

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:16-20: Jesus Calls His Disciples

“16 Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’ 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.” (Mark 1:16-20, ESV)

I. The Authority of Jesus

In our last lesson, we read about Jesus proclaiming the immanence of the kingdom. The kingdom has come near in Jesus. Jesus calls two pairs of brothers from their lives as fishermen to a life of discipleship and, eventually, the apostolate. Jesus calls them with absolute authority as Lord and King.

The pattern of call/promise/obedience is an echo of Genesis 12:1-4, the call of Abraham. Look at the following comparison of Jesus calling the disciples and Yahweh (LORD) calling Abram:

Mark 1:16-20 (ESV)

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me...
and I will make you become fishers of men.

And immediately they...followed him.”

Genesis 12:1-4 (ESV)

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go...to the land that I
will show you...’
And I will make of you a great nation...

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...”

In this comparison, we see the authority of Jesus placed on equal footing with that of the Lord God. Next, look at the contrast between the passages above and the call of Elijah the prophet to Elisha:

“So [Elijah] departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” (1 Kings 19:19-20, ESV)

Elijah does not call Elisha with a word command, but by the symbolic action of draping his cloak over Elisha’s shoulders. Elisha accepts the call, but delays fulfillment in order to say goodbye to his parents. Elijah’s response reveals an attitude very different from that assumed by Jesus: “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” Elijah’s reply is translated a variety of ways in English versions because the meaning is uncertain. From a survey of ten commentaries (House, Gray, Provan, Auld, Konkel, Jones, Davis, Patterson, DeVries, and Nelson), there is a virtual consensus that the reply is not intended as a rebuke. Some understand it as a denial, either of any intrinsic authority by Elijah, or of the prophet having made any demands on Elisha.

But Jesus is more than a prophet: “...behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:42). His demands are higher and his authority greater than Jonah or Elijah. When one who was commanded to follow Jesus asked to say goodbye to his parents Jesus rebuked him, saying, “...No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62, ESV).

Going back to our text in Mark, Baylor Prof. David Garland comments: “What is striking is that Jesus calls them to ‘follow me.’ Prophets did not call people to follow themselves but to follow God (compare 1 Kings 19:19-21). The sages of Jesus’ day never called people to follow them, only to learn Torah from them. Jesus’ call of the disciples is therefore dramatically authoritative and matches the biblical pattern of God’s calling of humans: a command with

a promise, which is followed by obedience (see Gen. 12:1-4). The call so overpowers these disciples that their lives will never be the same again.” (Garland, pp. 69-70)

II. The Call of the Disciples

1. *Called to Become New.* The Greek word for church means “called out”. Jesus called these men out of their old occupations and relationships and into a new occupation and a new relationship with God through Him.

Discipleship with Jesus changes people completely. “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, ESV). Our text focuses on one aspect of that change: “I will make you become fishers of men.” Although it presents awkward English, the ESV keeps to a very literal rendering of the Greek in order to emphasize the fact that following Jesus will change them; they will become something they are not. The NIV smooths it out, but loses the emphasis on personal change: “I will send you out to fish for people” It sounds as though the disciples will simply do a new thing. However, the Greek text says that they will actually become a new thing.

2. *Fishers of Men.* The metaphor of fishing for people is found in several passages in the Old Testament. The passage most relevant to ours is found in the Book of Jeremiah. The prophet warns that the LORD will send out fishers to catch the wicked in Israel:

“Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the LORD, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. 17 For my eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes ...” (Jer. 16:16-17, ESV).

This oracle of judgment is sandwiched between a promise to restore Israel from captivity (“For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers,” v. 15) and a prophecy of the conversion of the Gentile nations from idols to the LORD (“O LORD....to you shall the nations come...and say...‘Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods!’”). The cumulative sense of these three passages in Jer. 16 is well stated by D. R. Jones: “The hope of a glorious second Exodus from the northern exile (vv. 14-15), and the cleaning out of the last pockets of evil in the land (vv. 16-18), will make it possible for the LORD to make Zion the centre to which all nations will turn (vv. 19-21)” (Jones, pp. 234-235).

Israel must be purified in order to fulfill her calling to bless the nations (Gen. 12:3). He will use the enemies of Israel to help effect this purpose. But how is the prophecy relatable to our passage in Mark? After all, Jesus and the disciples were concerned to *save* people. True, but when the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed, the message cuts two ways. It brings salvation to those who heed it but also judgment to those who reject it.

Zechariah declared Jesus to be a “horn of salvation for us” (Luke 1:69, ESV). But Simeon prophesied of Jesus: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel...” (Luke 2:34, ESV). Jesus brought salvation to the faithful remnant of Israel, but cursed the generation that rejected him, saying, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” (Matt. 21:19, ESV). And the disciples were instructed, “But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town” (Luke 10:10-12, ESV). The gospel indeed brings judgment upon those who reject it.

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19).

In our passage in Mark, salvation seems to be the leading idea in the “fishing” metaphor. Because of the double-edged nature of the gospel, Jesus can go the other way with the same image:

“When Jesus used the metaphor of fishermen to describe the mission of his disciples, he was reversing its meaning from that intended by Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s fishers caught men for judgment; Jesus’ fishers caught them for salvation.” (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, p. 219)

III. Responding to the Call

1. *The Call Demands Kingdom Priority.* Disciples of Jesus are commanded to completely abandon their old way of life. The kingdom must displace all other competing interests in the life of the Christian:

Family: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26, ESV)

Money/possessions: “...sell all that you have and give to the poor...and come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21, ESV)

Old way of life: “...forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:13-14, ESV)

In return for their temporal loss the disciples are promised eternal blessings in the “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28, ESV), which they have now entered but have yet to inherit (Matt. 25:34).

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” (Matt. 19:29, ESV)

“Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.” (Luke 12:33, ESV)

“...whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.” (Mark 8:35, ESV)

2. *Jesus enables our response.*

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (John 15:16, ESV)

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” (John 15:4-8, ESV).

Sources of Quotations

Craigie, Peter C., Kelley, Page H., and Drinkard, Joel F. - Jeremiah 1-25 [Word Biblical Commentary]. (Word, 1991)
Garland, David E. - Mark [The NIV Application Commentary]. (Zondervan, 1996)

Jones, Douglas Rawlinson - Jeremiah [The New Century Bible Commentary]. (Eerdman's, 1992)