

Follow (Mark 1:16-20)

Notes from a sermon preached by Pastor Matt Privett at Covenant Baptist Church

The End of the Beginning

In this study we arrive at the end of the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, for the first twenty verses of this Gospel lay the groundwork for everything Mark is going to tell us in the rest of the book.

In 1:1 he gives us the thesis: Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that is good news. Mark was probably writing from Rome to the church at Rome made up of mostly Gentiles, living in a multi-god, pluralistic society. He wanted to end any confusion about Jesus Christ. He wanted to show Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

In 1:2-8 he connects that thesis with what has come before in the Old Testament through the ministry of John the Baptist. John is the one Isaiah and Malachi looked forward to who would prepare the way for the Lord, the one who would make His paths straight. John prepared the way for the Son of God, who is the only One who can baptize with the Holy Spirit.

In 1:9-13 Mark shows us how Jesus identified with sinners and was validated by His Father when His ministry was inaugurated through the baptism of John. He was shown to be the Son of God there and again when He confronted the Adversary, Satan, during the wilderness temptations.

Then, in 1:14-15, Mark began to express to us the message, the heart, of Jesus' ministry. The Old Testament is done. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand, in your midst. Repent and believe in the gospel. Because you can't have one with the other. You can't repent and not believe. And you don't believe if you do not repent. They are two facets of the same action by which one who has been given new life in Christ is driven through the grace of God and the conviction and power of the Holy Spirit to turn away from their sins and turn in complete trust to Jesus.

Everything in these first twenty verses sets the stage for the rest of the book. We're going to see these things develop over the other 15-1/2 chapters. So now, as we look at verses 16-20, as we see Jesus calling His first disciples, Mark will begin to show us what life looks like for someone who repents and believes. Someone who obeys the commands to repent and believe in the gospel will be compelled to obey one other very big command, one other all-encompassing command, one other command which is really an umbrella over all of life. It is so simple yet so far-reaching.

Those who repent and believe then follow. Those who repent and believe obey the command to follow Jesus Christ. So Jesus came into Galilee and was preaching the kingdom of God. Repent and believe in the gospel was His message, and then as He was going along He came by the Sea of Galilee.

Now, the Sea of Galilee isn't really a sea. It's an inland lake. At its longest point it's 12-1/2 miles long, 7-1/2 miles wide. It's 680 feet below sea level. That makes it the lowest body of fresh water on the planet. And this sea was a hub of commercial activity in the first century, and the main industry was fishing. Because of the elevation of the lake the Sea of Galilee was known for its rich, pure water. That produced a fruitful and diverse array of fish, when meant that the fishing industry of Galilee was well-known around the Roman Empire.

It was fish, not meat, that was the main staple food in the Greco-Roman world, and the fish out of the Sea of Galilee was known to be exported as far as Alexandria in Egypt. Galilee was to fish what we might consider Alaska or Maine to be to lobster, or Idaho to potatoes. This was a huge industry in Galilee, so big that there were up to 250 fishing boats on the lake every day. And because the fishing industry was so big, so integral to the region and its economy, the people involved in the industry, if they were to be successful, had to be competitive, smart, and shrewd in business.

All too often the twelve men who followed Jesus are mislabeled and misrepresented by preachers and Bible teachers as kind of backwoods no-nothings. Acts 4:13, in which the Sanhedrin, the council of rulers in Israel, said that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained has probably contributed to what is really a false notion. What the Sanhedrin meant

was that they were uneducated and untrained as rabbis. They were taught in the schools of religion, but there they were in Acts preaching the gospel. Just because they were uneducated in the rabbinical schools doesn't mean, though, that they were stupid.

Quite the contrary. Mark tells us about Simon, Andrew, James, and John - all fishermen who would've had to know what they were doing if they were to survive in the highly competitive fishing market of Galilee. They would have, for example, probably been very familiar with the Greek language, the international language of business in the Roman Empire. They would've had to know Greek if they were to export their product with any reasonable success. In fact, it would appear Zebedee and his sons, James and John, were actually prosperous in the business. Verse 20 tells us they had hired servants on the boat with them. We'll find out later in Mark that Simon Peter and Andrew had a home big enough for many people to be in at one time. They, too, were probably reasonably prosperous.

