

Calling Disciples

John 1:35-51

The work of the church today is to make disciples, a task assigned to us by Jesus just before his ascension into heaven, with words which we generally call the great commission.

Mat.28:19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus began that work himself, by calling the first twelve disciples, which we read about in our text this evening. Those twelve begin with Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel. Those twelve would also come to include James and John, the sons of Zebedee. And then Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. And the basic definition of a disciple is simple.

I. DISCIPLES FOLLOW THEIR LEADER.

A disciple is a follower. Literally, a learner. And disciples are those who hear and follow a direct command,

v.43

“Follow me.” That’s what Jesus says to his disciples today! That’s his call to us. Ultimately, that is the invitation of the gospel. “Follow me.”

But a radical commitment is called for. Following Jesus is a life-changing, life dominating calling. Look with me at,

Luke 9:57 Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You

go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." 59 Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." 60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." 61 And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Those aren’t the normal words of evangelistic invitation today, are they? But they should be. They must be. We must be calling people to discipleship. We must be in the business of calling people to follow Jesus, and that means to give up everything else.

Listen to these words,

Matt. 10:37 “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Or,

Luke 14:26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters —yes, even his own life —he cannot be my disciple. 27 And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? 29 For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, 30 saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31 “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he

not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. 33 In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”

That’s the call of a disciple, not the superficial, sentimental, shallow call that so often passes off as evangelism today. It is a call to radical commitment. Life-changing obedience and total submission to Jesus.

That is your calling, every one of you who claims the name of Christ. Those who are saved by grace through faith are called to be disciples. Not merely converts! Not merely people who pray the sinners prayer or profess to ask Jesus to come into our hearts. You are called to be a disciple. And “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”

Those words of the great commission define such discipleship, by telling us that “making disciples” means “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Teaching them to obey. That’s discipleship! Learning to obey. That’s what it means to follow Jesus. And that’s the calling that I have as a preacher of the word, a calling to teach. To teach you to obey everything which Jesus has commanded.

Not just a calling to invite the wicked unto salvation, though that is part of it. But then, once a man is brought to salvation, to teach him to obey Jesus.

With that understanding, and realizing its demands upon our lives as disciples, let study the calling of the first disciples. First, what is obvious is that,

II. JESUS KNOWS HIS DISCIPLES.

With a sovereign, infallible knowledge. He knows who they are know, and, as we’ll see with Peter, he knows what they will become, by God’s grace.

First, with Nathaniel, we see that Jesus knows who and what his disciples are now. He knows their hearts, for surely he knows the hearts of every one of us. Look at how he speaks to Nathaniel, looking at his heart, not at the outward appearance.

v.46-48

Surely,

A. Jesus reveals his knowledge of the heart of Nathaniel.

He heard what Nathaniel said, in his omniscience. Jesus knew Nathaniel’s reaction to his identification with the city of Nazareth. Now, there is nothing wrong with Nathaniel’s question, for it was just a candid thought, realizing that the prophets of the OT had predicted no Messiah from Nazareth. There were no great OT prophecies of good things to come from that town.

And Jesus recognizes Nathaniel’s integrity and honesty.

v.47

I believe that Jesus might well have in mind a comparison with Jacob, an OT patriarch known for his guile and deceit. And Jesus is comparing Nathaniel with Jacob, favorably. Unlike Jacob, there is no deceit or cunning or treachery in Nathaniel. There is no trickery designed for selfish advantage, such a dominant characteristic of Jacob and his descendants, right from Jacob’s own birth when he came out of the womb grasping his brother’s heel, as if to pull his brother back and become the firstborn himself. Of course, Jacob did manage to obtain that birthright of the firstborn later on, by deceiving his rather gullible brother Esau.

But in Nathaniel's case, Jesus immediately comments on his character. His integrity. His lack of deception or guile. Deceit is contrasted with sincerity, and those who are deceitful are said to have a double heart. It refers to the gross hypocrisy of those who know they are wicked but pretend to be good, as well as those who are so blinded by their own sins that they deceive not only others but themselves as well.

Indeed,

Ps. 32:2 "Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."

Nathaniel was such a man, and with that lack of any internal deceit, he wanted to know the source of Jesus' knowledge. And Jesus' answer is astounding.

v.48

"I saw you."

Nathaniel learns, to his great astonishment, that the penetrating eye of his new Master had entered even the sanctuary of his inner devotions beneath the fig tree.

Now, if you are without guile, if the thoughts of your heart are pure and right, that it is a marvelous comfort to know that God knows every one of them. But what a warning to those whose minds and hearts are filled with wickedness, though outwardly they might give a good impression. God knows the heart of a man, and he knows your heart.

Jesus knows his disciples. Notice how that applies to Peter, where we see that God not only knows the present, but the future. Jesus knows what Peter will be, by God's grace, in the future, and names him accordingly.

