

“Selected Gospel Sections”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 2

“The Call of the First Disciples”

Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-51.

Objective: To understand the message of the Gospel accounts in their context within each work independently and then to compare the accounts to each other to seek understanding of emphasis and focus. The goal is then to apply this message to our time and context in order to understand the message’s call on our lives.

Materials: To use the Greek, Syriac, and other ancient translations in order to help us understand the message of these Gospels. We will also examine the writings about these passages in journal articles, commentaries and other sources.

Procedures

1. To first translate each text from Greek and then compare it to other ancient translations
2. To identify issues of importance within the texts and to explore possible meanings as they applied to the original audience.
3. To take the meaning for the original audience of the Gospels and to understand it how applies to our modern context and cultural situation.
4. To explore ways that these text call the disciples of Jesus to live their lives as faithful followers.

Matthew 4:18-22: ¹⁸ As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishermen of men." ²⁰ And immediately they abandoned the nets and they followed him. ²¹ And going from there he saw two other brothers, Jacob the one of Zebedee and Johanan, his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father mending their nets, and he called to them. ²² And immediately abandoning the boat and their father they followed him.

Mark 1:16-20: ¹⁶ And he was passing by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fish for men." ¹⁸ And immediately abandoning the nets they followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little further he saw Jacob the son of Zebedee and Johanan his brother and they were in the boat mending the nets, ²⁰ and immediately he called them and abandoning their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men they departed with him.

Luke 5:1-11: ¹ And it happened, that a crowd assembled to hear the word of God while he was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret. ² He saw two boats standing by the shore, but the fishermen had departed from them and were washing their nets. ³ He entered one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out from the land a little; then sitting down, from the boat he was teaching the crowds. ⁴ As he finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the depth and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ And answering Simon said, "Master, through the whole night we worked and caught nothing, but upon your word I will cast the nets." ⁶ And doing this they

John 1:35-51: ³⁵ The next day John was standing with two of his disciples. ³⁶ and he was watching Jesus walking by, he said, "Behold the lamb of God." ³⁷ And his two disciples hearing him saying this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following he says to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi, (which means teacher), where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." Then they came and saw where he was staying and they remained with him from that day. It was hour ten in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two hearing from John and following was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. ⁴¹ This one first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "we have found the Christ," (which is translated the Messiah). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus saw him

caught a multitude of fish, so many that the nets were broken. ⁷ And they signaled their associates in the other boats to come and help them, and they came and filled both the boats so that it began to sink them. ⁸ But Simon Peter seeing it he fell down at the knees of Jesus saying, "Go away from me, because I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all who were with him were seized by amazement by the catch of fish which they had seized; ¹⁰ and likewise Jacob and Johanan, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon; and Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹ And they brought their boats upon

and said, "You are Simon the son of Johanan, you will be called Rock (Cephas), (which means Peter [rock])." ⁴³ The next day he wished to go to Galilee and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, from the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ And Nathaniel said to him, "Is it possible for anything good to come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him and he said concerning him, "Behold truly an Israelite in whom is no deceit." ⁴⁸ Nathaniel said to him, "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before

the land, after leaving everything they followed him.

Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.”⁴⁹ Nathaniel answered, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel!”⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Do you believe because I said I saw you under the fig tree? Greater things than this you will see.”⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly I say to you, you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

As we come to the accounts of the calling of the disciples we are intrigued by many elements of their calling. The synoptic Gospels give the impression that the calls are almost arbitrary and not only do the calls seem to come unexpectedly, but the response of the disciples seems unexpected, as well as, the call to leave immediately with what seems little persuasion, or little reasoning given. This grates heavily against our Enlightenment era sensibilities where reason and understanding are so important. There are some differences to be sure in the accounts given by the synoptic writers, but when we come to the account given by John it appears that the writer is not interested so much in recounting the actual occasions of the call of the disciples: His interests appear to lie elsewhere. The readiness of the disciples to abandon their livelihoods in the Markan tradition (or even to lend Jesus their boat in the Lukan tradition) may actually in some sense be explained by the information that John gives us in his account. His information seems to make more historical sense than simply to expect that the very first time the disciples met Jesus they answered the call of a stranger and followed his voice.¹ The emphasis, certainly in the Synoptic Gospels, is that Jesus called and the disciples answered. Luke does give the account of the great catch of fish as at least partial reasoning for their agreement to follow Jesus so readily.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 466.