So when Jesus came to the Sea of Galilee He called these four men. And just as their fish were exported throughout the Roman Empire, unbeknownst to these would be disciples, Jesus was calling them so that He could prepare them to be exported through the known world for the sake of His gospel. Simon Peter, who we've talked quite a bit about here lately, would go to Rome, the capital of the world. Andrew, church tradition says, would go to the borders of what we know today to be Russia. John would go at least as far as Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. Only James would not escape the boundaries of what we know as Israel, and that's probably only because King Herod had him killed in Acts 12:2.

So with that little bit of background, we turn now to the passage itself and see Jesus' call of these disciples. And what we will see is that, if you are in Christ, if you have repented of your sins and believe in the gospel for salvation, then you too have been called, like the disciples, to leave your nets and follow Him.

The Sovereign Command of Christ

If you were to get a phone call or message of some sort in which you were told the President of the United States wanted to see you, you would go. No matter what your political leanings might be, if you got that message you would go. A summons from the White House is like a command. When the President wants to see someone they get on a plane and get there as soon as possible.

This is precisely the sense we get from the scene at the Sea of Galilee. That's how these four men respond to Jesus. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John considered this invitation to be a direct command. They considered it obligatory to their lives. They dropped everything and immediately followed Him. Everything else became secondary to the Lord's command in the blink of a moment. Their family relationships became secondary. Their business relationships became secondary. Nothing else was as important in their lives now as this call. This was primary. This was paramount. This was preeminent. Nothing else would take priority over the call of Jesus upon their lives. Like the old Ford commercials used to say that "Quality is Job 1," following Jesus was now Job 1.

It was a summons with sovereign authority, a divine mandate from heaven above. This was a divine command which necessitated immediate obedience. It was binding. Non-negotiable. They were drafted into the service of the Son of God and they could not say no. And it required them to drop everything and follow Christ.

They could not have one foot in the boat and one on dry land. They were being directed to abandon everything they knew for the sake of the Lord's call. They were directed to abandon everything to reach the world for Jesus Christ.

And this was a very specific call. Jesus didn't ask everyone in the boats to follow Him. He directed His command to four specific individuals here, and they would be asked to respond with radical obedience.

In this sense Jesus was going against the grain of Jewish culture. In the rabbinical schools of the day the student was the one who sought out the teacher. Rabbis didn't hand pick students. But here, the Teacher is calling four men out, knowing that one day He would pass the baton of earthly ministry to them.

Being a follower of Christ isn't something people seek to sign of up. He called them out. This command would be given to specific people whom the Lord Himself sovereignly called. Jesus was the initiator of this relationship. And unlike the young men in the rabbinical schools, these disciples would not be loyal to the Torah, to the Law, to the Old Testament. They would be loyal to a Man. They would follow a Man. That's why they were called Christians very early in the history of the church. They didn't follow the Law of Moses or any particular pet doctrine. They followed a Person, the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Now, if you were to read this passage isolated from the rest of the New Testament, the rest of the Gospels, it kind of seems like these four men left their lives to follow someone they had never met. But, as we saw last week, that's not the case. In John 1:35-42 we read about John and Andrew being disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus met them and called them, I believe, to saving faith in Him. John the Baptist had said, "Behold the Lamb of God." Andrew would go to his brother Simon and say "We have found the Messiah!" They had clearly formed an opinion about Jesus and determined that He was the Anointed One Israel was waiting for.

So Mark 1 isn't the first meeting between Jesus and these four fishermen. There's about a year's time between John 1 and Mark 1:16-20. So they might have been jumping off a cliff, but Peter, Andrew, James, and John weren't jumping blindfolded. They were being asked to follow someone they at least had a working knowledge of. That doesn't, however, diminish in the least the radical obedience that was being demanded of them here. Jesus said to them, "Follow Me." That's the sovereign command of Christ.

The Powerful Purpose of the Command

The sovereign command of Christ is made with the purpose that those who follow Him might become fishers of men.

God didn't create His disciples to be rebels. The cross isn't merely our ticket to heaven, but the conduit through which sinful people can live for the reasons we were created. And God formed us for two reasons: That we might enjoy His grace and that we might extend His glory.

