

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

(Mark 1:16–20)

Introduction

Many things that we now take for granted began in very small, unnoticed ways and, often, in out-of-the-way places. For example, Microsoft began in a college dorm room by a young man who would soon drop out of university. Apple had a similarly inauspicious beginning. The rest, as they say, is history.

Other things, which have become almost household words, also had an otherwise insignificant beginning. For example, in the United States, I grew up with a product called WD-40. (Its South African equivalent is Q8.) This wonderful and now ubiquitous water displacement product almost never happened. Its inventor tried numerous times to develop the product. It was only after the fortieth attempt that he succeeded – hence the product name.

When you think about it, this was how it was when Jesus began his public ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God. He started his kingdom with a very small beginning, in the backwaters of Galilee, with four average and far from outwardly remarkable men. But these men, along with eight others, would eventually be used by the King to turn the world upside down. And, like the invention of WD-40, there were lots of failures along the way.

As we turn our attention to Mark 1:16–20, we should keep this in mind. In the passage before us, the call to the kingdom – by the King – is heard by the first four disciples, and they answer the call. Their lives, and the world, would never be the same.

This same call has come to multitudes. It comes to us, again, today. By God's grace, most reading this have probably answered the call. Some may still need to hear and heed it.

We will examine several things about this call. May we be helpfully reminded of the greatness of our King and of our commitment to him.

Your Call has a Context

The context of the call of these four men is the commencement of the Lord's preaching ministry in Galilee. Previously, we considered vv. 14–15, which sets out the theme of Mark, which was the theme of Jesus' life and ministry: the establishment of the kingdom of God. Jesus came proclaiming the call of the kingdom and he expected his audience to hear this call from him, the King.

The account of Jesus calling his first disciples is, in keeping with Mark's style, very brief and to-the-point. He simply says to Simon (Peter) and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (v. 17). Concerning the call of James and John, Mark simply writes, "And immediately he called them" (v. 20). This is not a lot of information, but they knew enough to answer the call.

Mark informs us, with a sense of breathless immediacy, that, as Jesus was passing by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Peter and his brother Andrew, and called them to leave their fishing tackle and follow him. They did so "immediately" (v. 18). Jesus then walked a bit further and "immediately" called another set of brothers to follow him (v. 20). Like Peter and Andrew, James and John answered this call. It is remarkable that "the first recorded act of Jesus' ministry in Mark is not something sensational—a spectacular miracle or a mighty sermon—but a simple summons of four common labourers into fellowship with himself" (Edwards). But the result would prove to be miraculous.

As Jesus began proclaiming the kingdom, announcing its arrival, he did so with a view to populating his kingdom with his willing subjects (see Psalm 110:3). Jesus was issuing a call to his kingdom. And because his kingdom is inseparable from him, it was a call from the King. He was calling them to acknowledge him as King. In fact, he was calling them to come and to learn that he is King. He was calling them to be his *disciples*.

This is not the first time that Jesus had encountered Peter and Andrew (see John 1). And since James and John were apparently partners with Peter and Andrew (Luke 5:9), they probably also had prior contact with Jesus. Therefore, this call did not come out of the blue. These men, no doubt, had been baptised by John and so were prepared for the way. They were just awaiting to hear the word, to hear the call from the one who had been announced. And now they heard this.

There is a good lesson here for us. Information is needed before there will transformation. People need to know who it is that they are being called to. People need to know what they are being called to. Preparation is the usual course towards regeneration.

It is also interesting to note that Jesus called two sets of brothers. God seems especially interested in saving families. When family members answer the call of the King, what a difference it makes!

Ancient Mentoring

It is helpful for us to understand the historical context of discipleship in the ancient world. In those days, a man who was well-known as a great teacher would be sought after by his would-be learners. A person would approach such a master and ask to become his pupil, his student. If the master agreed, the individual would follow him around as a learner, as well as a servant. We see some semblance to this in our own day with the presence of *gurus* and their entourage.

