

*Called to Follow Jesus*

**Mark 1:14-20**

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Exploring God's call, we've seen the experiences of biblical characters like Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah. There are many others we could look at. Today we're giving our attention to the primary call, the basic call for all of us. It's the call to follow Jesus.

In Mark's Gospel, after Jesus' baptism and temptation, he starts proclaiming God's good news and calling people to follow him. Before he teaches or heals, he announces God's kingdom and calls followers.

Often when we think about our "calling," we figure it has to do with what kind of career we'll have or who we'll marry or specific ways we'll serve in the church. And those are important decisions. But they're not the primary call for us. The primary call is to follow Jesus, to be with him, to know him, love him, learn from him. When we hear and respond to the call to follow Jesus, we're then free to do what's best and what we love best. We're not locked in to one certain way we can do God's will in our lives. Instead, we're free to pursue any of a number of good options for living our calling as Jesus' followers in our specific circumstances.

Mark Labberton, in his book *Called*, says it this way:

The vocation of every Christian is to live as a follower of Jesus today. In every aspect of life, in small and large acts, with family, neighbors and enemies, we are to seek to live out the grace and truth of Jesus. This is our vocation, our calling. Today. ...

Call is primarily about who we are and what we do all the time. Call isn't measured by outcomes—how much we achieve or accomplish—but through the process of following Jesus in and through it all. In the end, call is about continuous formation into the likeness of Jesus Christ far more than it is about finding direction or getting a job. (45, 135)

In this scene in Mark, Jesus preaches the gospel of God. This good news is that God is on the move and is now coming into his kingdom. And this calls for a definite response: "Repent and believe the good news."

Now Jesus walks along the shore of Lake Galilee and sees Simon and Andrew, two brothers, fishing. That's how they make their living. He calls them to follow him, and if they do, he will make them fish for people. Immediately they leave their nets and follow him. A little farther down the shore, Jesus sees another set of brothers, James and John. Immediately he calls them and they leave their father, their crew and their boat and they follow Jesus.

What does "follow" mean? As children, we play "Follow the Leader" and try to do everything the leader does. Or, we might talk about following someone's example—again trying to imitate someone. Today people can "follow" someone on social media. You're notified when they post something, you see what they're saying or doing. Some people follow the career of their favorite celebrity. We might follow a public leader or an agenda.

Those ways of talking about following might help us see something of what following Jesus is. But none of them is quite what the Scripture means. Trying to imitate Jesus gets confusing. We don't live in first century Palestine. We can't live the exact kind of life Jesus did in that time and place.

"To follow" here means *to be a disciple*. Jesus was calling these fishermen to let him be their Rabbi, their Teacher, and for them to be his disciples, his students.

The word "Christian" is used three times in the Bible (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The word "disciple" appears about 270 times. "Christian" became a way to talk about disciples of Jesus. The word Christian means "little Christ," that is, one who follows Jesus Christ and becomes like him.

Disciple, Christ-follower, student, apprentice—these words describe what the New Testament says about people who are in Christ, who are committed to him and seek to have their lives shaped by him. An apprentice watches and learns from a more experienced person in order to

be able to do eventually what the more experienced person does. A disciple not only learns information, but is transformed and learns how to live, how to work, from the one they follow.

Now those Galilean fishermen didn't know all they were getting themselves into. But there was something about Jesus and his call and they responded. They left some things and some people behind and they went with Jesus.

Peter could not begin to imagine where he would be going or that he would never really be coming back. But the Man and his words, Follow Me, were so compelling that with hardly a glance at each other, he and Andrew had pulled in the net and tied the boat to the shore and started out. (Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 144)

This is a miracle story—as much as the healings (“rise and walk,” “be clean”), the exorcisms (“come out”), calming the storm (“be still”) or raising the dead (“get up”). Jesus simply says, “Follow me” and they do.