We are made in the image of God. Dogs aren't. Cats aren't. Only mankind. The animals can't enjoy a relationship with God like we can. God has blessed the human race, not because of anything good in us, but because of His amazing grace. We are to ENJOY His amazing grace.

But we are also to EXTEND His glory. God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth. Why? That we might multiply God's image on earth. He created us to extend His own glory throughout the earth. The command to follow Christ is part of His global purpose.

Throughout the Bible we find God working through His people to show His grace and mercy, not primarily for His people's sake, but that His own glory might shine forth. Indeed, in the Revelation of Jesus Christ we find people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, from throughout the earth, praising the Lord before His throne, fulfilling the ultimate purpose of all things, to give glory to God.

We have, I think, by and large lost sight of this ultimate goal of discipleship. We've lost sight of the fact that the end game of the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't our salvation, but God's glorification.

We are not the most important thing. Even to God. God is the most important thing to God... and that's not selfish, because unlike you and I, He is worthy of being the most important. If He were not worthy of being most important, He would not be God. And God is glorified when people throughout the earth come to faith in Jesus Christ and sing His praises.

We cannot afford to separate God's blessings upon us with God's greater purpose to glorify Himself. If we do, we settle for a lesser Christianity, what one writer describes as an "unbiblical, self-saturated Christianity that misses the point of God's grace" (Platt, *Radical*, 71). Jesus doesn't call us to settle for anything less than Him.

Notice what Jesus says to these fishermen: "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Jesus doesn't tell them what a great plan He has for their lives. He doesn't talk to them about heaven and the great by and by. In short, He doesn't call them to discipleship by talking about the privileges of Christianity. Now, there are undoubtedly many privileges, great privileges, for those who follow Jesus Christ, but the Lord Himself called Peter, Andrew, James, and John by speaking of obligation.

And the obligation is that they follow and He would make them become fishers of men. They would follow Christ in order to make more followers. Here are the seeds of the Great Commission being planted. Mark uses the language, "As He was going along the Sea of Galilee" in verse 16. That same type of language is used in Matthew 10:7, when he told the disciples, "As you go, preach."

You see, all too often we boil evangelism down to a set time, a set strategy. But the Bible doesn't call for that. Instead, as you are going, preach. As you are going, be a proclaimer of truth. Anywhere and everywhere you go, at every opportunity, be a proclaimer of truth. Whereas the four fishermen used to cast their nets for fish, now they would be casting their nets for the kingdom of God which was at hand, and they would do it by Christ's power. He would MAKE them become fishers of men.

Ultimately, God is sovereign over every single thing that ever happens. Period. Nothing escapes His notice, nor does anything happen without Him not only allowing it to happen, but decreeing that it will and does happen. Jesus told those four men to follow Him, and that He would make them become fishers of men. There was no doubt in Jesus. No equivocation. He said it, knowing it would come to pass, not just because it is God's will, but because He is the Son of God and He had specifically chosen them for this purpose.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would sovereignly enable them for the task at hand. The Lord wouldn't leave His disciples hanging. He wouldn't leave them powerless.

They would be trained by following Him. They were face to face with the Word made flesh. And in that sense you and I need to be face to face with the Word of God as well. To be able to do the task we've been called to we need to be enabled by God, using His Word, trained by His Word.

But second, that sovereign enabling comes from the Spirit of God Himself. Jesus promised the disciples in the upper room the night before His death He would be sending a Helper to guide them into all truth. He told them before ascending into heaven that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and give them power to do what He had called them to do. In Acts we read about how the Holy Spirit came upon them and how the disciples and the early church turned the Roman Empire and the whole world upside down. And if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, it means that the Holy Spirit is indwelling even you today, and that you, by God's power, are able to obey His commands, to heed His call, including the command to be a fisher of men.

Jesus was promising Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John that they would produce by the power of God. They had a promise of production. The Son of God empowers His disciples to fulfill His purpose. And His purpose for the Twelve took them from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the remotest parts of the earth. And so it is with us. We are told to go and make disciples of all nations and we cannot shirk from that responsibility.

