

Sunday July 28, 2024

Lesson 1: Follow Me, I will make you Fishers of Men (Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20)

The first recorded instance in the Gospels where Jesus uttered the words “Follow Me” as a command can be found in Matthew 4:18-22 (Mark 1:16-20). This is the instance where Jesus approached Peter, Andrew, James and John by the sea of Galilee near Caesarea – where they were fishing – and invited them to follow Him. The Gospel account informs us that upon hearing this invitation, the four future apostles all effectively dropped everything and followed Jesus -- immediately.

Many readers often misunderstood these passages to believe that on a random day, Jesus approached some random fishermen as a stranger, invited them to follow Him, and they proceeded to drop everything in their life and followed Jesus. This narrative has been preached often and used often as a recruiting mechanism to encourage Christians of all maturity levels to effectively drop everything and just Go! Sadly, this grave misunderstanding has destroyed lives and created ministry scars and hurts, particularly those who are spiritual infants.

To properly understand the principles behind this first instance where Jesus said, “Follow Me”, we need to examine what Jesus said carefully, and understand it in the context of that setting in those days before we correlate its meaning into our modern-day applications. This analysis begins first by understanding the background or timeline, which will inform us of the purpose of the invitation extended by Jesus to His future apostles. We also need to understand what Jesus meant – in the context of that setting – with His choice of words cited in Scripture, telling them that He will make them “fishers of men.” Understanding both the timeline and the immediate context will help us see that on this occasion, Jesus was not a stranger to the four future apostles, His command was not a random invitation without purpose, and the future apostles’ response was not as assumed where they seem to respond to a calling, leaving everything behind to follow Jesus.

Context –Timeline – The Beginning of Jesus’ Public Ministry

The timeline and immediate context leading into this episode takes us back to the ministry of John the Baptist. At issue is to identify when the public ministry of Jesus actually began. We know that there is a definite starting point for Jesus’ public ministry because Jesus told us so in the Gospel of John (Jn 2:4). We were then told that this definite starting point began at the end of the public ministry of John the Baptist when he was arrested by King Herod (Matt 4:12-17; Mk 1:14-15). Both Matthew and Mark informed us that Jesus extended this invitation to the four future apostles after the arrest of John the Baptist (the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry). The arrest of John the Baptist then, can serve as a form of a time-marker to help us understand the whereabouts of Jesus before his public ministry formally began.

Cross referencing this time-marker from Matthew and Mark with the Gospel of John, we learn more about the context leading into this invitation to the four future apostles. From John 3:24, we learned that Jesus already have disciples before John the Baptist was arrested (Jn 3:22-24). We learned that these disciples were formally disciples of John the Baptist, encouraged by John to follow Jesus; among whom was Andrew and Peter (Jn 1:35-42). We learned that they began “hanging out” with Jesus after Jesus returned from the wilderness (Jn 1:29-34), and that they were also with Jesus at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:2) and in the Judean countryside (Jn 3:22) through Samaria (Jn 4:27), all before John was arrested. Finally, we learned that Jesus retreated back to Galilee from the Judean countryside when he realized that His own baptism ministry became an obstacle to the ministry of John the Baptist (Jn 4:1-3). With this information, a proper timeline for the whereabouts of Jesus before inviting these future apostles to “Follow Me” would look something like this (Use the map on the last page to track the movements):

- [A] – John the Baptist baptizes Jesus near Bethany beyond the Jordan (Matt 3:13-17; cf Jn 1:28)
- [B] – Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan (Matt 4:1-11)
- [C] – Jesus returns from the wilderness, arrives at the site of His baptism. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he recounts what he saw when he baptized Jesus (Jn 1:29-34) and told his disciples about Jesus (Jn 1:35-36)
 - Andrew and Simon heard John’s remarks, chose to “hang out” with Jesus (Jn 1:37-42).
 - Philip and Nathaniel also joined the group hanging out with Jesus (Jn 1:43-51)

- [D] – The disciples were with Jesus at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1)
- [E] – Jesus attends His first Passover in Jerusalem in Judea (Jn 2:13)
- [F] – John the Baptist moves his ministry up the Jordan to Aenon near Salim (Jn 3:23)
- [G] – Jesus continues to spend time with his disciples, taking them to the Judean countryside (Jn 3:22)
 - Jesus decided to support the ministry of John the Baptist in the Judean countryside (Jn 3:26), while also using the opportunity to teach ministry to his disciples (Jn 4:2).
 - John the Baptist has not been arrested yet (Jn 3:24).
- [H] – Jesus heard that His support for John the Baptist in the baptism ministry has created an obstacle to the ministry of John the Baptist (Jn 3:26; 4:1), so he retreated towards Galilee through Samaria (Jn 4:4). His disciples went with him (Jn 4:27; 31)
- [I] – Jesus and his disciples left towards Nazareth (Jn 4:44 cf Lk 4:14-24), but chose to visit Cana again (Jn 4:46)
- [J] – John the Baptist was arrested by Herod (Lk 3:19-20). Jesus left Nazareth (which is in Galilee) and headed towards Capernaum (Matt 4:12-13). His public ministry formally begins (Matt 4:17; Mk 1:14-15).

