone else of his day (Genesis 11:31-12:3). It is nevertheless clear that God is precise and specific in His work and His call. We will never know if Jesus ever called others and they said 'No', because true history is always the record of what happened, not what might have been.

Note that the story of the calling of the first disciples is swift. Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew '*left their nets immediately*' (1:18), and that James and John were called '*straight away*' (1:20). Yesterday, we noticed the speed with which everything happened once Jesus was baptised, and there is no let up in the pace here! The task of saving the world was immediate and urgent. Jesus was not being cruel by asking these men to leave everything immediately; what Jesus wanted of them could not wait. God's plan of salvation was His urgent response to sin and evil in the world.

Lastly, we should not think that Simon, Andrew, James and John, were simple people, merely driven by God's Spirit to do what Jesus wanted. Each had individuality and character, and responded because they felt drawn by Jesus' spiritual power and authority. The whole incident tells us that when God's authority is met by positive human response, then God can work in power to bring salvation to our world.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The meaning of, 'Come, follow me ...'
- Discipleship and doing work!
- The response of the disciples

Going Deeper

If we go deeper into the story, we must look for this spiritual potential in Simon, Andrew, James and John, and in the mission of Jesus who called them. Jesus called the first disciples out of their worldly life and into the spiritual life of the Kingdom of God, but it was not a spiritual life of ideas and thoughts. It was a spiritual life which required the disciples to take the direct action of leaving behind everything of their past so that God could use them to build a new future for the world through His Kingdom.

The meaning of, 'Come, follow me ...'

At the heart of this simple story is Jesus' dramatic call of the four fishermen to 'come and follow me ...' (1:17). In those days, a Rabbi did not choose his followers, the followers chose the rabbi they wished to follow. So this complete reversal of the world's values is the first thing we should notice because it signals so much of what is to come in Mark's Gospel. Jesus frequently turned human values upside down to demonstrate God's

purposes and the nature of the Kingdom. For example, when Jesus was asked who was greatest in the Kingdom, he took hold of a child (9:33-36) and held him up for all to see!

There is no simple or easy way for us to understand the magnitude of the spiritual power and authority of Jesus in calling the disciples, because what Simon, Andrew, James and John did was complete nonsense from every human point of view. Personally, they abandoned their homes and family; Mark even mentions that James and John left their father with 'hirelings', unreliable paid labourers who were normally used to provide cover for family businesses when members of a family were unable to fulfil their usual duties. In a religious sense, the disciples acted rashly, for they had no real knowledge of what Jesus had in store for them, and there is no indication that they knew anything about Jesus' teaching or even His preaching (see 1:14,15). Lastly, we know little of what went on between Jesus and the disciples; what body language or even what discussion (with the exception of Jesus' pun about fishing for men 1:17 – see below). We are simply told that they heard the call and followed.

However much we would love to know more about what happened (and Luke's Gospel does give a bigger possible scenario for what happened – see Luke 5:1-11), Mark's minimalist story helps us to accept that this is how God calls people. A time for decision comes, and a 'Yes' or a 'No' is required; either someone says 'yes' and goes Christ's way to follow Him, or they say 'no' and return to their own familiar ways. However much we dress up the call to Christian discipleship today, this stark challenge represents the heart of the matter, as it does in Mark's story.

Discipleship and doing work!

What we cannot avoid is the fact that Mark describes a basic call to discipleship which is not simply a call to follow Jesus blindly, it is a call to do some work! Jesus said 'come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' (1:17) There is little choice for those who translate this text into English because this is almost exactly what the Greek words in Mark 1:17 say. It was clearly a pun on the trade of the first disciples; yes, Jesus may have been laughing as he asked them to stop fishing for fish and fish for people with him!

