

Follow Me

Scripture Text: Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13-19

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore themes of discipleship by looking at the call stories of several disciples and Jesus' choosing of the twelve. Of importance will be themes of obedience, community, joy, and suffering.

Digging In

The Call to Follow

We need not look far in the Gospel of Mark to find the call to follow Jesus. Indeed, this call comes three times in the first two chapters, the first two being issued to fishermen and the third to a tax collector. In each case, the call is radical in nature, demanding a break from prior life and obedience to Jesus. Each call will be examined below.

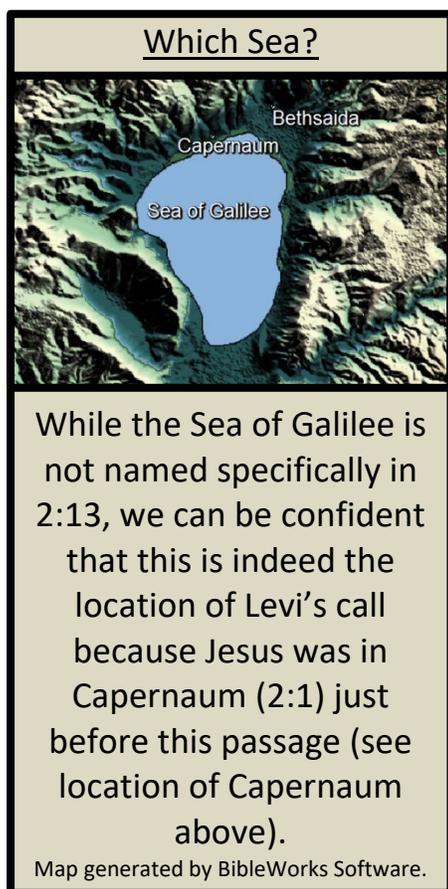
The first two calls to follow are found in 1:16-20, with the first being issued to a pair of brothers named Simon and John. This episode follows hard on the heels of Jesus' baptism and temptation. Having been anointed by the Spirit at his baptism (1:9-11) and then driven by the same Spirit to be tested in the wilderness (1:12-13), Jesus emerges in Galilee preaching that "the kingdom of God has come near" (1:14-15). Then, as he walks the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he spies two fishermen "casting a net into the lake." To these he offers a commanding invitation, "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." Without question or objection, Simon and Andrew leave the tools of their trade lying on the beach and respond obediently to Jesus' call.

Then, on the same day and on the same shore, Jesus takes note of another pair of fishermen brothers, James and John, preparing their nets in a boat. To these Jesus also issues the call to follow, and they act much like Simon and Andrew in obeying without question. James' and John's context is a bit different, though. While Simon and Andrew left their nets behind, we see James and John leaving their father and hired men in the boat to follow Jesus. These men, it seems, are leaving the family business.

A Note on Nets

"The casting net was a circular net with stones attached to its edge to weight it, and a draw rope which was pulled, to enclose the fish in the net."ⁱ

The third call to follow comes in 2:13-17. At this point in his ministry, Jesus has been preaching and healing throughout Galilee. Now we find him walking beside the same sea as before, the Sea of Galilee, which once again becomes the sight of the call



to discipleship. Just as the first two calls were addressed to people in the midst of their occupations (fishermen), so is the third. Levi son of Alphaeus is sitting at his tax booth. As David Garland explains, "Levi ... is stationed at an intersection of trade routes to collect tolls, tariffs, imposts, and customs."ⁱⁱ As a tax collector, Levi would not have been well respected by his countrymen, for tax collectors were allowed to set the amounts they collected. They were therefore able to collect moneys over and above what the authorities required, thus lining their own pockets along the way. Needless to say, tax collectors were distrusted by the folk they taxed.ⁱⁱⁱ More than this, tax collectors came into regular contact with Gentiles, a problematic association for fellow Jews who were concerned about holiness and ritual purity (gentiles were considered unclean).^{iv} Despite these marks against Levi, Jesus nonetheless issues the call, "Follow me," and Levi, like the fishermen, leaves his post with no questions or objections.