By correlating the events between these Gospels and developing this timeline, we can definitively conclude that Jesus was not a stranger to Andrew, Simon, James and John – as well as Philip, Nathaniel, and others – when He invited them to “Follow Me” by the Sea of Galilee. By this time, Jesus and his disciples have already spent considerable time together in both social settings (wedding in Cana – John 2:1-12) and ministry settings (showing His disciples how to baptize - John 4:2). Thus, as Jesus began His public ministry, His first order of business is to recruit team members to join him. His invitation is extended to those with whom He has already invested much time developing quality relationships.

This naturally leads to the first principle that we can learn by modeling Jesus from this event:

Following Jesus – especially into ministry – is preceded by investment in Quality Relationship Development Time

Context – I Will Make You...

When Jesus invited Andrew, Simon, James and John to follow Him, He added a follow up statement to the invitation – that He will make them “fishers of men.” This phrase “fishers of men” is clearly a metaphor describing missionaries, evangelist, or similar ministry identity roles in our modern-day context. What is notable is the action verb in Jesus’ follow up statement – that He *will make them* (into) fishers of men. The implication here is clear: These disciples, though they have already spent much time with Jesus, they are not yet trained, not yet qualified as evangelist or missionaries. That Jesus “will make them...” indicates that they will be trained to become missionaries or evangelist – a future reality.

This understanding naturally contextualizes this “Follow Me” event as an invitation to participate in ministry with the goal of being trained, rather than a “calling” passage, where trained individuals are called into a specific role or function. The expectation and the personal sacrifice involved for accepting this invitation is not the same as the expectation and the sacrifice involved for accepting a *calling*, which can be observed in a later “Follow Me” episode in the ministry of Christ.

When Jesus recruited these individuals to join his ministry team, He wasn’t looking for someone who was already a so-called “expert” in ministry. His invitation includes a clause joined by the conjunction word *and*, which means when the disciples accepted this invitation, they not only accepted the invitation to join Jesus’ ministry, they also accepted the opportunity and the expectation to be trained. They each already possess certain personal giftedness, talents, and skills, so the training would then involve learning to use their own talents and skills in a ministry context. This is the expectation.

This leads to the second principle that we can learn by modeling Jesus from this event:

Following Jesus – especially into ministry – is succeeded by Investment in Ministry Training

Context – Fishers of Men

Finally, Jesus' choice of words in His invitation to train His disciples into "fishers of men" is not without meaning. Both Matthew and Mark informed the readers that the profession of these first disciples were "fishermen", understood in that context to be experts at catching different kinds of fish. Capernaum, in that first century, was a very popular and important "travel stop" city on a major international trade route. Among other notables about this city is that it has a very large fishing industry; meaning that this is where fishermen, or fishing professionals work.

In that culture, fishermen (or fishing professionals) uses different techniques to catch different types of fish, for different purposes. For certain delicacies, fishermen may need to use a more delicate line fishing techniques (cf Matt 17:27). For catching large mammals in the deep sea, they would use harpoons and with teamwork (cf Job 41). To fish for the masses, they would use the net fishing technique, with or without teams. Moreover, beyond possessing the skills for each of these fishing techniques, they also know the habits of the fish – when and where to catch them, preservation techniques, and so forth. This is what makes them professionals – being experts at catching different kinds of fish; and what it means to be fishermen.

This understanding help to add more meaning to Jesus' choice of words. What Jesus is saying is that He will train them from being experts at catching fish, to become experts at catching men. He will teach them to use their different skills and knowledge acquired from their fishing expertise to find and catch different kinds of fish and train them to apply the same principles to find and minister to different kinds of people. Thus, becoming fishers of men.

Jesus did not invite these future apostles to help Him build a house, a business, or even a church (at least not at this point). Jesus came to reach the lost, and His public ministry is all about reaching the lost and serving the needy – a very diverse people group, people-centric, people-focused goal. His invitation, thus, includes a promise to train these disciples to also be able to work in a very diverse people-centric ministry.