However, there was a serious side to what Jesus said. He spoke to the disciples using the language they knew, the banter of fishermen going about their work, not the theological language of rabbis, Pharisees or scribes. In our own day, some have noted that there are a number of Old Testament prophetic texts which speak about fishermen catching people instead of fish, and they are all somewhat negative. Jeremiah, for example, speaks of the Lord sending fishermen and hunters amongst the people of Israel to catch sinners to make them face the consequences of their sins (Jer 16:16; see also Ez. 29:4, Amos 4:2, Hab1:14-17). It is easy enough for us to understand these prophecies for what they are, and we do not have to attempt to tie them to this passage and what Jesus called the disciples to do in the Kingdom of God using fishermen's banter. We know from the whole of Mark's Gospel that Jesus wanted to reach out and catch all people, indeed, all sinners, offering repentance and the forgiveness of sins (1:14,15). However, no hearts or minds could be touched unless those who God called went out and 'caught' people's attention with this amazing 'good news'. Jesus disciples were called to follow Him not just in the unknown future which lay ahead, but in the practical work of what Jesus was doing at that time, which was 'catching' the attention of people to the Gospel, the 'Good News' of God..

The response of the disciples

The response of the disciples was decisive, complete and immediate. This threesome would make a good three-point sermon on this passage. When Jesus, in later times, preached to the crowds about letting go of the past and following God's path for their lives completely and without reservation (see 3:31-34, 8:34-9:1), He did not say this with the example of His own life in mind, but that of the disciples who travelled with Him as well. Their decisive, complete and immediate response assisted the message Jesus preached.

In the Old Testament there is one great example of the call of a disciple, and that is the call of Elisha by Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21). In that instance, Elijah called Elisha to follow him, but Elisha requested permission to go and say farewell to his family before he returned, immediately, to follow Elijah and eventually (2 Kings 2:13) receive Elijah's mantle as a prophet. The call of Jesus' disciples is similar to this, but because Jesus was God's Son and no mere prophet, the response called for was more immediate, more decisive and more complete.

We cannot sit back and imagine that it was easy for Simon, Andrew, James and John to respond to Jesus in this way, but they were faced with Jesus Christ the Saviour, and their simple and absolute response has spoken to Christians throughout two thousand years. It challenges people who have never accepted the call of Christ to do so, and it challenges those who have always gone to church to ask whether they have truly responded to Christ with the immediate, complete and decisive response which the Lord looks for from His people.

Application

I have sat through discussions within churches over many years in which good and godly people say that they have never had any 'great light' experience of faith (as with Paul on the road to Damascus - see Acts 9:1f.), but they justify their beliefs and their church practise based upon the heritage of faith they have received. To a certain extent, I feel I have little to add to such debates and do not always join in. Certainly, Paul's Damascus Road experience was important for the life of the church, but as far as being a disciple of Christ is concerned, the call of Christ to Simon, Andrew, James and John seems to me to be a far more challenging measure of true faith and discipleship. Whatever our personal experience of coming to faith or growing into it in the life of the church, the challenge of our passage today remains clear and absolute. Am I immediately, completely and decisively committed to Jesus? There are no greys with which to answer this question, and I must either answer 'yes' or 'no'.

If this passage of Scripture has any value in the life of God's Church today, then it must surely be to face Christian people with the same call of discipleship again. Whatever gloss we like to put on our churchgoing, our faith, our churchmanship or our preferred style of worship in church, it is only when people answer 'yes' to the absolute call of God that the real church of God becomes visible and the Kingdom of God on earth is extended.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss why Jesus chose to call fishermen as his first followers.
2. Does Jesus commonly ask people to leave everything including family and work, to follow Him today?
3. Do you believe that it can be harmful to leave everything and start a 'new life' with Christ, from the point of view of those left behind?

Personal comments by author

I find it amazing to read this story and think that one quick decision made by these men enabled God to do so much in the world. I wonder whether Jesus called others and they did not respond, and I wonder whether Jesus is always calling people today, but only some respond. The whole business of call and response is a deep mystery that is hard to fathom, and perhaps it is something we should leave with the Lord. We do know one thing, however, which is that Jesus transforms people's lives for the better. It was true of Peter, Andrew, James and John, and it is true of us now.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down on a sheet of paper what might make you 'leave everything' at the behest of someone else. Think about what you have written and how it illustrates your own faith. Offer your thoughts up to God in prayer.*
 - *Give thanks to God for the many people who, over the years, have left everything behind to follow Jesus and do His will. Pray that God will bless those who have made this sacrifice today.*
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Final Prayer

Stay with us, Lord Jesus, through all the dangers and perils of this day. May we have such a firm grasp of You through faith that we do not let you down, and may we demonstrate in all we do how much we love You and give You thanks for what You have done for us. Hold on to us by the power of Your Holy Spirit, we pray; AMEN