The accounts given here are indeed intriguing to us today, especially as they are to be found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), as it seems that this stranger, Jesus, just walked up to these men out of the blue, and told them to follow him, and they did. One of the questions that we need to ask is, “Is this really what these authors meant to convey, or perhaps we are reading this from our perspective as if the intent of the writers is to convey history in the way we would think of it as giving facts of what happened to leave a historical record. It is highly unlikely that the focus here is historical in the sense that we so often perceive the meaning of that concept. There is here, in these accounts, a deeper theological meaning that is obscured to us by our preconceptions in a way that causes us to distort the meaning. In part, their response is to be seen in the light of the hopes and expectations of the Jewish people. They still believed and trusted that God would fulfill His promises and they lived each day looking to see if today was the day that this would happen.

I have very often heard sermons from these passages that focus on how we should quickly, and though not stated directly, without a great many questions and objections follow after Jesus. This in fact may be something that is theologically correct, or maybe not, but it is not the central point of these texts. We must remember who our audience is in these accounts of the calling. He is not calling people who are considered



to be outside covenant relationship with God, at least not at the point here of their initial calling. He is calling them not into salvation, or to make a personal commitment in the way that we so often portray such things. He is calling them into discipleship. He is calling them to follow Him, though at this point they may suspect He is the Messiah, that is only a suspicion not a foregone conclusion. We must remember where we are in the story. We are here at the beginning of the story, and we must not let the end of that story obscure the unfolding of that story.

The call here is not a calling to salvation, as has so often been portrayed, in an individual existential sense. The call here is a calling into mission, the mission of God. The mission they are being called into here is the one that will be marked by those who choose to answer that calling by becoming disciples of Jesus and His ways. They are not called to express their willingness to join in the mission of God through some verbal acknowledgement, or the recitation of some acceptable formula, or expected words that bear some magical significance in and of themselves. They are being called into discipleship, into the mission of God as followers of Jesus. They are not fully aware of all the places that this journey of discipleship will take them, but they are aware that they are being called to lay aside their former way of life, their former occupations, and to take up

this calling. They are called to be “fishers of men.” We have so often applied this passage to be connected with catching men somehow and netting them into salvation.

However, the background for this expression appears to be from Jeremiah 16:15-16.² This is a passage associated more with judgement than salvation, at least in the sense that we so often use that word. This concept (**hordes of fishermen**) from Jeremiah becomes “fishers of men” in all three of the synoptic Gospels.³ The question then left to us is, are we to understand this as an expression of judgement, or an expression of salvation? So often we take concepts from Scripture and we dissect them with such questions as if these are the only proper questions that may be asked of such passages. In such questions we perhaps hear the echoes of the past preachers that we have heard expound such passages in the countless sermons that we have listened to over the years. We come with our hammer and chisel to get at the simple truth of such words as if this is the sacred task to which we are called. A question that I would lay before you though is, is this truly the way we are called to read Scripture? Is it not the case the Scripture is perhaps the hammer and chisel that

² ¹⁵ instead, they will say, “As the LORD lives who brought up the Israelites from the land of the north and from all the lands where he has banished them.” I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors. ¹⁶ I’m going to send **hordes of fishermen** to catch them, declares the LORD. Afterward I will send a party of hunters to hunt them down on every mountain, hill, and cave. CEB.

³ Jindřich Mánek, “Fishers of Men,” *Novum Testamentum* 2:2 (1957), pp. 138-141.



is intended to strip away the hardness of our own hearts and the blindness and deafness that centuries of misinformation and misunderstanding have brought to the forefront of our vision?

Perhaps instead, we should let these words of the Gospel writers impact us and call us to see them afresh with new eyes and ears that might perhaps be opened by the power of the Spirit of God to new possibilities, new challenges, new ways of seeing the power of God working in our world through our calling to be disciples. One of the things that I see coming from the calling of Jesus is a calling into many unanswered questions; at least in the way we would look at it today. Jesus calls them to follow Him and to learn to be like Him and I believe that these first disciples understood that a part of that calling would be a calling to the judgement of this world and many of its people. You see they are called to follow, and in this following they demonstrate something that we see as an essential element of salvation, faith. Their faith is expressed not simply in words, but in their actions emulating and following Jesus. There is no magical formula of the right words, or even the right knowledge, other than the knowledge that this person whom they are following is God's Messiah, and thus is the one who will transform this world into God's vision of what is good.