B. Jesus gives Simon the name "rock."

v.42

Simon was his given name, Simon the son of Jonah, or John. And Jesus gave him a new name, the Greek name Petros. Now, the giving of a name had great significance, for names were intended to describe and define the person. Names had meaning, even as they sometimes do today. Specific meaning.

Jesus gave Peter a name which would become an accurate description of his life and character. It was the name Petros, a Greek word meaning "rock," or perhaps "stone." I think "rock" is a little bit better translation, giving the clear idea of strength and stability. And that strength, that solid and unshakable stability of Peter, among the other apostles, was the very foundation upon which the church of Jesus Christ would be built.

Mat.16:15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Now, prior to Pentecost, Peter was anything but a rock. He was an impetuous, impulsive, emotional and unstable man given to foolish outbursts. Yet that is the man, that is the nature of the man, whom Jesus would transform into a rock. So great is the power of God.

Before we move on, let me just prompt you to think about God's knowledge of you. I wonder what name God would give to you. It is edifying to think about what name you might like God to give to you. How would you like to be known? What characteristic of your life would you like to be known for?

If you dare, you might ask someone who knows you quite well what name would be appropriate for you? Ask someone who knows you what they see to be the chief characteristic of your life. You are, of course, then identifying your reputation. And you could think of this in terms of your legacy. What will you be known for after you have died?

It's good to think of such things, because it forces you to identify priorities for your life now. For example, if you want to be known as a rich man, then you will live your life very differently than the man who wants to be known for his gentleness. If you want to be known for your power and achievement, then you will live much differently from the man wanting to be known for his humility.

I hope you see my point. Be assured of this, that Jesus knows you. But we also see that,

III. HIS DISCIPLES KNOW JESUS.

And I want to go through this text, this account of Jesus calling the first disciples, and see how insightfully those disciples come to know Jesus. And my goal is not merely to study those disciples, but that each one of you would come to Jesus as fully as they did.

First, those two followers of John the Baptist heard from John that,

A. Jesus is the Lamb of God.

v.35-36

Who were those two disciples of John the Baptist? One is identified in verse 40 as Andrew. And the other? Well, there is at least implications that it was the gospel writer John, since John knew so many details about this meeting, including the time of day that it happened, according to verse 39.

Yet we don't know for sure, and that's not nearly as important as understanding what they knew about Jesus. I devoted an entire sermon to the identification of Jesus as the lamb of God, from verse 29, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

As a quick review, remember that the reference there would be to the lamb of the burnt offering, the whole, unblemished lamb offered in devotion to God as a sweet smelling aroma. That reference would also be to the passover lamb, whose blood was sprinkled upon the doors of the people of Israel when they lived in Egypt, and that sprinkled blood protected them from God's curse of death upon the firstborn in every home.

And the third OT reference to the lamb of God is that sacrificial lamb that was led to slaughter, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the one who "was pierced for our transgressions, [who] was crushed for our iniquities;...[the one upon whom] the LORD has laid..the iniquity of us all." The "man of sorrows,...familiar with suffering. ..[The one] we considered...stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted."

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Secondly, as his disciples identify him,

B. Jesus is the teacher.

In Hebrew, and Greek, the Rabbi.

v.38

The same identification is given in,

v.49

Those who gave themselves to expounding and explaining the word of God were called Rabbi, a title still used in Jewish circles today. And how right they were, for Jesus was a teacher. Jesus is the teacher, for he is the word of God in the flesh.

The name Rabbi, by itself, doesn't prove or even necessarily imply deity, but it certainly does express the proper relationship of a disciple to his master. Indeed, the counterpart to a disciple would be a teacher.

And the disciples would later learn just how significant Jesus' role as teacher would be.

Mat.23:8 "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. 9 "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. 11 "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus is condemning those who used exalted titles for themselves, in arrogant hypocrisy. And gives us a warning against such hypocrisy and human exaltation. Don't call men, Jesus says, by titles of honor. You should reserve those titles for Jesus himself. Don't call men "Rabbi," he says. Don't exalt them over you, for we all exist in the same category. We are all brothers, and Jesus, alone, is the master teacher.

And don't call anyone on earth Father, in a title of exalted honor, for only God in heaven is your father. And let me emphasize, the prohibition is not against calling your biological father your father, but against exalting a man above you in the place of God, as I was taught to do in my childhood at the Episcopal Church, where the priest was called by that title, "Father."

We ought not to do such. And we ought not to exalt a man with the title "teacher," if it is a title of exaltation and not merely a title of description. Clearly, some are teachers today, and James and Paul both refer to teachers in the church. But they are not exalted men. They are simply servants. And so Jesus says in,

Mat.23:11 "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

We do have one title of eminence and honor that we use, in our conservative Presbyterian circles, and I generally choose not to use it, because of the principle of what Jesus is teaching here. It is the title "Reverend." Actually, to be correct, the title is, "The Reverend." "The one to be revered." I do not deserve your reverence, for that is a term of worship that ought to be given to God alone.