But it is interesting is that *Jesus* is the one who did the recruiting. *He* was the one who issued the call. In fact, he often seemed to put off *volunteers* (see Luke 9:57–62; John 2:23–25; etc.). We learn from this that Jesus takes the initiative and therefore gets all the glory.

Think of your conversion. Was it not Jesus who called you to himself. C. S. Lewis once said that God had dragged him kicking and screaming into the kingdom of heaven. That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but the point is taken: God took the initiative.

We don't know all that had transpired between Jesus' first encounter with these men and their call, but it seems that they had some inkling of the mission of Jesus—and some understanding of his Messiahship (John 1:40–42)—and so these sets of brothers heeded his call and began to follow him. They heard the call of the King and answered it.

The Call is to Christ

Jesus called them to “follow” *him* (vv. 17, 20). It was a call to shadow him in order to learn from him. It was a call to be committed to him. What they would become would depend on their following him. And such following would prove costly. “They demonstrated by their actions how to respond to the announcement that the dominion of God was at hand. A radical announcement requires a radical and total response” (Witherington).

Clearly, there was a cost for these men to follow Jesus. The text makes this clear, and in no way does Mark try to hide this. They understood that he took precedence over livelihood and family (France). All prior claims would not lose their validity (Lane).

But it is also interesting that, when Jesus called them to himself, he did not spell out all that following him would require. It is obvious that following him meant that their relationship with him would take priority over all other relationships. (James and John left their father.) It is obvious that there would also be some measure of socio-economic cost. (They left their

nets, their boat, and their hired help.) Yet there is no mention at this point of the martyrdom that most of them would experience.

Though we are further down the historical road than they were, the lesson remains valid that Jesus does not spell out all that it means for an individual to follow him today. If he did, we might resist the rescue. But as we follow, we are strengthened for whatever God brings our way.

Where's the Cross?

We often sing the classic hymns, “Amazing Grace,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” and, “And Can It Be?” These all speak the same theme: the matchless love of God in Christ, displayed supremely on the cross, which “demands, my soul, my life, my all.” These hymns function both as worship as well as a call to take up our cross and follow Jesus. They call us to Christ, and the expectation is that we will answer the call.

If we were to ask Peter, his brother, Andrew, and the two brothers, James and John, to tell us about the circumstances surrounding their call to Jesus Christ, we might be surprised to learn that, for them, the cross of Jesus had little to do with it – at least initially.

In fact, when we read about Jesus calling his disciples, both here in Mark 1 and elsewhere, there was no mention of the cross. Jesus simply commanded them to follow him and he promised, at least in our text, to make them something that currently they were not: fishers of men. And having heard the call, they answered the call – immediately. This is significant.

They would *come* to learn about his cross—and theirs—but initially they were merely informed about their mission (their *commission*). They were to fish for men.

It is true, as Bonhoeffer said long ago, that, when Jesus calls a man to follow him, he bids him to come and die. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is costly. It can be *extremely* costly. But at this point, these disciples did not understand just how costly it would be. Most of us likely did not understand how costly following Jesus would be when we first heeded the call. Perhaps we still don't. But if we answer the call of Christ to follow him, then his mission will become our mission. And his cross will lead us to ours. I trust that this study will teach us something of this truth.

We should understand that many hear the call of the King about the kingdom and they to follow. That is wonderful, but is only the beginning. As we follow the King, his mission will become clearer, and, as it does, our commitment to follow will be increasingly put to the test. As his cross, and ours, becomes more and more into focus, will we keep following?

This is a painful but necessary part of body life. This is why consistent church discipline is so vital to the life of the church. This is why trials are so important for us, both individually and corporately. This is why careful, ongoing discipleship is so important.

The call that Jesus proclaimed, and the call that he expected them to answer, was a call to himself. It was a call to the person who is the King.

Related to this is that, since this is a call to the King, it is by nature equally a call to his kingdom. It is a call to kingdom living. It is a call to a counter-cultural life and loyalty and love. It is a call to submission to Jesus Christ as Lord – as the Son of God.

