

THE GOSPEL AND DISCIPLESHIP

SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

By Doug Goins

In 1937, in pre-war Germany, a book was published that exploded like a bombshell in a very liberal church that had become deaf to the voice of God. The author, a young pastor who was deeply concerned about the life of this church, was only 30 years old when he wrote it. The book, *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is really an exegetical study of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Sixty-five years later it is still relevant. In fact, Bonhoeffer's introduction to the book sets the right tone for the passage we are studying today as we consider the relationship between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the call to discipleship:

Revival of church life always brings in its train a richer understanding of the Scriptures. Behind all the slogans and catchwords of ecclesiastical controversy, necessary though they are, there rises a more determined quest for him who is the sole object of it all, for Jesus Christ himself. What did Jesus mean to say to us? What is his will for us today? How can he help us to be good Christians in the modern world? In the last resort, what we want to know is not what would this or that man, or this or that Church, have of us, but what Jesus Christ himself wants of us. When we go to church and listen to the sermon, what we want to hear is his Word--and that not merely for selfish reasons, but for the sake of the many for whom the Church and her message are foreign. We have a strange feeling that if Jesus himself--Jesus alone with his Word--could come into our midst at sermon time, we should find quite a different set of men hearing the Word, and quite a different set rejecting it. That is not to deny that the Word of God is to be heard in the preaching which goes on in our church. The real trouble is that the pure Word of Jesus has been overlaid with so much human ballast--burdensome rules and regulations, false hopes and consolations--that it has become extremely difficult to make a genuine decision for Christ. (1)

In Mark 1:14-20, Jesus speaks for the first time in Mark's gospel. The first thirteen verses have served as a prologue--preparation for Mark's record of the public ministry of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist has prepared the nation Israel to receive the message and ministry of Jesus, and God himself has prepared his beloved Son, both through baptism and his temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

Mark chooses to pass over many of the events recorded in the first 4 chapters of the gospel of John--Jesus' first meeting with the men who would later become his disciples, the wedding at Cana, the night meeting with Nicodemus, and the meeting with the woman at the well in Samaria--and picks up his story approximately one year later with his account of Jesus' public ministry. He begins with Jesus' proclamation of good news, the gospel of God.

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14, 15)

Jesus proclaims the "good news"

Jesus begins his ministry only after John completes the task that God gave him. John's work as God's forerunner to Messiah is finished when Herod arrests him and puts him in prison. Mark then tells us that Jesus came into Galilee. Those of you who have traveled to Israel would describe Galilee as a rural area, peaceful and tranquil, especially in contrast to Jerusalem which is very cosmopolitan. In fact, on all of my trips I've always been relieved to get out of Jerusalem and into the countryside of Galilee. However, in Jesus time things were different. In his book entitled *Encounters With Jesus*, Stuart Blanch wrote about the Galilee of Jesus' day:

Galilee was the center of a humming political and commercial life. It stood at the crossroads of the nations of the ancient world, through which the armies and the traitors and the diplomats

passed. There some of the greatest battles of the world have been fought...Galilee was the home of a thoroughly cosmopolitan population: Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic would all be heard in the market; Syrian, Jew, Roman and Parthian mixed freely. It was a land of passing excitements and dangerous fashions, of a barbarous dialect and offensive manners. (2)

The rest of the nation looked down on the people of Galilee. There was a comment made about Jesus being a son of Nazareth: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). What kind of person can the Galilee region turn out? Jesus didn’t come to some quiet backwater town to begin his ministry. Rather, his ministry began in a place of conflict. Mark’s account draws our attention to this tense political and religious scene. He focuses on the content of Jesus’ message, providing a context that will help us understand the rest of the gospel record. It’s a lens through which we can see all of his activity--his teaching, his miracles, his battles against evil, even his crucifixion and his resurrection.

Verse 15 consists of four phrases--two indicative statements followed by two strong imperatives, or commands. Both indicatives concentrate on God’s initiative (what God has done), and the two commands are in response to God’s sovereign activity. All four phrases clarify God’s decisive action in sending his Son into the world.

The content of the “good news”

First, “The time is fulfilled,” or, “the time is come.” Jesus announces that the time of waiting for Messiah’s coming is over. All that God has said and done in history has been fulfilled in Jesus. All the centuries of preparation and prophecy are over and this is a time heavy with eternal significance. All of us have important times in our lives; certain events that take place that are more significant than others. The hour or so that Candy and I spent getting married was much more important time than the three hours I spent watching the Super Bowl last year. And Mark’s point is that this time is *the* most unique, most important time the world has ever seen when Jesus steps onto the scene of human history.