To be fair to them, and to us, the call to discipleship is not a calling that brings with it the certainty of understanding all things and knowing exactly how all things in the universe fit together and work. The



calling is to follow Jesus as He leads us deeper and deeper into the mind and heart of God's plan of redemption of creation. We are called to understand that we are to follow, not to come to understanding of the deep things of God. We may never, in this life, understand those deep things, but even if we do not understand many things we are still called to follow Jesus, to be like Him, to live like Him, and to die to self, and to allow His life to shine through our lives. He will indeed transform our understanding as we follow Him deeper and deeper into the will of God.⁴ However, understanding is less important than trust and obedience even when, especially when, we do not understand.

We see in Luke's account that Simon came to understand that Jesus was something more than a mere man, even at this very early stage of contact with Jesus, but already he had chosen to follow him.⁵ At first, in recognizing this fact, he will ask Jesus to "Go away" from him because in this recognition he understands that he is a sinful man. He feels that the presence of Jesus judges him, and draws him to acknowledge his standing before God. He understands that judgment comes with the very presence of Jesus. That judgement though

⁴ Romans 12:1-2 **So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service.** ² **Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.** CEB.

⁵ Luke 5:8 **But Simon Peter seeing it he fell down at the knees of Jesus saying, "Go away from me, because I am a sinful man!"** ⁹ **For he and all who were with him were seized by amazement by the catch of fish which they had seized;**



will not come without a call to follow Jesus. It is not judgment that is meant to bring condemnation, at least not for those that choose to follow.

John's Gospel account gives a great many more details about the calling of Andrew and Simon and appears very different than the other Gospel accounts. When I was a child I can remember my father listening to Paul Harvey, who would always tell the rest of the story. So often in stories we pick and choose the details that we deem important and in so doing we leave out a great deal. We do this not with the intent of hiding, or even of changing the story, but we focus on what we think is important. If you have ever listened to witnesses testify in a trial you will find this to be at work as it often can seem that each witness is recounting a different incident, until one is able to put all the details of the various accounts together and see a fuller picture. I believe this is what we find in the four Gospel accounts. Each writer emphasizes what they see as important and in the four accounts we are given a fuller account of what happened seen from four different angles. John will focus over and over again on Jesus being the Messiah. He does not wait for this to be revealed, it stands at the heart of the response of the disciples, the reason they followed. We are challenged today in the same way. Will we believe that Jesus is God's Messiah, the redemptive agent who will bring all the promises of God into reality? Will we follow in obedience and trust?



For those that choose to follow Him, Jesus will guide them to the salvation that God offers to those who will trust in Him and much more. Jesus calls his disciples to participate with Him in the redemption of all creation. Paul and the other disciples would come to understand that the calling to follow Jesus is a calling into suffering. In their suffering the followers of Jesus become a part of the redemption of Jesus “to complete God’s word.”⁶ It is in suffering that God will transform the world. He chooses to take on Himself the pain and agony of transforming the chaos of this world into the order and goodness that He always intended in Jesus. The call to follow Jesus is a calling into the plan of God for the redemption of all creation. God chooses to call those whom have lost their way, those who initiated the chaos of this present world. He calls them to join together with Him to take part in its redemption through His chosen instrument Jesus. In this call to redemption also comes judgement for those who do not choose to follow. This message is inherent in the

⁶ Colossians 1:24-26 **Now I’m happy to be suffering for you. I’m completing what is missing from Christ’s sufferings with my own body. I’m doing this for the sake of his body, which is the church.** ²⁵ **I became a servant of the church by God’s commission, which was given to me for you, in order to complete God’s word.** ²⁶ **I’m completing it with a secret plan that has been hidden for ages and generations but which has now been revealed to his holy people.** CEB.



message of Jesus, though it is not the hope, or aspiration of God for any to fail to follow Jesus.⁷ We must understand that the message of the Gospels is a message that calls people to become followers, not participants in some form of life insurance policy that will guarantee them a spot with God. God calls us to join in His suffering to bring about the changes that are needed to restore order, and goodness, to all of creation. We are called to be like Jesus, living our lives in the light, hope, and trust of God.

⁷ 1 Timothy 2:1-4 **First of all, then, I ask that requests, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving be made for all people.** ² **Pray for kings and everyone who is in authority so that we can live a quiet and peaceful life in complete godliness and dignity.** ³ **This is right and it pleases God our savior,** ⁴ **who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.** CEB.