Hearing that call and doing it rearranges our lives, our priorities. It changes our lives and sets us free to change and grow along the way. One pastor tells about a friend of hers whom she describes as a man in his late 60s, rugged, burly, and brilliant. He studied at a prestigious university in the East and then moved to Texas to work on his doctorate. But somewhere along the way he became addicted to cocaine, tumbling into that dark pit. He lost his family, lost his place in graduate school, lost big pieces of himself. But, she says, somehow he washed up on the shores of a good church. At the time, he was very fragile, beat down by his addiction and by life. But the people in that church put their arms around him and slowly he started to heal. Eventually, miraculously, he even reunited with his wife and children.

The man and his wife were in this pastor's home for dinner and the man started talking about where his life was going. “I want to believe that my best days aren't behind me, and that my life can still count, can still make a difference for God.” Sitting at the table with his head in his hands, he said, “I just can't help but feel like I've blown all my best chances.” Then

his wife, whom the pastor describes as a “wonderful, middle-aged bohemian Texas flower child kind of woman”—his wife reached over and took his hand and said, “Baby, you’ve got to take your sticky fingers off that steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of a grave, I figure he can make something beautiful out of busted parts.” Remembering our first calling—to be with Jesus—gives us great freedom to change and to grow and even to blow it and find our way back again. (Julie Pennington-Russell, “Our First Calling,” [http://day1.org/1109-our first calling](http://day1.org/1109-our-first-calling), accessed 1/31/17).

The call to follow Jesus changes us. And it sustains us when it seems like nothing ever changes. There’s a book I’ve heard of for years and I’ve never read, but I love the title: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Eugene Peterson). That describes being a disciple. The subtitle is “Discipleship in an Instant Society.” Following Jesus, being with Jesus, learning from Jesus, becoming like Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit—none of that happens overnight. We’re in this for the long haul. We want to be lifelong followers of Jesus.

This call, and the grace to hear and respond to it, gives life direction, meaning, purpose. It energizes us. We are following, we are disciples of Jesus the Messiah and Son of God. Jesus fulfills God’s promises and the hopes of God’s people across the ages. The first verses of Mark quote prophets who looked for God to give a new Exodus, to set people free and restore them through forgiving sin and defeating the powers of death and darkness. Jesus does that.

The Jewish people longed for God’s kingdom, God’s rule and reign, to be fully recognized by all people, for God truly to rule everyone and everything. Jesus, who’s anointed with the Holy Spirit of God, proclaims the nearness, the availability of God’s kingdom. He says the time has come.

Jesus, like John the Baptist, announces the possibility of change when he says to repent. Repentance is a change of mind, of attitude; it’s reorienting our lives in God’s direction and arranging ourselves and our commitments around God’s kingdom.

Along with all that, Jesus invites us to believe *good* news. The good news of God, the good news about Jesus and the good news that is Jesus.

This is the context for the call to follow. And it's exciting! With Jesus, we get to be in on all this good stuff that God's doing. Jesus doesn't say, "Follow me and you'll feel a little better. Follow me and you can coast along, just watching amazing things happen." He calls us to join him in his mission, to be participants not spectators. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." That means going where people are. Showing and telling them who Jesus is and what he's like, what he can do. Inviting them to hear his call for themselves and to join us in following him together.

How can we follow Jesus immediately, this week? We repent and believe. We admit our need, turn to him and put our trust in him. We commit to follow—in the power of the Holy Spirit, as God helps us. We follow Jesus in particular and distinct ways where we live, with the people in our families, in our schools, at our jobs. We can follow Jesus in all our different situations and circumstances as we realize that he lives in us and is shaping our inner life to be like his inner life. At the same time he's leading us and teaching us to live our lives now the way he lived his life then. We live now the way Jesus would if he were in our place.

One way to practice that is to try to treat people the way we see Jesus treating people in the Gospels (<http://davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-3-b-following-jesus-today>, accessed 1/31/17). With love and compassion, with truth and healing, with forgiveness and challenge. Jesus was always able to do what needed to be done, when it needed to be done, in the way it needed to be done. He helps his disciples, he helps us, to follow him in living that way.