In light of who is issuing the call, what fools we are if we do not answer it! We are called by the King, to the King, to live for the King. Kingdom living requires bowing to the King. Will you answer the call? If you don't, the King will be angry, and you will perish (Psalm 2:12).

The Call Comes as a Command

The call came with a voice of authority. Jesus' call is actually more of a *command* than it is an invitation. Jesus does not say to people, "Please, follow me" with a take-it-or-leave-it tone. No. He expects obedience to his call. After all, he is King. And so this radical call is actually a radical command that demands a radical and immediate response of complete surrender. Some call this, lordship salvation. The Bible merely calls it being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us without apology and with full expectancy that we will answer his call. That is, he calls us with authority. He commands us to follow him. This following requires two things, and it results in a third thing.

Repentance

One commentator I read suggested that, when Jesus called these first disciples, he was no longer proclaiming "repent and believe" (v. 14). Though it is true that Jesus did not use these words, he was clearly preaching the same thing. He was very much heralding that they must change their *minds*, their *manner*, and their *Master*. We see this as they answered the call with the consequence that the direction of their lives changed—immediately. They manifested repentance. Certainly they repented of their sin, but, clearly, they had a change of mind about who is Lord and King.

The words "they left" (vv. 18, 20) speaks of a change of mind. They had a change of mind about what was a priority and their literal change of vocation indicated a change in their manner of life. This is part of what it means to repent.

Reliance

By repeating the words “they followed him” (vv. 18, 20), Mark is helping us to visualise what it means to not only “repent,” but also what it means to “believe in the gospel” (v. 15). This means to rely fully on the Lord Jesus Christ.

These brothers (and I speak of them as fellow Christians) were willing to rely entirely upon Jesus Christ. Remember that Jesus had no visible sign of material support, yet they were willing to leave their source of income and follow him. This is a wonderful illustration of what it means to trust in the Lord. Presumably, they weighed their options and chose to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. They would soon learn that, indeed, all things would be added to them. They understood the later words of one famed, martyred missionary: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”

Reordering

By following Jesus, their entire world was about to be reordered. It would be reoriented in ways that I am sure that they would never have dreamed of.

I don’t know how successful at fishing these pairs of brothers were. They may have had a thriving fishing business. No doubt, the Sea of Galilee was teeming with fish, and the fact that they had hired help (v. 20) may indicate some prominence. What I do know is that their world was about to be radically changed and they would be used to turn the world right side up.

These men from Galilee were, probably like most Galileans, quite parochial. But they would eventually leave their familiar surroundings to stand before kings. Two of these men would lose their heads by the hand of a king. One would be exiled by an emperor. They would preach the gospel far outside of Galilee. (John would become a leader in church of Ephesus, while Andrew would go to Russia with the gospel.)

When Jesus calls you to himself, you will find your plans being altered and your world getting larger. My brother and sister-in-law recently visited our family in South Africa. As we were driving in the Kruger National Park, my wife mused, “Who would have thought forty years ago that we would be together one day on the other side of the world?” But that is what the call of Jesus does. When Jesus calls you, the nations will matter to you. That is, you will become less parochial.

If we lose sight of the King and his kingdom, missions will not matter, because you won’t care that others don’t worship him. As Piper famously wrote, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” We need to let go of our petty little kingdoms and our petty parochial comforts.

When Polycarp enjoined the persecuted Ephesians Christians to stand faithfully for Christ despite the cost, someone objected, “But we must live!” Polycarp responded, “Must we?” Are we willing to count the cost to follow King Jesus?

Let’s stop living for retirement and start living for the extension of the kingdom. Remember, in all of these things, we are commanded to do just that (Matthew 6:33; 20:18–20). Let us not lose our focus; let us not forget our purpose. Let us turn our attention to this.

The Call was a Commission

As Jesus called these men to himself, he also calling them to a new vocation. Though they would still fish in the future (John 21), they served as examples of truly bivocational ministry, for they would be fishers of men in the chaotic and dangerous sea of the world.