We cannot put it off on missionaries or others to fulfill Christ's command to make disciples of all nations. That command isn't just for the superspiritual. It's not merely for some Christians, but for all Christians, for all who hear Christ's command, "Follow Me." Church tradition indicates that the twelve apostles would go in all different directions to preach the gospel of God. They took the gospel to the world.

So it must be with us. There isn't one of us who trusts in Jesus Christ who hasn't been called... commanded... to live in such a way that we impact the nations for the glory of Christ. No one who believes in Jesus has not also been commanded to live for the sake of people around the world who don't know and have never heard the name of Jesus.

We live and worship in comfort this morning, but God hasn't blessed us so that we can be all that we can be. He hasn't blessed us for comfort in this world. He's blessed us that we might follow His Son to make His name great... for the purpose of maximizing His glory on earth.

That is why God has given you the income you have. That is why God has given you the education you have. That is why God has given you the resources you have.

We must consider the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ take His words "Follow Me" seriously in everything we have and everything we do. Following the Master is the job of a disciple. To walk where He walks. To learn as He teaches. To do good works as He has done. To proclaim His message that men must repent and believe in the gospel. To resist temptation as He did. To do the will of the Father as He did. To hold fast to the word of God, just as Jesus did.

God doesn't call spectators. He calls disciples. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were commanded to follow. It was not optional for them. Just as repenting and believing in the gospel are commands, so is this. We must follow the command... and rest in the promise that it is not in our power that we do this, but in Christ. It is the work of God in those He has called. He makes His disciples become fishers of men.

The powerful purpose of Christ's command is glorify Himself through His disciples following Him by proclaiming Him to the nations, being fishers of men indiscriminate of gender, ethnicity, nationality, or any other dividing wall we erect to shirk our God-given obligation to make His glory known.

The Radical Response of the Called

The fact of the matter is those whom God has predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son He has called to repentance and faith, and has commanded to follow Him. But it is clear that God enables His people to follow. He gives us the Spirit. He gives us His word. He compels us by His love and makes us become fishers of men.

That God is sovereign over all of this, however, does not negate the great sacrifice we are called to make, following in the footsteps of Christ. It does not diminish the reality of putting both hands to the plow and not looking back. It does not diminish the necessity of letting the dead bury their own dead. It does not nullify the urgency with which we must obey.

Consider the response of Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Verse 18: "IMMEDIATELY they (Simon and Andrew) left their nets and followed Him." Verse 20: "IMMEDIATELY He called them (James and John); and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him."

The command of Christ demands an immediate, radical response. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were called to leave their careers behind. They were successful businessmen. James and John, along with their father, had hired servants working for them and with them. Simon and Andrew had a decent size house in Capernaum. They fished for a living, not for recreation. So when they left their nets they weren't just going to do something more fun. They were leaving their livelihood to obey Jesus Christ. Here they were, called by Christ, commanded by Christ, to follow Him.

Not only did they leave their careers, but their families as well. James and John left their father to follow Christ. Simon Peter was married. We don't get the sense that Jesus was calling them to forsake their responsibilities, but what we do see is that, from here on out, family loyalties would be secondary to following Jesus Christ.

Just a couple of chapters later Jesus will say that the ones who are His mother and brothers are the ones who do the will of God. Here is that teaching exemplified.

And this is a big problem in the church today. We come on Sundays and Wednesdays and fellowship with one another and even go so far as to call this a church family, or a family of faith. But the way we live still elevates family, even distance family connections, above the spiritual brotherhood of those who trust in Christ.

This is a big deal in America, I believe, because we don't really face persecution. We don't really understand what it means for father and mother to betray child, and vice versa. As a result we don't really get what it means to be in one accord, to have all things in common, the way the early church is described in its infancy in Acts 2.

In short, we in the church are short on the kind of radical obedience we see in Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Following Christ means He comes first and family comes second, career comes second, friends come second, your own desires and aspirations come second. All of these things are a distant second behind submission to the Son of God.

Everything and everyone must come second. Everything else must decrease and Jesus must increase. Christ must increase. Christ must be first. Christ must be so high a priority over all other priorities for anyone who claims to be His disciple, that upon looking down at the other priorities in your life you cannot perceive them but through the lens of Christian discipleship, Christ following.