While those who receive the call to follow Jesus are different (a point to be pursued in the next section), their responses to Jesus are all identical. Upon hearing the call, each person who has been addressed immediately obeys, even to the point of leaving their livelihoods behind. While we can be impressed by these examples of obedience, they at the same time prove puzzling. In each case, people who apparently have had no contact with Jesus follow him without question. In the case of the fishermen, Luke and John paint the first disciples as having had prior experiences that lead to discipleship. (In Luke the fishermen have already experienced a miracle, and in John John the Baptist has pointed the way).^v Mark, however, gives his readers no such explanation. Instead, "Mark's text presents us with a sudden call and a response that is just as sudden."^{vi} In telling the story in this way, Mark highlights the great authority of Jesus, whose word commands obedience. In the flow of the gospel, this authority causes readers to wonder about the identity of Jesus. Who is this whose words carry so much weight?^{vii} On another level, "Mark not only impresses his readers with the authority of Jesus, but reminds them that they, too, are called by Jesus to obey the same command."^{viii} The call to follow carries great weight in Mark's gospel, and those

who read this gospel are pushed to consider how they themselves will respond to this call.

Strange Company

While the responses of Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Levi to Jesus' call are all identical, the backgrounds of these men are not. True, the first four are fishermen, but the details of their stories point to the possibility of difference even within the same profession. Notice that Simon and Andrew are casting their nets from the shore (1:16-18), while James and John mend their nets in a boat with their father and hired hands (1:19-20). From these descriptions, it seems that "Simon and Andrew ... are possibly too poor to own a boat while the Zebedees are more upscale..."^{ix} Thus a difference in income and means may exist between the fishermen Jesus calls.

If difference is implied among the fishermen, it is obvious when Levi is added to the mix. Not only is Levi of a different occupation, but his profession is also looked upon with disdain by his fellow countrymen, even to the point of hostility. As Jesus calls these men to himself, he calls them to a disparate community. Some are "upscale" while others are not. Even a despised tax collector finds a place in this company. And now they must all follow Jesus *together*. To follow Jesus, it seems, is to allow Jesus to define one's company. Indeed, once the call has been issued and obeyed, all other identifiers fade into the background. As Paul says in Colossians 3:11, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

Even as we note that the disciples may have understood themselves as running in strange company, we should also note that Jesus himself is surrounding himself with the same. We might expect the leader of a new movement to seek out the wealthiest, brightest, and most respected. Jesus does not follow this logic, though. Instead, he calls fishermen and tax collectors to follow and learn from him. As Garland says, "...those who are drafted apparently have no special preparation. Jesus does not choose the most socially prominent, the best trained, or even the most religiously devout. He does not find them in some hallowed religious setting, such as the synagogue, but he is just passing by and finds them in the midst of everyday life, going about their daily routines."^x In this, Jesus is no respecter of persons, and we find that all who are willing may come regardless of background or credentials. Paul once again sounds a similar theme, this time in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the

lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

Choosing the Twelve

In Mark 3:13-19, we see Jesus taking a new step with his followers. Up to this point, we have seen him call five specific people and have been told that many others followed him as well (2:15). Now as he stands on a mountain Jesus calls “those he wanted, and they came to him.” From a motley band of many followers, Jesus now chooses twelve to comprise an inner circle. Interestingly, Levi is absent from the list of names in this passage. To solve this problem, some commentators have identified Levi with Matthew (Matthew 9:9 records the story of Jesus calling a tax collector named Matthew), while others have argued that Levi is another name for the James son of Alphaeus named in Mark’s list of the twelve (Levi was also the son of Alphaeus). Still others simply point to Levi being one of the many who followed Jesus in 2:15. According to this last argument, Levi would have followed Jesus but would not have been included in the inner circle.^{xi} While the identity of Levi proves an interesting point for debate, we should be careful not to allow this mystery to cloud the thrust of the passage at hand.

As the passage continues, we find that Jesus has named this inner circle for two specific reasons: to be with him and to send them out. The second part of this equation holds two parts. First, the twelve will be sent out to preach. Second, they will be sent out to cast out demons. To this point in Mark’s gospel, we have already seen Jesus engaged in both of these activities (see 1:14-15, 21-34). In choosing the twelve, then, Jesus chooses people to extend his own ministry. This extension becomes reality in 6:6b-13, where the twelve are sent out in pairs.