The second indicative statement in verse 15 tells us why it is so important: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” The word “kingdom” doesn’t refer to a place, but to rule, or reign; the sovereign influence of a king. Jesus’ presence is the decisive display of God’s ruling power over the world. The rule of God is a dynamic event in which God intervenes powerfully in human affairs to achieve his sovereign purposes. The dominion of God has come so near, Mark says, that you can touch it in Jesus. There is a life-giving tension in this announcement because it contains an implicit demand for submission. The divine rule announced by Jesus requires immediate human decision and commitment because God does want to reign in the lives of his people. The two commands which follow tell us how to respond to that truth.

First, we are called to repent--to change direction, *a change of mind* (see Discovery Paper 4792). It means to turn away from sin and turn toward God, who offers the solution to sin. When we read the conversion stories in the New Testament we see how repentance is experienced in a variety of ways. The same was true at the baptisms we had this year at PBC, both on Easter Sunday and then again on Servant Sunday. Just hearing the testimonies of all those who had recently come to faith in Jesus Christ emphasized this diversity. For some there was the sense of guilt for sin that was overwhelming in the beginning. For others it was the discovery of the only true source of meaning in life. And yet, for others there was a radical call to discipleship, obedience to Jesus Christ. Every one of those experiences involves changing direction, turning around, changing their minds and turning back. What they share in common is turning away from a self-determined path and entering the path that God offers in Jesus Christ. True repentance, this *change of heart*, captures our emotions, our will, and our intellect so that we experience a radical transformation.

Secondly, we are called to believe in the gospel; a call to personal faith. It’s what Paul refers to in Acts 20:21 as “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the only place in the New Testament that the phrase “believe in” is used. It’s not just to believe the gospel, but to believe *in it*. It deliberately reinforces the idea that faith or belief is more than just consent, more than just credence. Believing in the good news of Jesus Christ involves commitment to him, and that commitment will lead to a trust that affects the way we live because God’s

kingdom is coming in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself made that very clear in Luke 17 when he says, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation [it's not external, it's not visible], nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21, NIV). We can't truly experience the reality of that kingdom without a submissive commitment to his loving authority over our lives.

In the first two verses of Mark's opening statement, we can draw at least two points of personal application. First, anyone who has been captured by that truth has the privilege of sharing the gospel of God with other people. As the apostle Paul said in Acts 20:21, every one of us is called to "solemnly testify to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

The gospel that we have been entrusted with has content that may make some people uncomfortable; the quality of our lives *is* important, and relationships *do* matter. We earn the right to be heard in sharing the gospel with people by how we treat them and how we love them. We don't want to turn the vitality of Christian faith into a set of dry doctrinal propositions, or a "classroom religion." However, faith does have content, a vocabulary which has meaning. Jesus used particular words that signaled that content to his hearers, and then to Mark's readers. He used words such as, "time," "kingdom," "repent," and "believe." We ought to be committed to loving people into the kingdom, but we've also got to be able to tell them the truth of the good news. Peter's exhortation in 1 Peter 3:15 captures that balance, "...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...."

The second implication in these first two verses has to do with the two indicative statements of God's saving grace, followed by the two imperatives; an important priority to maintain in our lives. *It is God who always initiates, and we are the ones who need to respond.* The basis of Jesus' call to repentance and faith was the announcement of God's initiative in bringing the kingdom near to us. The only reason we enjoy physical life now is because God chose to give it to us. The same is true of spiritual life. The only reason we enjoy life in Christ now is because of God's initiation in sending Jesus to us.

Therefore, if Jesus is our King, the Lord of all of life both physically and spiritually, then we are called to respond to his initiatives at every level all of the time. Later in Mark's gospel, Jesus is going to tell us that we are called to abject humility, to become like a slave, to become like a little child. We must be willing to give up trusting in ourselves and to allow God to take control of the areas of our lives that we don't want to let go of. Corrie ten Boom suggested that for some of us, repenting and believing may mean opening a clenched fist and lifting it, empty to God.

Jesus' call requires each one of us to examine our expectations of other people and our commitments. Believing in the gospel will affect the way we live our lives, and we see this trusting, life-changing belief in the very next event. In verses 16-20, Jesus calls the first disciples. Pay close attention to the details. Notice the repetition--Mark essentially tells the same story twice:

As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.

Jesus calls the first disciples

This is actually Peter's story--details only a fisherman would be clear on. There are the two sets of brothers. The first mentioned are Simon (Peter) and Andrew, who are both casting nets from the shore; they are bank fisherman. When the call comes to "follow me," they immediately drop the nets and follow Jesus. The second story is of the sons of Zebedee. They, too, upon receiving the call to "follow me," immediately drop what they are doing and follow Jesus. The call and the purpose are the same. Jesus sees both sets of brothers as he's going along and calls them to follow him. The immediate purpose is for them to be disciples, but the ultimate purpose

is to change them into something, to make them “fishers of men” who will confront men with God’s salvation.

