

Following Jesus in His Mission

Mark 1:16-20

John Breon

After his baptism and temptation, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. This good news is that God is on the move and is now coming into his kingdom. And that calls for a definite response: "Repent and believe the good news."

Then Jesus begins to call disciples. His call, "Follow me" is an extension of his message, "Repent and believe." Jesus does the work of a traveling rabbi or teacher. Rabbis in those days had groups of students or disciples who accompanied them, learned from them, and followed their example. An interesting difference in Jesus' approach is that he *called* disciples. Usually, a person would approach a rabbi and ask to become a student. But Jesus takes the initiative, selects disciples, and calls them to himself.

As Jesus walks along the shore of Lake Galilee he sees Simon and Andrew, two brothers, fishing. They fished by throwing a net into the water and drawing in the fish. That's how they make their living. He calls them to follow him, and if they do, he will make them become fishers of people. Immediately they leave their nets and follow him. A little farther down the shore, Jesus sees another set of brothers, James and John, who are also fishermen. 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. 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.

Disciple, Christ-follower, student, apprentice, friend—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 eventually to be able to do what the more experienced person does. As disciples, we not only learn information, but we're transformed and learn how to live, how to work, from the one we follow.

The call to follow Jesus in his mission comes in the context of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. God's powerful reign was invading this world in Jesus Christ. God's rule was being inaugurated in Jesus' life and ministry. God's kingdom of peace, justice, and love was coming to change the world. God's coming in sovereign power reorients our lives. It moves all other commitments and claims for allegiance out of first place. The kingdom's presence calls for response: "repent and believe," "follow me."

And these two sets of brothers followed. 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.

Following Jesus means giving up some things. We follow Jesus until our faith is our own. And we follow Jesus until our hearts are entirely his. The greatest day in Peter and Andrew's business was the day they gave it up. Peter was caught between Jesus and the fish—and those fish cast human shadows on the shore. Those men left their nets and family and followed Jesus. The call of Jesus reaches into every aspect of our lives and rearranges our priorities.

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)

Following Jesus means sharing in his mission, becoming “fishers of people”—learning how to proclaim this message and help others come into the kingdom.

Jesus calls *us* to take part in his mission as well. The call to follow Jesus involves learning from Jesus how to invite others to follow and how to involve them in God’s kingdom and in the process of discipleship.

Jesus makes his requirements known right up front. He knows that small demands lead to small commitments and great demands lead to great commitments. So he says right away that we’ll be expected to bring others in. Part of what following Jesus means is helping others come to follow him.

Someone told me one time about being in a church meeting and talking about evangelism, witnessing, and various things needed to reach new people. Another person in the meeting said, “I left another church and came here so I wouldn’t have to do all that.” But “all that” is part of being a follower of Jesus.

The call to follow Jesus includes the call to join him in his mission and to help others follow him. Most of us would say that’s true. Maybe our question is, “How do we do it?”

Fishing for people is the opposite of fishing for fish. Jesus takes his fish alive. We get ready to “take people alive” by *experiencing for ourselves the forgiveness and new life we want to communicate*. It’s a good thing to be a fish caught by Jesus and his gang. We’re not caught to be consumed, but to be rescued from chaos and death (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. The Biblical Journey* DVD). Have you heard the good news of God in Jesus Christ in such a way that you respond to it by saying yes and putting your trust in Jesus? Do you know that God has forgiven your sin and given you new life? Is our life in Christ so exciting that we want everyone to experience this joy and power?

Jesus says "I will make you to become fishers of people." He makes us into the kind of people who can do this. It's not instant or automatic. It's a steady process of God's reorienting us and reshaping us into people who help carry out the mission of God's kingdom.

Relationships are essential for effective "fishing for people"—relationship with Christ and relationships with the people we hope to introduce to new life in Christ. Our witness needs to be personal, sincere, warm, and conversational. In the context of knowing people and their needs we share the good news with them and become part of God's meeting their needs.

A woman named Betty and her husband had gone to China to teach English as a second language. They also found plenty of opportunities to share their faith in Jesus. Betty got fairly well acquainted with her students. One of them, named Hannah, seemed open and teachable, but also resistant to the gospel. She would laugh and argue when any reference was made to the name of Jesus. Between themselves, Betty and her husband called her "Hard-hearted Hannah." But Hannah's true spirit began to surface.

Betty usually got up early to go pray in the dining room. One day she realized that Hannah, who was preparing the tables for breakfast, was watching. Hannah asked, "Betty, what are you doing?" Recognizing that the Holy Spirit was at work, Betty said, "I'm praying." Hannah asked, "What does 'praying' mean?" Betty answered, "It is talking to my heavenly Father in Jesus' name." This time Hannah didn't resist but asked further, "What does that mean?" Betty explained, "It's just telling God what I need, asking for forgiveness, and asking him to guide me in everything I do. He cares about my everyday activities, even my aches and pains. I pray in Jesus' name because faith in him assures the forgiveness of my sins and that seems to make my prayers more personal and powerful. Jesus says in our Bible that 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father ... and that I am in the Father and the Father is in me'" (John 14:9, 10). That got Hannah's attention. She asked if Betty would pray to God, in Jesus' name, to protect her two brothers who were learning to drive a truck, a dangerous occupation in that part of China. Betty promised she would.