What is remarkable about Simon, Andrew, James, and John is that they didn't think twice. Remember: They knew Jesus was the Messiah. This was the Christ. This was the long promised Anointed One. This was the One who would deliver Israel and save the world. That made Jesus more valuable to these fishermen than a lifetime's worth of big catches. It was more valuable than riches, more valuable than anything else. And so they didn't think twice. Immediately they left their nets. Immediately they followed.

The command of Christ demands immediate obedience. The call to be His disciple, to leave everything and follow Him, is one which you must not delay answering. Jesus Christ must be more valuable to you than anything else, the way He was, and is today, to Simon, Andrew, James, and John.

They didn't think twice. They showed no hesitation, but IMMEDIATELY left their nets, left their boats, went to the shore, and then wherever Jesus went from then on, there they were. They were called and commanded and they responded with radical obedience. They followed Jesus wherever He led them. And He eventually led them to suffering, persecution, and for many of His disciples, martyrdom.

What About You?

Are you following Jesus wherever He may lead you? You're being commanded to follow someone you have at least a working knowledge of. Are you following Jesus? Or are you making excuses for your disobedience?

Maybe you don't know Christ as well as you should. The bottom line is none of us do. When we see Him face to face, in glory, we will know Him, but until that day, as Romans 8:29 teaches, those who have repented of their sins and believe in the gospel and, as a result, follow Him, are being conformed to the image of the Son of God. You have some working knowledge of who Jesus is if you are saved. He has saved you. He is in you by the power and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You have been enabled by God Himself to follow His commands.

If the President or Congress or the Governor or the Mayor called you, I have little doubt that you'd go, no matter your political leanings. You would treat it like a direct command to appear.

What, then, is keeping any of us from appearing before the Son of God when He says, "Follow Me!" Why would we treat a leader in our government better than we would treat the One on whose shoulders the government rests? The King of Kings and Lord of Lords? The One who created us and then bought us with a price, His own body?

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has commanded everyone everywhere to repent and believe in the gospel, to accept by faith that He, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity, left His heavenly abode, added humanity to His deity, fulfilled the requirement of God that we all fail at, to be perfectly righteous. Then, He went to the cross and bore the full fury of His Father's wrath against all sin, for all time, for all who will ever believe.

If you don't believe in Him, believe in the gospel, then when your physical life ends you will be punished for eternity.

But if you do believe in Jesus, if you do believe in the gospel, then you will be saved. And to those who do believe, in this earthly life there is an additional requirement that goes hand in hand: Follow Me!

It is not something that we add to faith. It is not a work that we do to merit favor before a holy God. Following Jesus doesn't save us. No. Following Jesus is the outworking of your faith. Following Jesus is the byproduct of our faith. Following Jesus is what happens to one and for one who has been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone!

Discipleship, the act of following Jesus, is absolutely essential to the Christian life. To not follow is to not do what a Christian does. You are either following Him or you are not.

To be Jesus' disciple is to be radically obedient in the face of a world that is going to say you are crazy, ignorant, rude, naive, stupid, intolerant, hard-headed, bigoted, hateful, and extreme. But just as Adam and Eve should have believed God and not the serpent, so too must we believe Jesus Christ and not what the world has to say about Him and His disciples.

Do we love Jesus Christ enough and trust Jesus Christ enough to enjoy His grace and extend His glory throughout the earth? Is our heart for the nations? Is our heart as God's heart?

Are you following Him...?

In your marriage?

As a parent?

When you are all alone and no one but God sees you?

With your family and friends?

At work?

In your church?

In your prayer life?

In your finances?

With what you spend money on?

In your offering?

In being a fisher of men near and far?

Are you following the Lord Jesus Christ? He is worthy. He is worth it. He is worth us giving everything to Him, the way He gave all of Himself for all of those He saves.

So to paraphrase a song I recently heard about obedience to the Lord, we cannot afford to lose our follow-through between the altar and the door.

Follow Him! Follow Him! Follow Him!

Repent. Believe. And follow Him!

Repent. Believe. Follow.

Leave your nets! Leave whatever it is that holds you back from radically obeying Jesus Christ. Drop everything right now and follow Him!