The twelve are chosen for more than extending the ministry of Jesus, though. Indeed, the first reason given for the inner circle is that “they might be with him.” In one sense, this “being with” Jesus is necessary for the extension of his ministry. The twelve must learn the content of their preaching from Jesus, and after the resurrection and ascension they will witness concerning their time with him. In this, “being with” Jesus is a matter of learning and witness, but it also goes further than this.

Another way that the twelve will be with Jesus is in the midst of his labors and sufferings. Garland once again proves helpful in pointing out that we sometimes idealize “being with” Jesus. As he states, “The many hymns that exult in being with Jesus, such as ‘In the Garden,’ may mislead us into thinking only in terms of the joys we share with him as we tarry in some idyllic setting. For the Twelve in the Gospel of Mark there was little time for tarrying as they rushed hither and yon with Jesus. It was not all luminous joy, prestigious authority, and triumphant exorcisms. To be with Jesus in Gethsemane (14:33) was certainly no picnic.” To be sure, we can expect times of

intimacy and joy in the presence of Jesus, but being with Jesus also means that his enemies become our own and that we have a share in his sufferings. Paul once again brings the point home, this time in Philippians 3:10-11. There he says, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” To be with Jesus (or in Paul’s language “to know Christ”) is a matter of both joy and suffering.

Application

Obedience

As noted above, the call to follow in Mark is not accompanied by any explanation of the immediate obedience that it evokes. In telling the story in this way, Mark challenges us to consider how we ourselves will respond to the call of Jesus. While our initial calls may not be as abrupt as those of the fishermen and Levi – some of us may indeed leave our professions, but many will not – this does not mean that our commitment to the call need be less than theirs. Indeed, we can embrace the same commitment as we choose to offer the same obedient response regardless of the content of Jesus’ call. At root, discipleship is a matter of obedience. Of course, heeding the call of Jesus will often require discernment, especially in regard to big decisions (our Christian brothers and sisters can help us here), and there will be times when we may struggle with the nature of the call. At the same time, we can commit ourselves to hearing and pursuing the call of Jesus on our lives.

Community

It is interesting to note that the company of Jesus’ followers was composed of people from various backgrounds. In the passages explored in this lesson we saw rich and poor fishermen and a tax collector gathered into Jesus’ band. Though it was not looked at above, the choosing of the twelve displays variety. James and John are known as the “Sons of Thunder,” referring perhaps to their quick tempers. Simon is nicknamed “Rock” (Peter), looking perhaps to his steadiness, though such steadiness will desert him later in Gethsemane. Also mentioned is another Simon, and this one is named a zealot, which can refer to either an enthusiastic personality or to a radical political affiliation that sought to violently overthrow Roman oppression.^{xiii} Different backgrounds, professions, personalities, and economic statuses found themselves thrown together in pursuit of Jesus. Importantly, some of these might not have chosen to associate with one another. After all, who wants to spend so much time with a tax

collector?! Yet, the call to follow supersedes all other identifiers, and this disparate company will come to be known by an identifier that will unite and define them: disciples. The same is true of the church today. We are not allowed to choose our company as we follow Jesus. Indeed, we may sometimes find ourselves with “Sons of Thunder” or zealots who rub us the wrong way. At the same time, we are bound by a common call from and a common response to Jesus. This call and response can place us in strange company as Jesus constructs a people for himself. And it is as we love one another in the name of Jesus that the world comes to recognize our common allegiance to Christ (John 13:35).

Doing As Jesus Did

The second reason given for Jesus’ choosing of the twelve is that Jesus might send them out to preach and cast out demons, two activities that were central to Jesus’ own ministry. As disciples of Jesus, we are called not only to learn from him but also to do the same kinds of things that he did. Of course, we may raise our eyebrows at the concept of casting out demons (though this has not always been true of the Christian community), but we can certainly embrace the rubric of mercy under which this activity falls. Jesus came preaching, healing, and casting out demons. As his disciples, we can move into the world on Jesus’ behalf and in Jesus’ name as we embrace the same kinds of ministry that he himself embraced.