Again, notice that the response is identical--both left and both followed. But the language in verse 20 is expanded to say “they *went away* to follow him” (emphasis mine). This is a stronger construction because unlike Simon and Andrew--who seemingly had very little to leave behind--the sons of Zebedee were leaving behind the family business and relationships. Even so, Mark’s focus in both stories is on the urgency of Jesus’ call and the immediate response of the fisherman, whether they had limited or great resources, who abandoned everything and followed him.

Jesus demonstrates amazing authority because he is able to call men out of their regular occupation and make them his disciples. Who else could interrupt somebody in the midst of their livelihood and say, “leave it, I’ve got a higher calling for you” and get a response? We know from John’s gospel that Jesus had already met Simon, Andrew, James and John several months earlier. They had already come to trust him, so this was not their initial call to saving faith, but it was their initial call to discipleship.

Jesus’ promise to transform them from fishermen to “fishers of men” could have been unsettling for these two sets of brothers because in the Old Testament the image of fisherman is a metaphor in the prophetic literature for gathering people not to save their lives, but to punish sin in their lives. In Jeremiah 16 there is an oracle of judgment against the sin of the nation: “Behold, I am going to send for many fishermen,’ declares the LORD, ‘and they will fish for them ...For My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes” (Jeremiah 16:16, 17).

Jesus is not using fishing as an innocent reference to mission and evangelism. He’s not saying: “Fish *love* to be caught...they *love* to jump in the net...it’s going to be a *blast!*” But in reality, when the fish swallows the hook it has fatal consequences. Life can’t go on as before, and that’s the image Jesus is after. It fits the transforming power of God’s rule, bringing judgment and death to the old life, and promising a new creation. The apostle Paul captured that tension, that spiritual reality, in Romans:

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him....” (Romans 6:5-8)

Jesus is calling these disciples to be messengers, “agents of reconciliation” as Paul calls them. They are going to bring a compelling message to others that will change life beyond recognition--resurrection life, life in the Spirit.

Notice that Jesus’ ministry is different than John the Baptist’s ministry. He doesn’t wait for people to come to him at a designated place. He keeps moving, going where people are and taking the initiative to seek out followers while giving the command, “follow me.” That was different than every other rabbi before him. To be a disciple of any Rabbi implied personal devotion to the teacher, and also adherence to what he taught. But the men who Jesus chose had no special preparation. He didn’t choose the most sophisticated or socially prominent. They weren’t the best trained. They weren’t even the most religiously devout. He doesn’t find them in the synagogue, but on the seashore doing their work--hard physical labor. His command to these men turns their comfortable, familiar, everyday world upside-down.

Mark’s account of Jesus calling his first disciples confronts each one of us today if, in fact, we too claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. We are not only to repent and believe his gospel, but we also have to be ready to leave and follow him in obedience. This story ought to shatter our comfortable world of middle-class discipleship. These men weren’t called to be eavesdroppers and onlookers. And we are not called to be pew-warmers at church, to give of ourselves casually, thoughtlessly. We are not called to just be involved in the occasional Bible study, or to help out sometimes because Servant Sunday made us feel guilty. Jesus’ call to “follow me and I will make you ‘fishers of men’” has powerful implications; he is calling us to a lifelong

process of transformation.

There are several applications to draw out of this passage. First, to be a disciple means to accept Jesus' call unconditionally. Peter understood this because later on he reminds Jesus, "we left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28). He is actually whining about the cost he paid. According to Mark's gospel, discipleship is not part-time volunteer work done at my convenience and on my own terms. Peter, Andrew, James and John chose to leave the security of their livelihoods--fishing nets, boats, capital, and business assets--and traded them in for something new and unpredictable. They chose to walk by faith and not by sight.

We may not be called to sell everything and live in poverty, but Jesus does call each one of us to follow him always. We belong to him *all the time*. No matter where we go--in the work place, in school, even on the tennis court--and in every relationship, he is with us. Now, to us, in our modern world, that may seem unreasonable, even scandalous! Our common sense may tell us that that is much too risky, too reckless. But remember, those first disciples weren't even given time to transfer their equity, or to put their businesses in trust. The call to follow came and they immediately responded.

Some of us might hope that Jesus would offer a less rigorous category like "auxiliary discipleship"--the promise of the same benefits and rewards, but a discipleship that would allow us to pursue whatever *we* want to pursue. The problem is that we would end up trying to love God and mammon (the biblical catch word for "stuff"). James refers to this perspective as "double-mindedness" (see James 1:8)--trying to listen to God and listen to the world at the same time to define issues of mission, safety, time, ministry, security and priority. Eventually, mammon speaks louder and louder and God seems to speak softer and softer and we end up with the fatal illusion that our real needs are physical, which often leads to a self-centered concern for material security.