Now, I understand that often that title just appears as a formality, and I don't get all bent out of shape about it, but generally speaking, I prefer not to use it! For if it is used with all its implied meaning, it would deny the unique position of Jesus. Indeed, he alone is worthy to be addressed as "the reverend."

And ultimately, with capital letters or other such emphasis, he alone is worthy to be addressed as the teacher. I have nothing of

my own to teach you. I have nothing of my own to give you to you. Instead, my “teaching” is simply the work of explaining and expounding and applying what Jesus has already taught. And I am restricted in that teaching, limited to what Jesus has already taught. So if there is anything that is original with me, anything I teach that cannot be proven or demonstrated from the Bible, then I am guilty of great offense.

Jesus is your teacher. My job is simply to proclaim to you what he taught.

Third, the disciples knew and understood that,

C. Jesus is the promised Messiah.

v.40-41

I know I’ve explained those words before. Let me do it again quickly. “Messiah” is a Hebrew word, “meshiach,” correctly pronounced. When that Hebrew word was translated into Greek, the Greek word is christ. And the meaning of both those words, in English, is the anointed one.

Now, anointing meant reigning as king. The king was anointed, and so we read in,

Ps.2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

The Lord in heaven responds,

Ps.2:6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

And the Messiah, the son, understood what that meant.

Ps.2:7 “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”

There are, of course, many references to the coming king, the descendant of David who would rule upon the throne of God forever. And Jesus is that King, the anointed seed of David who would rule over David’s kingdom, which is the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the promised Messiah. These disciples gave him that title right away. And more fully, they knew that,

D. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

ALL the law and the prophets. Jesus fulfilled them all.

Everything in the OT.

v.44-45

Philip’s introduction to Nathaniel is so praiseworthy, because it so properly identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of everything in the OT. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that is Jewish, everything that the people of Israel had been promised by God.

Moses taught about Jesus. The law itself is a prophecy and preparation for Jesus. And the prophets themselves, they spoke of Jesus. And if you deny that, if you reject that, as the people who call themselves Jews today do, if you deny Jesus, you lose everything. The OT is an empty shell without Jesus. It is empty, meaningless, useless, and lacking any power to bring salvation. If Jesus is taken away.

Everything in the OT, from the first chapters of Genesis until the final warning of Malachi, everything is given by God as a

preparation and prediction of Jesus. Every word. Every event. Everything. And everything in the OT points to what the disciples reveal in our text today, that,

E. Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel.

I wish to connect those two things, just as Nathaniel does.

v.49

The Son is the King. The King is the Son. Again,

Ps. 2:6 "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son ; today I have become your Father."

The Son of God is the King and ruler of the world! The Son of God is the judge who will condemn and destroy the wicked for their wickedness. The Son of God is the one who will return in glory and majesty on the day of judgment.

Jesus is the Son of God, the eternal son of God. Who was with God in the beginning. Who is God himself.

And he is a King. At his ascension, God the father "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

And therefore, in that great commission to his church to go and make disciples of all nations, Jesus begins with these words,

Matt. 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me! Think about that. Think about that as you witness and experience the wickedness of evil men and the foolishness of those who hate God. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus.

And one final thing. One final way in which the disciples learned about Jesus. Because they understood as much as they did, Jesus promised greater things.

v.50-51

There is an obvious reference there to Jacob's ladder,

Gen. 28:10 "Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 11 When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."

The angels ascended and descended upon that ladder, ministering the needs of the people on earth before God in heaven, and ministering the help of God in heaven to the people on earth.

And what is that ladder? What is the only bridge and point of connection between men on earth and God in heaven? What is the only way?

Jesus! Jacob's ladder is Jesus!

F. Jesus is the only mediator between heaven and earth.
The angels that travel between heaven and earth ascend and

descend upon Jesus.

v.51

And how shall we be able to reach the presence of God in heaven? We who are mortal and sinful men?

1Tim. 2:5 “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all men —the testimony given in its proper time.”

Paul goes on to write,

1 Tim.2:7 “And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle —I am telling the truth, I am not lying —and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.”

For that purpose I was appointed a herald, also. Not an apostle, but a herald, a preacher. And I proclaim to you this, I am telling the truth, I am not lying. “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

There is one way to come to the father, and he is Jesus, who says of himself,

John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

So what about you? Do you know Jesus?

If you do, then serve him. Make yourself his disciple.

Matt. 4:19 “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”

But realize the cost.

Matt. 16:24 “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever

wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

Finally,

John 12:25 “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”

May God the Father honor you, as you follow Jesus.