With Him

While joining Jesus in ministry is important, we must never forget that he also called the twelve to be with him. This same call is issued to us today. We are to learn from Jesus, to sit in the joy of his presence, and also to join him in his sufferings. Far from being separate from joining Jesus in ministry, this time with Jesus prepares us for ministry and ensures that we will see it through. We must learn the content of ministry from Jesus, and we must commit ourselves to sticking with Jesus through thick and thin, even in our own Gardens of Gethsemane. To be with Jesus today means that we identify with him regardless of circumstances and that we also open ourselves to his teaching and direction. This latter piece of being with Jesus can be pursued through personal Bible study and prayer and through corporate worship and teaching.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, “How did you spend your snow days last week?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the Gospel of Mark that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today’s lesson will focus on themes of discipleship from chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Mark.

Opening Question: What is discipleship? What words would you use to describe it?

Obedience

- **Scripture Reading:** Have three different people read:
 - Mark 1:16-18
 - Mark 1:19-20
 - Mark 2:13-14
- **Question:** Name the characters in these stories.
- **Question:** What do these people have in common?
- **Question:** Why do you think that Jesus chose these people?
- **Question:** Why do you think they followed with question or objection?
 - Be prepared to lead a discussion concerning Mark’s presentation of the call to discipleship (see “The Call to Follow” section above).
- **Questions:** How are our calls similar to or different from the calls of the fishermen and Levi? What does it mean for us to be obedient?

Community

- **Question:** We have already seen what the characters in these stories had in common. How are they different? (See “Strange Company” and “Community” sections above for more on this.)
- **Question:** How do you think these people would have gotten along as they followed Jesus together?
- **Question:** How does the contemporary church mirror this situation?
- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus calls different kinds of people to himself (drawing perhaps on the “Community” section above) and that we sometimes find ourselves in strange company according to the world’s standards.

- **Question:** What does scripture tell us about the differences in the church community?
- **Scripture Reading:** Have two people read:
 - Galatians 3:28
 - Colossians 3:11
- **Question:** How do these passages inform our understanding of the differences in the church?
- **Explain:** Explain that while our differences do not go away, they take a back seat to our new identity in Christ.
- **Question:** In light of the differences present in the church, how are we called to treat one another and act together?
 - Be prepared to discuss themes of love and unity.

Doing As Jesus Did

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 3:13-18.
- **Question:** What is happening in this passage?
- **Question:** Read the list of the apostles' names again. Who is missing?
 - Be prepared to explain the different theories as to why Levi is not mentioned in the list. (See the "Choosing the Twelve" section above for more on this.)
- **Question:** According to the text, why did Jesus choose the twelve?
- **Question:** Why did he call them to preach and have authority to cast out demons?
- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus is calling these apostles to further his own ministry.
- **Question:** What do you think about the disciples casting out demons? How should we understand this today?
- **Question:** How can we as Jesus' disciples further his ministry today?

With Him

- **Question:** The other reason given for the choosing of the twelve is that they be "with him." What does it mean for the disciples to be with Jesus? Why is it important?
- **Explain:** Explain that the disciples must learn from Jesus and witness his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. (See "With Him" section above for more on this.)
- **Question:** How can we be with Jesus today?
- **Question:** Is being with Jesus easy or hard, joyful or difficult?
- **Question:** Can anyone think of a time when being with Jesus was joyful for the disciples? (A possible answer is the transfiguration, which was an awe-inspiring experience for Peter, James, and John.)
- **Question:** Can anyone think of a time when being with Jesus would have been difficult for the disciples? (Possible answers are Gethsemane and the crucifixion.)

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Philippians 3:10-11.
- **Question:** For Paul “being with” Jesus was the same as “knowing” Christ. According to this passage, what does it mean for Paul to be with/know Jesus?
- **Explain:** Explain that being with Jesus both prepares us for ministry and ensures that we will see it through. It is both joyful and difficult. (See “With Him” section above for more on this.)
- **Question:** What are we to do with those times when being with Jesus is difficult?

ⁱ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 2009), 60.

ⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Mark* (Zondervan, 2011), 103.

ⁱⁱⁱ PHEME PERKINS, “The Gosepl of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 552.

^{iv} Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 2009, 94.

^v Garland, *Mark*, 78.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid., 78–79.

^{viii} Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 2009, 59.

^{ix} Garland, *Mark*, 69.

^x Ibid., 84.

^{xi} Ibid., 103–104; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 2009), 94. ^{xii} Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 2009, 112–113.