Jesus called Peter and Andrew from fishing for *fish* to fishing for *men*. Presumably, he issued the same call to James and John. He was calling them from one difficult, and sometimes unpleasant, task to another difficult and *often* unpleasant task. And yet in both cases, the task is often very *rewarding*.

There seems to be the suggestion of two aspects that are necessary for kingdom living and expansion. Fishing for men (vv. 16–17) points to evangelism, while mending nets (vv. 18–20) is a picture of edification and equipping.

Go Fish: Evangelise

Jesus told Andrew and Peter that he would “make [them] *become* fishers of men.” That is, they were not yet fishers of men, but they would *become* that. It was a call to mission. It was a call to transformation. It was a call to a miracle.

The content of the call implies that there would be a gradual process of training, and so it was all the more urgent that Jesus called these men early on in the story. They would require a lot of training to fulfil the purpose for which they were called. As Robertson said, “It would be a slow and long process, but Jesus could and would do it.” And as Kent Hughes comments, “Christ committed himself to completing a miracle in them.”

We can note that not everything in the natural realm automatically transfers into the spiritual realm. That is, these men may have been excellent at catching hake, but that was no guarantee that they could catch men. They would need divine help. Therefore, they must follow Jesus.

Is there perhaps a significant reason why Jesus chose his first disciples from the realm of fishermen? There may have been an eschatological motif here. In the Old Testament, God

was the Fisherman, and when this image appears, it is in the context of judgement (see Jeremiah 16:14–16ff; Ezekiel 29:3–5; 38:4; Amos 4:2; see Habakkuk 1:14–17).

In the light of the Old Testament usage of fishing imagery, it is most likely that Jesus had on his mind growing his kingdom by rescuing those who otherwise would face the final judgement of God. To “fish out” a person means to rescue him from the kingdom of darkness, out of the sphere which is hostile to God and remote from God. Jesus was calling these men to rescue the perishing. But, in the very process of rescuing some, they would also be condemning those who would not repent and believe.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

(2 Corinthians 2:14–17)

As Jesus announced the inauguration of the kingdom of God, he announced good news. But that very good news is bad news for those who refuse to answer the call of the King. Those who refuse to bow the knee will abide under the judgement of God. Apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no escaping the net of God’s wrath.

The kingdom of God grows by proclamation. People need to hear the King before they can answer the King. And his subjects are the ones who are his voice until he returns.

It is appropriate to draw the conclusion that, when Jesus calls us to himself, he calls us to *his* mission. We are therefore commissioned to fish for men. We are commissioned by the King to do all we legitimately can to deliver our fellow human beings from God’s impending judgement. We are called to be evangelists. How are we doing?

As when you fish with nets, you are not always sure what you will get when you cast your evangelistic net widely. But in the midst of the sharks, the plastic bottles, and kelp, you often get the kingklip. Jesus will sort out what is caught up in the nets when he returns (Matthew 13:47–50). In the meantime, we are to go fish.

Go Fix: Edify and Equip

Jesus found James and John “in their boat mending the nets” (v. 19). As I have said, this can be seen to be a picture of edification and equipping those who have been evangelised. By

mending their nets, these disciples were “getting ready that they might succeed better at the next haul” (Robertson).

The word translated “mending” (v. 19) means, to render sound or complete; to mend what has been broken or rent, to repair; to strengthen, perfect, make one what he ought to be.

The word is used in various places, which enrich our understanding of its importance for the Christian. It is translated in 1 Corinthians 1:10 as “united” (“perfectly joined together” in the NKJV). Galatians 6:1 translates it as “restore,” and 1 Thessalonians 3:10 as “perfect.” Hebrews 10:5 renders it as “prepared” and Ephesians 4:12 as “equip.” In the ancient world, the word was used to describe the setting of a bone that had been broken.

When it comes to following the King and serving in his kingdom, his subjects are to be concerned about fishing for the lost *and* fixing them when they are found.

We should understand that not every problem will be fixed. In the kind and kingly providence of God, sometimes things are not always mended in our lifetime (relationships, bodies, careers, finances, etc.). Nevertheless, we should be committed to taking the time, making the offer and doing what we can to help those who have been caught in the net.