A few months ago my family faced some financial reverses, and I'm embarrassed and ashamed to admit how much it has troubled me. I've been struggling with feelings of insecurity, fear, and even resentment for being taken off the course we were on. But, in studying Mark's gospel, and while reading *The Cost of Discipleship*, I've come face-to-face with my faithlessness. I realize now that I wasn't really trusting God with my life; I wasn't following him unconditionally. But God is faithful, and in bringing this to my attention, Jesus Christ is dealing with my bondage to material security. In Mark's gospel Jesus is going to deliver people from all sorts of things--the bondage of demonic spirits, physical disease, etc-- so he can certainly deliver me from my financial concerns for the future. And he can deliver you from bondage too, but only if you are willing to accept Jesus' call to discipleship unconditionally and with no strings attached.

Another application we see in this story is that Jesus is going somewhere--into ministry and mission--and he calls his disciples to come along with him. In this passage, four men began following Jesus. In chapter 2, Jesus will call Matthew (also known as Levi, the tax collector and son of Alphaeus) to follow him and he does, leaving his work behind and joining Jesus. It didn't always happen this way though. We'll see a contrasting story in chapter 10 where Jesus is approached by a wealthy young man (some people think that might have been Mark himself). Mark tells us that Jesus loved him and tells him to sell all he possesses and to follow him. Now others had made the choice to follow, to begin the process of transformation, but this young man declines. Mark tells us that it was too much for Jesus to ask of him (see Mark 10:17-23).

Discipleship combines two important elements, and it's easy to get them out of balance. For the twelve it meant spending time with Jesus in biblical reflection, theological consideration, praying together and sharing life. But it also involved work. The faith that was growing in them was to be acted on, to be lived out. There is an account of Jesus summoning the twelve and sending them out in pairs and giving them authority in ministry (Mark 6:7-13). When they returned, "the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught" (Mark 6:30).

Discipleship calls us to balance study, training and prayer, all of which are important. Religious activism without biblical reflection is dangerous. But so is doing nothing; being quiet in the Lord with no active expression of life and gifts and energy. Our call is to a lifestyle of Christ-like ministry, service for the sake of the kingdom of God. Peter proclaimed that Jesus "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). That "good" is defined

by Jesus himself in Luke, chapter 4. In his hometown synagogue, in Nazareth, Jesus defines his agenda for ministry, quoting from Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year
of the Lord's favor.”

A third application, which will become clearer later in Mark's gospel, is that the disciples were not called to a program of self-development, but to sacrificial service. We considered some of the implications of that last week in our study of verses 9-13 (Discovery Paper 4792). Jesus will require his followers to deny themselves, to endure suffering, and to take up their cross and to follow him.

Finally, and most importantly, Jesus assumes full responsibility for changing those men into something, saying “follow me and *I will make you* to become something you have never been before.” Just as Jesus is the initiator of the relationship he is also the sustainer of the relationship, and he guarantees the outcome.

And [Jesus] went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted [there is the initiation], and they came to Him [there is the response]. And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him [there is the intimacy, the learning and being together] and that He could send them out to preach [he gives them ministry responsibility].... (Mark 3:13, 14)

Being a disciple of Jesus is more of a gift than an achievement. Jesus models what he calls them to do as “fishers of men.” They've been caught in the nets of God's grace and it's going to transform their lives. The same promise is true for us. Whatever competence we experience in discipleship is because of Jesus' competence expressed through us. If we follow him, he will make us to become something we aren't good at naturally. We are in a process of life-change and Jesus assumes complete responsibility, and He fully equips us for whatever task he calls us to. But we need to respond; we've got to be willing to follow him. We need to learn how to walk in a way that relies upon the power of the Holy Spirit of God, the same Holy Spirit that anointed Jesus with power. Jesus promised his disciples, “Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these...” (John 14:12).

In closing, consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words from his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*:

We can only achieve perfect liberty and enjoy fellowship with Jesus when his command, his call to absolute discipleship, is appreciated in its entirety. Only the man who follows the command of Jesus single-mindedly, and unresistingly lets his yoke rest upon him, finds his burden easy, and under its gentle pressure receives the power to persevere in the right way. The command of Jesus is hard, unutterably hard, for those who try to resist it. But for those who willingly submit the yoke is easy, and the burden is light. “His commandments are not grievous [they are not burdensome]” (1 John 5:3). The commandment of Jesus is not a sort of spiritual shock treatment. Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it. His commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it. (3)

NOTES:

(1) Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost Of Discipleship*, © 1959, 1995. A Touchstone Book published by Simon & Schuster, New York, NY. P. 35.

(2) Blanch, Stuart. *Encounter With Jesus*, © 1983, Hodder & Stoughton, London. P. 31.

(3) Bonhoeffer. Pp. 37, 38.

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Mark 1:14-20

3rd Message

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