This then leads to the final principle that we can learn my modeling Jesus from this event:

Following Jesus into ministry is always about finding and ministering to people. Ministry is about people.

Analysis and Application: Dynamics of a Ministry Team

Both Matthew and Mark informed us that this invitation to follow Jesus came when Jesus' public ministry officially began. The implication here strongly suggest that this invitation was an intentional effort by Jesus to recruit and form His ministry team, especially given how Jesus left Nazareth for Capernaum, where these fishermen worked. Given that Jesus' public ministry has formally begun, His first order of business seems to be to recruit a team, with the expectation that the team will be trained to accomplish His goal.

The Gospel of John informed us that Jesus had invested considerable time building relationships with these – and other – future apostles *before* His invitation. This implicitly demonstrates how Jesus values relationships both as an Identity of His deity (God is relational) and also in practice in human affairs. His promise to train these disciples is an indication of His expectation for their qualifications for joining His team – He wasn't recruiting them for their skills or what they can do for Him. Rather, He plans to train them by showing them how to use their skills for ministry purposes. Finally, the response by these future apostles (*immediately* drop their nets) reflects their humility and desire to be trained and be part of Jesus' ministry team.

Thus, the theme for this "Follow Me" episode can be summarized as "The Dynamics of a Christian Ministry Team: The Recruiting, The Expectation, and the Goal. With this summary, the following application principles can be observed:

- **Ministry always functions as a team** – Jesus' first order of business when His public ministry formally begins is to recruit a ministry team. He did not actually need the team, and this team at times seemed more a hindrance than a help to His ministry (as we will see in later studies). The purpose here, likely, is to model both team ministry and the blueprint for ministry expansion.

- **Relationship is key for a functional ministry team** – Jesus Himself demonstrated how God values relationships between people. It is, after all, part of the Greatest Commandment (cf Matt 22:36-40). Team dysfunction can often be traced to trust issues, which is an extension of either a broken relationship, or lack of relationship. Functional teams focus on building relationships.
- **Personal skills are overrated in ministry** – A common mistake teams make when recruiting for teams is to put too much emphasis on people's skills without recognizing that the highly skilled can also often create more problems than it helps. The disciples Jesus invited are all skillful individuals that very well could insist that Jesus listen to them. Jesus did not invite them for their skills. Moreover, the Gospel accounts showed us that these disciples exercised humility, dropped their nets (metaphorically, putting their skills aside) and followed Jesus.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read John 1:35-51; 3:22-36 with a focus on Jesus' disciples.

1. What can we observe about the disciples' character – their background, relationships, knowledge – before meeting Jesus (Jn 1)? How were they drawn to Jesus?
2. What can we observe about the disciples' attitude towards spiritual leaders – both to John the Baptist and to Jesus (Jn 3:22-36)? What did they learn?
3. Before Jesus invited His disciples to join His ministry team, He invested a lot of time with them (cf Jn 3:22). Scan through John Chapters 2-4. What were some of the activities that they did together? How would you describe their relationship / friendship? (hint: Remember – John was one of these disciples / friends).

Reflecting Upon Our World

"Fisher of men" was a term Jesus used probably because His first disciples were all fishermen (experts at catching different types of fish using different techniques). The term correlates well in the ministry context to show that different ministry techniques will be needed to reach different people groups in the world.

1. What are some of the differences between people groups that need to be considered in ministry and evangelism (ex: culture, age, etc..)?
2. Fishermen uses different techniques to catch different types of fish. Some techniques are gentle while others are more aggressive. Some techniques require teamwork while others can be solo. What can we learn from a fishermen's approach to catching different types of fish as they relate to how we correlate these habits to reaching different people groups in ministry? Think specifically in your / your church's ministry context.
3. What are some common misunderstandings about doing ministry in the world that we can learn from the "fisher of men" illustration?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Choosing to follow Jesus to become a fisher of men (participate in and be trained in ministry) necessarily means letting go of our attachment to various things of this world. The "Follow Me" passage in Matt 4 / Mark 1 is an invitation from Christ to join Him in ministry and, by extension, allow Him to train us towards doing the Great Commission. It requires a willing heart to let Jesus make us into a fisher of men (trained in ministry) in our own context.

1. Have you committed to allow Jesus to make you into a fisher of men (participate in ministry)? Why or why not?
2. What are some obstacles in your life that (may have) kept you from participating actively in ministry to become a fisher of men?
3. What are some things you have learned about ministry that brings you closer to becoming a fisher of men?
4. How have you utilized your personal skills in a ministry context to reach the unique people group God has placed in your life? Document your journey in testimonial form and be prepared to share with others as God leads.



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