Obviously, the better the net is mended, the better the haul of fish. The healthier the church, the better poised for growth.

The Lord called these disciples in order to train them to fish and to fix. They were often very slow learners, but in the end what a wonderful ministry they had! I know that our church needs to be better at this: *every* member ministering *to* every member! I suspect many other churches can likewise do better.

The Call is to Community

When Jesus Christ, the Son of God, called his disciples to follow him, he was calling them to *community*. He was calling them *from* a family *to* a larger family. Jesus was calling them to what would be a wider and a more diverse community. You see, a major consequence of them answering the call of the King was that they became a part of what would be a new and unique community in the world: the new covenant church.

Edwards observes, “The call of the four fishermen indicates that the essential work of Jesus consists in forming a fellowship, and that only within fellowship is the call of Jesus heard and obeyed.” It is, he says, a “community of individuals whose names are known.” He concludes, “The seeds of the Christian church originated in the first act of Jesus’ public ministry in which he called four fishermen into community with himself.”

Jesus did not call people to follow him and then train them in isolation from others. No, he called them to train them in community. The community would get messy at times. The disciples would bicker with each other and would vie for one-upmanship. They would often fail to grasp what the Lord was teaching them. They would lose their temper with those who were not Christians. They would grieve their Lord, on several occasions, when they failed to take seriously his mission and message of his cross. They would all ultimately forsake him when the shadow of that cross crept closer. Yet what do we find at the end of the story? We find them as a community again – in Galilee (Mark 16:7)!

When we answer the call, we are answering it individually, to be sure. But we are, at the same time answering it in community. In other words, we are not the only ones answering the call.

When Jesus Christ, the Son of God, called these sets of brothers, he was calling them to be *true* brothers. His call transcended their blood relationship to a much higher and longer lasting relationship. They were called to be followers of Jesus Christ *together*, to be fishers of men *together*, to be fixers together. Jesus was calling them to be meaningful, faithful members of the community of faith – the church.

The Idiocy of Individualism

In his best-selling book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam examines the shift to individualism in the wider society of the United States. He highlights the debilitating effects of living life apart from community. What secular sociologists like him observe should be Christianity 101 to followers of Christ. In other words, we are not meant to go it alone as followers of Christ. Whether *bowling* alone is a good thing or not, clearly when it comes to being a Christian, *following* alone is not a good thing.

When God saves us, he connects us to his family, to his community. We therefore must not go either fishing alone or fixing alone.

The best kind of evangelism arises in connection with the community of faith. As we grow in our passion for the gospel together, we should be growing together in our compassion for those who do not believe the gospel. We should be growing in our passion, together, for the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God. As we demonstrate love one for another, the wider community will see that we really are followers of Christ. Credibility as a community will grow and, with it, so will evangelistic effectiveness.

There is a dear saint in our church who first attended as an unbeliever when her daughter, a church member at the time, was engaged to a young man in the church. This woman started attending as wedding plans were being made. By her own testimony, watching how

the church gathered around her daughter and son-in-law-to-be impacted her powerfully for the cause of the gospel. Watching the church in community helped her to hear the call of Christ, and she was converted shortly thereafter. Community opens the door to the gospel!

We should not evangelise alone, but neither should we attempt fixing alone—either ourselves or others. Our sanctification is designed, by God, to be a communal effort. Without communal connection, we will live in a bubble, assuming that all is well when, most likely, there is a lot of room for improvement. And this improvement can come through *you!* Yes, the body heals itself.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Mark loves the word “immediately.” And when it comes to answering the call of Christ, we must do so immediately and wholeheartedly. Let the gospel of the King lead you to this.

Survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died. When you do, you will see that such amazing love demands your soul, your life your all. Answer the call today, tomorrow, and the next days—until that day when Jesus issues that final call to go home.

Being a disciple of Jesus involves a radical commitment to him and the urgent task of serving him. That is no less true today than it was for Peter, Andrew, James and John.

AMEN