² Peter 3:9 **The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.** CEB.

Synopsis

In this section we come to the calling of the disciples of Jesus and there are many aspects of this calling that are intriguing. Certainly in the Synoptic Gospels the calling appears to us almost random and unexpected. We are given no real information as to why these men were chosen nor why they would accept such an invitation from what appears to be a virtual stranger. At least in Matthew and Luke there is material in the Gospel account that would appear to prepare the audience for who Jesus is, as the promised Messiah. In Mark this does not perhaps appear to be the case for us, but with the quotation of the passages from Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20 these words were an indication of who it was thought Jesus was, he was the Messiah.

We must be aware that the Synoptic Gospels do not intend to give us a historical account in the way we so often think of that today; providing all the details that would help us to be able to systematically, and scientifically analyze the calling of the first disciples. The Gospel of John appears to give many additional details that indicate that there indeed was more contact between Jesus and the disciples than appears to be



indicated by the Synoptic accounts. The focus is upon something other than the reasoning and the details as if somehow Jesus convinced them with His eloquence and His charisma in one brief encounter. These were people who had been taught from birth that God would send His Messiah and He would redeem the people from the dominion of others and restore them to their place as the covenant people of God.

They understood the sign of the great catch of fish and the allusion to being “fishers of men” as a reference to Jeremiah 16:15-16 as a reference to the promise of God to bring the people of Israel back to the land and it was to be time of judgement and not just redemption. To be sure there are a great many unanswered questions in the calling accounts, most of all why would they follow? The answer rests in their hope, Jesus provided them hope that at last God would fulfill His promises and they leapt at the chance to be a part of that. They had no real idea of what Jesus was calling them into; the suffering, the loving of enemies, the caring for those who were in need and their alienation from family and ultimately from fellow Jews. Yet, they answered the call to follow where Jesus led in the hope of redemption and of the world being better through the intervention of God.

Questions

1. Why do you think someone might choose to follow Jesus into suffering?
2. What do you think it means to follow Jesus?
3. What do you think God expects of the followers of Jesus?
4. Why do you think the presence of Jesus brings judgement?
5. What do you think it means to come under the judgement of God?
6. What do you think salvation actually means?
7. How do you see the idea of “hordes of fishermen” in Jeremiah in the words of Jesus about “fishers of men” in the Gospel accounts to be related?
8. How do you see suffering to be related to following Jesus?
9. What are some of the things that you would most like to see redeemed by God in our world? Why?
10. When do you feel it is hardest to follow Jesus? Why?
11. What are some things that you seek to do each day to follow Jesus?
12. Why do you think the catching of fish draws Peter to the conclusion that he is in the presence of holiness?

13.What are some of the ways that being called into God's community of disciples proves to be challenging for people?

14.How do you know when you trust someone?

15.What are some ways that people have expressed their trust in you?

16.What do you think changes in the world as people live their lives like Jesus?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important for us to understand that the calling to follow Jesus is more than just a calling in some way to intellectually acknowledge Him. We are called to become like Him, to think like Him, to act like Him, to live, and to die like Him. Being a disciple means that we give up many things, some of which are near and dear to our hearts. We do this because we trust and we acknowledge this trust in our following. Following is not something that we do just on Sunday, when others are watching, or when it is convenient and expedient, but in those times when it is hard, when it costs us something. It is in those moments that we truly become disciples. What part of following Jesus do you find the most difficult? Why?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words fulfilling His promises to redeem His people and doing far more than could have ever been imagined. The Lord is returning to walk amongst His people and to dwell in their midst. In this, God is calling for His children to take up the challenge to follow Him, to trust Him, to obey Him. He brings to reality that which they had only hoped for and dreamt about. Now, in the coming of Jesus, He begins calling to those who will respond. When you think of the promises of God, which promise most inspires you to trust Him? Why?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The calling of Jesus reaches out to us calling us to examine our source of hope and the way we think that hope will be fulfilled. For many living in the days of Jesus, their hope rested in the dream that God would send one to wage war on the battlefield with Rome and to conquer. Instead God chose to conquer hatred, fear and power through love, suffering and imperishable life. In what ways does the calling of Jesus challenge you to be different?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to follow Jesus. It challenges us to trust Him and to put aside our fears, our questions, even at times our reasoning, and to trust Him in an obedient following of Him. He calls us to be willing to suffer and sacrifice ourselves for others. What are some ways that this calling calls us today into suffering?