The next day, after breakfast, Betty had an impulse. She said, "Hannah, I'm in real pain. My back is hurting. Would you pray to God to make it better?" Hannah said, "I still do not know what prayer is." Once again, Betty explained that praying to God is like talking to your best friend. Betty was delighted when Hannah bowed her head and prayed, "Hello, God, this is Hannah speaking. You don't know me. I don't even know how to say these words, but please make Betty's back feel better. Please help our American teachers as they help our Chinese teachers to speak English. Help the Chinese teachers with their pronunciation so they can speak and understand the English words. In Jesus' name I pray this prayer. Amen." Smiling, Hannah asked if that was the correct way to pray. Betty assured her that it was.

The next day, since Betty's back was better and Hannah's brothers were safe, she asked if she could pray again. This time she prayed, "Hello, God, this is Hannah again. Do you remember me? I'm Betty's friend. I spoke to you yesterday about Betty's back. Now I want to talk about her daughter who is having a baby. By the way, are you only a 'western God,' do I have to talk to you in English? Do you understand Chinese? In Jesus' name. Amen." Betty smiled and gave her a hug.

In a few short weeks, simply by remaining open to the Holy Spirit at work within her and talking to God as she would a friend, Hannah learned how to pray—in Chinese as well as English—and she came to know Jesus Christ and acknowledged his name instead of resisting him (Bob Tuttle, *Can We Talk?* 24-25).

We get to know people in relationships. We also need to *be prepared*. We prepare first by *praying*. Pray that God will give us a greater love for the lost. Pray to be sensitive to God's leading and to the opportunities to minister that God gives us. Pray for wisdom to listen to people and to speak what needs to be said. Pray for the fruit and gifts of God's Spirit to be evident in our lives and witness.

Nicky Gumbel is a pastor in London who developed a program called *Alpha*, which is designed to help people explore Christian faith and life. He tells about a friend of his named Ric who became a Christian. Ric then called another friend that he knew was a Christian as well and told him

what had happened. The friend replied, "I have been praying for you for four years." Ric then started praying for another of his friends and within ten weeks that friend too became a Christian (*Questions of Life* 195).

Another part of preparation is to *know Scripture*. Get acquainted with summaries of the Gospel that you can use in witnessing. I like "Good News/Bad News/Good News"—"created in God's image" (Gen 1:26-27)/"all have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (Rom 3:23)/"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19).

Become comfortable *telling your own story* of how you came to Christ, what he's done for you, what he means to you. We can learn more about doing this by listening to other people's stories.

Nicky Gumbel tells about a couple, Bruce and Geraldine. They'd been married several years when Geraldine became a Christian. Bruce wasn't interested. He was a busy lawyer and an avid golfer. He played most weekends and never went to church.

For ten years Geraldine prayed for Bruce and lived out the Christian life in front of him. She didn't pressure him and didn't argue about her faith in Jesus. Over the years, Bruce was struck by her extraordinary kindness and consideration, especially to his mother whose cancer and related illnesses made her increasingly difficult. Eventually, Geraldine invited Bruce to an *Alpha* dinner. He went to the dinner and decided to attend the next *Alpha Course*.

During week seven of the course, Bruce gave his life to Christ and by the end of the course he was the most enthusiastic Christian around. Geraldine wrote to Nicky and told him about Bruce:

He tells everyone about Jesus. Instead of trying not to mention Christianity in front of friends when Bruce was there, in case it harmed our marriage, at every dinner party he talks to people about God and I am left at the other end listening to what he is saying. It seems all my prayers have been answered. Last March I told God I was fed up with Bruce not being a Christian. I told him I didn't care what happened to our house or money as long as Bruce became a

Christian. Life will never be the same again—thank God for that.
(*Questions of Life* 187-88)

Another principle of being a fisher of people is to *go where people are*. You won't catch many fish in a bucket on your back porch. Not many fish are going to jump onto the shore. If you want to catch fish you go where the fish are. If you want to introduce people to Christ and his kingdom, you go where the people are. That applies to us individually and as a congregation. We do hope to attract people with programs and buildings, but mostly we need to go to people, get out in the community, or online, to witness and serve.

A couple of men I know, who attend another church, felt led by God to start a Bible study in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Durant. They started meeting in the yard of a man they know. Several people from the neighborhood started coming. They eventually moved the meetings into a tent. They've gotten to know many people, prayed with them and shared the good news of Jesus with them. Several people have come to Christ. I'm amazed at their willingness to go where God said go and at the fruit of their obedience.

Be prepared. Go where people are. Relate to people. *Be alert to opportunities* to share the Gospel, to tell what Jesus means to you, to serve in Jesus' name. And, in the power of the Holy Spirit, boldly seize the opportunities God gives. Boldness doesn't mean bullying or shouting. Our witness can be quiet and gentle and still be bold.

Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, the true King, is alive and active today. He's here now in the presence of the Holy Spirit and through the gospel message. He's still proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom and calling for response. He calls us to follow him and to join him in inviting others to follow, to repent and believe, to live in the fullness of God's powerful reign.